

# Essays

## Writing Haiku: The Two-Line Form

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The majority of English-language haiku published today is, of course, written in a three-line format. One-liners have comprised a smaller (but increasing) share in recent years. But two-line haiku remain rare. For instance, in a recent issue of *Frogpond*, there were four two-line haiku and senryu out of a total of 197 poems. Similarly, a recent issue of *Modern Haiku* featured two out of 268. In *Take-Out Window*, the 2014 Haiku Society of America members' anthology, only four appeared in a collection of 291 poems.<sup>1</sup> These numbers prompt the question of why two-line haiku remain, in fact, “unicorns.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the introduction of haiku into English the three-line form has predominated.<sup>3</sup> Much early scholarship defined haiku as a three-line poem. Kenneth Yasuda wrote that haiku is a “one-breath poem in three lines.”<sup>4</sup> James Hackett recommended that haiku poets “write in three lines . . .”<sup>5</sup> The early translations by Blyth, Henderson, and Yasuda were composed in this form. The Beat poets mainly wrote three-line haiku, which includes Jack Kerouac's popular work.

The weight of tradition is not the sole cause, however, for the persistence of three lines. Over the past century, English-language haiku poets have migrated from other established conventions, such as a strict seventeen-syllable count, for example. So what does account for the dearth of two-line haiku? While it seems unlikely that this format, which sits between the two preferred options, would be especially demanding, the two-liner does feature unique constraints. Simply put, the key qualities of English-language haiku are more difficult to achieve in a two-line structure.

A basic challenge of the two-line structure is rhythm, or meter. In English-language haiku, a short-long-short pattern predominates. This was true for the five-seven-five syllable count of early decades and for the more prevailing compact form today. Of course, a short-long-short pattern fits organically into a haiku that is composed of three discrete units (lines). This is not the case with a two-line structure. Indeed, even when this pattern is present, it may not be as noticeable:

after the quarrel . . .  
a singed peanut's lingering scent

The second line in this haiku by Jennifer Corpe<sup>6</sup> is fairly long, being composed of eight syllables. It does not feel unnatural to read the line with a pause between “a singed peanut’s” and “lingering scent.” This reading brings the poem closer to the three-unit standard.

Sometimes the sounds in a line are prolonged so that they prompt a slower-paced reading:

first breath of spring  
**harrRRRRLEYS**

The onomatopoeic word “HarrRRRRLEYS” accentuates the second line. Font size and letter case divide the line into two parts. Although not resulting in a strict short-long-short structure, the poem by Del Todey Turner<sup>7</sup> nevertheless feels longer overall than the total number of words (just five) would suggest.

Another common attribute of haiku, the pivot word or line, lends itself more to a three-line structure. Lee Gurga defines the pivot as “a word or phrase that combines with the forgoing text in one way and with the following text in another.”<sup>8</sup> The second line often functions as (or contains) the pivot. In each of the haiku above, two images are present. In the first haiku, the images are “the quarrel” and “the singed peanut.” In the second poem, the images are “first breath of spring” and

Harleys. However, a pivot is absent in both of these. This is common in the two-line format, as also seen in this poem by David Reynolds:<sup>9</sup>

same old argument  
rusty yo-yo

Due to space limitations, *kigo* and seasonal references are often treated differently, too. In a standard haiku, it is not unusual for a *kigo* to fully occupy one of the three lines. In a two-liner, this practice leaves the poem with only a single line for other material. This limitation can be addressed by using *kigo* that provide sufficient information:

october loneliness  
two walking sticks

In Vincent Tripi's haiku,<sup>10</sup> the seasonal element "October loneliness"<sup>11</sup> conveys an experience of aging and disability. "Loneliness" underscores the association of autumn. If Tripi had omitted either word, readers would likely miss the full, rich meaning.

It's also helpful if the other line (without the *kigo*) is developed—suggestive enough—to shoulder the weight of conveying the experience:

a quiet kind of love  
autumn crocus

In this haiku by Greg Piko,<sup>12</sup> "a quiet kind of love" points to the subject with "autumn crocus" as the *kigo*. A reader doesn't need additional context. But this approach carries a risk of saying too much or being heavy handed:

Slug trail on the porch . . .  
now, I understand my life

In David Rosen's haiku,<sup>13</sup> the image of the "slug trail" anticipates the insight expressed in line two. However, the second

line verges toward being too declarative (for a haiku). Rosen explicitly connects the image to the meaning for the reader.

The experience of cutting and the usage of a *kireji* (a cutting word) are different in a two-liner. Punctuation like ellipses and dashes, which can be substitutes for *kireji* in English, are used (as in Rosen's haiku earlier). But there are other techniques—for instance, extra spacing—that are economical in a compact space:

Deep in the smell of  
childhood comic books winter rain

In this poem by Scott Terrill,<sup>14</sup> an extra space is inserted between the words “in” and “the” in line one, and “books” and “winter” in line two. If these additional spaces were not present, there would only be one option for the cut: the end of the first line. The spacing has produced two new potential cut points that compel the reader to pause. This results in a rhythm that feels unique when compared to many other haiku.

Another hallmark of haiku is its open-ended character. When Eric Amman considered the two-line form, he argued that “the two lines balance each other, tending to ‘close’ the poem.”<sup>15</sup> While this assessment may be too categorical, it is true that an additional (third) line, especially when employing a *kigo* or a seasonal reference, can create a sense of space and also accommodate a shift between two parts. Jim Kacian observes: “One or three lines has offered a more flexible handling of material without losing the music, asymmetry, surprise . . .”<sup>16</sup>

Beyond this range of haiku-specific challenges, another notable constraint of the two-line poem is that it leaves the poet with less material to develop. By reducing the number of lines to two, the poet surrenders one-third of the units to work with. This limits the opportunity for lineation (enjambment and end-stopping).

The differences inherent in the two-line haiku add up: varying rhythms, restrained pivoting and cutting, less room for a seasonal element, and less opportunity for lineation. When combining these factors, it's apparent that the two-line form is unique and sometimes unforgiving. Even if a two-liner is successful in working with these constraints, that success may still feel very different from the haiku that readers are familiar with and expect.

Considering these handicaps, why resort to the two-line haiku? What benefits does this structure offer? There are, in fact, several qualities that make it a useful option. The first of these can be termed "proximity." As illustrated above, the absence of a pivot or another transitional element has the effect of joining two images. There is a risk of tying the images too tightly, and losing the shift between them. However, if well executed, the result can be a potent concentration of images:

deserted tennis court  
wind through the net

In this haiku by Gary Hotham,<sup>17</sup> the two images are presented sequentially and with no mediating element. Each conveys emptiness and loneliness. The first image does so of its own accord (through the use of the word "deserted"). With this context set, the second image adds to the feeling.

By leaving out more concrete description than the three-line format, the reliance on suggestion may be even stronger. In this poem by Karen Sohne,<sup>18</sup> the background is wholly absent:

androgynous stranger  
winks at me

An additional line might provide detail such as a setting or a season. As it stands, the reader is left with only a snapshot of an interaction, and nothing more.

Two-line haiku also afford the opportunity to compose longer lines, as in this poem by Robert Boldman:<sup>19</sup>

Death camp in the photograph  
the little girl's hair will always be blowing

The first line contains seven syllables and the second contains eleven syllables, for a total of eighteen. In these terms, this poem is longer than is customary in haiku today (whether in two or three lines). The second line is able to accommodate an adjective (“little”) and the present participle “will always be blowing” (rather than the present tense “blows” or “blowing”). A two-liner can afford the poet an opportunity to experiment with longer lines while conforming to the traditional overall word volume.

The opposite is true as well. Two-line haiku can approximate the shorter feel of the one-liner. Jörgen Johansson’s poem is an example:<sup>20</sup>

a ladybird  
b5 to c4

In this haiku, the two images are presented with no intervening component. Because it is composed in two lines, the reader pauses at the end of the first line. However, it’s easy to imagine this poem as a one-liner: “a ladybird b5 to c4.” The result is a quicker read but not radically different from the original.

English-language haiku has grown more diverse over time. It remains to be seen if two-line haiku become more common or remain sparse. If poets do produce more two-liners, they may discover new strengths of the form and overcome some of its constraints. As it stands, haiku poets will benefit if they consider the two-line format as a viable option when composing their work.

### Notes

1. *Frogpond* 38.1 (Winter 2015) and *Modern Haiku* 46.1 (Winter-Spring 2015). I tallied the poems in the “Haiku & Senryu” sections of each journal. *Take-Out Window: Haiku Society of America 2014*

*Members' Anthology*, Gary Hotham, ed. (New York: Haiku Society of America, 2014). In "Editor Comments," Hotham notes the paucity of submissions of two-liners (1).

2. My examination excludes two-liners that appear in linked forms like renku and rengay. In such cases, two-liners belong to a larger context and perform different or additional functions (e.g., stanza transitioning) than stand-alone two-line haiku.

3. There were exceptions. For example, Basil Hall Chamberlain translated into a two-line form. Refer to "Bashō and the Japanese Poetical Epigram" in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Vol. XXX (Tokyo: Rikkyo Gakuin Press, 1902), 243–362. Google Books digital version. Accessed June 15, 2015.

4. Kenneth Yasuda, *A Pepper-Pod* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), xv.

5. James Hackett, *Haiku Poetry: Original Verse in English, Volume One* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc., 1968), 51.

6. Jennifer Corpe, *Frogpond* 34:1 (Winter 2011), 31.

7. Del Todey Turner, *Modern Haiku* 42.3 (Autumn 2011), 22.

8. Lee Gurga, *Haiku: A Poet's Guide* (Lincoln, IL: Modern Haiku Press, 2003), 78.

9. David C. Reynolds, *Modern Haiku* 45.2 (Summer 2014), 101.

10. Vincent Tripi in *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English*, Cor van den Heuvel, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 227.

11. The Yuki Teikei Haiku Season Word List. <http://youngleaves.org/season-word-list/>. Accessed August 9, 2015. The *kigo* listed is "autumn loneliness."

12. Greg Piko, *Modern Haiku* 42.3 (Autumn 2011), 76.

13. David Rosen. "Your Daily Poem" website. [http://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem\\_id=1848](http://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=1848). Accessed June 6, 2015.

14. Scott Terrill in *Fear of Dancing: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku 2013* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2014), 74.

15. Eric W. Amman, *The Wordless Poem: A Study of Zen in Haiku* (*Haiku Magazine*—Special Issue, Vol. III, No. V), 37.

16. Jim Kacian, "Identifying UFOs," *Modern Haiku* 45.2 (Summer 2014), 48.

17. Gary Hotham in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 40.

18. Karen Sohne in *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English*, Cor van den Heuvel, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 187.

19. Robert Boldman in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, Kacian, Rowland, and Burns, eds., 87.

20. Jörgen Johansson, in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, Kacian, Rowland, and Burns, eds., 252.



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