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Gerald Vizenor

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# CHICAGO REVIEW

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The Envoy to Haiku

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Gerald Vizenor

## The Envoy to Haiku

The *Toya Maru* might have been the end of me.

The train ferry lost power and turned over in a typhoon between the islands of Honshu and Hokkaido. More than a thousand people died at sea that night. I was lucky. Our battalion had been ordered, at the last minute, to remain on the northern island and bivouac in the pristine Imperial National Forest.

"The vessel carried soldiers of the United States First Cavalry Division transferring from Hokkaido to new posts on Honshu," reported *The New York Times* on 27 September 1954. "The typhoon did widespread damage over the main islands of Japan."

The *Toya Maru* carried my typewriter and copies of my first stories to the bottom of Tsugaru Strait. I was wise to haiku that summer and would tote no more than a notebook. Naturally, that coincidence, and the loss of my typewriter, were trivial at the time.

I was a crossblood on the natural margins of a cultural contradance. My father was from the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, a newcomer to the city, and my mother lived in Minneapolis. The chance union of my parents was a contradiction of suspensive racialism in the ruins of representation.

The woodland dream songs and trickster stories that would bear the humor and tragic wisdom of tribal experiences were superseded in the literature of dominance. Indians were invented to maintain the notions of savagism and civilization. The Anishinaabe, my ancestors of the woodland, were named the Chippewa. The oral stories and dream songs of the tribes were translated and compared as cultural evidence; scarcely with wisdom, humor, or eminence. Biblical and classical references, the

traces of dominance, encumbered the common pleasures of creation in literature.

"The sky loves to hear me sing" is a heartened invitation to the dream songs of the Anishinaabe. The dreamers listen to the natural turnout of the seasons, and the everlasting sky hears their voices on the wind. "With a large bird above me, I am walking in the sky" is a translation of an avian vision that was heard in woodland tribal communities. My interpretations of selected dream songs in translation were later published in *Summer in the Spring: Anishinaabe Lyric Poems and Stories*.

Frances Densmore was one of the most honorable translators of tribal dream songs and ceremonies; these and other creations that she recorded at the turn of the last century would come to me later with a haiku nature.

*as my eyes  
look across the prairie  
i feel the summer  
in the spring*

*overhanging clouds  
echoing my words  
with a pleasing sound*

*across the earth  
everywhere  
making my voice heard*

Chance and the contradictions of tribal and national identities would become my sources of incitation as a creative writer. I would have to leave the nation of my birth to understand the wisdom and survivance of tribal literature. How ironic that my service as a soldier would lead me to haiku, and haiku an overture to dream songs. Haiku would be my introduction to the pleasures of literature, a national literature that did not exclude the common reader by dominance, decadence, or intellectual elitism.

The Japanese would hear me in haiku, not at war; my first liberation in literature. Neither nation had me in mind at the end of the war or even later in narratives; nonetheless, the coincidence of suspensive maneuvers in the military and the assurance of haiku were assumed on the pine islands at Matsushima.

The United States Army trained me in combat simulations and guerrilla tactics, but the most elusive maneuvers of nations were overcome by chance, in the sensations of literature, not in the ruins of war.

The United States Steamship *Sturgis*, with more than three thousand soldiers on board, was bound for the port at Inchon, South Korea, an industrial center on the Yellow Sea. General Douglas MacArthur, commander of United Nations forces, had carried out an amphibious landing from the same port, behind the lines of the North Koreans.

Panmunjom, in the demilitarized zone between the nations, seemed so far removed from our troop ship, but we were certain at the time, and that much out of fear, that our fate would be traded in measured words over a military blanket. Peace negotiations were down, checked over the absence and presence of names, and there were no indications that the war would end before we docked. Meanwhile, a hospital ship was delayed in the port of Inchon, so the *Sturgis* docked at Yokohama. Thereafter, several hundred soldiers were mustered each day from the top of the alphabet for military flights to the front lines in Korea.

That slow muster to combat was unbearable the closer my name came on the war list; then, by chance, near the end of the tees in the alphabet, there were no more musters. We waited at the end of the alphabet for a few days, and then we boarded a train for Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan. Chitose was our destination, a small town cornered by two military bases near the city of Sapporo. The names at the lower end of the alphabet, about two hundred soldiers, were assigned to the Seventieth Tank Battalion, First Cavalry Division, a celebrated unit that had been decimated a few months earlier in Korea.

Three months later the war ended. An armistice was signed, after two years of negotiations, by officials of the United Nations and North Korea at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953.

The Japanese and their literature were my liberation. I was eighteen years old and saw haiku in calligraphy that summer for the first time and read translations of poems by Kobayashi Issa and Matsuo Bashō. That presence of haiku, more than other literature, touched my imagination and brought me closer to a sense of tribal consciousness. I was liberated from the treacherous manners of missionaries, classical warrants, the themes of savagism and civilization, and the arrogance of academic discoveries. The impermanence of natural reason and tribal remembrance was close to the mood of impermanence in haiku and other literature. My poems and stories would arise as shadows, the evanescence of interior landscapes.

A haiku is "not explicit about what has been going on in the mind of the author," wrote Daisetz Suzuki in *Zen and Japanese Culture*. "He does not go any further than barely enumerating, as it were, the most conspicuous objects that have impressed or inspired him. As to the meaning of such objects . . . it is left to the reader to construct and interpret it according to his poetic experience or his spiritual intuitions."

The haiku poem ascribes the seasons with shadow words, the sources of creation and visual memories, a moment of wonder in the natural world; the morning light that turns the leaves, the hands of children on the cold window, animals and birds in the first snow, the reach of waves at the end of an ocean storm. Shadow words and haiku thought are intuitive, a concise concentration of motion, memories, and the sensations of the seasons without closure or silence.

"In haiku, the two entirely different things that are joined in sameness are poetry and sensation, spirit and matter," wrote R.H. Blyth in *A History of Haiku*. "The coldness of a cold day, the heat of a hot day, the smoothness of a stone, the whiteness of a seagull, the distance of the far-off mountains, the smallness of a small flower, the dampness of the rainy season, the quivering of the hairs of a caterpillar in the breeze—these things, without any thought or emotion or beauty or desire are haiku."

These sensations are the tribal shadows of creation.

Donald Keene, in *Japanese Literature*, observed that a "really good poem, and this is especially true of haiku, must be completed by the reader. It is for this reason that many of their poems seem curiously passive to us, for the writer does not specify the truth taught him by an experience, nor even in what way it affected him . . ." What haiku poems have sought, he pointed out, "is to create with a few words, usually with a few sharp images, the outline of a work whose details must be supplied by the reader, as in a Japanese painting a few strokes of the brush must suggest the world."

Earl Miner, and others, in *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature*, defined the haibun as a prose composition, "usually with *haikai* stanzas . . . with an autobiographical" interest that "could treat many kinds of experiences. When it treats a journey, it becomes a species of *kiko*." *Haikai* is a form of linked poems, or "*haikai no renga*." The *renga* is linked poetry that "developed from a pastime in the twelfth century into serious art." The *kiko* is travel literature that expresses an "appreciation of famous places." Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi*, or *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in prose and *haikai*, "is no doubt the greatest." Haiku is an "abbreviation of *haikai no ku*,

and a term seldom met in classical literature, although *hokku* were increasingly composed in ways highly similar."

Matsuo Bashō was born near Ueno in Iga Province. He wrote his first poems when he was eighteen years old, but his best haiku and haibun were composed during the last ten years of his life. He wrote about the common experiences of the world in a serious manner. Bashō created his haibun at the same time that my tribal ancestors encountered the colonists and their diseases.

Bashō visited Matsushima and wrote in his haibun diaries about the moon over the pine islands, the treasures of the nation. I was there three hundred years later, touched by the same moon and the master haiku poet. "Much praise has already been lavished upon the wonders of the islands of Matsushima," wrote Bashō in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa. "Yet if further praise is possible, I would like to say that here is the most beautiful spot in the whole country of Japan. . . . The islands are situated in a bay about three miles wide in every direction and open to the sea through a narrow mouth on the southeast side. . . . Islands are piled above islands, and islands are joined to islands, so that they look exactly like parents caressing their children or walking with them arm in arm.

"The pines are of the freshest green, and their branches are curved in exquisite lines, bent by the wind constantly blowing through them. Indeed, the beauty of the entire scene can only be compared to the most divinely endowed of feminine countenances, for who else could have created such beauty but the great god of nature himself? My pen strove in vain to equal this superb creation of divine artifice."

Bashō died in October 1694 at the age of fifty. Four days before his death, one of his disciples wrote this about the master haiku poet: "Soon I heard the clatter of an ink bar rubbing against a slab. I wondered what manner of letter it was, but it turned out to be a poem." Bashō wrote this, his last poem:

*seized with a disease  
halfway on the road  
my dreams keep revolving  
round the withered moor*

Matsushima is a natural remembrance, a dream of the moon over the pine islands in haiku. I considered his most frequently translated haiku, *an ancient pond, a frog jumps in, sound of water*, and wrote this original haiku in the autumn:

*calm in the storm  
master basho soaks his feet  
water striders*

My haiku poems are read in the four seasons, and there are three attributes of development. The haiku in my first three books, *Raising the Moon Vines*, *Seventeen Chirps*, and *Empty Swings*, were common comparative experiences in the past tense. Later, in *Matsushima*, my haiku were more metaphorical, concise and with a sense of presence.

*wooden bucket  
frozen under the rain spout  
springs a leak*

*march moon  
shimmers down the sidewalk  
snail crossing*

*hail stones  
sound once or twice a summer  
old school bell*

*bold nasturtiums  
dress the barbed wire fences  
down to the wild sea*

*acacia leaves  
rain on the construction site  
saved the bright trees*

The third attribute in the development of my haiku widens the sentiment and attitude of the poem with an envoy, a prose concentration and discourse on the images and sensations. This practice combines my experiences in haiku with natural reason in tribal literature, a new haiku hermeneutics. Tribal dream songs and haiku are centered in nature. For instance, the haiku poems that follow have an envoy, or a discourse on the reach of haiku sensations and tribal survivance. The envoy is interpretative; the three lines of the haiku are heard in shadow words and printed without punctuation. The envoy is in prose.



*calm in the storm  
master basho soaks his feet  
water striders*

*The striders listen to the wind, the creation of sound that is heard and seen in the motion of water; the wind teases the tension and natural balance on the surface of the world. The same wind that moves the spiders teases the poets.*

*Those stubborn flies  
square dance across the grapefruit  
honor your partner*

*Fat green flies dance on the back of spoons, turn twice, and reach for the grapefruit. The flies allemande left and right in a great breakfast dance, but the owners of the spoons in the restaurant would terminate the insects to save the grapefruit. We are the lonesome dancers over the remains of so many natural partners in the world.*

*redwing blackbirds  
ride the reeds in a slough  
curtain calls*

*The crack of bird songs and the flash of color on the wing is a comic romance in sloughs. We pose at lamp posts as the blackbirds might, cocked on the side of reeds with the wind close to our ears. Listen, audiences are better in the sloughs; the curtain calls never end.*

*cocksure squirrels  
break the ice at the window  
raid the bird feeder*

*My poems and stories about the squirrels were heard as a menace to neighbors, an invitation to honor mere rodents and tree rats. The squirrels must have heard the literature in their name that winter. Silence is not a natural world; the earth hears no balance in termination.*

Haiku hermeneutics, that sense of haiku, is a natural habitude in tribal literature; the interpretations of the heard and written must consider the shadow words and sensations of haiku. The turn of the

seasons, the course of spiders, the heat of stone, and the shadows of remembrance rush to the words laced in stories and poems. Stories must have their listeners and readers to overcome a natural impermanence. Oral stories must be heard to endure; haiku are shadow words and sensations of the heard. Words wait for no one on the page. The envoys to haiku are the silent interpretations of a "haiku spirit."

"The haiku never describes; its art is counter-descriptive, to the degree that each state of the thing is immediately, stubbornly, victoriously converted into a fragile essence of appearances," wrote Roland Barthes in the *Empire of Signs*. "Hence the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings. . . . Here meaning is only a flash, a slash of light."

Bashō was a critical interpreter; he exercised, in a sense, the hermeneutics of haiku. He considered two attitudes of "poetic composition," observed Makoto Ueda in *Matsuo Bashō*. "A good poet does not 'make' a poem; he keeps contemplating his subject until it 'becomes' a poem. A poem forms itself spontaneously. If the poet labors to compose a poem out of his own self, it will impair the 'soul' of his subject."

Uedo wrote that Bashō made use of the critical concept of "surplus meaning." The poem means more than the words; the meaning is "suggested" and "stated" at the same time. "According to Bashō's principle of 'lightness' then, a poem should present a picture of life objectively in familiar words, avoiding intensely emotional expression. A poet should not pour his passion into his work; he should rather detach himself from the passion and submerge it within an objective scene."

Bashō wrote that he "tried to give up poetry and remain silent, but every time I did so a poetic sentiment would solicit my heart and something would flicker in my mind. Such is the magic spell of poetry." Uedo noted that the haiku master "who considered poetry nothing more than a pastime in his youth, came to demand too much of it in his last years."