

How to Haiku by Jim Fowler as presented at the monthly meeting of the Monadnock Writers' Group, (3/15/2014). Mr. Fowler's most recent work includes *Connections to this World*, a chapbook of Japanese forms and just-published *Falling Ashes*, a full-length book in the Granite State Poetry Series.

A haiku takes place in the present. It is a frozen moment in time, a moment of awareness, insight, or surprise. Sometimes known as the 'aha moment' or the 'Zen moment.' This delight or surprise adds to the depth of a haiku. A haiku is two images. I like to think of them as the short image and the long image. But it becomes more than the two images. What made you stop and look at the scene, what was that aha moment you felt? But, most importantly, a haiku is not a lyric poem, so you cannot say how you felt about the moment, you just introduce the two images and trust the reader to experience the images as you did. The images are the poem, not you. Even in a senryu, (haiku written by commoners in Japan) do not make any decisions or tell why you wrote the poem. Keep the ego out of it. The long image has two lines, the short one line. The two images should be as far apart as possible and still have the reader connect them. Ex: if I started with butterfly nets to then mention butterflies would not be much of a leap.

Now to back up a step, I said you must stay out of the haiku. That's true. You shouldn't say explicitly how the images attracted you, you do that with your word choice, phrasing and attitude toward the images. Avoid sentimentality. Don't in any way try to say how the images made you feel or how you think it should have made you feel. If you have written a successful haiku, the images and how you described them will make the reader have the same feeling. Yes, I understand. Everyone comes at a poem with their own baggage so may feel something different from the haiku from the poet meant. So what? As long as they experienced the haiku somehow.

Forget anything you knew of poetry. None of the Japanese forms (except tanka, an early five line form. Haiku was fashioned from the first three lines of a tanka) use poetic devices, no metaphors, no similes, no word play, no rhyme, no rhythm etc. I have known haijin (Japanese-American writers) who try to have the same syllable count for the first and third lines. That's a personal choice, I don't do that. I find that if you try to use a specific syllable count you pad the poem. Limit the use of adjectives. I've seen few adverbs in haiku. It's all about the bare-bones of the images.

Specifics – usually the two images are not grammatically linked. Some poets like to use a punctuation mark, usually a dash or comma, at the leap, most do not. You're choice. I don't. Otherwise, no punctuation, no caps, no title. (a title is cheating the tightness). It's been debated across the haiku world if "I" should appear in a haiku. It can in a senryu, but down played. I've seen essays that say no use of "I" if you want to have the 'you' doing something use an 'ing.' Other essays say never use an 'ing' because it adds an emphasis to the passive verb construction. I tend to rewrite the haiku to exclude me completely and do away with the need for either.

Tricks – put the order of the images to deliver the greatest surprise at the end, be simple, and concentrated. Bring in more than one sense if you can. The images, words, phrases and sound should be in balance.

On visual impact, most haiku are written in three lines. That's not how all of them are done. In the early days, haijin monks would write their haiku on posts or rocks and then they wrote them as one long down line (Japanese is written down, right to left or if across, then right to left) or they wrote them as two lines, a long and a short or vice versa.

All that said, many of these 'rules' can be broken if warranted, except don't explain anything, just present the images. That's one rule that stays consistent.

