

Naked Haiku

from A Field Guide to North American Haiku¹

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In this installment of the Field Guide we consider the use in haiku of nakedness. English has many words to describe that state, principally “naked” and “nude,” but also “unclothed,” “undressed,” “in the raw,” “au naturel,” etc. Related words for part-nakedness such as “hatless,” “barefoot,” and the like, also pertain.

“Naked” describes a *natural* state, but not the *normal* one. “Naked” implies that one’s usual clothing is missing or has been removed. “Nude” is applied mostly to the human form. As a noun, “nude” suggests a naked human being, especially a model for a painting, sculpture, or photograph. As a simple adjective “nude” means “[naturally] bare” and, more often, in the attributive sense of depicting or performed by naked people: “nudist,” “nude beach,” “Nude” has overtones of the artistic, even erotic, that are lacking in “naked.” Both terms can be used to describe inanimate objects as well, “naked” much more commonly than “nude.”²

¹ “A Field Guide to North American Haiku” is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-saiki a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and illustrating what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese *saiki* (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. The current compilation presents “Human Affairs: clothing: nakedness.” The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 375,000 haiku. Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to trumbullc@tcomcast.net. Many thanks to haiku translator/scholars Hiroaki Sato and David G. Lanoue for their help in interpreting the Japanese haiku, to Jim Kacian for insight into his haiku, and to Noriko Martinez, my Japanese teacher for help with translations.

² There a number of excellent online discussion groups that deal with the shades of meaning. See for example, “English Language & Usage,” on *StackExchange*; <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/106582/when-to-use-nude-and-when-naked>.

first the model gets naked
then nude

Larry Kimmel, *Bottle Rockets* 30 (2014)

The Japanese word 裸 *hadaka*, “naked,” is value-neutral, while *naked* in English carries a tinge of unnaturalness, impropriety, even shock. Consider book titles such as David Sedaris’s *Naked*, William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape*, Penelope Ashe’s *Naked Came the Stranger*, and hundreds of others. In the *World Kigo Database* online, Gabi Greve identifies *hadaka* as a kigo for all summer in the “Humanity” category. She explains (text edited slightly):

The humidity and heat of Japan is quite something, and in olden times without air conditioning, getting naked was the easiest way to cope with it. Men and women would just wear a small piece of cloth to cover the private parts.... In many rural hot springs people enjoyed the bath naked and all together (*konyoku buro* 混浴) but with the advent of Western “civilization” this habit has been almost gone out of practice. The hot bath is still taken while naked, but now men and women are separated in different pools.

Naked innocence is the sense of one of Bashō’s three *hadaka* haiku, here translated about 2005 by Jane Reichhold on her *Old Pond: Bashō’s (almost) 1,000 Haiku* website:

花木槿裸童のかざし哉

hana mukuge hadaka warawa no kazashi kana

a hibiscus
worn by a naked child
in its hair

Inexplicably, though, Reichhold takes a turn toward the erotic in a retranslation in her print compendium, *Bashō: Complete Haiku* (2008):

hibiscus flower
naked I wear one
in my hair

Buson has a haiku about the naturalness and innocence of nakedness:

裸身に神うつりませ夏神樂
hadakami ni kami utsurimase natsu kagura

May the gods bestow
the Shinto summer blessings
upon those naked boys

Buson, in W. S. Merwin and Takako Lento,
Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson (2013)

Much more common in Japanese haiku, however, is the image of Man naked or baring himself to the Heavens, for example:

乞食かな天地を著たる夏衣其角
kojiki kana tenchi o kitaru natsugoromo

The beggar
wears heaven and earth
as summer cloth

Kikaku, in Stephen Addiss et al.,
Haiku: An Anthology of Japanese Poems (2009)

山の温泉や裸の上の天の川
yama no yu ya hadaka no ue no amanogawa

Hot spring in the mountains:
high above the naked bathers
the River of Heaven.

Shiki, in Makoto Ueda,
Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology (1976)

大空のした帽子かぶらず
ōzora no shita bōshi kaburazu

Right under the big sky, I don't wear a hat

Hōsai, trans. Hiroaki Sato,
Right Under the Big Sky, I Don't Wear a Hat (1993)

大海へとび込む前の裸なり
taikai e tobikomu mae no hadaka nari

Before leaping
into the great ocean
completely naked

Imase Gōichi,
in Bruce Ross et al., eds., *A Vast Sky* (2015)

さよならを言ふには遠き裸かな
sayonara o iu ni wa tōki hadaka kana

too far away
for good-byes—
this nakedness

Ishihara Yatsuka, in Patricia Donegan,
Love Haiku (2010)

On the other hand, in another instance Bashō's persona seems to flout the gods' intentions for reasons of personal comfort. In the following haiku, translator David Barnhill writes, "Bashō alludes to the story of priest Zōga, on pilgrimage to the Ise Shrine, who obeyed an order from a god to give all his clothes to beggars":

裸にはまだ衣更着の嵐哉
hadaka ni wa mada kisaragi no arashi kana

be naked?
not yet, with second month's
windstorm

Another “naked” haiku by Issa carries weighty philosophical overtones:

灯籠の火で飯をくふ裸かな
tōrō no hi de meshi o kuu hadaka kana

by Bon lantern light
eating my rice...
naked

I asked translator Lanoue why the poet would be naked while eating his skimpy meal, especially on the rather formal and serious occasion, the Bon Festival, which memorializes the souls of the departed. He replied that he pictures Issa naked because he is too lazy to put on clothes. Lanoue adds that this haiku was written at a very low time in Issa’s life, when he had lost two wives and four children to death and divorce, so he may have been reflecting on his own mortality, and is symbolically ready for the grave, postponing the imminent with one more bowl of rice.

Higginson³ says *hadaka* is a late summer *kigo* and provides a number of related words in Japanese: “For obvious reasons, people are more likely to remain stark naked (真っ裸 *mappadaka*), nude (まる裸 *maru hadaka*), or at least stripped to the waist (肌脱ぎ *hadanugi*) or barefoot (裸足 *hadashi*)— also summer topics— during the summer than at other times of the year, even in a nudist camp.” Some samples:

まっ裸を太陽にのぞかれる
mappadaka o taiyō ni nozokareru

my nakedness
highlighted
by the peeking sun

Santōka, in Stephen Wolfe, *Wreath of Weeds* (1977)

3 William J. Higginson, “Humanity-Summer,” in his *Haiku World*, 129–30. Higginson’s formatting removed and Japanese original added.

雨ふるふるさとははだしであるく
ame furu furusato wa hadashi de aruku

raining
in my home town
walking barefoot

Santōka, in Burton Watson, *For All My Walking* (2003)

いつも二階に肌ぬぎの祖母ゐるからは
itsumo nikai ni hadanugi no sobo iru kara wa

Grandma goes topless
so we always keep her
on the second floor

Iijima Haruko, trans. C. Trumbull, unpublished

Of course, nakedness is often sensuous, even erotic:

夕立や裸で乗しはだか馬
yūdachi ya hadaka de norishi hadakauma

rainstorm—
a naked rider
on a naked horse

Issa, in David G. Lanoue,
Haiku of Kobayashi Issa website

衣を脱ぎし闇のあなたに菖蒲咲く
i o nugishi yami no anata ni ayame saku

beyond the dark
where I disrobe
an iris in bloom

Katsura Nobuko, in Makoto Ueda,
Far Beyond the Field: Haiku by Japanese Women (2003)

Hadaka can describe nonhuman objects, notably trees. It is used in the phrase translated “utterly leafless” here:

裸木となりたる空の深さかな
hadakagi to naritaru sora no fukasa kana

The sky deepening
beyond the branches of a tree—
utterly leafless

Katō Kōko, *A Hidden Pond* (1996)

One other Japanese word, 裸婦 *rafu*, means “nude or naked woman,” and it can combine with nouns such as 画 *ga*, “painting”: thus 裸婦画 *rafuga* means “nude painting.” I have found only two Japanese haiku for which the translator chose the word “nude” over “naked,” however. Both are contemporary, both fall within the use of the word “nude” outlined above, and both, I find, are inscrutable:

金銭の一片と裸婦ころがれる
kinsen no ippen to rafu korogareru

One fragment of money and a nude woman lie about

Saitō Sanki, trans. Saito Masaya,
Frogpond 18:1 (spring 1995)

裸婦像は暗し外套群がりて
rafuzō wa kurashi gaitō muragarite

The nude sculpture’s dark with overcoats swarming.

Katō Minako, trans. Hiroaki Sato,
Frogpond 22:3 (1999)

Asked how he understands Katō’s haiku, Hiroaki Sato wrote, “Some say this haiku is puzzling, though I imagine it describes a scene in a museum: a nudesculpture...has a swarm of men in overcoats surrounding it, ever sexually unsatisfied, surrounding it, darkening the nude/sculpture.”

I have not found any Japanese “nude beach” haiku—but then I have not looked very hard!

English-language haiku are rarely as matter-of-fact or natural about nudity than Japanese. Senryu on the topic vastly outnumber haiku. But among the poets who have written on the subject of Man naked and confronting Nature or the Gods, we have:

facing the sea
i undress
Bob Boldman, *Eating a Melon* (1981)

stepping out barefoot to hear the night rain
Christina Smith Krause,
Frogpond 14:1 (spring 1991)

rather listen to night with nothing on
John Stevenson,
Roadrunner VII:4 (November 2007)

summer morning:
pausing in my nakedness
at the window
Michael McClintock, *Light Run* (1971)

barefoot in dew:
across the alpine lake
the sweep of stars
Ruth Yarrow, in Michael Dylan Welch and
Billie Wilson, eds., *Tracing the Fern* (2007 Haiku
North America conference anthology) 4

bareheaded girl
on a runaway colt...
spring wind
John Wills, *Mountain* (1993)

4 This haiku with “wildflowers” in place of “dew” was published in *Modern Haiku* 38:3 (2007)

DEATH POEM

I've loved these mountains!
reaching the end of the trail
I go nude
Marlina Rinzen, *Hummingbird* 2:2 (March 1992)

I thought I detected a pale reflection of Hōsai's hatless haiku in
Jim Kacian's

for his statue
the Great One hatless...
spring rain
Jim Kacian, *Frogpond* 31:2 (spring/summer 2008)

but the poet informs me that he was writing about the statue of
Lenin in Sofia, Bulgaria, now removed and replaced by a statue
of Saint Sophia, the city's namesake. The image of the communist
leader receiving inspiration from above is as distressing as it is
ironic!

Jack Galmitz offers a droll and curious inversion of Kikaku's
image of the beggar clad in only heaven and earth:

If I was the summer
People would remove their clothes
To adore me
Jack Galmitz, *Simple Circle* (2005)

Far and away, "bare feet" is the most appealing aspect of
nakedness for haiku poets. Sometimes the poet's direct
connection to the Earth is the subject:

finding time for the earth to feel my bare feet
Deb Koen, *The Heron's Nest* 15:3 (September 2013)

heartsong
bare feet
to bare earth
Joan Morse Vistain, *Modern Haiku* 40:3 (autumn 2009), 93

barefoot
the earth
pushes back
Bill Kenney, *Acorn* 21 (fall 2008)

Dozens of poets have written about waking barefoot across something appealing, such as grass (cool, frosty, wet, dew-dampened, newborn, newly mown, moonlit) or light snow, or something unappealing, such as asphalt, stones, or thorns. Here are a few pacesetting barefoot haiku:

lawn sprinkler
the child in me
runs barefoot
Roberta Beary, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, June 2013

late summer wind
covering one bare foot
with the other
Jack Barry, *Frogpond* 26:2 (2003)

the actor's bare feet
poke out from his kimono—
midnight galaxy
Patricia J. Machmiller, *Modern Haiku* 40:1
(winter–spring 2009)

As for nudes in art, Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece *Nude Descending a Staircase* has attracted the attention of some haikuists:

nude
de-
cend-
ing
a stare
Sidney Bending, *Haiku Canada Review* 9:1
(February 2015)

Nude Descending a Staircase
taping windows
before the hurricane
Raffael de Gruttola, *Modern Haiku* 35:1
(winter–spring 2004)

Regrettably, I have not found any haiku or senryu featuring other famous nudes such as those by Titian, Donatello, Goya, Renoir, Klimt, or Mapplethorpe.

Many people are self-conscious or shy about nudity...

the nude mannekin
in the dress shop window
... looks away
Cor van den Heuvel, *Cicada* (1980)

bulging eyes
of the goldfish...
I turn away to undress
Dawn Bruce, *Paper Wasp* 19:3 (winter 2013)

a shyness
as waves cover and uncover
my nakedness
Jane Reichhold, *A Dictionary of Haiku* (2nd ed., 2013)

then nude
normal silence
between fears
Richard Gilbert, *is/let*, Sept. 24, 2014

Nakedness made her visible
then she wore banana-leaves
and disappeared
Wazir Agha, in Zoe Savina, ed., *Haiku: The leaves are back
on the tree – International Anthology* (2002)

others not so much:

Without clothes
it's a different
conversation
John Brandi, *Weeding the Cosmos* (1992)

deliberately she undresses
as though someone were waiting
to see her naked
Audrey Olberg, *Modern Haiku* 43:2 (summer 2012)

Undressed—
today's role dangles
from a metal hanger
Alexis Rotella, *Modern Haiku* 13:2 (summer 1982)

Naked and nude haiku certainly can veer in the direction of the erotic or even prurient. I don't want to go too far in this direction, which will be covered (or uncovered!) in a future Field Guide installment, but I present a few fine examples here by way of suggesting the possibilities:

undressing
her moonlit shadow
on the tent wall
Charles Rossiter, *BrooksBooks* website

Long linen sleeping bag
cool and white
my nakedness
Ken H. Jones, *Snapshots* 5 (January 1999)

warm front
quietly i undress
the weatherman
Brent Goodman, *Cattails* [Web], May 2014

such heat
we share our nakedness
over the phone
Pamela Miller Ness, *The Haiku Calendar*
(Snapshot Press) 2003

lilac
the familiarity
of his nakedness
Carolyn Hall, *Modern Haiku* 40:1
(winter-spring 2009)

after the party
undressing
myself

Tom Clausen, *Modern Haiku* 24:3 (fall 1993), 28

I sit by my window eating an orange
you enter & undress me—
without a word.

Patricia Donegan, *Without Warning* (1990)

man in the moon
she floats nude on her back
in the lake

William Cullen, Jr., *Frogpond* 32:2
(spring/summer 2009)

nude swimming
not yet a Buddha
the penis stirs

William M. Ramsey, *Modern Haiku* 30:2
(summer 1999)

HAIKU

it is i who have
awakened in nakedness
o cold the morning cock.

Sonia Sanchez, *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (1998)

nude in a stifling room
she opens her legs—
positions the cello

Larry Kimmel, *Still* 3:3 (1989)

a father undressing barbie
ai li, *Still* 1:4 (1997)

To end on a lighter note, we'll point out that "nude beach" is a very popular subject for the senryu writer. Often—too often maybe—the senryu are a variation on the same joke—what's covered and what's not:

nude beach
only his bald spot
covered

Yvonne M. Hardenbrook, *Raw NerVZ* 1:1
(spring 1994)

Guadaloupe beach
a towel covers her face
the nude sunbather

Mykel Board, in Spring Street Haiku Group,
Pink Bulldozer (1999)

At the nude beach:
even without the costumes
the same old roles

Tom Tico, *Spring Morning Sun* (1998)

nude beach
his enormous
sand castle

John Stevenson,
Gerald M. Brady Senryu Awards 1996, 3rd

really wrinkled
the map
of nude beaches

LeRoy Gorman, *Frogpond* 15:1
(spring–summer 1992), 17

nude beach
embarrassed
I'm the only one here

Michael Ketchek, *Modern Haiku* 36:1
(winter–spring 2005)