

Owls

from *A Field Guide To North American Haiku*¹

Charles Trumbull

Owls may not be the most popular topic for haiku about birds—crows have that distinction—but they rank eighth and they are number one among the raptors. Percentage-wise, owl haiku are slightly more popular among haikuists writing in Japanese than in English.

William J. Higginson provides a thorough classification of owls in Japanese haiku:

Many owls are most prominent in winter, when longer periods of darkness make their nocturnal activities overlap more with our waking hours. Also, their hooting calls increase with mating, mid-to-late winter and early spring for many species. The Japanese *saijiki* divides owls into two groups, 梟 *fukurō*, including the snowy owl (白梟 *shirofukuro*) and ural owl (梟 *fukurō*), and 木菟 *mimizuku*, including most of the horned owls, such as the long- and short-eared owls (虎斑木菟 *torafuzuku* and 小木菟 *komimizuku*). Additional types with similar habits include

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.

the barred, great gray, great horned, saw-whet, and screech owls. In haikai the word “owl” by itself indicates winter, but several other species of owl come to notice at different times of year, for example the HAWK-OWL of Eurasia and North America and the brown hawk-owl (青葉木菟 *aobazuku*) of Japan are both commonly seen in summer, and therefore a summer topic.²

Gabi Greve adds that the owl is considered auspicious in Japanese culture because its name, pronounced *fukurō*, can be alternatively read as 不苦労 *fu kurō*, meaning “no hardships, no trouble.” For this reason, owl 縁起物 *engimono*—talismans or good-luck charms—are very popular.³ However, of the 65 Japanese haiku involving owls that I have found, there are none at all by Bashō, Chiyo-ni, or Buson, though Issa wrote at least 24, Shiki 7, Jōsō, Kikaku, Santōka, and Takaha Shugyō among others wrote at least one each.

Owls seem to have deeper roots in Western culture; they were already established in classical Greek and Roman mythology. Athena or Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom, handicraft, and warfare was the protector of the city of Athens; an owl was her main symbol. Indeed *Athene*, the genus of owls that includes the little owl, the burrowing owl, and the spotted owl, was named for the Greek goddess. It was its association with Athena that established the owl’s reputation for wisdom. Minerva was Athena’s Roman counterpart, the goddess of wisdom and knowledge. But while the owl may have been seen by the Greeks as a positive force,

in Rome the owl was a bird of ill-omen and its hooting presaged death. The death of Augustus, for instance was predicted by the hooting of an owl; an owl came and sat in the room of

² Higginson, *Haiku World* 274–75; kanji added. Gabi Greve in the *World Kigo Database* follows Higginson’s explication closely.

³ Gabi Greve, ed. *World Kigo Database Newsletter* [Web], March 24, 2006.

the emperor Commodus Aurelius just before he died; Caesar's murder was heralded by the screeching of owls. The Talmud mentions its being bad luck to dream of owls. *Leviticus* numbers the owl among the unclean birds.⁴

In Rome a dead owl nailed to the door of a house was a way of averting evil.⁵

Other cultures attribute various powers to owls, nearly always magical or superstitious and usually ominous or portentous. In Scotland it is bad luck to see an owl in daytime; in Wales an owl's hooting could presage a death or the loss of virginity. Some American Indian tribes associate the owl with death, but others see them as protectors, especially at night.

English and American literature feature a modicum of owls. In *Winnie the Pooh*, the character named Owl presents himself as wise and knowledgeable but is really a blowhard and scatterbrain who even spells his own name incorrectly: "Wol." In Edward Lear's poem "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," the bird was inspired by the stars and won the heart of his feline innamorata with his guitar playing and singing (music was another attribute of the classical goddesses). Owl Brown in Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* represents an overbearing and avaricious landowner. T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) and the Disney film *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) has a part for Archimedes, the magician Merlin's talking pet owl. Similarly, when Harry Potter begins his career in wizardry he receives a birthday gift of a snowy owl, Hedwig, who becomes his friend and adviser as well as mail carrier until her untimely death in battle.

⁴ "Owl," in Maria Leach, ed., *Funk & Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (one-volume edition, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, ©1972, 838

⁵ "Top Ten Owls in Literature and Mythology," *Girl with her Head in a Book* website; <https://girlwithherheadinabook.co.uk/2017/09/top-ten-owls-in-literature-and-mythology.html>.

eleventh birthday ...
my daughter waits for an owl
from Hogwarts

Vandana Parashar,
17th European Quarterly Kukai, Spring 2017

Few haikuists, however, have alluded to the owls of Athena or Minerva. Marjory Bates Pratt is one who did so; she regards a statue in the ruins of Ephesus as a surviving artifact of wisdom and creativity:

Athene's small owl
is there, perched on a column
in ruined Ephesus.

Marjory Bates Pratt, *American Haiku* 3:2 (1965)

Similarly, contemporary Japanese poet Tange Yūko makes a social commentary with her haiku:

ミネルバの梟ヒューヒュー肺を病む
Mineruba no fukurō hiyūhiyū hai o yamu

Minerva's owl
with ailing lungs
t-witt t'woos

Tange Yūko, trans. Anthony P. Newell, from a
sequence, "The Tears of the Balkans," *Ginyu* 50
(May 15, 2011)

Wikipedia points out an interesting owl metaphor: "The 19th-century idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel famously noted that 'the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk'—meaning that philosophy comes to understand a historical condition just as it passes away."

This is very nearly a found haiku!⁶

owl of Minerva
now spreading its wings
autumn dusk

For the most part, however, poets have not been interested in making classical allusions in their owl haiku. They concentrate rather on the here and now. Their concern is the owl's appearance, distinctive call and habits, and the effect the birds have on humans. Front and center is the owl's nocturnal nature:

Owl at night
is always sound,
not sight.
Alan Watts, *Dragonfly 1:2* (April 1973),
center insert

Owls can swoop into poets' dreams and otherwise challenge their sleep:

ふくろうはふくろうでわたしはわたしでねむれない
fukurō wa fukurō de watashi wa watashi de nemurenai

owl in owl's way
I in mine
can't get to sleep
Taneda Santōka, in Burton Watson,
For All My Walking (2003)

⁶ "Owl of Athena," *Wikidedia*; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owl_of_Athena. The Hegel quote is from "Preface," *Philosophy of Right* (1820), trans. S W Dyde, 1896.

long midnight
owl
in my empty dream-garden
Colin Blundell, *Ardea* 2 (2012)

in an owl's dream, too
a giant mirror
on the ship
Ban'ya Natsuishi, in Kaneko Tōta, Kuroda Momoko,
and Ban'ya, Natsuishi eds., *Gendai saijiki* (1997)
(Japanese) and Fay Aoyagi, ed., *Blue Willow Haiku
World* [blog], Dec. 3, 2011 (Japanese and English)

sleepless night
where else does
she have owl tattoos
Lucas Stensland, *Bottle Rockets* 24 (2011), 15

in my dream
the owl
with the girl tattoooooooooooooo
Terry Ann Carter, *Haiku Canada Review* 7:2
(October 2013)

Kikaku and Issa advance the owl's point of view as to the
importance of the night:

木菟の一人笑いや秋の暮
mimizuku no hitori warai ya aki no kure

The autumn day is done,
A single solitary owl
Smiles at the setting sun.
Kikaku, in William N. Porter, trans. and comp.,
A Year of Japanese Epigrams (1911)

木兎は不断日永と思ふ哉
mimizuku wa fudan hi naga to omou kana

in the owl's opinion
every day
is long

Issa, in Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa* website

Issa is also concerned about the sour visage of the owl:

梟も面癖直せ春の雨
fukurō mo tsuraguse naose haru no ame

O owl!
make some other face.
This is spring rain.

Issa, in Robert Hass, ed., *The Essential Haiku* (1994)

The owl's hoot is a frequent focus for the haikuist:

木兎の寝てくらしでも一期哉
mimizuku no nete kurashite mo ichi go kana

while sleeping
from the scops owl
a hoot

Issa, in Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa* website

It may be because vocalizing an enigmatic question such as “who?” might suggest a search for Minerva’s wisdom, or that the assonance of the long “o” sound is so appealing, but not many haikuists can resist playing on the word “who” and the owl’s call, “hoo-hoooo.” Paul Reys was one of the first, in 1935:

owl
whoyoubeyou
mebeme

Paul Reps, 22 *Ways to Nowhere* (n.d.)

owl echoes whose hoo

Grant D. Savage, *is ... fog ... is: Algonquin Park
Haiku* (2014)

an owl in the wOoOds

Larry Kimmel, *Bottle Rockets* 24 (2011), 14

Some poets take the owl's putative question literally:

Moving into darkness,
my shadow hides from me;
an owl cries "who" ...

Emily Romano, *Modern Haiku* 4:2 (1973)

Who? queries the owl;
but I am still uncertain
and cannot answer.

Emily Romano, *Modern Haiku* 6:3 (1975)

the midnight owl
asking again
who I am

Adelaide B. Shaw, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, May 2014

the owl
asking me
over and over

Edward J. Rielly, *Bottle Rockets* 30 (2014), 2

an owl questions God twilight

Gregory Longenecker, *Bones* 3 (Dec. 15, 2013), 46

and a few perpetuate puns, for example:

The little barn owl
sitting on the pine branch—
he gives a hoot

Tombo (Lorraine Ellis Harr), *70 Sevens* (1986)

Frankly, this sort of wordplay has been done to death now, and poets should be circumspect if they want to traffic in “who / hoo” ku.

A great many poets see a relationship between owls and moon, undoubtedly because both are around mostly at night. Bashō’s disciple Jōsō tells of an owl who mistook the brightness of the harvest moon for broad daylight and took refuge in a shady spot:

梟

辻堂梟たてこむ月夜かな

tsujidō ni fukuro tatekomu tsukiyo kana

AN OWL

What a bright moonlit night! An owl
Took refuge in the wayside shrine

Jōsō, in Asatarō Miyamori, *An Anthology of Haiku, Ancient and Modern* (1932)

More recently, Toyonaga Minoru compares the owl's cry with shimmering moonlight in the title haiku from Kōko Katō's 1996 anthology *A Hidden Pond*:

梟や月に浮びし隠れ沼

fukurō ya tsuki ni ukabishi kakurenuma

Hoot of an owl—
the rays of moonlight shimmer
on a hidden pond

 Toyonaga Minoru, trans. Kōko Katō and
 David Burleigh

Such a synesthetic comparison is very common in English-language haiku as well, for example:

 Following owl wings,
 these echoings of moonlight
 left in trembling leaves.

Foster Jewell, *Leaves in the Wind* (1976)

 a little screech owl
 his calling the color
 of moonshadow

 Elizabeth Searle Lamb, *Cicada 1:1* (1977)

 northern lights shimmer
 a saw-whet piping
 on the distant shore

 Nick Avis, *Modern Haiku* 17:1
 (winter–spring 1986)

all night
the white moon quivers
in the owl screech
John Wills, *Reed Shadows* (1987)

moving
a handful of moonlight
the owl's wing
Jane Reichhold, *A Dictionary of Haiku* (1st ed., 1992)

filtered through pine
the pygmy owl's staccato—
flecks of moonlight
Ruth Yarrow, *The Heron's Nest* 9:1 (March 2007)

Jewell adds assonance to his synesthesia:

Full moon
and the round sound
of the owl's hoo ... hoo ... o
Foster Jewell, *Cicada* 1:1 (1977)

Here are a few of the more interesting owl + moon haiku, but, sad to say, such poems are now so common that they too have become clichéd.

Out of autumn leaves,
An owl spits an angry hoot
At a dull-red moon.
Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (2000)

Atop a gable
of the great Victorian:
owl and autumn moon.

Tom Tico, *Modern Haiku* 2:4 (autumn 1971),
5, Special Mention

moonless night:
silent owls glide
among dark branches

Ross Figgins, *Leanfrog* 4:4 (fall 1981)

full moon at midnight—
a barn owl glides
out of the slaughterhouse

Michael Dylan Welch, *Modern Haiku* 29:3
(fall 1998), 21

as near
as the owl's voice
August moonrise

Robert F. Mainone, *Modern Haiku* 37:2
(summer 2006), 25

soft moonlight
a second owl
answers

Michelle Tennison, *The Heron's Nest* 13:4
(December 2011)

Early on, Ross Figgins recognized the problem of overuse of
the image:

the owl at midnight
a cliché still
the owl at midnight
Ross Figgins, *Seer Ox 2* (1975)

Especially when flying, the owl can bring to mind stars as well as moonlight and moonshadow:

winter solstice—
on Orion's shoulder
the Little Owl
Sara Winteridge, *Shiki Internet Kukai*,
December 2012

the owl's flight unheard stars appear
Peter Yovu, *Modern Haiku* 38:3 (autumn 2007)

scops owl ...
she answers his song
across a river of stars
John Barlow, *With Words International Online
Haiku Competition* 2009

and fog too:

fog hangs in the hollow a nest of owlets
Debbie Strange, *Kokako* 27 (September 2017)

Lots of haiku have been written about the owl's flight, how silent it is, how it glides through forests and over fields and cemeteries, which are often covered with snow for good measure.

Perhaps more than with any other kind of bird in haiku, poets often mention a specific type of owl. For anyone who's counting, in English haiku our tally is as follows: *barn owl* 47, (*great*) *horned owl* 45, *screech owl* 43 (but 59 if phrases like "the owl's screech" are counted too), *snowy owl* 41, *barred owl* 21, *little owl* 9, (*great*) *gray owl* 7, *scops owl* 6, *burrowing owl* 4, *elf owl* 4, *saw-whet* 4, *short-eared owl* 4, *barking owl* 2, *long-eared owl* 2, *pygmy owl* 2, *boreal owl* 1, and *masked owl* 1. *Owlet* is mentioned in 13 haiku. English-language haikuists have been struggling to avoid overused images. The following are among the more successful efforts and point the way to wise and novel ways to include owls in haiku:

the widening dawn:
wings outstretched, a horned owl
nailed to the barn

Bob Boldman, *Modern Haiku* 10:3 (autumn 1979)

cello solo the owls in my bones
Tanya McDonald, *Frogpond* 37:2
(spring/summer 2014), 20

owl flight
the silent wings
in my genome
David McKee, *Modern Haiku* 48:1
(winter–spring 2017)

a lone owl
i walk
into your dusk
ai li, *Bottle Rockets* 2:1 (fall/winter 2000)

梟の声をフリーズドライする
fukurō no koe o friizudrai suru

a voice
of an owl
I freeze-dry it

Fay Aoyagi, *Shūkan Haiku* (“Weekly Haiku” blog)
508, January 15, 2017 (Japanese) and Fay Aoyagi,
ed., *Blue Willow Haiku World* [blog], December 1,
2017 (Japanese and English)

待針を失う木菟の声がして
machibari o ushinau zuku no koe ga shite

I lost a needle
for marking
a horned owl’s hoot

Hirai Kumiko, in Kaneko Tōta, Kuroda Momoko,
and Natsuishi Ban’ya, eds., *Gendai saijiki* (1997)
(Japanese) and Fay Aoyagi, ed., *Blue Willow Haiku*
World [blog], November 27, 2011 (Japanese and
English)

an owl calls
I wonder about buying
mobile phone

David Cobb, *A Shift in the Wind /*
Veter se obrne (2007)

our
path
deep
with
leaves
the owl doesn't try to hide
its
dis
approval
Lee Gurga, *Modern Haiku* 40:3 (autumn 2009)

far-off owl ...
the phantom scent
of father's pipe
John Hawk, *DailyHaiku* [Web], Nov. 23, 2011

the wait for an owl the second time
Jim Kacian, *Dead Reckoning* (2005)

ice floes into the deep blue snowy owl
Deb Koen, *Frogpond* 38:1 (winter 2015)

梟やいずれの道も帰路ならず
fukurō ya izureno michi mo kiro narazu

an owl—
every road is not a road
to home
*Kōno Saki, in Tsukushi Bansei, Tsushima Yasuko, and
Takayama Leona, Shinsen 21 ("New Selection 21,"*

2009) (*Japanese*) and Fay Aoyagi, ed., *Blue Willow Haiku World* [blog], Dec. 30, 2009
(*Japanese and English*)

An owl's call...
the slave burial ground
with sunken markers
Rebecca Lilly, *Acorn* 38 (spring 2017)

two a.m.
still awake
owl and I
Geraldine Clinton Little, from the sequence
"Storm / Aftermath," *Frogpond* 15:2 (autumn-winter 1992)

an inmate from Harlem
hears an owl
for the first time
Richman, Elliot, *Haiku Quarterly* (Arizona) 1:4
(winter 1989)

Splashed across
a thousand years of growth ring
spotted owl egg
Vincent Tripi, *Modern Haiku* 27:2 (summer 1996)

And two visual and concrete poems to finish off:

hoot
w
l
Marlene Morelock Wills (Marlene Mountain),
Old Tin Roof (1976)

nowl
Nick Virgilio, *Wind Chimes* 18 (1986)

A Note From Charles Trumbull

I am gratified by the warm welcome my "Down East Haiku" (FP 42:1) piece received. Several poets whose work was not mentioned in the article wrote to apprise me of their Maine connections!

Gary Hotham took issue with my opening statement, "Haiku are nature poems." He writes, "I thought we in the English language haiku world had left that idea way behind us. I know it's a popular way to teach haiku in the schools—that they are nature poems. But Harold G. Henderson fought that idea since at least 1934, in his book, *The Bamboo Broom: An Introduction to Japanese Haiku...* Yes, a lot of nature is in haiku but I, along with some help from the scholarship of HGH, would say the genre is not best defined as nature poetry." Without wanting to open a whole new can of worms, I would add that while Gary is quite right about the inappropriateness of my opening sentence, "Haiku are nature poems," and I certainly could have started with a more nuanced statement. But, Henderson notwithstanding, I do believe that haiku are at least essentially about Nature (which, for me subsumes human nature). The best haiku use Nature to shed light on human behavior. So, I would argue that the "nature" part of my assertion is not wildly inaccurate. On the other hand, I don't consider haiku a poem, at least not in the Western sense. It's that word in my statement that makes me wince in retrospect.

I also received a note from Frank K. Robinson, whose haiku was grossly misprinted in "Down East Haiku," and I beg forgiveness for the error. *FP* readers are kindly requested to take razor blade, blue pencil, and/or white-out in hand and make the haiku read as it was intended:

autumn wind
through the lobster pots
a gaunt moon