

Excerpts from
HAIKU REVISION

"An Interactive Presentation/Workshop First Held at the Fall HPNC Meeting October 21, 2018"
by Chuck Brickley

Introduction

Have you ever looked at one of your haiku, and thought: something's missing. Something's not quite right. It could be a haiku you've just written, or an old one you came across in a journal. Could be a haiku that's been rejected by several journals, and there it is in your notebook, taunting you. Or maybe this particular haiku has been published. Maybe even won an award. But here you are, years later, trying to admire your award-winning poem; trying, because something still nags, something you can't put a finger on. You go for a walk, clear your head, come back, and sneak up on it. For a brief moment, you think--hey, there's nothing wrong with this poem! It's pretty decent. Decent? Is that enough, you wonder. Was there an insight in the original experience that got lost in the writing of it, and that you have since forgotten? Or an insight you haven't yet discovered because, way back when, you accepted too easily your first go at it? You take a deep breath. You know there's a good haiku in there somewhere. You roll up your sleeves. You dig in.

Any of this ring a bell? Any number of variations on this theme has happened to me over the last 50 plus years. Fortunately, most of my haiku come fairly quickly, sometimes on the first go. But others? I take some comfort in the fact that even Basho revised haiku over the course of his career. Who am I to believe that I don't have the need to improve my work?

Today I will not be presenting a learned, objective methodology of revision. I haven't researched the many essays on the subject that have, no doubt, appeared in haiku journals over the years. I haven't read any treatises or books on haiku revision. What I will be presenting--at least, in the first part--is a personal history; a confession, really, of the struggles I've had with several haiku, and the insights I've gained from those struggles. Hopefully some of you may be inspired on how to re-approach your own problematic haiku.

The second part of this presentation will be an interactive workshop, wherein we'll work together on some of the haiku you have brought here today.

So now I invite you into my workshop, where I'll open my toolbox, and share the evolution of the six haiku you see here on the whiteboard . . .

[All six haiku presented had been published before, one even winning the Eminent Mention Award in MODERN HAIKU in 1979. All six had subsequently been revised. I walked everyone present through my changes to each haiku, explaining why I made them, and added whatever "tools" I had used to a column on the right side of the board. Here are the six haiku, and a list of the tools used, plus a few . . .]

SIX HAIKU by Chuck Brickley

sunlit rain
a snail unfolds
its feelers (Cicada 1981)

on a thistle bloom
a butterfly's sunlit wings
fold and unfold (MH 1978)

like I'm not here
ceiling stars
in the child's eyes (BR 2014)

evening light
the bee's shadow slips
from the lilac leaf (MH 1984)

Using my hands
near the crest of a rockslide:
a tiny white bloom (FP 1979)

after the abortion
the long drive to her apartment
through the spring rain (MH 1979)

TOOLBOX

"Some strategies for haiku revision"

the right word(s)

Consult dictionary and thesaurus often (i.e., a snail's "eyestalks" instead of "feelers").

specificity

Often (not always) the name(s) of the subject/object will add perceptual/connotative dimension (i.e., "bull thistle" instead of "thistle bloom", "monarch" instead of "butterfly").

weed/prune

Delete unnecessary words, phrases, lines, but not to the point of so-called "tonto-ism".

line adjustment

Emphasize or de-emphasize a word or phrase by changing line break (i.e., "a monarch's wings/fold and and unfold" to "a monarch's wings fold/and unfold."

part reversal

Most haiku are comprised of two parts, usually a one-line word/phrase and a two-line phrase. Try reversing them, letting content determine form.

go deeper

Look for opportunity to suggest, evoke deeper meanings (i.e., "monarch" a threatened species, *sabi*).

original experience

Memory always the best place to return when searching for nuances that may have been overlooked in original composition.

get out of the way

Let subjects/objects speak for themselves. If the haiku does not directly concern you, get out of the way.

accurate sequence of events

Direct the reader's attention in a natural, realistic progression (i.e., change "ceiling stars/in the child's eyes" to "in the child's eyes/ceiling stars").

be truthful to nature

In spite of philosophical arguments to the contrary, we know the way things are (i.e., "evening light" will not cast "the bee's shadow").

seasonality

Use *kigo* (season words) or seasonal references to add depth of emotion, but only if it feels natural, truthful, and not shoehorned into the poem for its own sake. Seek authenticity.

free fall exercise

When stuck for the solution to a problem, open your mind by copying the word, line, or haiku in question onto the center of a large paper, and then--without editing--quickly write all around it any and all random, free-associated words, quotes, thoughts, images, etc. that come to mind. A good way to stimulate the creative process.

spin-offs

When revising a haiku, be open to possibilities that may lead you in a different direction, to a new haiku.

the Italian fix

If a solution to a problem arises, one that was not part of the original experience, but could have been, try running with it. As my Italian mother-in-law, when questioned about any of her frequent exaggerations, used to say: "Why let the truth get in the way of a good story?" Or, put another way: "Why let the truth get in the way of the truth?"

secret titles

What are you really trying to say? When having trouble giving your haiku a focus, try giving it a title--if only for your personal purpose.

a, an, the

A world of difference between "a bullet shell" and "the bullet shell." Every single word, including articles and pronouns, can contribute or detract from the poem's meaning.

percepts

Merriam Webster: *an impression of an object obtained by use of the senses*. Haiku is rooted in the realm of percepts: what you see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Most concepts, emotions, or anything connotative can be implied by the juxtaposition of your percepts, rather than be stated outright. Show, don't tell.

techniques

Be not a stranger to poesy: alliteration, assonance, allusion, ambiguity, meter, onomatopoeia, rhyme, synaesthesia, syntax, form (variants), irony, shasei (sketch from nature). Compare/contrast, switch focus (narrow, widen), switch senses, telescope time.

Japanese aesthetics

Learn to feel, and in turn express, mono no aware, wabi, sabi, yugen, karumi, mu etc.

listen to advice/workshop

Adhere to original intent while remaining open to suggestions. Leave your ego at the door, but don't succumb to "art by committee." A pitcher will shake off a catcher's sign because, at the end of the game, the W goes after their name, not the catcher's.

A Final Observation

All the time you spend writing and rewriting--and rewriting again--is, even if nothing good comes out of it, not wasted. You're sharpening tools. So the next time you feel a wave of inspiration, you can ride that wave longer. You won't get bogged down as quickly with decisions like 'should this be in the third line?', or, 'what will be my kigo?' Responses to these calls of your craft will increasingly become second nature. You'll be able to respond more quickly, more intuitively to every little twist and turn your wave of inspiration takes.