

## Wabi Sabi in Haiku

(From stillinthestream.com, edited July 10, 2006 by the author)

The two word phrase "wabi sabi" originated in the Japanese language but has made its way into English largely because English lacks an adequate equivalent.

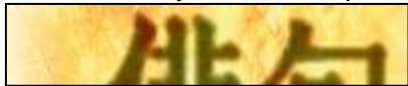
Even in Japanese the exact meaning of the phrase is difficult to pin down. It is first and foremost a beauty seen in aged or worn objects; objects that contain deep patterns, patina, character, or qualities of authentic individuality.

This article presents examples of haiku that exhibit wabi sabi or focus on a wabi sabi subject. The commentary that accompanies each poem discusses the images the poet chose, what the poet left out, what is implied, and what techniques contribute to the success of the poem.



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When a haikai (a writer of haiku) writes a haiku about something wabi sabi she will often attempt to capture both its transient beauty AND the abiding qualities within the beauty, what haiku masters in years past called, *Fueki Ryuko*<sup>1</sup>. Such haiku stimulate feelings of favourable melancholy. The most successful haiku of this type produce a clarity of perception in which the reader sees the subject of the haiku for what it is. There is a release of any desire to repair or arrest the effects of time, experience, or age.



Everything is just right the way it is, defects and all.

### The Examples

Below are 9 examples of haiku that succeed in communicating wabi sabi or which use wabi sabi elements to suggest *Yugen* or *Karumi*. You may want to scroll down and read all the haiku first, before reading the accompanying commentary. See if you can identify a common quality being expressed in these poems. Then, if you wish, return and read the commentary.

the morning's snow  
I can chew dried salmon  
alone

- Basho

This haiku by Basho\* reveals several important techniques that help capture wabi sabi in a poem.

First it presents two simple images without subjective interpretation. This makes the meaning of the poem satisfyingly ambiguous. Is Basho saying that because of the snow he can not go out and be with friends and must eat a cold meal at home alone? Or is he saying that because of the snow, he "gets" to stay home and enjoy an unhurried meal by himself? Or is he simply looking out on the snow while he eats his morning meal thankful

that he can still chew? Or is he noting the time he takes to savour the view by coupling the image with a second image of a "long slow chew"?

Secondly, the images presented in the poem are humble and common. They have a wabi quality. Thirdly the word "alone" is crucial to the success of the poem, because it points to the significance of the humble images. This word "colors" the images and is the sabi element.

washing away  
TONIGHT'S SPECIAL  
the thunderstorm

- Matt Morden

This haiku, which appeared in Canada pawEprint #63, is a good contemporary example of a haiku that exhibits wabi sabi. Both the thunderstorm and the chalk lettering are transient, each lasting for less than a day. The lovely echo of a transient storm washing away a transient sign is further highlighted by the sign itself, a special that is only offered on one night. This reverberation, like the thunder itself, continues in the image of meals half-eaten, conversations in progress, all against the backdrop of a darkening sky. A simple image filled with deep sounds and resonance.

fainter and fainter  
up church steps  
damp footprints

- Michael Dudley

This haiku by Michael Dudley has a clear sense of impermanence contrasted against the relative permanence of the church.

The steady chronological progression in the first two lines is light and ephemeral. The eyes move upward, searching for the object that grows fainter. Then the last line restores an earthy reality, the word "damp" especially evokes smells and that memory of being inside a rain coat. Someone or several people have passed into the church where they found, perhaps incidentally, shelter and dryness. There is, if the image is pushed a little further, an echo that inside the church the reality of the wet footsteps fades away. It harkens back to a time when the inner sanctuary was holy, higher, and hallowed. Or conversely it suggests that when we leave the street for the church, we leave our footprints, or individuality, behind.

Regardless of the interpretation a reader makes, the image itself is beautiful. Are you drawn to footprints? Do you enjoy seeing them in snow or sand? They reveal others, provide evidence that we are not alone, show where someone has gone. If they are your footprints, seeing them authenticates your existence, your movement through time and space, your journey across the days.

How would the poem have been different had Mr. Dudley written "stone" instead of "church?" Fading footprints on church steps elicit for me a deep emotional resonance, hinting at a deeper meaning. By contrasting impermanence and the recurring tendencies of human behavior this poem leads the reader to a sense of Yugen<sup>2</sup>, a deep nameless mystery filled with quiet longing.

drifting snow  
lambs inside the barn  
inside the ewes

-Harriot West

This masterful haiku by Harriot West is enjoyable on several levels not least of which is the twist in perception created by the last line.

The second, less immediate enjoyment, comes from the deep emotional satisfaction delivered shortly after the twist in perception. It is as if our minds have been pregnant, waiting for this image to come along and

birth a new awareness. But with the awareness comes a deep longing for something lost, some elemental connection with nature that we seem never to maintain.

The full extent of what is going on here is difficult to describe. The drifting snow suggests a cold winter storm and the barn glows warmly against the storm as a refuge created by humans for tender young animals. Then, with the entry into the very body of the mother sheep we begin a spiral out of sight and out of easy explanation.

In this image we have a scene that reveals a key cycle of nature and the deep mystery of nurture, the way human structures and sheep biology care for the young. We are left with questions about the ultimate fate of the lambs, the ultimate effectiveness of barns against the storm, and the curious attraction we have to animals that reflect both our affection and our hunger.

The tingling feeling produced by this haiku is also Yugen and the combination of generations of animals and the presence of animal husbandry combine to reveal wabi sabi.

snowfall  
the hush of a concert hall  
between each note

-Michele Root-Bernstein

I realized while assembling these haiku that this is the third poem with snow in it. Curiously the haiku tradition recognizes that certain images have universal meaning, and perhaps snow lends itself to yugen. Some art historians have suggested that yugen in Japanese culture is the highest goal of an artist, a goal in which the suggestion of deep meaning is made by allusion, indirectly.

In order for this technique to work, scholars suggest, there must be a homogeneous culture which sees objects and experiences through the same lens. To a degree I believe this to be true. In my study of different world literatures I have often puzzled over phrases and images that seem to hold great importance to the writer but which escape me because of my ignorance of the culture or religion, or literary tradition. In this I have found great worth in commentaries which provide the missing details that allow me to see what knowledge the writer requires in his or her reader.

So, is snow universally understood to hint at a deep mystery in life? In this poem Michele Root-Bernstein connects the falling of snow with the generally un-observed attention of a listening audience.

Two things happen for me reading this poem. First I remember several walks with my wife during snowfalls. There was on those occasions a hush imposed by the snow itself. Sounds were softened by the soft flakes.

Secondly I remember sitting in a concert hall in the seconds following the end of a powerful performance, that instant between the end of the last note and the beginning of thunderous applause. That millisecond of silence has always impressed me, like an extended pause between heart beats. In it I remember a Roshi's admonitions when plied by a student with questions about Zen. The Roshi's clearly enunciated answer held such authority: "Attention. Attention. Attention." Here we see that attention indirectly in the rapture of a silent audience.

But there is more. Deep within this experience of both falling snow and an attentive audience is an interesting contrast. Snow, while it is falling, limits a person's ability to see while at the same time draws out that person's attention towards the beauty. The same is true of a powerful piece of music. While listening to it, a person is both lost in the experience, and highly focused on listening. Yet Ms. Root-Bernstein here is not comparing falling snow with music, but the hush of falling snow with the hush of an audience listening to music. The contrast? Falling snow blocks sound and in its silence makes the experience profound, whereas the hush of the audience allows the music to reach its full power. Two hushes, one the cause of wonder, the other the result of it.

wings aglow -  
gulls rising above  
the garbage

- Eric Houck Jr.

This poem by Eric Houck Jr. contains wabi sabi elements; the humble gull and the downright unattractive garbage, but we see these commonplace objects in a new light, figuratively and literally, because of the first line. Why are the gulls wings aglow? Perhaps because they are rising into sunlight, or perhaps because they are white objects in an otherwise grey surrounding. Whatever the case we see

these "rats of the air" differently.

This poem contains a lightness itself, no razor sharp preaching on the virtue of the gull, no condemning diatribe on the polluting of our environment, but instead a rising above both in the recognition of the presence of the creatures themselves.

Yesterday while on a walk with my son we observed two herring gulls alight on a lamp pole. They seemed to be a pair and one stuck out its neck and emitted the common and recognizable call gulls everywhere make. I thought of Mr. Houck's haiku and watched as the two birds leapt into the air and soared over us. Looking up at these birds I was struck by their clean appearance, the sharp line between the white feathers and gray ones. Their bodies, when they glide, are smooth and elegant, heads pivoting on otherwise plane-rigid bodies. I was charged with a subtle joy, not overwhelming, but hopeful.

Mr. Houck's poem is an excellent example of a haiku that contains karumi<sup>3</sup>, the quality Basho considered to be the hallmark of his mature style.

rumors of war  
up into a darkening sky  
— a child's newsprint kite

- Angelee Deodhar

Another example of a haiku that contains karumi is this poem by Dr. Angelee Deodhar which won third place in the 2003 Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku contest.

In *Wabi Sabi for Writers* I discuss Basho's evolving style and suggest that he saw karumi as the most refined expression of sabi. In karumi there is plucky fortitude that accepts pain and darkness as a backdrop

to human character.

This haiku exhibits karumi in two ways. Firstly it contrasts the darkness of war with the lightness of play, and secondly it combines rumours and news and turns them into a kite, a child's toy. This is a rich combination of images that does not minimize the fear and apprehension of the possibility of armed combat, but points instead toward the hope we see in the kite, rising in a darkening sky, testimony to a child's innocence and to the value of that innocence for our own lives. This poem also indirectly serves as a reminder to warriors and warlords to consider alternatives to combat. The dark words that make up the rumours and the news can be treated lightly, can be transformed into something of wonder.

paddles at rest  
the trout rise  
into stillness

- Kay Grimnes

This poem, published in the February 2003 issue of Haiku Canada newsletter (VolumeXVI), captures the classic feel of wabi.

The origin of the wabi ideal goes back past the tea ceremony to a time when Japanese literati would retire to simple wilderness huts to gain inspiration from a tranquil natural environment.

This haiku particularly resonates for me because I am a paddler and know the feel of gliding in silence after resting my paddle, but also because so much is accomplished in the poem. The author is describing the kind of paddling I think is important, the kind where you paddle a bit and then stop to simply listen to the silence and watch the fish rise and the insects skip about the surface of the water. This choice to stop and take nature in, this going into wilderness to "be" rather than to conquer or master it, was, and is, central to the wabi experience.

What makes Ms. Grimnes' poem work so well is that it uses a passive image first to create a sense of stillness that is subtly tinged with anticipation. Then the image of the fish rising from depth to ring the surface of the water provides motion, but a smooth motion that echoes the gliding of the canoe. Finally the last line provides the confirmation that what is beneath this moment is a depth, not of water, but of non-action. The trout does not literally rise into stillness, but it rises into an almost bodily awareness of being still.

the tom asleep  
on the widow's porch  
is losing his sun

- William Hart

This poem is a good contemporary example of a haiku that exhibits *sabi* in the way that Basho pioneered.

There is a dusty feel to the poem evoked by the words "sun" and "porch" and this dryness suggests a loneliness about the tom and the widow.

Yet despite its sombre surface, the poem manages to stay on the light side of despair. The tom is not decrepit or bedraggled, just asleep, and the widow is not resigned to a rocking chair on the porch with the cat, so maybe she is off somewhere doing something interesting or important. The ambiguity of the poem is part of its charm. The tom is losing his sun, but we can predict that as he cools in the shade he will stir and move back into the sun. His lazy life of ease allows us to smile at his minor misfortune. This balance of humour and loss lends a quiet dynamic to the poem, which is one of the pleasures of *wabi sabi*.

There is a certain satisfaction in staring down hardship and loss, a certain deep steeled knowing in accepting the constant change of champions and scapegoats. In this complicated world it is nice to see a clear image, feel a poignant moment, realize a multileveled flavour. To sip in the smoothest nectar while the bees hover nearby, to look past the failing body of a favourite elder and see the wisdom, to savour the irony of a young person's pride, to see in a common utensil something almost sublime, these are the subjects of a *wabi sabi* haiku.

If you have enjoyed reading these examples and would like to enter further into *wabi sabi* through your own writing, consider purchasing *Wabi Sabi for Writers* or win a copy by entering the Still in the Stream Haiku Contest (<http://www.stillinthestream.com/files/haikucontest.htm>). This contest is intended to raise awareness of the pleasures of haiku and the expression of *wabi sabi* and related aesthetics in the haiku form.

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\* Basho's haiku is a paraphrase by the author.

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<sup>1</sup> Fueki Ryuko - 'Constancy and change.' The enduring patterns in the ever changing stream of nature. Sometimes understood to be the eternal truths that poets try to communicate.

<sup>2</sup> Yugen - Pronounced "You Gain." The word most often associated with *wabi sabi* refers to a deep mystery behind or beneath things. Several large volumes in Japanese are devoted to this word, particularly in relation to the Noh drama. A haiku contains *yugen* when it suggests subtle profundity or hints at a meaning beyond words. *Yugen* can not be described directly but emerges from a poem that captures the surface of a moment through which the deeper, often darker, wonder is glimpsed.

<sup>3</sup> Karumi - Karumi was the most notable characteristic of Basho's mature style. Karumi literally means a 'light beauty with subtlety' and was a quality Basho saw in higher levels of *sabi*. With *karumi* the loneliness of *sabi* opens into a contented acceptance. When asked to describe *karumi* Basho said it was a "shallow river over a sandy bed."