

Line Dancing
by Margaret Chula

Line breaks in *Japanese* haiku are clearly defined by the 5-7-5 syllabic form. Writers of haiku in English, however, do not necessarily follow this strict count. Although we grant ourselves more liberty to arrange lines and words, we usually follow the short-long-short pattern of three phrases to create a “one breath poem.” How we arrange these lines is part of the art of haiku.

Beginners often create a poetic sentence, divide it into three lines and call it haiku. As we become more skillful, however, we begin to pay attention to word choice, sound, rhythm and form. We think about ways that we can use line breaks to our advantage.

I would like to focus on the second line, as this is usually where the haiku pivots into the “aha” of the final line. The following examples show how well-crafted line breaks can:

intensify the experience

I step into old growth
autumn moon deeper
into sky. ¹

hoops fallen—
'round the wine casket, slats
held up by weeds ²

Placing the word “deeper” at the end of the second line brings the reader into the experience with the echoing tones of the vowels. The “slats” stick out even more by being placed at the end of the line.

give rhythm to the haiku

the artist's brush
sable hairs that used to glide
over log and stone ³

Cold winter full moon
shining all night, shining on
the fires of Kobe ⁴

By placing “glide” and “shining on” at the end of the line, the poets have extended the moment into the white space before rhythmically moving into the last line.

give a sense of space (temporal or linear)

September stillness
the long wait for the heron
to move ⁵

One might ask whether there are any rules for delineating line breaks in English-language haiku? When I asked Jim Kacian what he knew about line breaks he retorted, “Always break right after a preposition or article.” We laughed at the absurdity of this and then I remembered

just-born cicadas
start and stop and start and—
their rain-soaked wings ⁶

The staccato rhythm of the second line mimics the sound that cicadas make when their wings are wet. Ending the line abruptly with a conjunction also conveys to the reader the sense of futility. Poor cicadas, emerging from their shells during the rainy season!

Another haiku whose second line ends with an article

proud of the kitten’s
first kill until I saw the
babies ⁷

is very effective. The pause created by ending on “the” induces the same mental catch or hesitation we experience when we unexpectedly see something horrible. It is also parallel to the emotional transition we make from excitement to dismay. The “shining on” haiku above ends the second line on a preposition, which leads us into the surprise of the final line.

In the latest wave of avant garde haiku, traditional lines breaks are completely ignored. This visual haiku breaks after every word.

slow
rising
moon
the
cemetery
dead
quiet ⁸

And finally, there is Marlene Mountain who places haiku on its side.

hot night pushy for women our rights our rites our riots

The words, like the women, are clustered together in a line with the cadence of women marching.

Credits: ¹Ruth Yarrow, *Frogpond* XVII:2; ²Chris Herold *ibid*; ³Emily Romano *Modern Haiku* XXVI No. 1; ⁴James Kirkup *ibid*; ⁵Gary Gay, *Haiku Moment*; ⁶Margaret Chula, *Mainichi Shinbun*; ⁷Peter Yovu, *Frogpond* XVII, No. 4; ⁸Anthony Pupello, *Frogpond*, XVII 3; ⁹marlene mountain, *Brussels Sprout*