

Punctuation Words in English Haiku

by Randy Brooks

question mark, semi-
colon, dash: a squirrel
crosses the street

Pat Tompkins, Modern Haiku 48:1 (2017), 105

This is a great haiku to begin this essay examining references to punctuation in English haiku. Loaded with punctuation words and actual examples of punctuation, Pat Tompkins shows in this haiku that we know how punctuation guides us through our reading journeys. In this case, we have a scene of a squirrel crossing the street. Through the list of punctuation words, we can imagine just how the squirrel starts with a hesitating question, then goes part way into the street, and finally dashes the rest of the way across. This is an excellent haiku because it is not about punctuation. It employs our knowledge of punctuation (as readers, writers, and editors) to understand the squirrel's perspective as it crosses the street. It highlights the way we understand that punctuation indicates pauses, relationships, and tone or voice in written text. Tompkins taps into her readers' understanding of the functions of various types of punctuation, a sort of literacy consciousness, which evidently can be applied to an experience in nature.

On his website, *Grace Guts*, Michael Dylan Welch has posted an article he wrote in 1996, "Punctuation in Haiku." Welch provides a synopsis of types of punctuation, which I will use throughout this essay. Here is the brief overview by Welch:

"The first type of punctuation is pause punctuation, which includes the comma, semicolon, and period. . . . A second type of punctuation shows relationships as well as providing a pause. These marks include the colon, the dash, and the ellipsis. These pauses are also endowed with specific qualities of relationship. The colon, for example, marks expectation or addition—and says, essentially, that this equals that, which is often too heavy-handed. In haiku, both the colon and the dash show some sort

of spatial relationship between the actuality of what precedes and follows the punctuation mark. The ellipsis, though, typically suggests the passing of time (however quickly) in a haiku. . . . The ellipsis can also indicate contemplation rather than passing time. . . . Another type of punctuation indicates tone or voice. These marks include the exclamation mark, indicating surprise or emphasis, and the question mark, indicating questioning or doubt. Both are relatively rare in haiku. . . . Certain punctuation marks show the form of given text. For example, quotation marks often indicate that words are spoken or quoted, and apostrophes usually show possession or omission. These are actually non-punctuational symbols, yet they are worth considering.”

(1) PUNCTUATION

First, I will examine English haiku that refer to punctuation in general. For example, consider this haiku from one of the first English haiku anthologies, *Borrowed Water*:

On the wet, dark street
cherry blossoms pattern white—
spring's punctuation.

Peggy Card, Borrowed Water (1966), 34

Although not common in early English haiku, there are a few examples of references to language, grammar, or punctuation. Peggy Card's haiku narrator directs our attention to the white cherry blossoms and calls them “spring's punctuation.” Of course, this haiku reflects the 5-7-5 style of early haiku, with unnecessary padding and repetition. It features a closing metaphorical flourish to make it a beautiful “poem,” an approach common in early English haiku attempts. As readers, we do see the vivid white blossoms on a wet, dark street for ourselves. But the final line, “spring's punctuation,” is essentially metaphorical commentary. This is not a good example of the use of the word “punctuation” in a haiku.

About 10 years later, we can find a different approach to referring to language words as a form of consciousness. Here is a haiku from Marlene Wills (later known as Marlene Mountain):

frog punctuation
a star falls punctuation
splash punctuation

*Marlene Wills [Mountain], moment / moment /
moments, High/Coo Press (1978)*

This haiku is, of course, a satire of traditional haiku conventions. First, you might note that it is a 5-7-5 syllabic poem, with apparent superfluous repetition of the four-syllable word “punctuation.” Second, it satirizes the content of nature haiku (like haiku written by her ex-husband John Wills) if you consider “punctuation” to not be contributing to the meaning of the haiku. Marlene makes a point that we view haiku as literary constructions, not merely a mirroring of nature. Perhaps she is inviting readers to collaborate by thinking of what punctuation they might use as the end of each image—something like this:

frog?
a star falls . . .
splash!

Punctuation in haiku is a choice, an option. It may be just as controlling or superfluous as a poet’s explanatory commentary or abstract pronouncements.

In 2006, Cherie Hunter Day first published this haiku that was subsequently republished in five haiku anthologies, including a haiga version in Ion Codrescu’s book.

looking up
rules of punctuation—
the green hills

*Cherie Hunter Day, The Heron’s Nest 8:1 (2006); Lee
Gurga and Scott Metz, eds., Haiku 21 (2011), 57; Apology*

Moon (2013); Jim Kacian, Allan Burns, and Philip Rowland, eds., *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years* (2013), 159; Ion Codrescu, *Haiga: Something Out of Nothing* (2014), 55; Kala Ramesh et al., eds., *Naad Anunaad: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku* (2016), 46

I am sure that many readers identify with Cherie Hunter Day's narrator in this haiku, needing to look up the rules of punctuation. We relate to this urge to "get it right" or to understand the complexities of being literate. Will these rules help us be better readers, better seekers of understanding? Will they help us know? Will they help us write better haiku? What will we know by "looking up rules of punctuation?" The rules. Then we get to the last line of this haiku, "the green hills." There's so much more to know, to explore. More to life and engagement than following the rules. The "green hills" call for us to explore with our feet instead of with our rules of writing. Both are real realms to explore, but Day invites us to get beyond the limitations of our literary consciousness. Or does it just depend on where our creative minds live?

same brown grass
punctuation
of crocus

Ann K. Schwader, bottle rockets 22 (11:2, 2010), 29

In this haiku, we imagine someone reading the signs of spring. The focus is on the "same brown grass" of winter and noticing the first few colorful flowers of spring appearing, the crocus blooms. Schwader employs "punctuation of crocus" as a visual metaphor. Employing the analogy of reading, the crocus flowers create pauses that break the continuity of the brown grass. The reader can choose the specific imagined punctuation crocus represent. An exclamation mark! Or just a comma, or dash—here and there. Of course, all of this is done without actual punctuation in the haiku. We imagine the punctuation as well as the brown grass and crocus. Crocus can be singular or plural, which works very well in this haiku—again, keeping the choice up to the reader's imagination.

winter night
adding punctuation
to a love letter

Els van Leeuwen, Modern Haiku 45:2 (2014), 110

The narrator of this haiku is up late on a winter night, writing a love letter. This setting implies the dark, lonely, coldness of winter and a lover's wish for warm togetherness. Perhaps the first draft of the letter was written in a flurry of words, a pouring out of emotion. But this haiku focuses on the moment after the letter has been written. Now it is being cleaned up, edited, with consideration of more trivial things like following proper punctuation. Why is the narrator "adding punctuation"? The writer may be worried about being correct, about being judged for not being an educated, literate person. Or maybe the narrator merely wants to add emphasis to more accurately present certain feelings.

Let's consider a recent monoku from Brad Bennett's collection *A Turn in the River*:

pond still no punctuation

Brad Bennett, A Turn in the River (2019)

In this minimalist poem of four words, Bennett starts with "pond," which quickly establishes a scene. For haiku readers, this echoes several previous haiku including Bashō's frog pond. Or for lovers of nature writing, it may recall Thoreau's Walden Pond. Without so much as one adjective, like Bashō's "old pond," we just have to make do with the more generic "pond." As a monoku, there are no definite breaks, so we can read "pond still" as a weird Yoda-like syntax where the adjective follows the noun. Maybe we imagine a "still pond" transposing these two words in our imaginations. On the other hand, this reads more naturally as a continuous phrase "still no punctuation." Now we are thinking about why this pond has no punctuation. Does it need punctuation? Is this a literary pond? A pond to be read? Why did our narrator expect to find punctuation at this pond? What would pond punctuation look like? And why is it still missing? As a nature lover,

I'm more interested in the natural scene interpretation. In my mind, this is simply a very quiet, still pond without any ripples or wavelets of wind. No frogs jumping in. Just the quiet mirror of the pond and sky. Nothing disrupting nor pausing that stasis. No punctuation evident nor needed. Just being the pond, still.

(2) COMMAS

“The first type of punctuation is pause punctuation, which includes the comma, semicolon, and period.”

—Michael Dylan Welch, “Punctuation in Haiku.” *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

Second, let's consider the various uses of the word “comma” in English haiku. This has been a common reference throughout the history of English-language haiku.

TADPOLES

Wriggling black bodies
of tadpoles in pool look like
commas come to life.

Nelle M. Stauss, Haiku Highlights 4:2 (1968), 5

Birds huddled on fence
like a long row of commas
punctuating snow.

Dolores Malaschak, Modern Haiku 2:1 (1970), 33

In these two examples, the word “commas” is used because of its visual similarity to something seen. The tadpoles “look like commas” and the birds are “like a long row of commas.” These haiku do not ask us to consider the literary functions of commas, but simply use the comma as a metaphoric image. There is a bit of cartoonish playfulness in imagining “commas come to life,” but this is not an effective use of punctuation references in a haiku. That haiku is also plagued by the usual problems of early 5-7-5 haiku as you can see for yourself.

Although it is also a 5-7-5 haiku, at least the second one conveys a sense of the cold snowy day. The birds huddle together like a “long row of commas” typed on a typewriter. Neither one of these haiku asks us to consider the function of commas as part of the process of understanding what is happening.

Commas float—
dogwood petal pauses
for the crescent moon

Peggy Willis Lyles, Tightrope 9 (1979)

While Peggy Lyles’s haiku starts with a visual similarity of commas and the shape of dogwood petals, she puts these into a narrative of connections and pauses. The visual curved-shape similarities abound . . . the commas float, the petal pauses, and the moon is crescent. The reader imagines these simultaneous images as a unified scene. I imagine this as a peaceful scene after a storm. Perhaps it is early evening. Several dogwood petals have fallen to the ground and float in rain puddles. There are some petals hanging on to branches. We are in the pause between significant events or beautiful sights. The commas float. They are not carefully placed. The petal pauses. Ah, there’s the faint illumination of the crescent moon.

Consider this haiku by Alexis Rotella:

Dreary rain —
so many commas
in his letter.

Alexis Rotella, Wind Chimes 13 (1984), 15; Rotella, Looking for a Prince (1991), 45; Woodnotes 12 (1992)

The first line establishes the narrator’s attitude. It is a dreary day of rain that does not seem to be letting up. Perhaps the narrator was hoping to be cheered up by “his letter.” However, it appears that the letter is also dreary. The narrator is noticing how the letter is written instead of what the letter writer says. On a boring, dreary rainy day, she has got a letter full of commas. “So many commas” suggests the

letter was written without focus, with lots of asides, or alternatives and pauses. A couple years later, Rotella wrote a slight variation of this haiku as a link in the *kasen renku* “Without a Splash,” published in *Wind Chimes*:

commas
swarm like minnows
in his letter

Alexis Rotella, link from “Without a splash” [kasen renku (36)], Wind Chimes 18 [1986], 43

At least in this version, the commas are livelier than in the dreary rain haiku. They “swarm like minnows” suggesting an excitement or eagerness to be alive! The commas are, of course, a metaphor, but one that works in conveying the enthusiasm of the letter’s writer.

imminent spring—
how the dots and commas
fly about!

David Cobb, Haiku Scotland 12 (2007)

British haiku writers are known for their love of bird haiku. In this case, David Cobb’s literary narrator admires the vigor of “dots and commas” that “fly about” because spring is imminent. Again, we see the animation of punctuation as an analogy or metaphor for living creatures. As in most of our previous examples, the point is not that dots and commas are living things, but that our narrators relate to them the same way they read books or writing. We read the skies with our literacy. In the vague indeterminacy of the distant birds, they look more like abstract punctuation marks than specific birds.

a comma attached to the tip of the flowering branch

Scott Metz, Haiku 21, 2011, 122

We see this same observed similarity between commas and natural things in Scott Metz’s haiku. This dangling comma, like Peggy Lyles’s

dogwood petal, pauses on “the tip of the flowering branch.” It will fall any day, but for now, it’s still attached. It is but one of many pauses, danglers, on the flowering branch. It seems to be a frivolous, unnecessary thing to have a comma at the end of a flowering branch. Who “attached” it there? Nature? A clownish creator? A fanciful poet? A comma at the end of a sentence would probably be removed by an editor. But here in this haiku, it gets to exist, unfinished, dangling, still attached for no reason at all.

munching cookies the commas in our conversation

Sanjukta Asopa, Frogpond 37:2 (2014), 50; Kala Ramesh et al., eds., Naad Anunaad: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku (2016), 172

In this social haiku, “munching cookies” becomes the pauses, the commas, in “our conversation.” Asopa does a good job of creating a simple, ordinary moment at a party or gathering. The conversation is not urgent, but the cookies give those involved a short break in the give-and-take rhythm of the conversation. The word “commas” stands in for the idea of pausing. It is a metaphor that works.

cypress tips
all the phrases hanging
on commas

Alegria Imperial, Sonic Boom 2 (2015), 28

I love cypress trees and have planted several around our lake. Each spring, the new growth occurs on the tips of the existing branches, a light green beyond the darker green. Reading this haiku, I enjoy imagining the “cypress tips,” but then I wonder why our narrator says “all the phrases hanging on commas.” I guess the narrator is saying that these phrases are extra information, just hanging on commas, not worthy of their own sentence. However, I struggle to find any connection to the cypress tips, which to me are a sign of vitality and growth. The commas give us pause, but “all the phrases” could be about anything. Too vague for my haiku tastebuds.

a comma
 becomes a full stop
 moonshadows

Kat Lehmann, A Hundred Gourds 4:2 (2015), 13

I love the way that the comma is a dynamic actor transforming before our very eyes. If we stop long enough, the comma is not just a momentary pause in a train of thought. It becomes the same as a period. Full stop. Look again, more closely here. The moon shadows deserve our full attention, more than an aside. This haiku employs the literary consciousness of a writer. I imagine our narrator is a writer who has just edited their haiku to put “moonshadows” on a line of its own, not just an afterthought or context image to serve as the background for something else.

Oxford comma—
 the attention
 you pay me

Shloka Shankar, A New Resonance 10, 2017, 150

Oh yes, a writer’s fussy-foo about the Oxford comma. As an English teacher, I’ve known colleagues who have strong opinions about the last comma in a series of things, and others are more interested in what their students have to say. I’m fine for an editor to care about consistency in use of the Oxford comma (or not), but I am not someone who gives it much thought unless I’m in that final editing mode. As someone married to a professional writer and editor, I appreciate that she provides that attention and care to my drafts, essays, and haiku. (Notice my use of the Oxford comma in that previous sentence.) But I’m also concerned about literacy snobbery . . . those who put down others because they don’t know or follow such guidelines religiously. So, I think this is an interesting senryu about someone who cares enough to pay attention, but less so for the grammar or style correctness police I’ve known as well.

Oxford comma not for this blue hour

Cherie Hunter Day, Modern Haiku 53.3 (2022), 18

Again, we see a haiku referring to an Oxford comma as a favorite pet peeve of the style police. There is no list in this haiku, so it puzzles us what the Oxford comma is doing in it. The “blue hour” suggests a state of mind, a late afternoon before dusk . . . without a to-do list to complete. No need to follow the etiquette of style here. The blue hour is not just the last item on a list. It fully occupies this space so there is no need for an Oxford comma, or any comma.

snow stories . . .
the scattered commas
of maple seeds

Debbie Strange, Stardust Haiku 24 (2018)

As with several contemporary haiku, this one is written with a literary narrator. The narrator is talking about writing or editing “snow stories.” Employing a suggested similarity in appearance, we see maple seeds randomly scattered into the snow. They look like commas. Some could take root and grow into future maple trees. The space a comma holds. Could stories grow out of that space? As a long-time writing teacher, I can imagine an alternative reading where the haiku’s narrator is a teacher-editor. The students have written snow stories. Some of the students sprinkle commas in randomly because they have no idea how to use commas to create emphasis, dramatic pauses, or other aspects of a good story.

story of my life
she tears it apart
with commas

Sondra J. Byrnes, Modern Haiku 49:2 (2018), 19

Here is another haiku about someone writing the “story of my life.” The narrator in this haiku has spent hours or years writing this story and has asked an editor for response. Instead of responding to the story itself, this editor “tears it apart with commas.” The editor is seeking some sort of grammar or style perfection instead of feeling or caring about the story itself. Fixing commas becomes a passive-aggressive way of dismissing the story.

resting where
the commas fall—
old friends

Peter Jastermsky, Robert Epstein, ed., All the Way Home: Aging in Haiku (2019), 144

As in Asopa's haiku about "munching cookies," this haiku uses "commas" as the more relaxed portions of a conversation. The haiku features a social situation, a gathering of "old friends" who are enjoying getting reacquainted. There is so much to share, so many things to recount. The commas provide a pause, a resting place in their exchange. This is not about a struggle to find where to put the commas. It is letting the commas "fall" into place naturally so that they provide a short moment to catch one's breath. Commas are a place for us to rest a moment.

(3) COLON & SEMICOLONS

"The first type of punctuation is pause punctuation, which includes the comma, semicolon, and period."

—Michael Dylan Welch, "Punctuation in Haiku." *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

beneath contrails
I rake leaves
into semicolons

LeRoy Gorman, Wind Chimes 17 (1985), 40

This is a contemporary nature haiku, a haiku of the Anthropocene age. The airplane is leaving marks in the sky and our narrator is raking leaves into piles. One pile is round and another has a little tail, thus resembling a semicolon. With our literacy minds, we often see contrails as writing in the sky and so why not shape our leaf piles into semicolons. Living in a multiverse with simultaneous occurrences, humans are shaping the heavens and their front yards into our own familiar symbols.

add a semicolon a pleasant but popular two-moments haiku

Marlene Mountain, Cindy Tebo, Sheila Windsor, and Paul Conneally. Under the Pampas. Raw NerVZ 10.2, insert 2005.

Marlene Mountain has left us with another haiku satirizing the traditional haiku conventions. Here, the narrator is a people pleaser, citing advice to write a haiku in two neat parts. It's a simple recipe: "add a semicolon" and guaranteed result. You will get "a pleasant but popular two-moments haiku." What was a singular occurrence can be broken into two parts by adding a semicolon. Ah, the power of a semicolon!

the proper use of a semi-colon continuing on

Robin Anna Smith, FemkuMag [e-zine] 10 (2019)

This monoku also sounds like a prescription. The narrator is giving us a lesson on "the proper use of a semi-colon," which suggests a context of the classroom or writing center. The answer to the implied question is that the semicolon doesn't stop your reader very much. The reader simply pauses briefly and continues on. As a former teacher and writing center tutor, this feels very familiar, but sometimes the improper uses of a semicolon are very cool. Do we always have to be proper? On the other hand, this haiku could be reference to a semi-colon tattoo which is a popular culture reference to solidarity and support for those who have survived a suicide attempt. The "continuing on" after the semi-colon takes a deeper significance!

we read her semicolon as a blossom rain

Dan Schwerin, Kingfisher 4 (2021), 70

The narrator of this haiku appears to be a group leader or member of a group of writers. This narrator speaks for the group, the "we" voice. They are discussing someone's haiku and the fact that it uses a semicolon. What does the semicolon mean? What does it add to the poem? Evidently, the poem is about blossom rain, a traditional Japanese haiku topic. Maybe the semicolon looks like blossom rain—

it provides a visual illustration that fits the poem. Perhaps someone asks if the haiku really needs the semicolon, and the author must defend her choice. It's her semicolon; she wants to keep it!

nimbus semicolon agnostic comma

John Levy, is/let 6, June 12, 2021; Lee Gurga, and Scott Metz, eds., Haiku 2022 (2022)

In John Levy's short monoku, there is no apparent clue who the narrator is. There is no clear clue about context or implied scene. We get a four-word association game. Do we read this as "nimbus is to semicolon what agnostic is to comma"? Let's try a little Rorschach test reading. Let's take the four words and see if we can play with them like building blocks. Nimbus. A cloud. A dark cloud. Sometimes, art historians refer to a halo, or dark shadow around someone's head in a painting. A saint's head? Semicolon. A pause that indicates some vague connection between two independent clauses. So "nimbus" is one clause, and "agnostic comma" is another. But "agnostic comma" is not an independent clause. It is incomplete. Missing something. There's a pause after "agnostic," but nothing comes after that. Just the absence of what was expected. The promise of an independent clause that we never got.

Maybe there's a much simpler reading than unpuzzling the four-word association game. Let's revert to the common use of implied metaphors or similes we've seen in several haiku that employ punctuation words. "Nimbus" reminds the implied narrator of being like a semicolon. There's a little dot of cloud with a drop of water hanging beneath it. The semicolon looks like a nimbus. "Agnostic" looks like an inconsequential comma instead of a period. Not definitive.

semicolon	at	with
	my	a
	window	broken
		wing

Ron Scully, is/let, June 12, 2021; Lee Gurga, and Scott Metz, eds., Haiku 2022: 100 notable ku from 2021 (2022)

Starting in the middle of things, this haiku begins with “semicolon” followed by two more conventional images. The second line provides the scene for the narrator, “at my window.” And the third line offers the focus of our attention outside, “with a broken wing.” Although we might put these three parts together as “semicolon at my window with a broken wing,” the result is nonsense. To try to make sense of it, we replace the first word with “a bird” and change the word “semicolon” into an actual semicolon. So, now, we get something like “a bird at my window; it has a broken wing.” But that’s just a sentence or observation. Hardly a haiku. No feeling. No insight. Boring. Let’s spice it up by emphasizing that “semicolon” is not like a bird with a broken wing. It does not resemble a bird. It is not a metaphor. The haiku is not about a bird “at my window” with or without a broken wing. It is about language. It is about how language breaks and fails us. We look out our windows and don’t see and don’t feel. The language is not a transparent thing to look through. The semicolon fails to break through. It has a broken wing and cannot fly. The semicolon does not connect two things happening at the same time. The image phrase “at my window with a broken wing” is a metaphor about the failure of language, especially the semicolon.

(4) DASHES

“A second type of punctuation shows relationships as well as providing a pause. These marks include the colon, the dash, and the ellipsis. These pauses are also endowed with specific qualities of relationship. The colon, for example, marks expectation or addition—and says, essentially, that this equals that, which is often too heavy-handed. In haiku, both the colon and the dash show some sort of spatial relationship between the actuality of what precedes and follows the punctuation mark.”

—Michael Dylan Welch, “Punctuation in Haiku.” *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

Paper-white winter sky
the crow becomes a dash
then a dot

*George Swede, Frozen Breaths: A Collection of Haiku
(1983)*

In this haiku, the narrator is again observing distant birds in the sky and sees punctuation marks. In case anyone doubts that this is a literary-minded narrator, the sky is described as “paper-white winter sky.” On this blank sheet, many of the other birds have migrated away, but the crow remains, still punctuating the otherwise blank sky. This narrator admires the movement and collaborative action of the crow, his partner in discovering this haiku.

mating dragonflies—
my overuse
of dashes

Aubrie Cox, Frogpond 35:1 (2012), 18; Museum of Haiku Literature Award; Touchstone Haiku Awards for Individual Haiku (The Haiku Foundation), 2012; Jim Kacian and Dee Evetts, eds., A New Resonance 8 (2013), 61; Kala Ramesh et al., Naad Anunaad: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku (2016), 24

Aubrie Cox’s narrator is a haiku writer. Like Swede’s narrator, she enjoys collaborating with nature in writing her haiku. This time, she gets inspiration from the sudden actions of mating dragonflies. She watches how they dash about, connecting, disconnecting, chasing, catching up with one another. How does she capture this in a haiku? Turning into a self-critic, this haiku-writing narrator confesses “my overuse of dashes” when so much is happening at once that other punctuation won’t do. This poem also illustrates the use of the em dash in a haiku. The first line features the image of “mating dragonflies” followed by an em dash, which gives the reader time to pause and imagine the dragonflies and their lake or pond environment. Then the phrase of the second and third lines “my overuse of dashes” brings the haiku inside the narrator’s mind. It is the inner weather of the haiku. The dash provides the break, pause, and ongoing time to move from outward perception to inward contemplation. It is not surprising this haiku received two awards and was included in two anthologies after originally appearing in *Frogpond*.

When writing is chiseled into stone, it has a new physical presence that can be touched. Although the next haiku is not about the hyphen

or dash, consider how carefully we weigh the words, spaces, dates, and details of a loved one's tombstone in this haiku:

ordering my tombstone:
the cutter has me feel
his Gothic "R"

*Raymond Roseliep, Modern Haiku 12.2, 1981; Collected
Haiku of Raymond Roseliep, 137*

The narrator of this haiku by Roseliep is ordering his own tombstone. He is choosing the typeface that will be used to chisel his name, dates, and epitaph into the stone. The stone cutter takes pride in his work and is glad that the narrator will appreciate his attention to details: "the cutter has me feel his Gothic 'R'" brings the symbolic elements of his name into letters in stone. Like many of our narrators in this essay, this haiku features a literary consciousness, someone who knows typefaces and has choices about these details of publishing even in stone. He doesn't want to leave his tombstone writing to chance. He wants to leave it to a professional artisan.

The next five haiku in this essay illustrate how writers have noticed the significance of a dash or hyphen carved into a tombstone. These haiku are about considering the difference a dash makes. What matters. This has been a popular trope for contemporary English haiku.

old cemetery
all of those dashes
between life and death

Yvonne Cabalona, Feel of the Handrail (2005)

This is the earliest reference to tombstone date dashes found in Charles Trumbull's database. (Thanks, Charlie!) There may be other haiku that refer to this but don't use the word "dash" or "hyphen," but in this one, we see the seed of an insight that several haiku poets have considered. The narrator of this haiku is in an "old cemetery," and they are struck by "all of those dashes between life and death."

the dates on Dad's gravestone what matters is the hyphen

Frank Judge, Zee Zahava, ed., Brass Bell, 2014

In Frank Judge's monoku, the narrator takes a more personal stance. It is the perspective of a child at "Dad's gravestone" evidently paying respects and remembering his father. The point is the same, that the hyphen represents the days when he was alive. The hyphen is what should be remembered.

new headstone
all that matters
in a dash

Joe McKeon, A New Resonance 10, 2017, 113

McKeon uses a similar phrase about "what matters." I like how this haiku is literally about language carved in stone. It asks us to look at the headstone, specifically the dash. Of course, this is the dash between birth and death dates, so it represents (gives presence to) the life between those dates. How language reduces our lives to a mark on a page or in this case, stone. So much is left out, unspoken, unwritten . . . beyond the grasp of language. And that this is a "new" headstone is significant, so we are visiting the grave not long after the death of a friend or loved one. We still know so much of what that dash holds.

shooting stars—
the dash between
born and died

*Colleen M. Farelly, 4th Annual H. Gene Murtha
Memorial Senryu Contest, 2019, Highly Commended,
Prune Juice 28 (2019), 12*

This senryu won recognition in the Murtha Memorial Senryu Contest in 2019. Farelly's narrator notices the shooting stars, perhaps watching them from a cemetery. Of course, the shooting stars are very short-lived in the sky. They make a dash of light and are gone. She notes the

ephemeral nature of our lives evident in the “dash between born and died” on the tombstones.

after the dash
leaving the space—
Mother’s gravestone

Robert Moyer, Kingfisher 3 (2021), 20

The narrator of this haiku is in a cemetery. Perhaps their father has died, and they are at his grave. Mother’s gravestone is there, as well, with plans for her to be buried next to her husband. Her gravestone has her name and date of birth followed by the dash. However, she is not dead yet and so the other side of the dash is not completed. It is merely space where her death date will go. There is both thankfulness that she has not yet died and acceptance that she will be dying sometime in the future.

dot dot dot dash tadpoles

Dian Duchin Reed, The Heron’s Nest, 20:3 (2018), 4

This haiku is much more playful and reminds us of the comma-like tadpoles wriggling and swarming with life. The narrator of this haiku evidently knows Morse code. Three dots and a dash represent the letter V and were commonly used to spread the news of victory at the end of World War II. We can see how tadpoles look like Morse code dots and dashes. But as we have seen with other haiku, this narrator brings their own literacy to the scene. In this case, their literacy is Morse code. Another reader might imagine a narrator well versed in music history. They could hear “dot dot dot dash” as the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. What a playful way for us to watch tadpoles.

Let’s close our consideration of dashes with two haiku that ask us to think about how em dashes work in haiku. First, we have a hawk’s repeated em dashes:

em dash after em dash—
the screeching of red-tailed hawks
from high in the pines

Susan Antolin, Kingfisher 2 (2020), 76

In Susan Antolin's haiku, the narrator is listening to the red-tailed hawks screeching "from high in the pines." Their screeches are stark and loud, followed by silence. A hush of the birds and creatures below who do not want to attract deadly attention upon themselves. This haiku starts with the doubled use of "em dash after em dash" to suggest the silent pause that follows each hawk's screech. The actual em dash after the two spoken em dashes illustrates the silent pause after two cries. Hawks never seem to cry just once.

cloudburst
the interruption
of em dashes

Kat Lehman, Petrichor 21, 2022

Let's close with this haiku in which the narrator notes multiple em dashes. It opens with "cloudburst," which invites readers to imagine the sudden darkness and rainfall. The second phrase, "the interruption of em dashes," could be interpreted in different ways. The em dashes could represent silent pauses within the downpour. Or they could represent the breaks of sunshine between the dark clouds—sunbeams breaking through the overcast sky. Either way, to describe these as "em dashes" evokes a human literacy, where things are understood as elements of punctuation. If the entire haiku is actually about writing, about a piece of prose, then a lot of em dash interruptions could be described, metaphorically, as a cloudburst.

(5) ELLIPSIS

"The ellipsis, though, typically suggests the passing of time (however quickly) in a haiku. The ellipsis can also indicate contemplation rather than passing time."

—Michael Dylan Welch, "Punctuation in Haiku." Grace Guts [web site], 1996

trailing the snail
on the pale gray pavement
an ellipsis . . .

Pat Tompkins, Tinywords 10.3, Dec. 17, 2010

In this haiku, Pat Tompkins employs a final ellipsis to illustrate the point that the snail's trail lingers "on the pale gray pavement." We see a contrast of the silvery trail on the gray sidewalk, but the ellipsis is perfect, both visually and as a representation of a slow passing of time. From a literacy perspective, the snail is slowly writing the story of its journey.

distant thunder
the sound of an ellipsis

Terri L. French, HaikuNow Contest 2013; Jim Kacian et al., eds., Fear of Dancing: Red Moon Anthology 2013, 30

The ellipsis is usually silent, not pronounced, when we read a passage out loud. It is often represented by a longer pause than usual, a period of silence. Terri French's haiku starts with "distant thunder"; then we get the phrase "the sound of an ellipsis," which could be the silence that follows the faint thunder. In that silence, we expect the words to continue, or in this case, the distant thunder to continue rumbling. The story isn't over, and we are waiting for more.

Gita chanting . . .
the birds become
an ellipsis

Kala Ramesh, Naad Anunaad: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku (2016), 98; Robert Epstein, ed., The Signature Haiku Anthology (2021), 183

When I read this haiku out loud, I hear the pause in the chanting. And at that moment of silence, I hear the birds continuing their own song. The chanting and birdsong are working together in communion. Kala Ramesh chose this as her signature haiku in Robert Epstein's *Signature Haiku Anthology*. She saw the birds as visual representation of the ellipsis: "oneness is what I have tried to incorporate here. In simple words—the migrating birds look like the ellipsis (the pause) between lines when Gita is chanted. Thus, as the chanting of the Gita is carried into the cosmos, the birds become its ellipsis." The narrator of Kala's haiku is a spiritual person, chanting the Gita. The birds

becoming an ellipsis is not merely a visual metaphor. It represents a shared spiritual connection. Kala writes that “I’m trying to establish the connection between the high and low (in Master Basho’s words), between nature, cosmos and human—thus focusing on the principle that life is all one pulsating consciousness—when that blade of grass, that mountain, you and I all become one.”

you and I this winter ellipsis

Stella Pierides, Modern Haiku 46:1 (2015), 61

In this monoku, Stella Pierides creates a scene about a couple. The narrative voice is evident in the opening “you and I” followed by the season, “this winter,” and closing with the open-ended “ellipsis.” This ending suggests that the ellipsis is not referring to more expected words. Instead, it implies that their togetherness will continue on throughout the duration of “this winter.” Taking advantage of the multiple breaks possible in a monoku, we could say that this is a “winter ellipsis” nowhere close to a thawing spring when things will warm up for this couple.

kingfisher splash
again I use
an ellipsis

paul m. [Paul Miller], Scott Mason, ed., Gratitude in the Time of COVID-19: The Haiku Hecameron (2020)

The narrator in this haiku is a haiku writer. In the context of the anthology, this haiku celebrates getting outside after a long time indoors, but that is not evident in the haiku itself. So why does our haiku writer narrator say “again I use an ellipsis”? The “kingfisher splash” is sudden and momentary. Soon after it splashed into the water, it comes up again, often with a little fish to eat. What do we expect after the “kingfisher splash”? It is that moment of silent pause that the narrator tries to emulate by choosing to use an ellipsis again. This poem is about both the kingfisher trying to catch a fish and the poet trying to catch a haiku. The ellipsis provides just enough pause for both.

from the mountaintop
an ellipsis
of lakes

John Stevenson, Upstate Dim Sum 2020/II, 11

This haiku is about the narrator's mountaintop view. After climbing the trail to the top, our literary narrator notices three lakes below in the valley. This gives him pause, a time for reflection, before he continues on the mountain hike. The indented arrangement of the three lines works nicely to suggest a movement of looking down the mountain . . . or represents the various heights of the lakes. In addition to the visual representation of the lakes, the ellipsis again calls for a silent expectation. This haiku merges the natural and literary worlds into one moment of seeing.

budding branches
the ellipsis at the end
of his text

Jennifer Hambrick, Mayfly 71 (2021), 9

It's spring and the branches are budding, not long before blossoming. Everything is moist and warming up. Then the narrator's focus shifts to a mobile phone. A text message from someone. Perhaps a friend or possible romantic relationship. The narrator doesn't share the text with readers, but we do get "the ellipsis at the end of his text," which suggests that there is more to come. This is not an ending but an expectation of possibilities. Like the budding branches, there could be a full blossoming on the way. There is a wonderful connection between the seasonal nature and inner human nature in this haiku.

(6) QUOTATION MARKS

"Quotation marks often indicate that words are spoken or quoted."

—Michael Dylan Welch, "Punctuation in Haiku." *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

first feeders at dawn
 paired like red quotation marks
 last feeders at dusk.

Michael J. Rosen, The Cuckoo's Haiku and Other Birding Poems (2009); Brad Bennett, "Children's Haiku Books: An Annotated Bibliography," Modern Haiku 46:3 (2015), 49

The narrator of this haiku is a bird lover. They love watching the birds at a bird feeder from dawn to dusk. The story of their day is that cardinals were the first and last birds at the feeder. They are "like red quotation marks" for the extended analogy of watching the feeders being one long sentence. This 5-7-5 haiku is written as a complete sentence, ending with a period. There appears to be no reason why the narrator used the metaphor of "red quotation marks" other than that's what the birds looked like. The fact that they don't name the cardinals makes this a bit of a riddle. Perhaps children would enjoy solving the riddle of the metaphor?

morning birdsong requiring quotation marks

Lee Gurga, Notes from the Gean 3:3 (2010); Toshio Kimura, ed., The Blue Planet: Multilingual Haiku Anthology (2011), 35; Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, eds., Haiku 21 (2011), 81; Kala Ramesh et al., eds., Naad Anunaad: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku (2016), 113

Like the previous haiku, this one reads like a complete sentence with no breaks. It sounds like a writer's judgment or editor's declaration of fact. The narrator of this haiku appears to be a writer concerned with the rules of when to use quotation marks. The poem starts with "morning birdsong," but the haiku's focus is on the question of quotation marks. Of course, the reader immediately asks why morning birdsong would require quotation marks. Because it is not original? Borrowed from other haiku? Because this is just words about the morning birdsong and not the birdsong itself?

“Requiring” is an unusual word in this haiku. Why does the narrator say “requiring quotation marks”? Certainly the birds don’t require quotation marks. An editor might require or suggest quotation marks. Why do we put quotation marks on any words or sayings? To provide a proper attribute. To make it clear that these are not your own words. Maybe the narrator is asking how we can use “morning birdsong” in a poem or writing? If we use quotation marks, does the phrase just become words, something to play with to make up a poem? This literary narrator shows how our rules of language, even punctuation usage, reveal an appropriation or disregard of nature for our own literary intentions to make a haiku. Haiku are fictions to be written, edited, crafted within the expectations of our grammar, style, and punctuation guidelines of literacy.

(7) QUESTION MARKS

“Another type of punctuation indicates tone or voice. These marks include the exclamation mark, indicating surprise or emphasis, and the question mark, indicating questioning or doubt. Both are relatively rare in haiku.”

—Michael Dylan Welch, “Punctuation in Haiku.” *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

Question marks may be relatively rare in haiku, but references to questions marks have showed up in haiku from some of our earliest English haiku attempts. Many of these haiku refer to something shaped like a question. Here are three examples published in *American Haiku*:

Home in the hot sand
the lizards lie, question marks . . .
countless ones before.

*Violet M. Parks, American Haiku 2:2 (1964)
#90; Borrowed Water (1966), 58*

Through autumnal dusk
the smoke of leaves curls itself
in a question mark.

Charles Shaw, American Haiku 2:1 (1964) #13, 11

The old tabby cat,
 curled into a question mark,
 ogling a sparrow.

Charles Shaw, American Haiku 6:2 (1968)

This third example provides a double meaning in the question mark. The cat is “curled into a question mark,” which I take to be both appearance and mindset. The cat has a question in mind, “ogling” the sparrow as a possible meal. All three of these question mark haiku are written from the narrator’s voice of observing things in nature. People are symbol seekers and find them in natural shapes.

a single black hair
 makes a question mark
 on the bar of soap

James O’Neil, Frogpond 2:2 (1979), 10

James O’Neil’s haiku provides us with an indoor scene. The narrator is someone getting ready to use a bar of soap who observes that “a single black hair makes a question mark.” While this image begins as a “looks like” image of the hair in the shape of a question mark, it also brings up several questions or doubts. Why is our narrator noticing this hair? Because of the color? The narrator has become a detective, sleuthing out the significance of this “single black hair.” Whose black hair is this “on the bar of soap?” Who’s been in my shower?

so like a snake
 her question mark:
 the note left under my keys

Rod Willmot, Frogpond 6:3 (1983), 27; The Ribs of Dragonfly (1984), 63

Also focused on personal relationships, this haiku by Rod Willmot metaphorically transforms “her question mark” into a snake. The narrator is getting ready to go somewhere and picks up “my keys,” only to find a note from a significant other. Her question mark seems

to be exaggerated. Perhaps she is being cynical or doubtful about something he said or has done? He attributes her state of mind to be “like a snake.” The narrator is an astute reader of short messages (like haiku), and he can read between the lines of her note. He detects or imagines her tone from the question mark.

her insinuations . . .
squirrel’s-tail
question mark

Peggy Willis Lyles, Wind Chimes 18 (1986), 50

In this haiku by Peggy Lyles, the narrator is trying to understand “her insinuations” or underlying attitude. In this case, she is interacting with a squirrel whose tail is shaped into a “question mark.” Although the visual connection of the tail is about its shape, the underlying concern of the first line is appropriately focused on the voice of the squirrel’s interaction.

Dimly through the fog
a question mark reflected
great blue heron’s neck

Harriet Kofalk, Frogpond 9:1 (1986), 33

Like this haiku, there continues to be several haiku written and published about heron, egret, and swan necks looking like a question mark. I would suggest that editors stop publishing these because this has become an English haiku cliché. This is the only one I will include in this essay.

Shoveling snow,
the old man bends into
a question mark

Martin Lara, Frogpond 13:1 (1990), 30

This is a fresh take on the “looks like” approach. In this haiku, the narrator is watching a neighbor, an old man who “bends into a question mark” while “shoveling snow.” I feel the narrator’s

compassion for this neighbor and hope the old man will receive help soon. I get a visual of the old man and also the doubt that he is up to doing this work.

Quiet veteran
His leg the shape
of a question mark

*Magnus Mack Homestead, Modern Haiku 21:2
(1990), 87*

The narrator of this haiku is also an observer of humanity. In this case, the narrator considers a “quiet veteran” whose leg is “the shape of a question mark.” I take this to mean that his leg was lost in combat and replaced with a prosthetic device. The simple first line emphasizing “quiet” suggests that the veteran does not want to talk. The narrator and veteran have several unspoken questions.

my cat’s tail
forms a question mark
dinner yet?

*Stanford M. Forrester, Haiku Headlines 155 (13:11,
2001) #27*

Here’s a funny “looks like a question mark” haiku. The narrator is a cat lover and knows how to read the cat’s meows, leg rubs, and other means of communication. In this case, the way the cat raises its tail “forms a question mark,” and he knows what the question is: “dinner yet?”

thin snow over ice
half a heart
in her question mark

Francine Banwarth, Frogpond 27:3 (2004), 17

In this haiku, the narrator is skating on ice, perhaps literally or figuratively, venturing out on the ice after a “thin snow.” This scene suggests the narrator’s vulnerability. She is writing a message in the

snow, perhaps with her feet or ice skates. Maybe it is a Valentine's Day message? Or a love note? There appears to be uncertainty and doubt in her "half a heart" evident in the way she shapes "her question mark." Two question marks facing each other would form a heart, but I feel like this "half a heart" is about her inner state of being, as well.

some question marks
in the treble clef—
spring rain

Peggy Willis Lyles, Modern Haiku 36:2 (2005), 47; Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, eds., Haiku 21 (2011), 109

Peggy Lyles often includes references to music in her haiku. In this haiku, the narrator is a musician, perhaps a piano player. It is a day of spring rain, so the narrator is inside working on a song. Maybe there is a spring concert or recital coming soon, so the musician is making notes on the sheet music. Here are difficult parts, or places to emphasize. How heavy do you make those notes in the background? There are "some question marks in the treble clef" that require special attention. This song will find its day in the sunshine with some work during the spring rain.

first day of summer . . .
a question mark
unpacks its wings

Julie Warther [Julie Schwerin], Wild Plum 2:1 (2016), 16

In this haiku, the narrator is enjoying a "first day of summer," perhaps on a nature walk. One of the discoveries of the day is to watch a butterfly emerge from its cocoon. The butterfly is "a question mark" butterfly named for the shape of its beautiful spotted brown wings. When its wings are closed, it resembles brownish tree bark, but when the wings open, they reveal beautiful orange colors spotted with black markings. As someone who enjoys watching butterflies, I interpret the narrator's "unpacks its wings" in two ways. First, the butterfly is simply opening and closing its wings. Second, the butterfly emerges from the cocoon and opens up its wings for the first time, spreading them out to absorb the warmth of sunshine.

(8) EXCLAMATION MARKS

“Another type of punctuation indicates tone or voice. These marks include the exclamation mark, indicating surprise or emphasis, and the question mark, indicating questioning or doubt. Both are relatively rare in haiku.”

—Michael Dylan Welch, “Punctuation in Haiku.” *Grace Guts* [web site], 1996

I will close with three haiku that reference the use of exclamation marks. As Welch notes, exclamation marks are seldom used in haiku these days because they seem to be too emotive, a means of expressing the writer’s enthusiasm or surprise. Let’s see how the narrators of these last three haiku refer to exclamation marks in haiku.

Catalpa denuded
Of leaves wears exclamation
Marks of long green pods.

Frank Ankenbrand Jr., Mabelle A. Lyon, ed., Jewels on a Willow Tree (1966), 7

In this early 5-7-5 haiku, the narrator describes a catalpa tree in winter. The tree has been “denuded of leaves,” but the long green seedpods remain hanging from the branches. The anthropomorphic tree has been made naked of its beautiful flowers and leaves. How shocking! Therefore, the narrator says the catalpa tree “wears exclamation marks of long green pods.” This personification and overlaying of human attributes of clothing and nakedness is embarrassing by contemporary standards of English haiku. You might think this narrator is being sarcastic in exaggerating the “denuded” tree, but based on most similar early English haiku, I believe that this was a genuine attempt to be poetic in describing the winter catalpa tree.

death poem
he dictates
the exclamation mark

Julie Warther [Julie Schwerin], Prune Juice 28 (2019), 116

This senryu creates a dramatic scene in which a writer is serving as a scribe to a haiku writer. The haiku writer is dictating his “death poem.” He evidently wants to be emphatic, stating the “exclamation mark” out loud to ensure it is included in the poem. So much for humility and quiet acceptance of the ephemeral nature of things. This dying haiku poet has a point to make and wants his death poem (his life) to end with an emphatic exclamation mark. The scribe can’t help but raise one eyebrow and perhaps hold in a giggle as they comply with the haiku poet’s wishes. The readers get to identify with the scribe and make up their own mind on the motives and tone of voice of the haiku poet’s death poem.

birthday email from mom
counting the 10 extra
exclamation marks

*Jay Friedenber*g, *Zee Zahava, ed., Brass Bell, (2021)*

I will end with this playful senryu by Jay Friedenberg. It’s the narrator’s birthday and Mom has sent an email birthday message. She wants to show how enthusiastic she is by including “10 extra exclamation marks,” which, of course, indicates that she feels guilty for not doing more or exaggerates how she really feels. When exclamation marks overtake the message, there’s probably not much to the message in the first place. Maybe she’s just not very good with computers and the key got stuck. As with most of the English haiku discussed in this essay, when the narrators bring up aspects of punctuation, they are often actually talking about the art of writing or reading.

Dr. Randy Brooks is Professor of English Emeritus at Millikin University where he teaches courses on haiku. He and his wife, Shirley Brooks, are publishers of Brooks Books and co-editors of *Mayfly* haiku magazine. Randy is on the Executive Committee of the HSA as the Electronic Media Officer. He maintains the HSA web site and edits the web sampler issues of *Frogpond*. He serves as the webmaster for Modern Haiku Press and as web editor of *Modern Haiku* magazine. He is on the board for the American Haiku Archives. He also serves on the editorial board for the Red Moon Press Haiku Anthologies and was an editorial board member for *Juxtaposition*, a journal of scholarship on haiku. His most recent books include: (1) *Walking the Fence: Selected Tanka* and (2) *The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku: A Reader Response Approach*, both published in 2019.

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