#### Waterfalls1

from A Field Guide to North American Haiku² by Charles Trumbull

When it comes to waterfalls, what most impresses Japanese haiku poets, both classical and modern, is their sound and, to a lesser extent, their physical appearance and refreshing coolness. 滝 taki in Japanese refers to cascades and rapids as well as full-fledged waterfalls. Taki is a kidai (seasonal topic) for all summer and has spawned a number of daughter kigo, such as 滝見 takimi (waterfall viewing); 滝見茶屋 takimi chaya, a teahouse for waterfall watching; 滝風 takikaze, breeze from a waterfall; and 滝の音 taki no oto, sound of a waterfall.

Under the headnote "Nijikō"—the name of the rapids on the upper reaches of the Yoshino River, known for its torrential current over the rocks—Bashō composed this *hokku*:

## ほろほろと山吹散るか滝の音

horohoro to yamabuki chiru ka taki no oto

petal by petal yellow mountain roses fall sound of the rapids

This translation is by Makoto Ueda in *Bashō and His Interpreters*. Three of the five interpreters Ueda cites suggest that, in one way or another, the sound of the rapids *caused* the petals to fall. Three commentators believe that Bashō actually witnessed falling petals, while two think he was just exercising his imagination. One lauds the master for "putting something lovely and delicate in the foreground to screen a powerful, violent force of nature," yet "nevertheless succeeded in giving full expression to that force." Note that 山吹 yamabuki (Japanese globeflower or kerria), a late spring kigo, overrides 滝 taki, and so provides the seasonality of this haiku.

Bashō wrote similar haiku about other things going over the falls, such as green pine needles and moonlight, borne on the surface of a cascade.

Buson, too, composed a spring haiku about petals (i.e., "cherry-blossoms") in the rapids that is intended to suggest the transience of youth and beauty and, in the translation of W. S. Merwin and Takako Lento at least, the suggestion that the cascade of blossoms transmogrifies into the river rapids. There is no mention here, however, of the sound of roaring rapids:

#### 玉川に高野>花や流れ去

Tamagawa ni takano no hana ya nagare saru

Mount Koya's cherry blossoms cascade into the rapids of Tamagawa and are carried away

Buson, trans. Merwin & Lento<sup>4</sup>

### 水一筋月よりうつす桂河

mizu hitosuji tsuki yori utsusu Katsuragawa

THE TONASE WATERFALL

One strand of water is moonlight on its way to the Katsura River

Buson, trans. Merwin & Lento<sup>5</sup>

In another verse, Buson seems to suggest that a practical use could be found for the rapids on the swift Mogami River:

## 毛見の衆の舟さし下せ最上川

kemi no shu no fune sashi kudase Mogamigawa

Steer the farm inspectors' boat onto the white rapids on Mogami River

Yosa Buson, trans. Merwin & Lento<sup>6</sup>

Chiyo-ni also composed a haiku about cherry trees and a waterfall:

#### 影は滝空は花なりいとざくら

kage wa taki sora wa hana nari ito zakura

cherry blossoms against the sky waterfall shadow

Chiyo-ni, trans. Patricia Donegan & Yoshie Ishibashi<sup>7</sup>

Issa's most-translated waterfall haiku takes as its theme the cooling effect of the falls, an important and welcome attribute during the hot, humid Japanese summer:

## 一尺の滝も音して夕涼

isshaku no taki mo oto shite yūsuzumi

a one-foot waterfall splashes too . . . evening cool

Issa, trans. David G. Lanoue<sup>8</sup>

Issa's attention to a tiny waterfall might also be seen as typical of his emblematic concern for the unnoticed and underprivileged, usually directed at small creatures.

Shiki also was impressed by the coolness that emanates from waterfalls:

## すゞしさや瀧ほとばしる家のあひ

suzushisa ya taki hotobashiru ie no ai

coolness—
a mountain stream splashes out
between houses

Shiki, trans. Janine Beichman<sup>9</sup>

大声で話す凉みや滝の茶屋 ōgoe de hanasu suzumi ya taki no chaya

loud talking enjoying the cool waterfall teahouse

Shiki, trans. C. Trumbull<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the sounds of waterfalls as recorded by Japanese haiku poets, we have this chilling description by the eighteenth-century poet Kyokusui:

寒き夜や淘に落ち込む瀧の音 samuki yo ya umi ni ochikomu taki no oto

A cold night!
The sound of a waterfall
Falling into the sea.

Kyokusui, trans. R. H. Blyth<sup>11</sup>

and this one by Masaoka Shiki, who finds his imagination and loneliness stimulated by sounds in the night:

瀧の音いろいろになる夜長哉 taki no oto iroiro ni naru yonaga kana

Long night, when the waterfall makes all kinds of noises

Shiki, trans. Burton Watson<sup>12</sup>

Santōka's reaction to waterfalls was more immediate and personal:

#### 飲みたい水が音たててゐた

nomitai mizu ga oto tatete ita

Thirsty for a drink of water— The sound of a waterfall.

Santōka, trans. John Stevens<sup>13</sup>

as is Gary Snyder's:

HIKING IN THE TOTSUGAWA GORGE

pissing watching a waterfall

Gary Snyder<sup>14</sup>

Waterfalls are a recurring theme in the surreal work of modern haiku poet Ban'ya Natsuishi, but it is difficult to grasp the significance of his waterfall image. For example, take this, one of his most famous haiku:

## 未来より滝を吹き割る風来たる

mirai yori taki wo fukiwaru kaze kitaru

From the future a wind arrives that blows the waterfall apart

Ban'ya Natsuishi, trans. Natsuishi & Kacian<sup>15</sup>

or this one from his Flying Pope series:

# 天の滝より法王落ちて飛び始む

ten no taki yori hōō ochite tobi hajime mu

Falling from a waterfall in the sky the Pope begins to fly

Ban'ya Natsuishi, trans. Natsuishi & Kacian<sup>16</sup>

Ban'ya's vision of a waterfall escapes me, but perhaps the following haiku, which he selected for inclusion in his anthology *Haiku Troubadours 2000*, might provide a clue:

滝の影 天地 円く 寂れつつ taki no kage tenchi maruku sabiretsutsu

Shadow of waterfall—both heaven and earth round about becoming desolate

Kei Hayashi<sup>17</sup>

"Waterfall" in all these haiku might make sense if the image were taken as a representation of the clamor and chaos of twentiethcentury life. Here are two other enigmatic waterfall haiku by contemporary Japanese poets:

滝風に息を閉ぢても死にもせず taki-kaze ni iki o tojitemo shinimosezu

waterfall wind I hold my breath but do not die

Suzuki Akira<sup>18</sup>

kawa no se ni shiwasu no oto no nagarekeri

Running shallow with a year's end sound: river rapids.

Arimaru19

and one by an American poet in the same vein:

listening to the waterfall a thousand year nap begins

John Sandbach<sup>20</sup>

Western haiku poets also write about the sounds that waterfalls make, especially when they challenge the human voice or conversation. For example:

angling from waterfalls white music.

Guy R. Beining<sup>21</sup>

passing train its sound expands the waterfall

Helen J. Sherry<sup>22</sup>

Out from the falls
from the waterfall's sound
vincent tripi<sup>23</sup>
ouzel fledgling

silent deer the sound of a waterfall

Lenard D. Moore<sup>24</sup>

from the bend in the river to the sound of the falls

her silence

Nick Avis<sup>25</sup>

How ridiculous! my keeping silent around the waterfall

vincent tripi<sup>26</sup>

To hear it, not to hear myself, waterfall

vincent tripi<sup>27</sup>

A little dog barks At a roaring waterfall That swallows his voice.

Richard Wright<sup>28</sup>

waterfall—
the man with a booming voice
stops talking

H. F. Noyes<sup>29</sup>

the closer we get . . . losing my friend's heart-to-heart to the waterfall

D. Claire Gallagher<sup>30</sup>

no sound from the waterfall; winter solitude

Emily Romano<sup>31</sup>

Many poems in Western literature mention waterfalls, but not many actually feature them. Here are some of the more interesting examples that we encountered:

the spirit of Goethe lifts my soul up the waterfall to Heaven

Susumu Takiguchi<sup>32</sup>

Takiguchi's haiku refers to Staubbach Falls in the Berner Oberland region of Switzerland that was memorialized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his poem "Gesang der Geister über den Wassern" (Song of the Spirits over the Waters). LeRoy Gorman alludes to another literary waterfall in Switzerland, the Reichenbach Falls, where Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty fought to their death:

not Reichenbach but the water is thunderous even at Christmas

LeRoy Gorman<sup>33</sup>

The name Minnehaha, Hiawatha's lover in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1855 epic poem, is purported to have been taken from a waterfall and was said to mean "laughing waters" in English translation.

An idea that the waterfall moves water (and time) forward irreversibly is the theme of New Zealand poet Lauris Dorothy Edmond's poem "Waterfall" (ca. 1984). The final lines of the poem read:

suddenly then I love you with a quick intensity, remembering that water, however luminous and grand, falls fast and only once to the dark pool below.<sup>34</sup>

Haiku poets find inspiration, mystery, and even divinity, in waterfalls:

waterfall I find a voice for this longing

Renée Owen<sup>35</sup>

**AMBITION** 

The drop of water falling, falling dreaming of Niagara

José María González de Mendoza<sup>36</sup>

unicorns
pale shadows in moonlight
behind the waterfall

Elizabeth Searle Lamb<sup>37</sup>

mist from the waterfall wrapping us in stars

Alexis Rotella<sup>38</sup>

Waterfall, so small—but every drop having its own rainbow.

Foster Jewell<sup>39</sup>

gift of the spirit in tongues speak waterfalls

Johnny Baranski<sup>40</sup>

the Indians would make offerings to the spirit of the falls

Cor van den Heuvel<sup>41</sup>

神にませばまこと美はし那智の滝

kami ni maseba makoto uruwashi nachi no taki

Because it is divinity, Divinely beautiful is The Waterfall of Nachi.

Kyoshi<sup>42</sup>

niagara God in my ears

Jerry Kilbride<sup>43</sup>

after death my shadow will back to its waterfall

Johannes S. H. Bjerg<sup>44</sup>

And speaking of inspiration, waterfalls are often associated with love and, at least in the case of Niagara Falls, marriage:

searching for a coin by a Niagara Falls telescope lone young woman

Carolyn Archibald<sup>45</sup>

the waterfall where he proposed drowns out her crying

Bob Gates<sup>46</sup>

honeymoon detailed directions to The Falls

John Stevenson<sup>47</sup>

postcard from Niagara the years fall away

kjmunro<sup>48</sup>

waterfall her body shaping water

Jeff Hoagland<sup>49</sup>

Poets everywhere may name or allude to a specific location in their haiku. Ideally this practice, which the Japanese call 歌枕 utamakura (famous place), assumes that the reader will be able to associate with the named place. In this way, the meaning of the haiku is amplified. If the place is not widely known, however, by mentioning it specifically, the poet runs the risk of creating what might be called "tourist haiku," poems that flaunt the names of places they have visited, or a "Kilroy haiku," after the graffito "Kilroy was here" inscribed far and wide by American GIs returning from World War II. None of the haiku featured in this article, of course, are "tourist haiku" or "Kilroy haiku," but in reading haiku, it's good to consider whether they rely excessively on "place stamps."

Niagara Falls, which straddles the Canadian–U.S. border, is certainly the most often mentioned waterfall in English-language haiku. There are many examples in the previous section of this essay. The second most popular is probably Yosemite Falls in California. Among many others, these three top-flight American poets have written haiku documenting their visits to the falls:

AT YOSEMITE PARK

Cataract's white sheet Cleaves the lush foliage Many a hundred feet!

Shōson [Kenneth Yasuda]<sup>50</sup>

snow-covered pines Yosemite Falls in white water plumes

Jane Reichhold<sup>51</sup>

Yosemite Falls . . . the old zen master sleeps upright

Michael McClintock<sup>52</sup>

Patrick Pilarski describes Athabasca Falls near his home in Alberta, which are noted for the large volume of water coursing over stone shelves:

Athabasca Falls this empty bowl of winter stone

Patrick M. Pilarski<sup>53</sup>

In 2014, Canadian haikuist Luminita Suse compiled a collection of haiku written on a *ginkō* at Hog's Back Falls in Ontario. A small sample:

hushed by roaring my eyes drift down its path Hog's Back Falls

Sheila Bello<sup>54</sup>

the zen moment lost in the waterfall roar

Ann Goldring<sup>55</sup>

exercising stillness by the waterfall a solitary heron

Luminita Suse<sup>56</sup>

a small tide pool amidst the torrent her love

Mike Montreuil<sup>57</sup>

one side tranquility the other chaos Hog's Back dam

Sandra Stephenson<sup>58</sup>

Irish poet Gabriel Rosenstock commented on a waterfall in Scotland:<sup>59</sup>

Coire Shalach Coire Shalach / Ugly Hollow a hainm á ghlanadh the waterfall clears its name

Ernest J. Berry viewed Angel Falls in Venezuela on horseback:<sup>60</sup>

Angel Falls my horse pauses for a pee

Keith A. Simmonds waxed poetic over the sights he saw in Ghana:<sup>61</sup>

Boti falls . . . a rainbow festival merging with the light

On the other hand, some poets take a "so what?" view of natural wonders, even the instantly recognizable Niagara Falls:

so this is Niagara Falls look the moon

LeRoy Gorman<sup>62</sup>

at great expense watching streams of people Niagara Falls

Zinovy Vayman<sup>63</sup>

selfies not one shot of the falls

Ann Goldring<sup>64</sup>

urologist's office a framed photograph of the falls

Tom Clausen<sup>65</sup>

If the Japanese masters wrote about cherry blossoms, pine needles, moonlight, and such poetic things going over the falls, American poets are often more down-to-earth:

water falls all over itself over the falls

Marlene Mountain<sup>66</sup>

a stick goes over the falls at sunset

Cor van den Heuvel<sup>67</sup>

a tire floats from the falls

Alan Pizzarelli<sup>68</sup>

nothing, at the moment, flowing over the falls

John Stevenson<sup>69</sup>

But Pamela Miller Ness wrote a verse very much in the spirit of those Japanese masters:<sup>70</sup>

cry of a crow ~ its shadow passing over the waterfall Poets are fascinated by the dynamics and transformations that a river undergoes as it approaches the rapids, goes over the falls, and then placidly continues its course. The same goes for the phenomenon of the water changing from flowing freely to freely falling to pooling. The same also goes for the seasonal changes in rate of flow, from gushing to trickling, or physical state—liquid, frozen, and even dry depending on the season.

Chiyo-ni, for example, composed a haiku about the sound of the waterfall having diminished enough that cicada cries can be heard. Both the following translations are by Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi, but between their two collections of Chiyo-ni's work, they revised their opinion about whether it was the waterfall or its sound that diminished (\*\*\hat{\text{the}} ne means "thread"). The left-hand version is from 1996, and the version on the right is from two years later:

### 滝の糸も細るや峰に蟬の声

taki no ne mo hosoru ya mine ni semi no koe

waterfall diminishes— sound of the waterfall diminishes in the peaks— in the mountains<sup>71</sup> cicadas' voices<sup>72</sup>

## 滝涸れて夜々の月光巌に泌む

taki karete yo-yo no gekko iwa ni shimu

Waterfall dried up, moonlight drenched the rocks.

Nakajima Takeo, trans. Lucien Stryk<sup>73</sup>

Nakajima's haiku might remind readers of the following haiku, written aboard the first ship bearing Japanese immigrants to Brazil, when they saw the brilliant reflection of a dry waterfall on the *antiplano*:

A nau imigrante chegando: vê-se lá no alto a cascata seca The immigrant ship arriving: visible on the hill the dry waterfall

Hyōkotsu [Shuhei Uetsoka] trans. C. Trumbull<sup>74</sup>

Modern poet Masajo finds a metaphorical meaning in the diminished energy of a winter waterfall:

## 冬の滝音を殺して落ちにけり

fuyu no taki oto wo koroshite ochi ni keri

waterfall in winter it quiets itself and falls

Suzuki Masajo, trans. Lee Gurga & Emiko Miyashita<sup>75</sup>

New York poet Bernard Lionel Einbond is more literal in remarking the spent energy of his local river:

after waterfalls just the Bronx River again— Crestwood Lake no more

Bernard Lionel Einbond<sup>76</sup>

A frozen waterfall is a dramatic sight:

滝壺に届かざるまま凍りけり

takitsubo ni todokazaru mama kōrikeri

its shape before reaching the bottom a frozen waterfall

Igarashi Yoshitomo<sup>77</sup>

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plummeting
into a silent pool
the frozen waterfall

*Wally Swist78*

Capturing the image of a waterfall in a visual or concrete poem is hard to resist, be it simply, as by Bob Boldman:79

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or more metaphorically by Shane Gilreath:80

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mountain stream's liberation ...

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One can even imagine a horizontal visual haiku:

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Woman's hair in a dream smooth rapids

*Robert Lord Keyes*1
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Who has composed the most extreme vertical waterfall haiku, you ask? The tallest we have found are featured on the next two pages.

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Misty
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Lorraine Ellis Harr<sup>82</sup>

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# These placid woods;

b e 1 0 W t h e S h r k 0 f p W a 1 r u m m e t i n

g

L. Stanley Cheney<sup>83</sup>

#### Notes:

- 1. More information than anyone could possibly want to know about waterfalls, with photographs of dozens of them, can be found on the World of Waterfalls website: https://www.world-of-waterfalls.com/what-makes-a-waterfall-a-waterfall/.
- 2. "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 haiku in English 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 almanae) 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 in this essay are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 480,000 entries. "Waterfall": 950 haiku originally written in English, 219 translations from Japanese, and 35 translations from other languages. 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 cptrumbull|at|comcast.net.
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Charles Trumbull is a past president of the Haiku Society of America and recipient of its Sora Award. He edited Modern Haiku (2006 to 2013), and was honorary curator of the American Haiku Archives in 2013. A haiku chapbook was published in 2011, and his book of New Mexico haiku, A Five-Balloon Morning, in June 2013. A History of Modern Haiku followed in 2019. Trumbull helped organize the Chi-ku haiku group in Chicago and the Santa Fe Haiku Study Group; the biennial Midwest—Cradle of American Haiku conferences, and two Haiku North America conferences (1999 and 2017; and two international conferences in Kraków, Poland (2003 and 2015). For more than 30 years he has been collecting haiku for his electronic Haiku Database, which currently contains almost a half million entries. His latest project is Haikupedia, an online encyclopedia of all things haiku (www.haikupedia.org).