

Mendicants

from *A Field Guide To North American Haiku*¹

Charles Trumbull

When an idea for a new Field Guide episode struck me I had thought to tackle street people of all kinds: beggars and itinerant priests in Japan, the homeless, panhandlers, bag ladies, peddlers, hobos, transients and vagrants, hookers and pimps—all the people who live and eke out a livelihood on the street or on the fringes of society. It quickly became apparent that this was too broad a range, and I saw I would have to narrow the focus just to mendicants and others whose income depends primarily on begging.

Beggars have been a feature of societies worldwide for millennia but seem to be more visible—or perhaps just less welcome—in contemporary urban life, especially in industrialized countries. In classical Japanese haiku we encounter most frequently 乞食 *kojiki* or *kotsujiki*, beggars, who are simply paupers who make their living by begging (I note that Jisho, the Japanese-English online dictionary, indicates that *kojiki* is a “sensitive” term, which suggests that since Issa’s day the word has acquired a negative connotation.)

In Tokugawa Japan for the most part—at least in haiku—beggars were accepted as part of the landscape. Kobayashi Issa, for example, wrote some 50 haiku about *kojiki* (more

¹ “A Field Guide to North American Haiku” is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-*saijiki*, 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 *saijiki* (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 haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing almost 435,000 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 trumbulle@comcast.net.

perhaps than any other Japanese haiku poet save Santōka). Characteristically, he was usually very sympathetic to their lot:

乞食子がおろおろ拝む雛哉

kojiki ko ga oro-oro ogamu hiina kana

the beggar child prays
with trembling voice...
for a doll

Issa, trans. Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa*
website (acc. Dec. 12, 2007)

寒空のどこでとしよぬ旅乞食

samuzora no doko de toshiyonu tabi kojiki

under the cold heavens
where will you grow old
traveling beggar?

Issa, trans. William J. Higginson,
in Lorraine Lener Ciancio, ed.,
Chokecherries 1999

Issa was homeless himself for a while after he lost his house in the 1809 fire in Edo. Perhaps that is why he composed a number of haiku that show a great empathy for beggars. Generally, though, Issa's viewpoint was one of "beauty in adversity," just short of being Pollyannaish.

美しき凧あがりけり乞食小屋

utsukushiki tako agarikeri kojikigoya

A beautiful kite
Rose from
The beggar's hovel
Issa, trans. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 2: Spring* (1950)

Blyth wrote of this haiku, “the contrast of beauty and squalor is not purely one of colour and line; human feeling enters into it.”
Kikaku, too, painted a romantic picture of the life of the merry mendicant:

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

So the beggar goes!
Heaven and Earth he's wearing
For his summer clothes!
Kikaku, trans. Harold G. Henderson,
The Bamboo Broom (1934)

Chiyo-ni was even more upbeat:

にぎやかな乞食の床や蟲の聲
nigiyaka na kojiki no toko ya mushi no koe

The nightly couch of the beggar,—
How lively and gay,
With voices of insects!
Chiyo-ni, trans. R. H. Blyth,
Haiku 4: Autumn–Winter (1952)

Buson wrote at least one light-hearted haiku about a kojiki:

虱とる乞食の妻や梅がもと
shirami toru kojiki no tsuma ya ume ga moto

the beggar's wife
plucking off his lice—
under the plum tree

Buson, trans. Stephen Addiss,
The Art of Haiku (2012)

Scholar Cheryl Crowley (Haikai Poet Yosa Buson and the Bashō Revival) views this Buson haiku as an example of the humor of *haikai*, which combines “elements of literary elegance with images of ordinary life.... Following the description of a lower-class person engaged in base physical activity with a reference to the graceful blossoms, which Buson frequently uses as an emblem of purity, creates a sense of dissonance that is gently comic.”

Buson's verse might be compared with the following one by Naitō Meisetsu:

乞食の子も孫もある彼岸かな

kotsujiki no ko mo mago mo aru higan kana

The beggar,
His child, and his grandchild,
At the spring equinox.
Meisetsu, trans. R. H. Blyth,
A History of Haiku 2 (1964)

Of this haiku Blyth comments tellingly, “This kind of verse is hardly possible nowadays. When it was written we could smile at the scene of the beggar and his daughter feeding her baby, but not now.”

乞食の葬礼見たり秋の暮

kotsujiki no sōrei mitari aki no kure

a beggar
stares at the funeral
autumn dusk

Shiki, trans. Charles Trumbull from the Japanese
and the Czech version in *Antonín Líman,*
Masaoka Šiki: Pod tíhou měsíce (2015)

Another kind of beggar in Japan, perhaps even more accepted
in society, was the itinerant priest or pilgrim who supported
himself by begging. In classical haiku they were called 遊行
yugyō, for example

麦秋や遊行の棺通りけり
mugiaki ya yugyō no hitsugi tōri keru

Barley autumn;
A pilgrim's coffin
Passes along.

Buson, trans. R. H. Blyth,
A History of Haiku 2 (1964), 42

“Barley autumn,” the season when the grain is harvested, is a
very busy time for everyone, and the serene passing by of the
pilgrim’s coffin makes for an ironic contrast with the activity
in the fields.

Bashō wrote few haiku about beggars, unless one counts this
one in which he alluded to the beggar’s bowl:

この心推せよ花に五器一具
kono kokoro suiseyo hana ni goki ichigu

know my heart
the flower on these
five lidded bowls

trans. Jane Reichhold, *Basho: Complete Haiku* (2008)

Reichhold noted, “This verse was given to [his disciple] Shikō with a set of bowls with covers as he set out to cover the same territory Bashō had traveled in his journey to the Far North. Bashō was preparing him for the life of a mendicant friar.”

Bashō wrote another haiku in which he used the term 聖小僧 *hijiri, hijiri kozō* (mendicant monk, holy man). Himself leading a kind of *hijiri* life, traveling throughout Japan without a regular home, this could have been written about his own experiences:

初雪や聖小僧の笈の色

hatsuyuki ya hijiri kozō no oi no iro

first snowfall
the traveling monk's
faded backpack

Bashō, trans. Jane Reichhold,
Basho: Complete Haiku (2008)

A hundred years later Ryōkan, another mendicant monk, also groused about the adverse weather:

雨の降る日は会われなり良寛坊

ame no furu hi wa aware nari Ryōkanbō

On rainy days
The monk Ryōkan
Feels sorry for himself.

Daigu Ryōkan, in R. H. Blyth,
Haiku 3: Summer–Autumn (1951)

Most famously of the haiku poets, Taneda Santōka lived a beggar's life on the road, and a great many of his haiku had to do with traveling and panhandling. He was more matter-

of-fact about his situation than were the earlier poets, and his haiku are appealing if only for of their crispness, lack of pathos, and a mood that now often seems to verge on mawkishness.

もとの乞食にんったタオルが一枚
moto no kojiki ni natte taoru ga ichimai

I've become a real beggar;
One towel.
Santōka, trans. John Stevens,
Mountain Tasting (1980)

あるひわ乞ふことをやめ山を観てゐる
aruiwa kō koto o yame yama o mite iru

at times
I stop begging
looking at mountains
Santōka, trans. Burton Watson,
For All My Walking (2003)

It is interesting to compare the sangfroid in Santōka's most famous haiku with a somewhat different—and uncharacteristic—attitude of Buson's:

鉄鉢の中へも霰
tetsu hachi no naka e mo arare

Striking,
inside the begging-bowl, too—
hailstones...
Santōka, trans. Harold G. Henderson,
Haiku West 2:2 (January 1969)

木のはしの坊主のはしやはちたゝき
ki no hashi no bōzu no hashi ya hachitataki

The worthless monk
is beating his worthless
iron begging bowl

Buson, trans. Allan Persinger, *Foxfire:
the Selected Poems of Yosa Buson,
a Translation* (dissertation, 2013)

Much like his contemporary Santōka, Ozaki Hōsai, was a drinker and wanderer as well as a poet. In his haiku, however, Hōsai focused on his loneliness and physical deterioration rather than the difficulties of the itinerant life. Just reading his haiku it would be difficult to imagine that Hōsai was a wandering beggar. This one, his most translated haiku, might be an exception

咳をしても一人
seki o shitemo hitori

I cough and am still alone
Hōsai, trans. Hiroaki Sato, *Cicada 3:4* (1980)

Modern Japanese haiku poets rarely write of beggars and the like, but there are some exceptions:

乞食が通る強き日陰あり日向あり
kojiki ga tōru tsuyoki hikage ari hinata ari

Beggar passes—
shadow to sunlight,
sunlight to shadow.

Aoki Shikunrō, trans. Lucien Stryk,
Cage of Fireflies (1993)

Blyth (*History of Haiku 2*) explains this haiku in terms of whether the beggar should be viewed as an object of empathy or repulsion: “In the sunlight the beggar is dirty, uncouth, repulsive; in the shadow he is one with Nature, only a moving figure among stationary ones. Nothing is clean, nothing is dirty. No one is poor, no one is rich.”

In the 20th century, Shiki, Yoshino Yoshiko, and Niwano Shūji, among others, made nonjudgmental haiku about 雲水 *unsui*, mendicant Zen monks on a pilgrimage.

Plum rain downpour:
the itinerant monk's resolve
in his eyebrows
Yoshino Yoshiko, trans. Lee Gurga and
Emiko Miyashita, *Tsuru* (2001)

雲水の姿の佳かり遍路笠
unsui no sugata noyokari henrogasa

itinerant monks
in fine style—
bamboo pilgrim hats
Niwano Shūji, trans. Michael Dylan Welch
and Emiko Miyashita, “The Weather-Beaten Jizō:
Shikoku Pilgrimage Haiku by Shūji Niwano,”
Modern Haiku 47.3 (Autumn 2017)

Beggars appear more frequently in English-language haiku than in Japanese, and the range of reactions is wider: sometimes the poets are purely objective, sometimes they are repulsed or try to avoid what they see, but most often they are sympathetic or empathetic with their less fortunate neighbors. First, here are examples of descriptive, unemotional haiku by Westerners about homelessness and mendicancy. Verses by Tom Tico and Karma Tenzing Wangchuk, who have lived in these circumstances, have a special resonance:

Out of the darkness
the quiet intensity
of the beggar's plea
Tom Tico, *Modern Haiku* 22.3 (Fall 1991)

the beggar
holding out his hand
this too is work
Karma Tenzing Wangchuk,
Simply Haiku 1:5 (November 2003)

Some other fine, emotionally neutral haiku:

stop light
a beggar feeds
on traffic
Dave Read, *Tinywords* 16:2 (Oct. 27, 2016)

afternoon heat
the beggar's book
without a cover
paul m., *The Heron's Nest* 3:10 (December 2001)

a half moon
all my change
in the beggar's hand
John Barlow, *Modern Haiku* 39.1
(Winter–Spring 2008)

a
begging
bowl
back
of each
eye
John Martone, *Ordinary Fool* (2008)

drought ...
the panhandler shakes
an empty cup

Bill Kenney, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, September 2012

deep into autumn
the curl
of a panhandler's hand

Sharon Pretti, *Mariposa* 31 (October 2014)

origami
the folds
in a beggar's blanket

S. M. Abeles, *DailyHaiku, Cycle 15*, May 19, 2013

Still essentially value-neutral, the following haiku find beauty
in adversity much as we saw in Issa's haiku above:

reflected
in a beggar's cup
tropical sun

Fay Aoyagi, in Michael Dylan Welch, ed.,
*Shades of Green (Haiku North America 1997
conference anthology)*

afternoon sun
touching my shoulder
a beggar

Steve Dalachinsky, *Modern Haiku* 13.2
(Summer 1982)

white hands
of the mendicant priest
first bush warbler's song

Harumi Hasegawa, *Kokako* 18 (April 2013)

July Fourth:
from the beggar's hovel
a crisp American flag
 Alexis Rotella, link from a *kasen*,
 “Without a splash,” *Wind Chimes* 18 (1986)

Things fall into a beggar's cap or bowl that, however beautiful, are not very useful to the recipient. Some such unexpected offerings include snow or snowflakes (in haiku by poets James Minor, Martha Charlier Eckel, Juanito Escareal, and Chen-ou Liu); rain (Alan Gettis, Nick Virgilio, and Angela Giordano as well as Issa); leaves or falling leaves (H. F. Noyes and Jerome Cushman as well as Santōka); blossoms (Kala Ramesh); milkweed (Patricia Neubauer); fireflies (Alice Mae Ward); and moonlight (Raymond Roseliep and Kashinath Karmakar). Many of the same things also fall elsewhere: on the beggar's palm, head, face, or blanket, and so forth. These too are beauty in adversity haiku, but they run the risk of seeming imitative of Santōka's canonic hailstone haiku. In any event, haiku poets should exercise caution; this image has become a cliché.

Arguably beggars are more generous than the general population and quicker to share whatever they have. They also can be disarmingly friendly:

A blind beggar
throwing chirping sparrows
crumbs of bread.
 Vladimir Devidé, *The Moment* (1997)

stray dog
a beggar splits his sandwich
in half
 Marta Chociłowska, *Brass Bell*, April 2017

orphan
a fly shares
her begging-bowl
Christina Chin, *FemkuMag* 2 (July 2018)

street-corner Santa
drops a coin
into the beggar's cup
Vincent Tripi, from a rengay,
"Christmas in the City,"
Woodnotes 23 (winter 1994)

a hint of spring
the panhandler
asks my name
Joseph Kirschner, *Modern Haiku* 43.2
(Summer 2012), 59

late night drizzle
the panhandler asks me
to smile
Collin Barber, *Modern Haiku* 39:3
(Autumn 2008), 10

In response, however, most of us avoid the eyes of a beggar as
we walk by:

I pass a beggar
afraid of his eyes
Charles Nakamura, *Frogpond* 12:3
(August 1989), 34

beggar's bowl
people like me
gliding past it
Jennifer Gomoll Popolis,
Bottle Rockets 25 (2011)

my daughter's eyes
when I refuse
the beggar

Carlos Colón, *Frogpond* 22:1 (1999)

homeless beggar—
the itch of his clothes
all down my spine

H.F. Noyes, *Modern Haiku* 27.1
(Winter–Spring 1996)

Some people find encounters with beggars to be avoided entirely, either out of embarrassment or because they find street people repulsive or threatening in some way. Sometimes we feel bad about harboring such feelings, sometimes not. Sometimes the beggar takes our reactions with equanimity, sometimes not.

historic church
camera lenses
avoid the beggar

Maria Tomczak,
13th European Quarterly Kukai, Spring 2016

autumn downpour:
shaking off
the panhandler's pleas

Wally Swist, *Modern Haiku* 11.1
(Winter–Spring 1980)

first frost I give a beggar nothing
Anna Maris, *Frogpond* 38:2
(Spring–Summer 2015)

deep breath
before I enter
the panhandler's aura

Christopher Pickslay, *Tinywords* 10.3, Nov. 1, 2010

heat lightning
a beggar outside Starbucks
shakes his cup at me

Billie Wilson, *The Heron's Nest* 11:1, (March 2009)

outside the hotel
the beggar, denied again,
casts an evil spell

L. A. Davidson, *Modern Haiku* 15.3 (Autumn 1984)

through his holes
the beggar spits
words at me

Francine Banwarth, *Brussels Sprout* 6:2 (1989)

Occasionally there is a hint that the beggar's activities may be a scam, or at least that he or she is not as needy as we are supposed to believe:

Start of Day
The Beggar throws some coins
Into own begging bowl

John Tiong Chunghoo,
Itoen New Haiku Contest 2005, Special Award

brisk business
for the beggar woman—
rented baby

H. F. Noyes, *Raw NerVZ* 9:3 (2004)

the blind street beggar
wipes clean his
dark glasses

Andris Krumins, *Modern Haiku* 24.3 (Fall 1993)

After receiving alms
the limping beggar
skips away

John Brandi, *Weeding the Cosmos* (1994)

evening shift
same wheelchair
different beggar

Mykel Board, *Modern Haiku* 41.2 (Summer 2010)

Mostly, though, haiku poets look to find reasons for sympathy and understanding. A street person's physical handicap is likely to be noticed for example; after all, the beggar faces adversity beyond simply being down on his or her luck:

blind beggar—
his shadow stretches
across my feet

Ross Figgins, *Wind Chimes* 8 (1983), 24

people walk faster
past the begging girl
with no legs

Sandra Fuhringer, *Wind Chimes* 10 (1983), 41

roadside walk
a beggar stretches
leg as hand

Adjei Agyei-Baah, *The Heron's Nest* 14:2 (June 2012)

empty
the beggar's
nail bitten right hand

Graham Nunn, *Magnapoets 9* (January 2012), 17

Cold seems ever-present on the street, and warm clothing is
essential ...

cold snap
the panhandler's fingers
close on mine

Ernest J. Berry,
Hawai'i Education Association Contest 2000

cold night
a beggar and his dog
share shadows

Billy Antonio, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, December 2014

the warmth
of a penny
in the beggar's bowl

ai li, *Blithe Spirit 8:3* (September 1998)

a beggar
softly shod
nightfall

Michael McClintock, *Frogpond 35:3*
(Autumn 2012), 8

Hunger threatens as well ...

beach panhandler
the ribs of a wrecked ship
jut from the sand

Melissa Spurr, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, July 2009

...and darkness, sometimes dangerous, looms close...

cold moon
a beggar wrapped
in his shadow

Ramesh Anand, *Wild Plum* 3:1
(Spring & Summer 2017)

winter sunset
the beggar's shadow
grows thinner

Melissa Spurr, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, August 2009

Autumn rain—
left beside his chalk outline,
the beggar's cup—fills

Doug Ingels, *Modern Haiku* 9:3
(Autumn 1978), 9

...and despair is never far away:

the ancient's eyes
empty
as her begging cup

Marian Olson, *Chrysanthemum* 23 (April 2018)

One manifestation of sympathy can be finding a humorous side to an otherwise depressing situation. The humor usually draws attention to an incongruous or ironic situation:

park bench
pigeons begging
the homeless man

Jeff Hoagland, *Tinywords* 10:3

church steps
a homeless man
begging my pardon
Olivier Schopfer, *Cattails*, April 2018

foreign monk
begging on the corner
his big feet
Kristen Deming, *Frogpond* 17:4 (Winter 1994)

Times Square—
a beggar rattles his coins
in a Burger King cup
Ion Codrescu, *Foreign Guest* (2000)

asked directions,
turning to a panhandler
to tell the stranger
L.A. Davidson, *The Shape of the Tree* (1982)

bleak day—
correcting the spelling
on the beggar's sign
Jackie Hardy, *Counting the Waves* (1998)

ignoring beggar
then writing
Haiku about him
Pete Beckwith, *Above the Crumbled Bricks* (1980)

a beggar singing in the rain pennies from heaven
Johnny Baranski, *Monostich*, Dec. 28, 2011

corner beggar change is everywhere
George Swede, *Tinywords* 10.3, Dec. 30, 2010