

AMBASSADOR OF HAIKU: THE POETRY OF GARRY GAY

David Grayson

It's no exaggeration to say that Garry Gay is an icon in English-language haiku. He's been writing haiku for more than forty years. His poems have garnered innumerable awards and have earned a place in the English-language haiku canon. He invented the rengay poetic form. In addition to creative work, Gay helped establish several key institutions: Haiku Poets of Northern California and its Two Autumns reading series; the Haiku North America conference; and the American Haiku Archives at the California State Library in Sacramento. He has also served as president of the Haiku Society of America. Beyond these formal roles, Gay has exerted a behind-the-scenes influence on generations of haiku poets.

While Gay's poetry ranges over wide terrain and evades easy categorization, there are common threads and a consistent set of practices throughout his body of work. Gay's perspective is grounded in how he writes haiku. In an interview I conducted with him in 2016, Gay noted that it's part of his nature to approach things differently. He explained: "There's a part of me that's a little bit dyslexic ... I've already sort of went to third base, second, and then first. I never really ran a first, second, and third. ... I just turn things around. I've always done that." While he joked that it can be less than ideal in everyday life (he mentions mixing up numbers on street addresses), it's been a benefit to his writing process. "I think in some ways it's my secret weapon in writing haiku because I look at things backwards sometimes. I think my juxtaposition becomes more of a surprise ... building from the bottom up instead of the top down, or instead of writing from left to right, I'm writing from right to left."¹

This element of surprise is a hallmark of his writing:

Weight lifter
slowing lifting
the tea cup ²

Composing a haiku with an end in mind, or at least sensing where it might end, is similar to how some prose authors approach fiction writing. Gay noted: “Sometimes when you’re writing a story, it really helps if you know the ending.”³

Red-winged blackbird
defending his territory
with a song⁴

In these two poems, Gay produces a twist after setting a context in the first two lines. But haiku is not storytelling. Haiku usually capture a slice of a larger narrative—what Jim Kacian describes as a “cross-sectional” cut across a story.⁵ In the blackbird haiku, for example, there is a larger plot that the reader can sense but doesn’t know: Defending his territory from whom—another blackbird? The narrator who unwittingly crossed into his path?

First dream of the year
a chameleon
changes color⁶

In this haiku, the surprise is the connection between the two parts: “first dream” and the chameleon changing color. Upon waking from a dream, one can feel a sudden and dramatic shift in mood and emotion, which can feel like a bodily experience. This haiku illustrates Lee Gurga’s observation that “sometimes what is unexpected is the associations of the images.”⁷

Another hallmark of Gay’s work is supple imagery. In all three poems shared so far, the images are clear and vivid. This may not be a surprise to readers who are aware of Gay’s career as a professional photographer.

from the bottom of the tray
your smile slowly develops⁸

Gay reflected that he grew artistically in these two art forms—haiku and photography—together over time: “I certainly have pondered this pretty much my whole career of writing... I was writing poetry since high school, and high school is where I really started photography. So the writing blossomed at the same time.” Gay characterized himself as a “studio still life photographer... concept photographer.” He described his process: “I’m all day long building little sets of conceptual ideas and photographing them. ... But I think that all still applies to my haiku as well because the haiku is very in the moment. ... You set up something for someone to enter, and then you’ve lead them down some path. ... Nonetheless, you still set up a picture, you still set up a scene.”⁹

Gay noted that in photography, “you want to take that photograph at the peak of the action. And if you miss it, then you really don’t come up with a great photograph.”¹⁰

Where the ripple was
the fisherman casts his line;
another ripple ¹¹

Sequence is key in this haiku. The first ripple has moved or disappeared before the second materializes. Small happenings like these that we encounter each day are reminders of the ephemeral rhythm of life.

White morning glory;
a luna moth
unfolds with it ¹²

As in the fisherman poem, the right timing is a complement to the right imagery. Here, the moth unfolding with the flower points to a transition. Robert Spiess declared: “Those haiku that intimate a point of transition, the moment of transformation, Yes!”¹³

The morning glory haiku highlights another constituent of Gay’s images, the use of color. Gay characterized his photographic style as “colorful and bright and graphic,”¹⁴ and the same is true in his verse.

Blueberries
 we show each other
 our tongues ¹⁵

Of course, in some cases no specific color needs to be directly named in order to paint a picture:

Watermelon rind,
 sitting in its own juice
 the summer sun ¹⁶

Gay has noted: “Humor in haiku can be a very effective tool.”¹⁷ Readers familiar with his work will recognize the centrality of humor.

Hole in the ozone
 my bald spot ...
 sunburned ¹⁸

The outspoken humor in this well-known poem is the type that many readers might associate with senryu (though nature is present in an indirect way via the ozone layer). But Gay’s humor also occurs in more traditional haiku that are grounded in nature.

Navajo moon
 the coyote call
 not a coyote ¹⁹

This poem is a perfect example of traditional haiku in that it expresses a relationship of humans to nature. Something in nature (the full moon) triggers a human response. The character is influenced by the environment; indeed, he or she can be viewed as part of (embedded in) the environment. Additionally, the distinction between the subject and the object is fuzzy. Is the subject (the doer of the action) the man or woman who howls like a coyote? Or is the subject the moon?

River Baptism
for those of us not sure
the rain starts²⁰

The same relationship is present in this ritual. The ceremony of a baptism is—for a moment—a literal union of person and nature, as the convert is plunged into water. The rain is nature intruding into an event of which it was already a part. Here Gay pokes fun at how the fickleness of the weather exerts influence over us—in this case, providing a second baptism of sorts.

Formally, the attributes of Gay's poetry have been consistent. He typically writes in three lines and he usually capitalizes the first word of the haiku. Of course, this practice of capitalization has fallen out of favor, or at least is not as common as it once was. Gay noted that when he has written a haiku without the initial capitalization, if an editor is familiar with his work he'll sometimes be asked if he meant to capitalize it! On a more circumspect note, he told me that he "heard one poet (who I won't name) say at one of the haiku conferences ... [that] she cannot access or get beyond a haiku if the first letter is capitalized. And I took that to heart. I thought, 'Wow, is my work not getting through to people because of a capital letter in the first sentence?' It didn't make me change it, but it was something I was awakened to that I'd never considered."²¹ In "Notes on Haiku Capitalization and Punctuation," Michael Dylan Welch reflects that these "preferences become part of your style," and that is certainly the case with Gay.²²

Whether rooted in the natural world or casting his gaze on his fellow humans, Gay ranges over wide subject matter. But every writer has signature topics or themes that he or she revisits. For Gay, his home state is one important motif. He grew up in Southern California and has lived his adult life in Northern California, in both the San Francisco Bay Area and Wine Country.

A crow
among the seagulls
tourist season²³

California's cities and wine regions are global destinations. Tourists are a common sight—as are those who try to take advantage of them, in harmless ways or worse.

Aftershock—
 the crowded
 doorway²⁴

Along the West Coast, earthquakes are a fact of life. Every student in California schools learns how to prepare for an earthquake. During a tremor, the guidance is to take shelter under something stable like a sturdy table or doorframe. What's interesting about this poem is the indentation of the last two lines, which visually breaks or fractures the poem, evoking an earthquake. The em dash reinforces this.

Gay lives in Sonoma County, near the city of Santa Rosa, which suffered a devastating fire in October 2017. The fire destroyed 2,800 homes in the city and took twenty-four lives in Sonoma County.

This autumn rain
 my neighbor
 has no roof²⁵

He wrote this poem many years ago. Of course, it references the famous verse by Basho, but it seems like it could have been written today—as a response to the fire. Gay could not foresee the firestorm and its devastation, but he composed a poem that not only reflected haiku heritage but was sufficiently flexible to provoke readers to reflect on a variety of experiences. In this sense, this haiku allows the reader to finish it in different ways during different times (just as the inspirational Basho poem does).

Two poems published in *Mariposa* in 2018 are likely about the fire:²⁶

Worn map
 the creases
 through my hometown

Waiting for rain
 I still carry
 a broken compass

An entire neighborhood in Santa Rosa (Coffey Park) was destroyed—erased (temporarily) from the map. In the second poem, the broken compass is evocative of being lost in a new landscape. What was once intact no longer exists. Familiar landmarks are gone or changed. These are pregnant with emotions commensurate with the disaster.

William Carlos Williams famously declared “no ideas but in things.”²⁷ Certain objects as well as specific kigo recur in his work. One such example is “walking stick.”

Along the trail
trading one walking stick
for another ²⁸

Autumn woods
yesterday’s walking stick
just where I left it ²⁹

A walking stick is not commonly listed as a kigo, but it does perform some of the same functions in Gay’s haiku. It has rich associations around experiences like nature, travel, and aging. When I asked Gay about these two haiku, he noted: “These are cases where they are true stories. They were not invented haiku in any way.” He reflected: “Often when I hike, I’m starting a trail and I’ll just find one. There’ll be a branch that I just think, ‘Well, that’d make a perfect hiking stick. I don’t know I need one but I’m just going to pick that up in case it will help me along the way,’ and I’ll grab it. So it was really just a stimulus from an early experience.”³⁰

Along the way
an old oak branch
becomes a walking stick ³¹

Beach walk
a stray dog
brings me a stick ³²

These two haiku capture the experience that Gay just described. Although it might not seem so at first read, these are quintessential nature haiku. In each case the (human) narrator becomes a part of the environment. They take a literal piece of nature (a stick) and it becomes in a way a part of them, functionally (physical aid for walking) and emotionally (a comfort).

A classic kigo that recurs in his haiku is “dandelions.” Gabi Greve notes in the World Kigo Database: “One of the most common weeds, it may

be found almost everywhere in the United States and will grow almost anywhere.”³³ It can be challenging to write haiku with popular kigo in a fresh way.

end of the world
I blow apart
a dandelion ³⁴

I wish I had
a secret to keep
dandelion seeds ³⁵

One interesting point about these dandelion haiku is how personal they are. A first person pronoun is used in each. Robert Speiss noted: “It is this subjective aspect that accounts for very much of the difference between a haiku that is merely descriptive per se and one that engenders intuitional feeling—and this is the deciding factor between a haiku in which the poet simply records stimuli and one in which the poet is in accord with the haiku moment.”³⁶ Other kigo that reappear in Gay’s haiku (in various expressions) include the moon, autumn, snow, and clouds.

Gay’s poetry spans more than four decades and his unique voice has been recognized since early in his career. The previously quoted haiku of the fisherman casting his line earned an Honorable Mention in the Harold Henderson Memorial contest in 1979; the “tourist season” senryu won Honorable Mention in the annual HPNC Senryu contest in 2014. This is a span of thirty-five years! One of the pleasures of reading Gay is discovering poems that were composed years ago that are still fresh and alive. Gay’s plate remains full with writing, events, and organizational work—ensuring that the haiku communities he’s fostered continue to thrive in the future.

NOTES:

¹ Interview with Garry Gay by David Grayson. April 2016. Fort Mason, San Francisco.

² Gay, Garry. “Revelations: Unedited – Laughing At Myself.” *Frogpond* 33.2 (Spring/Summer 2010), 39.

³ Gay, interview.

⁴ Per Diem, May 2013: "Birds." Edited by H. G. Murtha. The Haiku Foundation: <http://www.thehaikufoundation.org/per-diem-archive-details/?IDcat=267> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

⁵ Kacian, Jim. "Haiku as Anti-Story." Speech given at the International Haiku North America Conference - August 7, 2009. <http://www.gendaihaiku.com/kacian/anti-story.html> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

⁶ *Mariposa* 32 (Spring/Summer 2015), 21.

⁷ Gurga, Lee with Charles Trumbull. *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*. Lincoln, IL: Modern Haiku Press, 2003: 40.

⁸ From the rengay "Snapshot" by Cherie Hunter Day and Garry Gay. Appears in Garry Gay, "Writing Rengay." <http://www.graceguts.com/rengay-essays/writing-rengay> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

⁹ Gay, interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Honorable Mention. 1979 Harold G. Henderson Memorial Haiku Awards. <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/hendersonawards/henderson.htm>.

¹² *Woodnotes* 6 (Summer 1990).

¹³ Spiess, Robert. *A Year's Speculations on Haiku*. Madison, Wisconsin: Modern Haiku Press, 1995): 15.

¹⁴ Gay, interview.

¹⁵ Honorable Mention. 1993 Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Awards. <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/bradyawards/brady.htm>.

¹⁶ Honorable Mention. 1989 Harold G. Henderson Memorial Haiku Awards. <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/hendersonawards/henderson.htm>.

¹⁷ "Revelations: Unedited - Laughing At Myself," 37.

¹⁸ Third Place. 1989 Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Awards. <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/bradyawards/brady.htm#Year1989>.

¹⁹ First Place. 2011 Harold G. Henderson Memorial Haiku Awards. <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/hendersonawards/henderson.htm>.

²⁰ *Mariposa* 12 (Spring-Summer 2005).

²¹ Gay, interview.

²² Welch, Michael Dylan. "Notes on Haiku Capitalization and Punctuation," Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival website: <https://www.vcbf.ca/notes-on-haiku-capitalization-and-punctuation> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

²³ Honorable Mention. The 2014 San Francisco International Senryu Competition. <https://www.hpnc.org/2014>.

²⁴ *Woodnotes* 7 (Autumn 1990).

²⁵ Miller, Paul. ed. *My Neighbor*. Santa Rosa, CA: Two Autumns Press, 2009: 12.

²⁶ *Mariposa* 38 (Spring/Summer 2018), 4 & 8.

²⁷ Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1992: 6.

²⁸ Gay, Garry. *The Long Way Home: Haiku & Photographs*. Brooks Books, 1999: <http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/ggayweb/ggay28.html> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

²⁹ First Prize. The 2004 Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku Awards.

<http://www.modernhaiku.org/spiesscontest/spiessawards2004.html>.

³⁰ Gay, interview.

³¹ Gay, *The Long Way Home*.

³² *Mariposa* 22 (Spring/Summer 2010).

³³ World Kigo Database, Gabi Greve, Daruma Museum, Japan. "Dandelion (tanpopo)." <https://worldkigo2005.blogspot.com/2005/04/dandelion-tanpopo.html> (Accessed October 28, 2018).

³⁴ First Place. The Heron's Nest First Annual Peggy Willis Lyles Haiku Award. https://www.theheronsnest.com/awards/awards_2013.html#pwl.

³⁵ *Modern Haiku* 41:1 (Winter-Spring 2010), 20.

³⁶ Spiess, 16.

Note: I would like to thank Charles Trumbull for his help in locating haiku texts.