

EMBRACING THE MOON: HAIKU ABOUT DRINKING

Kristen Lindquist

The relationship between poets and alcohol is age-old, stretching back to undoubtedly the origins of poetry itself. (Or of alcohol—who’s to say which came first?) Almost two thousand years ago Chinese poet Ruan Ji, one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, stated in his drinking song “Wine Mad:” “Once drunk, a cup of wine can bring 100 stanzas of poetry ...”¹ Several other cultures, including the ancient Greeks and the Japanese, also played drinking games that involved the recitation or spontaneous creation of poems.

late night renku
the linking shifting
wine bottle

*David G. Lanoue*²

As American writer John Cheever, a noted alcoholic, once observed in his journal, “The excitement of alcohol and the excitement of fantasy are very similar.”³ Drinking, as typified by the Greek god of wine, Dionysus, was associated with frenzied dancing and outright bacchanals (so-named for his Roman counterpart Bacchus). That Dionysus was also god of fertility and the performance arts makes perfect sense in light of his hard-partying persona.

Friday night
the taste of freedom
and wine

*Rachel Sutcliffe*⁴

In his article “Creativity and Alcoholism,” Dr. Albert Rothenberg cites the writer’s seeming need to use alcohol to “bring out exhibitionism, increase sociability, encourage fantasy, bolster self-confidence, ease loneliness, or most simply, to relax after a long day of hard concentration.”⁵ Indeed, poet Robert Lowell once said of his creative process, “Nothing was written drunk, at least nothing was perfected and finished, but I have looked forward to whatever one gets from drinking, a stirring and blurring.”⁶

moon viewing
i drink more sake ...
still no poem

*Angelee Deodhar*⁷

And yet, this quest for a more creative state of mind has its (sometime literal) downsides. Inebriation is not pretty. Too much alcohol can lead to stumbling, slurring, vomiting, black-outs—even death, as in the apocryphal story of legendary Chinese poet Li Bai, who was said to have drowned when he drunkenly tried to embrace the moon in a river. There’s “blurring” and then there’s blotto.

full of saké
stumbling
upon stars

*Philip Rowland*⁸

heading home drunk
the full moon
all over the place

*Rob Scott*⁹

With all this in mind, I became curious to explore how the act of drinking has been portrayed by (mostly contemporary, mostly English-language) haiku poets. Within the terse constraints of the form, haiku poets have successfully conveyed a respectively wide range of their experiences, as well as mirroring the full range of societal attitudes toward alcohol as a legal drug. The moments that emerge as poems reflect the full spectrum of pleasure and pain associated with the intoxicated mind—and that’s without even delving into two additional, associated aspects also well-represented in haiku: the hangover and AA.

By their very existence, tipsy haiku paradoxically exemplify the creative process by which “whatever one gets from drinking” is transformed by the sober mind into cogent poetry. The shifting reality experienced while under the influence has shown the poet a new angle or more creative way of seeing the world around them (if they’re able to remember it the next day). These misperceptions may generate poetic moments of synesthesia, for example, that have been characteristic of fresh haiku since the time of Bashō.

pleasantly drunk
fireflies come out
of the moon

*Jim Kacian*¹⁰

another whiskey
even the trophy trout
swims

*Jeffrey Winke*¹¹

As a precocious teenager, nineteenth-century French poet (and notorious absinthe drinker) Arthur Rimbaud declared, “The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses”—presumably “rationally” deranging the senses through the choice to intoxicate oneself with drugs and/or alcohol.¹² For the poet, alcohol thus provides an accessible, legal means to that gigantic derangement. A new vision, as exemplified by a good poem, can arise only from that altered state. One can make a direct connection between the euphemism “getting lit” to the illuminating spark of inspiration. As critic David Orr puts it: “The drunken poet, according to this view, isn’t merely drunk in the way a lawyer might be drunk, or an orthopedic surgeon, or even just a sad, anxious person. No, the poet has made a sacrifice. He is drunk for art.”¹³

And what art it is. Alcohol can be a welcome influence on an art form like haiku that celebrates sensual experience, especially a “deranged” one. Boozy haiku engage all five senses. From color to bouquet to the clink of glasses, haiku poets are attuned to these finer details of drinking. The question remains as to whether this heightened perception is due to alcohol having sharpened the senses, to the workings of the well-trained haiku mind, or both.

ring of wine glasses
now we have involved
all five senses

*Adelaide McLeod*¹⁴

two to tango
the sound of whiskey
on his breath

*Martha Magenta*¹⁵

homemade wine
she bottles all the colours
of autumn

*Lucy Whitehead*¹⁶

sakura ...
the taste of chilled wine
from a clay cup

*Lorin Ford*¹⁷

As expected, sake, of course, is enjoyed by many haiku poets. Rice wine was the alcohol that Bashō, Buson, and Issa drank, so it thus seems ideally suited for contemporary poets to channel the old masters by drinking it themselves and incorporating it into their haiku. If not in conscious homage to Bashō et al, the act at least reinforces a connection to the East Asian origins of the poetic form. In this way, sake goes with writing poetry, watching the moon, and even a few Zen-like moments.

After a few drinks
of the heated sake —
the floating world

*Tom Tico*¹⁸

sake bottle —
practicing
“emptiness”

*Stanford M. Forrester*¹⁹

Wine seems to be haiku poets’ drink of choice overall, maybe because, as one-syllable alcohols go, something about it seems more poetic than beer or rum. Particular wines carry their own connotations: white wine conveys a sense of clarity, coolness, and summer sophistication; red wine is more serious, aligned with autumn leaves, dusk, and warmth; dandelion and fruit wines often spark feelings of nostalgia or the pleasures of rural life.

a chilled white wine
sparkling in the slow dusk
fireflies

*Adelaide B. Shaw*²⁰

red wine spills
at the crack in the curtains
night

*Maurice Tasnier*²¹

dandelion wine
the grandfather
retells his story

*Brenda Roberts*²²

Ernest Hemingway once wrote in a letter to his Russian translator, “Do you drink?... What else can change your ideas and make them run on a different plane like whiskey?” Whiskey haiku imply a more hardcore style of drinking, sometimes with cigarettes, often at a dive bar or a rugged, outdoor setting that heavy-drinking Hemingway would have approved.

campfire
the warm glow
of straight whisky

*John Soules*²⁴

whiskey over ice
the bite
of her kiss

*Scott Larson*²⁵

Beer, like whiskey, seems more blue-collar in nature. However, while whiskey burns, a cold beer offers relief. In his seasonal almanac *Haiku World*, William J. Higginson includes beer as a summer kigo. This makes sense, as cracking open a cold one is a particular pleasure on a hot day. He offers as an example the beer haiku by Jim Kacian that I include below. (Whiskey drinking, according to Higginson, is a year-round activity.)

fishing
through the ice
for a beer

*Jim Kacian*²⁷

Cocktails belong to parties, with the clink of ice a notable component. Rum conjures the tropics and summer heat. Gin is clear, cool, often associated with rain. Tequila's a little wilder, linked with the sun; vodka, cold, its water-like clarity easy to hide. Interestingly, as best as I could tell, the distilled spirits were not as prevalent in this most distilled form of poetry as I might have expected.

a rum punch
and the swaying palms ...
sultry night

*Kristy Karkow*²⁸

polar vortex
another shot
of vodka

*Christopher Patchel*²⁹

orange nightgown
on the floor —
tequila sunrise

*Kristin Reynolds*³⁰

she asks
how I take my gin
winter rain

*Peter Joseph Glowiczki*³¹

For many haijin, savoring a drink alone is a simple pleasure of life, often accompanied by other accoutrements of solitary indulgence: a book and perhaps an edible treat.

A book of poems,
rum and coke —
rainy night.

*Bob Carlton*³²

chocolate
between sips of red wine
winter evening

*Sandra Mooney-Ellerbeck*³³

The levels of drinking activity expressed in haiku run the gamut from “a little drunk” or “tipsy” or “pleasantly drunk” to “very drunk.” That self-referential line gives the reader an immediate frame of reference for whatever craziness might happen in the next two lines. Depending on what state of inebriation they are in, a drinker may feel depressed; alcohol is a depressant, after all. Or they may go a little wild. As noted, drunkenness loosens social inhibitions, freeing one up to cut loose and misbehave in ways that potentially cause shame or regret upon sobering up.

Stylistically, these unexpected behaviors work well to rhetorically generate that feeling of surprise often effected by a haiku's juxtaposed images. The haiku (or more probably, senryu) may elicit a wry, empathetic smile on the reader's face. Other pieces written by known alcoholic poets, such as Jack Kerouac or Taneda Santoka, evoke a certain retrospective pathos.

fourth glass of wine
slurring
my excuses

Claudette Russell ³⁴

After New Year's
Sake cups
In the fish tank

Miriam Sagan ³⁵

drunk again my reflection fills the toilet bowl

Ed Markowski ³⁶

This bad behavior is not always our own. The usual tropes, the town drunk and the drunken priest, make regular appearances in the haiku village. Town drunks and winos often play the role of the archetypal fool, behaving in ways that defy societal norms. They may unwittingly say or do something profound, or at least poetic, in their inebriation. On the other hand, the inclusion of a drunken priest is often meant to highlight the irony of the situation.

The drunk
lets the butterfly
lead the way

Alan Pizzarelli ³⁷

arms balancing
wino steps carefully over
his demons

W.S. Apter ³⁸

One drinks alone, in pairs, or in the company of many others at a party, over dinner, or at a bar. Drinking alone is often burdened with connotations of loneliness, depression, sadness, or self-pity: consider the common image of the man hunched over his drink at a bar, "drowning his sorrows." The drink itself becomes one's only companion and comfort. Imbibing with others is more often a convivial activity, as at the televi-

sion bar *Cheers* where everyone knows your name. We make toasts and clink glasses as a way to celebrate together. Liquor loosens tongues, in vino veritas—and a night out fueled by alcohol often involves storytelling, confessions, and seductions.

whiskey i sip it till it loves me

*Jim Kacian*³⁹

nightfall

in the wine cup
an old friend's face

*Penny Harter*⁴⁰

February thaw —
a few sips of wine
loosen her tongue

*Cathy Drinkwater Better*⁴¹

sitting alone at the bar
with others sitting alone
spring drizzle

*Stephen A. Peters*⁴²

Haiku poets seem to find quite a few bugs in their booze, perhaps channeling Issa and his amicable relationship with insects. That these insects are frequently juxtaposed with hot weather indicates that the poet is often drinking outside. The human drinker seems to most readily identify with the behavior of a bee intoxicated by nectar. And as with the old joke about the fly in one's soup doing the backstroke (did this originate from one of Issa's haiku, below?), these haiku are often playful.

in a sake bowl

a flea

swimming! swimming!

*Kobayashi Issa*⁴³

a gnat floats in the glass of gin the heat

*Marlene Mountain*⁴⁴

Other, more abstract entities find their way into bottles or wine glasses, as well: light, music, stories, memories. Again, the influence of the alcohol may be to blame for these poetically filled glasses, or it may be the way haiku poets have trained themselves to look at the world. Also considered is what's not in the bottle, which sets up the irresistible punning pivot (found in several haiku I came across in my survey) of "half drunk."

in silence
 firelight fills
 two wine glasses

*Mark E. Brager*⁴⁵

long summer
 the whiskey glass full
 of midnights

*Tom Drescher*⁴⁶

Psychologist Carl Jung once riffed on the word 'spirits:' "You see, 'alcohol' in Latin is *spiritus*, and one uses the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison..."⁴⁷ So in drinking, the poet may hope, consciously or not, to tap into some form of higher spirit, something larger than the self, perhaps even mystical, that rearranges their perceptions of the world.

Perhaps this is why so many haiku poets drink with the moon in one way or another: as a poetic image, the moon's shining presence possesses mystical and bewitching qualities similar to those of alcohol. This alliance between moon and booze had an early start; in times past, sake was a requisite accompaniment of moon-viewing parties. And certainly, more drinking happens after dark when the moon is most visible and apparent.

Throughout the long history of the form, haiku poets have been inspired by the moon more than any other aspect of the natural world. The moon inspires many an illuminating, well-rounded metaphor. (Surprisingly, though, not a lot of moonshine is drunk in haiku.) Whatever the reason, every haiku poet's best friend, the moon, is easily, and perhaps naturally, also their most consistent drinking buddy. We could do worse.

drinking sake
 without flowers or moon
 one is alone

*Matsuo Bashō*⁴⁸

drunk:
 the moon
 is staggering

*Matthias Korn*⁴⁹

sake with friends
 the moon and my shadow
 three drunkards

*Doug D'Elia*⁵⁰

summer evening —
 the palm tree and the moon
 are tipsy too!

*Karma Tenzing Wangchuk*⁵¹

NOTES

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