



## Ray Rasmussen: An Interview

[The Haiku Guru Website](#)

Ray Rasmussen, a retired university professor, lives in Edmonton, Canada. His haibun, haiku, haiga and articles have been published in the major haiku genre journals and his work has been included in the *Red Moon Anthology*, *Contemporary Haibun* and the *British Haiku Society Haibun Annuals*. He co-founded *Contemporary Haibun Online* and currently serves as haibun editor for *Haibun Today*. In the past, he served as haiga editor at *Simply Haiku*, haibun editor at *Notes from the Gean* and *A Hundred Gourds*.

**Your website suggests that you feel a deep affinity with the poetry of Basho, is this so?**

It's true that I have an affinity for some of Basho's poetry, but let me confess from the start that I've never been moved by (or perhaps "I've failed to understand" is the better way to put it) his famous frog-in-the-pond poem (1). I have used four of Basho's haiku that I particularly relate to as part of a haibun website about a romance (2). And as a means of explaining the characteristics of haibun prose, I have recently done a commentary on Basho's "Hiraizumi," a passage from his classic, *The Narrow Road to the Far North* (3). Furthermore, as a way of deepening my feeling for Basho's subject in "Hiraizumi" and for the man himself, I've used that passage as a model for a haibun about an experience I've had that parallels Basho's story (4). I also wrote a spoof

on myself that allowed me display a number of my favourite Basho's poems (5). But of the Japanese haiku masters, I have the greatest feeling for the poems of Issa. I like his humour and humility and the way he expresses feeling for creatures of the world. A poem of his that I've worked into a haibun that will appear in the Winter 2011 issue of *Frogpond* is:

don't worry spiders  
I keep house  
casually  
(trans. Robert Hass).

**How important do you think is the lifestyle of the poet in creating haiku and haibun. Have you adapted your lifestyle so it is more creative and conducive to writing?**

If you want to create publishable haibun and haiku, I think that it's important to develop this sort of practice:

- (1) Read a lot of haiku and haibun so that you understand the forms;
- (2) Do a lot of writing;
- (3) Get a lot of feedback;
- (4) Revise, revise, revise ...
- (5) Submit your work to a variety of journal editors.
- (6) If you get a rejection, figure out what's wrong, revise, and submit it somewhere else. Don't give up on a piece because of one editor's reaction.

A recent idea from Geoff Colvin's bestselling pop culture book, *What It Takes to Be Great*, is that "Greatness doesn't come from DNA but from

practice and perseverance honed over decades.” That fits my experience. I feel that I’ve only started to get reasonably good at the haibun form after 10 years of writing. In order to develop my writing, I formed a Writers Workshop, a place where a few of my fellow writers exchange critiques of one another’s work. And I’ve regularly submitted my finished work to a variety of well-respected journal editors and suffered the pains of rejection and the joys of acceptance.

I don’t write everyday. I tend to start a haibun when something moves me: an experience outdoors, a conversation with a friend, something that I read, and so on. If I feel moved or have an emotional reaction, then I know that there’s a subject worthy of an attempt of a haibun. I almost always think that the idea will be easy to put to words, but also always find that it takes 5-10 drafts over a period of several months to get a haibun to the point where I’m willing to try it as a submission.

**Do you meditate, study Zen, or have an interest in the more spiritual aspect of haiku? Do you feel that the art of photography is intimately related with the art of haiku? When taking photos, does the simple observational aesthetic of the haiku influence your technique?**

I practice tai chi, which is a form of meditation. I wrote an essay, “[Haiku & Meditation: A Learner’s Path](#)” (*Simply Haiku*, 4:3 Autumn 2006) that expresses my thoughts about the relationship between haiku, photography and meditation. Here are a few passages from that essay:

“Haiku is more a process, a way of being in the world, than a quick route to a written product. Both photography and haiku composition lead to an intense focusing on direct experience that is different from normal daily living. For example, normal practice when visiting a setting like the Kurimoto Japanese Garden in my city seems to be to walk around, chat with a friend, enjoy the

sunshine, that sort of thing—at least that's what I see most Kurimoto visitors doing.

In contrast, when engaged in the process of photography, I focus in, attempting to isolate forms and colors that strike my aesthetic sense. Looking through the lens, composing the frame, selecting the camera settings, imagining the print, all these provide a deeply relaxing contemplation of place. Time becomes frozen yet passes quickly. I spent 5 hours at Kurimoto, shot many rolls of film, and suddenly found myself in darkness. Where did the day go?

Similarly, I discovered that the process of haiku composition is not an activity that takes place exclusively at one's desk. Instead, on a walk in the woods or when visiting a coffee house, one learns to pay attention to events [some call them 'haiku moments'] that stand out. This spring, when the geese and ducks had just begun returning to Canada, I was deeply immersed in the silence of a nearby forest and heard a single sound—the call of a male mallard. I stood for a time listening in on his conversation with his mate. Louis Armstrong's voice came to mind. If you've ever heard Louie sing, "I'm in the mood for love," you understand the power of the Mallard's rasp as I experienced it on that quiet day. I began to compose a haiku in my mind, played with possible verses, continued my walk, caught a streamside glimpse of Mr. and Ms. Mallard, and when I returned home, wrote this haiku:

mid-day hush  
the rasp of a mallard  
calling his mate  
~ The Heron's Nest

You may or may not like this haiku. But whether or not I produced a worthy haiku, I had a great walk, one that was enhanced by the practice of focusing my attention on the mallard's love talk, of

paying attention to the stream of associations that flowed from that experience.”

Ref: <http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv4n3/features/Rasmussen.html>

**Which came first, photography or haiku and how has the presence of the second art influenced the first?**

Photography came first, then haiku, then haiga, then haibun. I had done a photo study of the Kurimoto Japanese Garden near my home and began building a website to display the garden:

Ref: <http://raysweb.net/japanesegardens/>

I wanted some Asian poetry to go with some of the images. An Internet search led to haiku poetry, particularly that of the Japanese Masters. I then began corresponding with current English-language haiku poets and creating what is called haiga (images + haiku) websites based on their haiku poems and those of the haiku masters like Basho and Issa. This led to my own early attempts at writing haiku and to the discovery that this shortest form of poetry is very difficult to create, at least haiku that are worth reading and sharing.

**Links:**

1. See the website Matsuo Bashô: Frog Haiku for 31 different translations:

<http://www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/basho-frog.htm>

2. A Monk's Journey, *Simply Haiku*, 6:4 Winter 2008:

[http://raysweb.net/fallromance/pages/haibun\\_rr\\_amonksjourney.html](http://raysweb.net/fallromance/pages/haibun_rr_amonksjourney.html)

3. A Commentary on Basho's "Hiraizumi," *A Hundred Gourds*, 1:1  
December 2011:

[http://ahundredgourds.haikuhut.com/ahg11/exp\\_rasmussen\\_basho.html](http://ahundredgourds.haikuhut.com/ahg11/exp_rasmussen_basho.html)

4. Slickhorn Canyon, *Haibun Today*, 5:4, December 2011:

[http://haibuntoday.com/ht54/Rasmussen\\_Slickhorn.html](http://haibuntoday.com/ht54/Rasmussen_Slickhorn.html)

5. Basho and me, *Simply Haiku*, 7:4 Winter 2009:

<http://www.simplyhaiku.com/SHv7n4/features/Rasmussen.html>