



Jim Kacian

A Brief History of English-Language Haibun

Editors Note: In his introductions to *American Haibun and Haiga* and its successor, *Contemporary Haibun*, Jim Kacian outlined the origins of haibun in Japan and the development of English-language haibun over the last 50 years. With his permission, I've used excerpts to convey a sense of how contemporary haibun has grown and reached its present state of health.

~ Ray Rasmussen

Excerpts from [AHH vol 1 2000](#).

Bashô's [Oku no Hosomichi](#) (*Narrow Path to the Interior*), the world literary classic and most important example of haibun, appears at the end of the seventeenth century. Kobayashi Issa's [Oruga Haru](#) (*My Spring*), the second most well-known haibun, appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Now at the end of the twentieth century, haibun is apparently not a viable form in Japan, the culture of its birth. So it's interesting that haibun is experiencing a renaissance in twentieth-century America and, indeed, in other countries.

In the late fifties experimentation with haibun-like form began with Gary Snyder's travel diaries (*Passage through India*) and Jack Kerouac's fiction which some consider to be haibun-like (*Desolation Angels*, *On The Road*, *Dharma Bums*). Jack Cain's

“[Paris](#),” the first formal-looking haibun to be published in the Americas, appeared in 1964 in the journal *Volume 63* and is reprinted in the first volume of *American Haibun & Haiga*. Bob Spiess’ *Five Caribbean Haibun*, the first chapbook-length American haibun, appeared in 1972, followed by Paul F. Schmidt’s [Temple Reflections](#) in 1980, a section of which also is reprinted in *AHH* vol.1.

In the '80s and '90s haibun appeared more frequently in the haiku journals and book-length experimentation continued in America, including work like John Ashbery’s *Haibun* (1990). Other cultures have also produced interesting examples, with book-length works such as Richard von Sturmer’s [A Network of Dissolving Threads](#) (1991), a section of which is reprinted in *AHH* Vol 1, Croatian Vladimir Devidé’s *Haibun, Words & Pictures* (1997), and Romanian Ion Codrescu’s *A Foreign Guest* (1999).

Haibun has come under consideration for critical attention as well. The comparative literature scholar Earl Miner published his *Japanese Poetic Diaries*, the singularly significant work on Japanese haibun, in 1969. In 1996 Miner published a study comparing the strategies in Bashô’s *Narrow Path to the Interior* to those in Dr. Samuel Johnson’s *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, a journey taken in 1776. A number of *haikai* writers have likewise responded critically and creatively to the relationship between Bashô and our own Henry David Thoreau; in fact Shokan Kondo, a well-known Japanese *renku* master in residence at Harvard University, is researching Thoreau’s relation to Japanese nature values.

The haibun and *haiga* in the volumes of *American Haibun & Haiga* and *Contemporary Haibun* make the haibun form an extraordinarily living and entertaining part of our lives. The best of

the works collected in these volumes speculate wisely and movingly upon our collective humanity and its place as a burgeoning sensibility that embraces and is embraced by the world of nature that surrounds us and is, in an ineffable way, our own.

Excerpts from [AHH vol 2, 2001](#)

In preparing Volume 2, I've recently re-read Ki no Tsurayuki's [The Tosa Diary](#), a Japanese travel journal written in 935 recounting a sea return of fifty-five days to Kyoto by a court nobleman. The simplicity of the prose, or rather, the effortless flow of sensibility, is most noticeable. An exchange with someone over editing issues with his haibun also recently prompted the thought that most of us writing haibun suffer from issues of narrative style, particularly that we are often too prosaic in manner.

Ion Codrescu's "[Toward the Mountain Temple](#)," a poetic journey to an ancient Chinese temple and an exploration of the aesthetics of the moment in nature, compares favorably with *The Tosa Diary* and Bashô's *Journey to the Interior* in stylistic approach. Put simply, the manner in which we tell our narrative is as important as the narrative itself, notwithstanding that a good tale is a good tale.

Compare the naive but unsentimental "[Hospice](#)" by John Crook to the postmodern tone of "[Buying a Soul](#)" by William M. Ramsey. Crook's simply stated emotion evokes one of life's great challenges and mysteries. Ramsey, a product of contemporary spiritual anxiety, reminds us in a circuitous way about the unsettling malaise that colors our collective horizon. Both are forthright in their sensibility, the one reminiscent of *kokoro*, the Japanese word for heart, the other of the so-called "postmodern

condition” of a troubled mind filtered through sentiment. In either case, in either style, pure sentiment touches us deeply.

Although, from another angle, haibun is made up of poetic prose, one should be careful to curtail one’s enthusiasm for figurative expression when such expression begins to overshadow the sentiment at the center of a given haibun. We thus might proceed to define haibun as *autobiographical prose (heightened by sentiment) that incorporates haiku*.

The haibun in the second volume of *American Haibun & Haiga* are varied in their approaches to the form but, as you might choose to agree, uniformly exhibit this touchstone of sentiment, even in their most demonstrative narratives. For simplicity of expression consider Yu Chang’s moving childhood memory, “[Rain](#),” Gene Williamson’s epiphany on the persistence of natural beauty, “[Home Again](#),” or Ken Hurm’s understated homage to love, “[Mother’s Day](#).”

For deft modern versions of travel diaries consider Gop’s Thailand exploration of the enigma of spiritual practice and human frailty, “[The Monk’s Bowl](#),” John Martone’s presentation of deep meditation practice in Vietnam, “[Bien Xu](#),” or Brent Partridge’s unpretentious account of travel with his mother in out-of-the-way Japan, “[The Dawn Road](#).”

For narrative focus consider Cherie Hunter Day’s adroit weaving of past and present in “[The Cabinetmaker’s Wish](#),” Margaret Chula’s stirring ironic drama of synchronicity, “[At Year’s End](#),” and Kenneth C. Leibman’s humorous encounter with Japanese cuisine, “[Okonomiyaki](#).”

And for a heightened meditative or measured tone consider Jesse

Glass's absorption of a Japanese monk's spiritual example, "[Unsen's Stone](#)," Linda Jeannette Ward's elegiac rumination on the Outer Banks, "[Small Time](#)," and Gerald George's refined exposition of ecological engagement, "[Arizona](#)."

These haibun and those standing beside them in this second volume of *American Haibun & Haiga* attest to the vitality of a form so simply started in such an unaffected overture as *The Tosa Diary*. There is nothing but possibility and further possibility in an American and world haibun bound ever-so-lightly by the common strands of human sentiment.

Excerpts from [AHH vol 3, 2002](#)

It has been over 300 years since Bashô wrote his famous haiku *natsugusa ya tsuwamono domo ga yume no ato* which R. H. Blyth renders as:

Ah! Summer grasses!
All that remains
of the warriors' dreams.

This was the poet's response to visiting [Hiraizumi](#), site of ancient battles, by then reduced to barren fields. It also refers to a poem by Tu Fu on the fading of glory.

On Meeting Li Guinian South of the Yangtze
By Tu Fu, Translated by A.Z. Foreman

Oft were the times I saw you sing at Prince Qi's mansion
Many a time I heard your song in Lord Cui's hall

Here south of the Yangtze - how wonderful the landscape
As once again I meet you - as the last Spring blossoms Fall

And it is incorporated within perhaps the most famous haibun of all time, and one of the highest achievements of the form, [Oku no Hosomichi](#) (*The Narrow Road to the North*).

In this brief compass we can discover nearly everything of value that haibun is capable of delivering. Everyone knows the poem, but relatively few have read the haibun, "[Hiraizumi](#)," so as to encounter the poem in its original context. But there is no doubt that the context deepens and enriches even this, one of the finest haiku written by one of the greatest *haijin*.

There are many fine poems included in the pages of *AHH* vol. 3, and it is possible that some of them will attain a degree of fame and familiarity apart from its existence within its haibun. But it is equally certain that the full life of these poems will not be known outside of their "natural habitat."

At any rate, haibun is growing once again, in new contexts and cultures, after having been left for dead in its country of origin. And just as the forms grow, so, too, does our awareness of interest in them. In fact, poets from so many different lands and languages have now picked up the pen that we have had to change our way of formulating the 3rd volume of *AHH*. What had begun as a strictly American enterprise (hence our series title) has enlarged into a cross-cultural quest that continues to grow with time.

We have taken steps to accommodate these many new

practitioners from around the world, welcoming Ken Jones of Wales to join original editors Jim Kacian (United States) and Bruce Ross (Canada). Consensus over what works culture-to-culture is hard to achieve, and even the present editors were not always unanimous in making their selections. There is, perhaps not coincidentally, a larger presence of writers from outside of the United States in this volume than ever before. It will be interesting to us to follow the development of these forms around the world over the next few years.

Excerpts from [*Contemporary Haibun*](#) Vol 4, 2003

In recognition of the practitioners from around the world, we've changed this year's title from *American Haibun and Haiga* to *Contemporary Haibun*.

There is no doubt that haibun is growing quickly. In this, our fourth year, we considered five times as many pieces as we did for our first volume. Talks and workshops on haibun are featured at virtually every haiku conference now. International haibun contests have been created, and renewed interest in the form as it appears in classical Japanese literature is evidenced by new translations and scholarly works. Volumes of haibun by individual practitioners, many of whom will be found in these pages, now appear with regularity. The Internet features many sites which offers one or both of these forms. And haibun has become a staple of readings by haiku poets worldwide.

What will become of haibun? You readers and writers will decide, and on the early evidence, you have decided that this special literary genre that elucidates the intuitive, the insightful, the

profound, has a viability that ensures its continued practice for a long time to come.

Excerpts from [*Contemporary Haibun*](#) Vol 5, 2004

Haibun is moving into the mainstream of English language literature. *The New Yorker* featured recently a lengthy “short story” in haibun form; several mainstream journals have done likewise; and flash fiction devotees have recognized haibun to be a near kin. This increased exposure is likely to lead to many more writers adopting the genre: and so it has transpired. We editors have sifted through nearly twice as many submissions this year as last.

Exposure, however, does not promise to mastery, and we have found approximately the same number of worthy works to offer you in this, our fifth volume. The usual problem in arriving at mastery is, as one might expect, the managing of the relationship of the elements. Those who have never worked with haiku often fail to grasp the subtleties of the genre, and the oblique fashion in which the poem adduces to the prose. What results is a repetition of the content, most commonly, or else a connection so attenuated as to be barely if at all discernible. Neither shows the genre to its best effects.

In this issue, we offer work in which the elements have been twinned to a degree which is neither obvious nor impossible; where the prose contains its own inherent interest, and the poem functions in the best traditions of the genre, capable of standing on its own, but also enhances, like a gem in a setting.

Excerpts from [*Contemporary Haibun*](#) Vol. 7, 2006

The selection process for the editors of *contemporary haibun* has, in the past twelve months, become yet more difficult by half. This year we have looked at well over 400 submissions, easily the highest total in our seven years of operation. We take this to be the most heartening sign of the health of haibun we've seen in all this time.

Much of the explanation resides in the success of our sister project, *Contemporary Haibun online*. Under the general management of Ray Rasmussen, *CHO* has reached thousands of people, perhaps most of whom might never have otherwise discovered the genre. This new infusion of blood and talent is essential for the growth of haibun, and it is gratifying to be part of a process that ensures its future.

The very best of what appears in *CHO* likewise appears in print in the current volume, so *CHO* serves as a proving ground for new talent, as well as a regular forum for those more established in the genre. It is not too much to say this is the most important thing to happen to haibun in English since it was first translated from the Japanese.

Excerpts from [*Contemporary Haibun*](#) Vol. 9, 2008

Many interesting things have become apparent over the course of the nine years this anthology series has been offered. When we first conceived of the series, we presumed that we would receive perhaps a few hundred submissions each year, and that 95% of these submissions would come from close to home. At first this is exactly what happened—there was no great throng of writers of

this arcane form.

What has changed over the past half-decade is that haibun has migrated. Spurred perhaps by easy access via *CHO*, fully 25% of our submissions now come from overseas, largely, to be sure, from other Anglophone countries, but not exclusively so. The interest in haibun in the Balkans, Scandinavia, even Japan, is unprecedented in modern times, and this is a trend we see continuing. This makes for a multi-voiced colloquy that is bound to enlarge the scale and interest in the genre. Of particular interest would be the re-adoption of haibun in Japan, where it has been largely moribund for the past two centuries. Such an eventuality would be a true gift of western *haikai* back to the motherland, and a clear signal that what we have been doing on the far horizon has been noticed, and more, has significance, as seen in historical context. This is more than we might ever have hoped.

Excerpts from [*Contemporary Haibun*](#) Vol. 10, 2009

We all know there's something magical about ten: ten fingers, ten toes, of course, but also ten years in a decade, ten commandments in a moral code. We don't speak idly when we recognize a power of ten to be an order of magnitude. When you've done one of something it could be an accident, but if you've done ten, then you've had a plan or a very long run of good luck.

We'd like to feel our ten-year run indicates a plan. When we started this series (in its original incarnation as *American Haibun and Haiga*) there was nothing quite like it. But now there is a great deal more haibun being published in the various [haiku journals](#),

both online and print. We can't take all the credit for this growth, but we are surely entitled to some.

And of course we have gone modern ourselves, with our online presence at *Contemporary Haibun Online*. The increasing number of new authors we publish each year is an indication that writers are discovering us, and are challenged and intrigued by this most difficult amalgam of form, which demands skill in two disciplines—a facility with haiku and the ability to pair it with an equal caliber of prose. Mastering one of these areas is challenge enough for most, and we can't claim all the works we see fit to publish are masterworks, but they show significant improvement over the years we've been at it—growth of an order of magnitude.

~ Jim Kacian