



# nippon no haiku

by  
henri takahashi

o-o-o-o-o

To understand the Japanese mind, its habitual moods, feeling and ways of thinking, one must have a fine knowledge of Haiku—a form of poetry composed of seventeen syllables, consisting of three lines of five, seven and five syllables, respectively.



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Affecting no pedantry, the literary merits of Haiku is judged solely on the intuitive basis. No poetic theory goes to the making of the poem. Written by ordinary people, it is a simple record of the impressions and feelings of life. It is not an easy art. In a Haiku the thought has to be complete in itself, and cause an intended reaction in the reader's mind.

Essentially a combination of impressions and imaginations jumbled into one, in the literary method of the Haiku, no realism in the Western sense has a place. A Haikuist knows how to suggest a great deal more than he ever writes, this suggestiveness being the only and fundamental law of the Haiku, and, for that matter, of all Japanese art.

To bring about vividness of impression in the Haiku, no mention of facts and details is used. Mere allusions of sound, color and image are sufficient to "feel" the entirety and profundity of the Haiku.

Kare-eda ni  
Karasu no tomari keru  
Aki no kure.

A crow is perched on a bare branch;

It is an autumn eve.

—Basho

This Haiku describes only that which the poet Basho observes. It seems to signify nothing else. On the surface, at least, there is no expression of feeling and no use of simile or metaphor. Yet from this simple delineation, from this barest of suggestions, we can visualize a tall tree standing alone, its branches minus their leaves groping into an advancing autumnal evening. The setting sun is shining faintly on the tree tops, its light growing dimmer as minutes slowly pass. Silhouetted on one of the leafless boughs is a crow.

With all these factors—a solitary tree bereft of leaves, the setting sun and the lonely crow—Basho effectively symbolizes a dreary autumn evening without employing the word "dreary." We can easily make of this Haiku a profound philosophy.

Furuike ya  
Kawazu tobikomu  
Mizu no oto.

The ancient pond!  
A frog jumped . . .  
The splash of water!

—Basho

Here we have a picture of an old pond banked with soft moss and weeds many miles away from the hustle and bustle of a busy city life. There is an air of undisturbed stillness, far removed from the artificialities of human nature. Then, suddenly, breaking this silence is the sound of a frog leaping into the pond.

. . . asa no tsuyu . . .

by  
hiroyuki

*Moisture slowly collected on the end  
Of a pine needle which overhung a quiet  
Little pond. Gradually the needle became  
Bent with the weight of a drop of water  
That was being formed  
The drop, growing larger and larger,  
Held on stubbornly to its last resting place  
As though reluctant to leave.  
It became pear shaped, then, being too heavy,  
Plunged into the pond with a  
"Plunk!"  
While the pine needle snapped back.  
Many circular ripples grew about the spot  
Where the drop landed and slowly  
Disappeared into the banks.*

In this Haiku, Basho eloquently records a sense of peace and quiet and complete serenity. According to one critic, "the verse makes it possible for the Japanese mind to feel the profundity, vastness and stillness of the Universe, and the indescribable loneliness of human life in it."

Tsurigane ni  
Tomari te nemuru  
Kocho kana.

Upon the temple bell  
A butterfly is sleeping well.

—Buson

Here again is suggested a complete picture, with only the barest essentials recorded . . . a picture of a huge black heavy temple bell, and sleeping serenely on it, a lovely white frail butterfly. The bell, we realize, is capable of uttering a terrific boom, yet the little insect is resting complacently, quite unaware of its terror.

Meigetsu ya  
Tatami no ue ni  
Matsu no kage.

What a beautiful moon!  
It casts a shadow of pine boughs  
Upon the mats.

—Kikaku

The moon is shining brightly. The poet is seated in a corner of his room looking at the cast shadows of the pine tree softly playing on the white mats. The mere mention of the moon and the shadows on the mats re-creates for us the scene which inspired him to write the beautiful poem-picture.

ful poem-picture.

UENO NO SAKURA

Hana no kage  
Aka no tanin wa  
Nakari keru.

Under cherry flowers,  
None are utter strangers.

—Issa

Men and women, rich and poor, young and old, high and low, are strolling and singing leisurely under the cherry blossoms, so much enchanted by their beauty that everyone is friendly to one and all. Here all hypocries of civilization are forgotten or drowned in the ocean of friendliness and wine.

Na wo kiite  
Mata minaosu ya  
Kusa no hana.

Learning its name,  
I looked again at the flower.

—Teiji

Here is described a brief sketch of a man who chanced upon a pretty flower along the roadside. He asks of a passerby the flower's name. Finding its name to be familiar he again looks at it with renewed interest. It is a delightful little depiction of a charming scene.

BO-OJI WO OMO-O

Bo-oji no yo wa  
Tsuyu no yo nagara  
Sari-nagara.

TO A DEPARTED CHILD

Life is the morning dew;  
'Tis true indeed, but well-a-day!

—Issa

A parent is poignantly longing for his departed child, though he fully realizes that the span of man's life is short and more or less determined by fate.

One can easily sense the philosophy of the Japanese mind, the Japanese exquisite appreciativeness of the beauties of nature, after reading a few Haiku poem-pictures.

The lengthy cultural background which Japan enjoys is self-explanatory of the complexity of nature that goes to constitute the Japanese mind, its philosophy and its aesthetic outlook.