

## URBAN BATHING: HAIKU AND SENRYU OF THE CITY

*David Grayson*

In *Modern Haiku* 51.1, Michael Dylan Welch published an essay about forest bathing. He describes a forest bather as “someone who delights in taking long and luxuriant soaks in woods and forests.”<sup>1</sup> He notes the long history of writers, including haiku poets, who have recognized the virtues of immersing oneself in nature both for its own sake and for creative inspiration. I’ve personally relished forest bathing, no doubt in company with haiku brethren far and wide.

But I live in an urban area. In this I’m joined by 81% of the U.S. population and 55% of global humanity.<sup>2</sup> This left me with a question. As someone who also delights in taking long and luxuriant soaks in cities, how much of the experience of forest bathing applies to its counterpart, which could be termed “urban bathing” or “city bathing?” Do haiku and senryu provide insights into this practice?

through city fog  
the faint roar  
of zoo lions

*Nathanael Tico*<sup>3</sup>

The National Geographic *Resource Library* defines an urban area as featuring a high density of both population and “human structures such as houses, commercial buildings, roads, bridges, and railways.” An urban area refers not only to a city but also to its surrounding towns and suburbs.<sup>4</sup>

At first blush, there are both obvious parallels and differences between nature walking and urban walking. The physical experience of walking and its benefits (as exercise) are similar. But Welch highlights a study about the positive effects of walking specifically in nature (which include a boosted immune system and improved blood pressure).<sup>5</sup> Some of these

may not apply in every urban environment due to aspects like noise, safety concerns, and hazardous air quality.

Of course, many cities have lush green spaces, but even in the densest concrete jungle, we're never far from nature:

all the parking spaces  
taken  
by gulls

*Bill Gottlieb*<sup>6</sup>

There are several categories of architecture, including residential, commercial, religious, and governmental. Human built structures have their own inherent character—beautiful, functional, or otherwise. We interact with these forms, whether they are homes we live in, streets we walk, or sites we visit.

on the iron lace balconies  
only flowers  
sunning

*Anita Virgil*<sup>7</sup>

cobblestone alley  
the juxta puzzle  
of my random thoughts

*Hifsa Ashraf*<sup>8</sup>

Fisherman's Wharf  
a row of children  
hold their nose

*Peggy Hale Bilbro*<sup>9</sup>

Maybe not surprisingly, skyscrapers have figured prominently in haiku about cities.

60 stories  
of glass:  
the summer moon

*Michael McClintock*<sup>10</sup>

A wailing siren  
Scales up sheer skyscraper walls  
In a blinding sun.

*Richard Wright*<sup>11</sup>

Both of these poems express ambivalence about these soaring edifices. McClintock's third line surprises the reader with the appearance of a celestial body reflected in the tower of glass. The engineering achievement this building represents is overshadowed by the summer moon. Wright uses the skyscraper to highlight what is presumably an unfolding tragedy, represented by the siren.

skyscrapers  
my collar turned up  
to the cold

*Joe McKeon*<sup>12</sup>

This poem conveys the “canyon effect” that results from streets lined by tall buildings, which creates strong winds (an example of the built environment inadvertently imitating nature). McKeon's poem, too, suggests ambivalence. There is the direct cold of the canyon effect and the figurative use of cold as a response to what these commercial buildings might represent (overdevelopment, capitalism, etc.). Indeed, some people view the world of the business district as the opposite of nature:

Men in business suits  
checking the sundial's time  
with their wrist watches

*Tom Tico*<sup>13</sup>

In these poems about skyscrapers, it's worth noting that multiple senses are invoked: sight in McClintock's; sight and sound in Wright's; and touch in McKeon's. These are signals of being alive to your surroundings. Welch refers to this as being “fully present.”<sup>14</sup>

While downtown is the center of commerce, it's the neighborhoods (often with distinctive flavors) that house the majority of a city's residents. Walking, sometimes just outside our door, can bring us into contact with other groups, as the Bangalore poet Ramesh Anand observes:

mixed neighborhood  
 the toddlers wear  
 the same smile <sup>15</sup>

Some communities are developed for specific demographic groups.

retirement town  
 all the men  
 in camouflage vests  
*Robert Epstein* <sup>16</sup>

There are also neighborhoods where some groups have been compelled to reside through either formal policies or informal practices:

Juneteenth  
 on one side of town  
 fireworks  
*Mark Forrester* <sup>17</sup>

The National Geographic description encompasses railways and roads, as these networks make an urban area function and tie it into a cohesive unit. Indeed, it's on public transit where people from various backgrounds meet.

waiting for a bus  
 with strangers  
 bird song I should know  
*Jacquie Pearce* <sup>18</sup>

Despite sharing compressed spaces, you can nevertheless feel a social or emotional distance between you and fellow riders, as implied by Pearce. Remarkably, one of the earliest and most iconic English-language haiku, Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," reflects the transitory experience of the subway:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
 Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>19</sup>

But connections are made, sometimes in understated or unexpected ways:

winter commute  
my hand finds a warm spot  
on the handrail

*Dee Evetts*<sup>20</sup>

day moon  
out of the subway entrance  
a saxophone solo

*Olivier Schopfer*<sup>21</sup>

These metro poems provide a hint of a recurring difference between immersing oneself in nature versus the urban. The former is often an individual and not a communal experience. That is, forest bathing is often about communion with nature (not people), which moreover is often paired with solitude. Indeed, Welch describes it as “an intimate exchange” between the individual and nature.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, urban bathing is usually more people-centric—indeed it is often specifically about encounters or connections with your fellow humans. This is probably rooted in the reality of city life; whether intentionally bathing or simply journeying between two points, you’re rarely alone. As Fay Aoyagi relates, this is true even in the late hours.

moonlit sunflowers  
at a 24-hour deli —  
his ‘good night’ lingers<sup>23</sup>

Welch notes that forest bathing can help the poet reach an “internal stillness”<sup>24</sup> that enables noticing the details of the world around us. It’s possibly more challenging to accomplish this in a busy, noisy, and dense urban core. But attentiveness can reveal the unnoticed underneath the hubbub:

San Francisco  
song sparrows sing  
in many dialects

*Sarah Paris*<sup>25</sup>

city street  
the darkness inside  
the snow-covered cars

*Cor van den Heuvel*<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the senses of hearing and sight, urban areas are an amalgamation of smells and even tastes.

spring in the air  
 lily-of-the-valley  
 from a sidewalk laundromat

*Ingrid Baluchi*<sup>27</sup>

summer sidewalk  
 the lingering taste  
 of lemon ice

*Debbi Antebi*<sup>28</sup>

These poems about laundromats and sidewalks and dialects represent the opposite of the sentiments evoked in the earlier skyscraper poems. They are an embracing of the city, in spite of its imperfections and contradictions. Lorine Niedecker wrote, “I am what is around me—these woods have made me.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, simply walking past a laundromat, site of a basic quotidian task, can remind us of how we are constituted by bricks and mortar, too.

In addition to the seasons, cities can change dramatically due to governmental policy, economic forces, migration, and more. The change can be small and local. Or, we can be privileged to bear witness to a larger current of history:

bathroom ruins  
 mallards rest in the shallows  
 at sunset

*Lane Parker*<sup>30</sup>

Berlin Wall  
 a smooth stone  
 in my pocket

*H. Gene Murtha*<sup>31</sup>

The passage of time represented in these haiku reminds us that we are not only connected to cities and their denizens in our own lifetime, but also to those who came before—and those who will follow our footsteps.

William Higginson wrote that the “central act of haiku is letting an object or event touch us, and then sharing it with another.”<sup>32</sup> A city can be both eye-opening and disorienting. It can represent a daily grind as well as an invigorating lifestyle. Settling into a receptive frame of mind can confer some of the same rewards as forest bathing (for instance, gratitude) while also emphasizing others (fostering community). Whether it’s your home or a once-in-a-lifetime destination, approaching a city like an “urban bather” will yield many benefits, both as a haiku poet and as an individual.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Welch, Michael Dylan. “Haiku and the Art of Forest Bathing.” *Modern Haiku* 51.1 (Winter-Spring 2020), 27. Note: Welch posted an expanded version on his website, Graceguts. <https://www.graceguts.com/essays/haiku-and-the-art-of-forest-bathing> (Accessed June 24, 2022). All quotations are from the original article. (Both accessed December 2, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> “Urban Areas Facts,” United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/ua-facts.html>. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Mariposa* 45.

<sup>4</sup> “Urban Area” Encyclopedic Entry, *Resource Library*, National Geographic. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/urban-area> (Accessed June 24, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Welch, 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> *Frogpond* 43:1.

<sup>7</sup> *Frogpond* 13:4.

<sup>8</sup> “Haiku Dialogue.” The Haiku Foundation Blog. “Finding peace and contemplation...” April 6, 2022. <https://thehaikufoundation.org/haiku-dialogue-finding-peace-and-contemplation-in-quiet-spaces-far-from-crowds/>. (Accessed July 1, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> “Haiku Dialogue.” The Haiku Foundation Blog. “Gourmet Gallery – smell.” October 16, 2019. <https://thehaikufoundation.org/haiku-dialogue-3/>. (Accessed July 1, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, ed. Jim Kacian. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Hakutani, Yoshinobu and Robert L. Tener., eds *Haiku: This Other World*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998, 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Frogpond* 44:2.

<sup>13</sup> *Spring Morning Sun: Haiku*. San Francisco: Belltower Press, 1998, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Welch, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Frogpond* 43:1.

<sup>16</sup> *Mariposa* 41.

<sup>17</sup> *Frogpond* 44:1.

<sup>18</sup> *Frogpond* 44:3.

<sup>19</sup> *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1957, 35.

<sup>20</sup> *endgrain: Haiku & Senryu 1988-1997*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Honorable Mention, The Robert Spiess Memorial 2017 Haiku Awards. *Modern Haiku* 48.2, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Welch, 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Chrysanthemum Love*. San Francisco: Blue Willow Press, 2003, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Welch, 30.

<sup>25</sup> First Place, 2021 San Francisco International Senryu Competition. *Mariposa* 46, 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> "Troutswirl." The Haiku Foundation Blog. "A Sense of Place: City Sidewalk – smell." December 12, 2018. <https://thehaikufoundation.org/a-sense-of-place-city-sidewalk-smell/>. (Accessed July 1, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> "Troutswirl." The Haiku Foundation Blog. "A Sense of Place: City Sidewalk – taste." December 19, 2018. <https://thehaikufoundation.org/a-sense-of-place-city-sidewalk-taste/>. (Accessed July 1, 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Welch, 33.

<sup>30</sup> *Mariposa* 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, 244.

<sup>32</sup> Higginson, William J. and Penny Harter, *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985), 6.