
ESSAYS

IT'S NOT ALL BLACK AND WHITE: A CONSIDERATION OF CROW HAIKU

Kristen Lindquist

Any discussion of crows in haiku must begin with Matsuo Bashō's famous crow haiku written in 1680:

on a bare branch
a crow settled down
autumn evening¹

This poem has loomed large in haiku history, arguably overshadowing all successive crow haiku. Indeed, Bashō's appreciation for the value of crow-as-image reflects how he turned on its head the haikai tradition of his time. He notably told his disciples: "The old verse can be about willows. Haikai requires crows picking snails in a rice paddy."² This approach—to use plain language to convey ordinary yet resonant moments—transformed haikai then and helped shape the haiku aesthetic many of us follow today.

It seems especially fitting, then, that an image associated with this early, formative history of haiku—the crow—has persisted as a popular haiku subject. (And even in Bashō's time it was not new; Shiki dismissed the poem above as an imitation of an older Chinese poem.³) A century after Bashō and his followers made the crow a model topic for verse, the Japanese master Kobayashi Issa wrote at least 150 crow poems, through which one can trace his wry affection for and identification with the bird.⁴ More than three centuries later, in preparation for writing this essay, my query of Charles Trumbull's haiku database produced an initial list of more than 3,300 poems. We are still drawn to and charmed by these common and ubiquitous birds.

fallen leaves —
not a single crow
is irksome

*Kobayashi Issa*⁵

flooded field —
Bashō's crow splashes
in the furrows

*Julie Warther*⁶

A brief sidenote: for the purposes of this essay I am not including haiku about ravens. William Higginson lumps “crow” and “raven” in his *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* as a year-round topic (with “baby crow” being a summer topic), noting that the Japanese word *karasu* can mean both.⁷ Scientifically speaking, ravens are indeed large crows, with raven and crow species worldwide sharing the genus *Corvus*. However, while there is much associative and metaphorical overlap between the two birds, the use of “raven” in contemporary haiku in English often introduces additional cultural references that I unfortunately don't have the time or space to consider here.

That said, crow haiku vastly outnumber raven haiku—and probably any other bird haiku. So, what is it about the crow that attracted the attention of the masters and, now, inspires so many contemporary haiku poets? To begin with, we can simply look around: crows are everywhere. The American Crow can be found year-round in every state except Hawaii and in almost every Canadian province during the nesting season. An adaptable, omnivorous, opportunistic bird, the crow can be found in our backyards, garbage dumps, parks, treetops, farm fields, beaches, and roadsides. We know about crows because they live alongside us. In my rural town, when I look out my back window searching for a topic for a poem, no matter what season, weather, or time of day, nine times out of ten a crow flies past. (As I was typing this piece, their constant appearance became almost eerie.)

mocking the farmer
plowing, the strutting
crow

*Kobayashi Issa*⁸

a crow works
the demolition rubble ...
autumn deepens

*Claire Everett*⁹

Because crows are around us all the time, we not only notice them, but, as with our human neighbors, we observe how they live. Like us, crows have a complex social structure. During the breeding season, crows live in small family groups, with offspring from previous years often helping their parents to raise that year's young. After the young have fledged, family groups will stick together to forage during the day and then often join hundreds, even thousands of other crows in the area at a communal night roost. This behavior takes advantage of safety in numbers, and studies have shown that birds seem to exchange foraging information at the roost, as well. The sight of big flocks of crows flying toward a roost at the end of a winter's day can be both awe-inspiring and ominous.

spending more time
with his family
crow

*Jennifer Hambrick*¹⁰

gathering darkness
hundreds of crows stream
into the roost

*Kristen Lindquist*¹¹

Crows are also downright sociable. Most of us learn as children how to recognize and imitate their distinctive caw. These highly intelligent birds clearly communicate with one another, making it easy to feel they are also talking to us, or at least about us. Research has shown, after all, that they recognize us as individuals, which is more than we can do with them. Various Native American tribes, including the Crow (or Absaroka) tribe of the northern Great Plains region, recognize the sly intelligence and verbal skills of the crow, often representing the bird in stories and art as a glib trickster.¹² One doesn't need to be a member of a tribe's Crow Clan to relate to the way crows relay calls back and forth from treetops or, like an avian Neighborhood Watch, mob a bird of prey that crosses their airspace.

raucous crows
circle the moored ice houses
nightly stories

*Gerald Vizenor*¹³

crows
a discussion
all about me

*Jann Wright*¹⁴

so many
of my poems
cawing crows ...

*Polona Oblak*¹⁵

a crow with more
than a thing or two to say
sour wind

*Chad Lee Robinson*¹⁶

But the physical characteristic that haiku poets capitalize on the most is the crow's black plumage. Unlike, say, the hummingbird or peacock, the crow is not celebrated for being colorful. But a largish bird with shining black feathers and alert, beady black eyes has a certain presence, especially silhouetted against sky or, especially, snow. To paraphrase the riddle, What's black and white and read all over? Crow-on-snow haiku! Perhaps we poets are so drawn to crows on snow because the image makes us think of ink on paper.

a crow
against snow
and other grievances

*Scott Mason*¹⁷

always hateful —
those crows, except in this
morning's snow scene

*Matsuo Bashō*¹⁸

A natural and familiar metaphor for night, coldness, and mystery, the monochromatic crow is also broadly aligned with the grey, liminal areas of twilight and shadow. Crow haiku of today often continue to echo the austere and lonely mood of Bashō's "bare branch" poem noted above. Indeed, the number of crow haiku set in autumn is notable; the dying season and the dark bird correspond closely in tone. In his later years, Bashō told his students, "Poetry of other schools is like colored painting. Poetry of my school is written as if it were black-ink painting."¹⁹ The typical representation of the crow in haiku perfectly illustrates that approach.

moorland edge
darkness hardens
to a crow

*Paul Chambers*²⁰

cold moon
the bare tree branch
turns into a crow

*Hifsa Ashraf*²¹

Crows serve as winged mediators between us and the darkness around us or, alternatively, the darkness we harbor within us. In this way, the crow's color becomes a poetic touchstone for profundity—like a black hole, a dark unknown that we cannot fully understand—thereby embodying the elusive Japanese aesthetic concept of *yugen*.

deep in the pine
a crow calls me
by my real name
*Elmedin Kadric*²²

crow at dusk
crossing from this world
into another
*Keith Polette*²³

sunrise ...
a crow holds the night
in its wings
*Barrie Levine*²⁴

earthbound
crow shadow after crow shadow
flies through me
*Julie Schwerin*²⁵

This imagistic relationship with darkness can run deep; many consider crows evil. After all, they raid our crops (hence, scarecrows), steal baby birds from nests, and eat roadkill and garbage. Historically, they are linked with the bloody battlefield, where they plucked out the eyes of the dead and feasted on gore. The Celtic triple-goddess Morrigan, aligned with war and fate (and thus, death), often took the form of a crow. The age-old English nursery rhyme for counting crows also associates the bird with augury, and ends with the seventh crow mysteriously signifying “a secret never to be told.” Poets find irresistible the fact that the collective noun for a group of crows is a “murder.”

scorched paddock
the crow perched
on a ribcage
*Gavin Austin*²⁶

a murder of crows night comes to pieces
*Roland Packer*²⁷

Finally, the word “crow” itself is appealing for a haiku poet—at only one syllable, it leaves a lot of room for more poem. And its strong

sounds—the hard initial C and open-ended long O at the end—invite alliteration, assonance, and euphony with evocative words like “hollow,” “shadow,” and, of course, “snow.”

one crow

within the zendo

silence

*Tom Clausen*²⁸

recess duty

the kids call

for my crow caw

*Brad Bennett*²⁹

All this of course begs the question of whether there are too many crow haiku out there. But that’s like asking if there are too many crows. When done well, the crow haiku has become a classic that never seems to grow old thanks to its many creative iterations, like a good haiku about the moon or cherry blossoms. Perhaps we can even think of the crow haiku as the flip-side of the sakura haiku, with the two themes together forming a yin-yang pairing of opposites throughout centuries of poetic tradition: spring/fall; light/dark; rebirth/death. Just as many of us appreciate and admire the charismatic crow, so we can continue to appreciate a good crow haiku. And the crows? They continue to live their crow lives, mindless of what we say about them, but ever watchful for a tasty scrap left in the compost.

paying no attention

to the departing spring...

crows

*Kobayashi Issa*³⁰

NOTES

¹ Reichhold, Jane, trans. *Basho: The Complete Haiku*. New York: Kodansha International, 2013.

² Hass, Robert, ed. *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa*. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1994.

³ Ueda, Makoto. *Basho and His Interpreters*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University

Press, 1992.

⁴ Lanoue, David, trans. Accessed at <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index> on 3.12.22.

⁵ Lanoue, David, trans. Accessed at <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index> on 3.12.22.

⁶ *Stardust Haiku* 4 (2017)

⁷ Higginson, William J. *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac*. New York: Kodansha International, 1996.

⁸ Lanoue, David, trans. Accessed at <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index> on 3.12.22.

⁹ *The Heron's Nest* 19.3 (2017)

¹⁰ *is/let*, 21 July 2018.

¹¹ *Tandem* 2.1 (2022), from rengay "Tricks of the Trade" (with Jacquie Pearce)

¹² Marzluff, John M. and Tony Angell. *In the Company of Crows and Ravens*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2005.

¹³ Vizenor, Gerald. *Favor of Crows*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1964/2015.

¹⁴ *The Heron's Nest* 22 (2020)

¹⁵ *Presence* 72 (2022)

¹⁶ *Shamrock* 40 (2018)

¹⁷ Board, Mikel, ed. *A Tiny Wobble*. New York, NY: Spring Street Haiku Group, 2020.

¹⁸ Ueda, Makoto. Ibid.

¹⁹ Ueda, Makoto. Ibid.

²⁰ *Presence* 60 (2018)

²¹ Asahi Haikuist Network, Dec. 21, 2018.

²² *Acorn* 38 (2017)

²³ *Shamrock* 42 (2019)

²⁴ *Stardust Haiku* 55 (2021)

²⁵ *Kingfisher* 4 (2021)

²⁶ *The Heron's Nest* 19.2 (2017)

²⁷ *Tinywords* 17.2, Oct. 30, 2017

²⁸ *Upstate Dim Sum* 2021/1.

²⁹ Bennett, Brad. *A Turn in the River*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2019.

³⁰ Lanoue, David, trans. Accessed at <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index> on 3.12.22.

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