

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

Charles Trumbull

Hiromi Inoue, in his *kiyose* (structured list of *kigo*),² and Gabi Greve of the online *World Kigo Database*³ identify 虹 *niji* “rainbow” as a *kigo* for all summer. But in haiku *niji* occurs most often with some modifier or another, for example, 夕虹 *yūniji* (evening rainbow), 朝虹 *asaniji* (morning rainbow)—both summer *kigo*—and 初虹 *hatsuniji* (first rainbow [of the year]), a New Year *kigo*; 春の虹 *haru no niji* (spring rainbow), and 秋の虹 *aki no niji* (autumn rainbow)—seasonally appropriate *kigo*.

“Rainbow,” in fact, was used relatively infrequently by the classical Japanese haiku poets. Bashō and Chiyo-ni wrote no haiku using *niji*. Buson made one rainbow haiku, but the *kigo* was “peony”:

虹を吐て開かんとする牡丹哉
niji o haite hirakan to suru botan kana

ready to open
and breathe forth a rainbow
a peony flower

trans. Makoto Ueda,

The Path of Flowering Thorn (1998)

Adam L. Kern’s version of the same verse in *The Penguin Book of Haiku* (2018) is more, well, dynamic:

bursting open
disgorging its rainbow:
peony dynamo!

and he appends the note: “The phrase *niji o baite*, literally ‘rainbow disgorging,’ is an idiomatic expression for a human dynamo.”

Issa wrote several rainbow haiku, including this one in the same vein as Buson's, i.e., imagining the source of the rainbow:

垣津旗よりあの虹は起りけん
kakitsubata yori ano nihi wa okoriken

irises —
where that rainbow
starts from

*trans. David G. Lanoue,
Haiku of Kobayashi Issa website*

Issa's 垣津旗 *kakitsubata* (blue-flag iris) is also a summer *kigo*. Lanoue notes: "Issa imagines that the rainbow has arisen from blooming irises—the intense, showy colors of the flowers continuing in bold streaks upward, into the sky, forming the rainbow. It's interesting that 'iris' derives from the Greek word for 'rainbow.' Issa could not have known this, but he intuitively the same connection that exists in many Western languages. The rainbow is a flower in the sky; irises are rainbows on earth."

Shiki, too, had an opinion on the source of the arc of light:

虹の根に白壁光る青田哉
niji no ne ni shirakabe hikaru aota kana

a glowing white wall
at the start of the rainbow—
green rice paddies

trans. C. Trumbull, unpublished

Issa made two other non-summer rainbow haiku, in one of which the season word is 野分 *nowaki* (autumn gale), and another with the *kigo* 春の虹 *haru no nihi* (spring rainbow). Another haiku of Issa's uses "First rainbow" as the *kigo*:

昼寝るによしといふ日や虹はじめ
hiru neru ni yoshi to iu hi ya nihi hajime

a noon nap
on a good day ...
first rainbow

Lanoue advises that 虹はじめ *niji hajime* (first rainbow) refers to the first rainbow of the year—i.e., it's a spring *kigo*.

Shiki wrote seven other haiku mentioning a rainbow, none of which has yet been published in English. Only in this one is *niji* the *kigo*:

舟一つ虹をくゞつて帰りけり
fune hitotsu niji o kugutte kaerikeri

one boat
has passed under the rainbow
and is back home

trans. C. Trumbull & Noriko Martinez unpublished

Few other rainbow haiku written by Japanese before the 20th century are to be found, but here is one—a puzzler—by Kikaku:

海づらの虹をけしたる燕かな
umi zura no niji o keshitaru tsubame kana

a swallow has erased a rainbow above the face of the sea
trans. Hiroaki Sato, Big Sky (Amoskeag 2, 1980)

Contemporary Japanese poets take a more subjective view of rainbows. Consider these two widely published and anthologized haiku of Ban'ya Natsuishi's:

階段を突き落とされて虹となる
kaidan o tsukiotosa rete niji to naru

Shoved off the stairs
falling I become
a rainbow

trans. Ban'ya Natsuishi & Jim Kacian, in Natsuishi, (1983)

太平洋上ことばからことばへ虹
Taiheiyō-jō kotoba kara kotoba e niji

Over the Pacific Ocean
a rainbow from one word
to another word

*trans. Ban'ya Natsuishi & Jim Kacian, in Natsuishi,
Hybrid Paradise (2010)*

Modern Japanese haiku often juxtapose the colorful arc of light with the play of human motion or emotion. For example, the first of Natsuishi's haiku above is reminiscent of Kyoshi's:

虹立ちて 忽ち君が 在る如し
niji tachite tachimachi kimi ga aru gotoshi

a rainbow
stand up suddenly
and you're just like it

*trans. C. Trumbull, from Yamamoto Kenkichi,
comp., 500 Selected Basic Kigo (1989)⁴*

Natsuishi's second haiku above shows how the Japanese imagination frequently envisions the human being—the poet—underneath or encircled by the rainbow:

円虹の中に吾が影手振れば振る
enkō no naka ni waga kage tebureba furu

ringed by a rainbow
my silhouette wavers
if I wave

*trans. C. Trumbull, from Yamamoto Kenkichi,
comp., 500 Selected Basic Kigo, 1989*

The idea of a rainbow—especially a winter rainbow—being something beautiful but transient or unattainable figures prominently in 20th- and 21st-century Japanese haiku, for example:

Thou too Brutus! 今も冬虹消えやすく
Thou too Brutus! ima mo fuyu nihi kieyasuku

Et tu, Brute!
even now a winter rainbow
ready to disappear

*Katō Shūson, trans. William J. Higginson,
Haiku World (1996)*

Greve confesses that she does not understand this verse but adds an explanation: “Shūson wrote this haiku during WWII, when he returned from an official visit to China and found his haiku friends in a lot of disagreement about the proper form.” For my part, I imagine that Julius Caesar’s cry as he is stabbed in the back by his good friend Brutus is being used here to evoke a vision of harmony and beauty that has been lost owing to politics and personalities.

指させばたちまち消ゆる冬の虹
yubi saseba tachimachi kiyuru fuyu no nihi

it disappears
as soon as I point it out—
winter rainbow

*Mayuzumi Madoka, trans. Fay Aoyagi and
Charles Trumbull, unpublished*

鴨川二片足かけて冬のにじ
Kamogawa ni kataashi kakete fuyu no nihi

winter rainbow
one foot lingers
at the Kamo River

Mayuzumi Madoka, Haiku: Love in Kyoto (2001)

母の嘆きのとほざかるしぐれ虹
haha no nageki no to hozakaru shigure nihi

my mother's grief
now so far in the distance
misty rainbow

*Kuroda Momoko, trans. Abigail Friedman, I Wait
for the Moon: 100 Haiku of Momoko Kuroda
(2014)*

大空はきのうの虹を記憶せず
ōzora wa kinō no sora o kioku sezu

The enormous sky
does not recall the rainbow
of a day before

*Hasegawa Kai, in Bruce Ross et al., eds.,
A Vast Sky (2015)*

虹消えてしまえば還る人妻に
niji kiete shimaeba kaeru hitozuma ni

The rainbow having vanished I'm back to being a wife
*Mitsuhashi Takajo, in Hiroaki Sato, "Explicating
the Haiku of Mitsuhashi Takajo 三橋鷹女
(1899–1972)," Frogpond 32:3 (Fall 2009)*

みごもるといふ知らせあり虹かかる
migomoru to iu shirase ari niji kakaru

news of her pregnancy
the rainbow
hangs in the air

*Tōgo Nagase, "from 'Fukushima'" (2011),
trans. Emiko Miyashita and Michael Dylan Welch,
in Modern Haiku 43:2 (Summer 2012)*

If Japanese haikuists concern themselves with the source of a rainbow and its relationship to humans, English-language poets seem more interested in what lies at the other end of the rainbow. It's traditional for us Westerners to expect a pot of

gold at the end of the rainbow. It probably has been secreted there by leprechauns. Western haiku poets, however, have by and large not yet discovered leprechauns. Instead, they use the pot of gold as a metaphor for mystical, likely unattainable goals. Lyn Reeves updates the leprechaun's trove:

Rainbow's end
comes to rest
on the Casino

*in André Duhaime, ed., Haïku sans frontières:
une anthologie mondiale (1998) and Haïku sans
frontières website*

while Michelle Tennison's ethereal rainbow disappears into the sea mist:

hypnagogia
a rainbow ending
in the ocean

Frogpond 37:2 (Spring/Summer 2014)

Other poets' rainbows point the way to pots of varying desirability:

tumbler of water
the rainbow ends
in a handful of pills

John Stevenson, Upstate Dim Sum 2008/1

at the end of the rainbow:
a flock of crows

*Kevin Everett FitzMaurice, Modern Haiku 20:3
(autumn 1989)*

Detroit
the rainbow ends
at a union hall

Ed Markowski, Simply Haiku 7:4 (winter 2009)

rainbow
ending among
the petroleum tanks

Penny Harter, In the Broken Curve (1984)

rainbow's end
no parking

Helen Buckingham, Prune Juice 7 (Winter 2012)

So what really lies at the end of the rainbow? Most poets would likely agree it is some mystical and probably unattainable goal or location. As one example, on the farm in Kansas, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, longs for “some place where there isn't any trouble”:

After April rain
“Somewhere over the rainbow”
a clap of thunder

*Tombo (Lorraine Ellis Harr), from a sequence,
“Familiar Sayings Haiku,” in Harr,
70 Sevens (1986)*

rainswept streets—
homeless trumpeters wail
“Over the Rainbow”

Bruce H. Feingold, Frogpond 18:2 (summer 1995)

In Western traditions, a rainbow can be a spectacular omen, a message from beyond, as in the interpretation of the rainbow that appeared to Noah as a message from God that He would not again flood the Earth.

Weather and its impact on humans can purportedly be predicted through popular sayings such as: “rainbow (or red sky) at morning, sailor [or shepherd] take warning; rainbow (or red sky) at night, sailor's [or shepherd's] delight.”

The rainbow's arch can represent a bridge to or a communication channel with another world. This haiku by Jane Reichhold, like the Issa haiku we examined earlier, identifies the origin of a rainbow as a flower while alluding to Iris, the messenger in

Greco-Roman mythology who communicated between Earth
and Heaven via the rainbow:

arching
the iris opens
a rainbow

*Jane Reichhold, A Dictionary of Haiku
(1st ed., 1992)*

(Note that in some Latin languages the term for “rainbow” is
“Iris’s arch”— *arco iris* in Spanish, *arco-íris* in Portuguese.)

The arch of the rainbow often dramatizes or brings to mind
other arches:

rainbow
over Wimbledon
the arc of his serve

Helen Buckingham, Riverbed, Summer 2008

journey’s end —
a rainbow
over McDonald’s

*George Dorsty, Modern Haiku 41:1
(Winter–Spring 2010), 18*

tracer bullets the soft arc of the rainbow’s reds
Mark E. Brager, Moongarlic 2 (May 2014)

身をそらす虹の
絶巔
処刑台

the body arches
at its rainbow peak —
“petite morte”

*mi o sorasu niji no
zetten
shokei-dai*

*Takayanaki Jushin
[Shigenobu], in Patricia
Donegan, ed., Love
Haiku (2010)*

Wordsworth used the rainbow image to represent an arc of time rather than space:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!...
The Child is father of the Man.

虹をかけ時が至ればまた外す
niji o kake toki ga itareba mata hazusu

God hung this rainbow,
and in the goodness of time
God will take it down
*Yamaguchi Seishi, trans. James Kirkup,
A Certain State of Mind (1995)*

Rainbows also define or enclose a space underneath:

under a rainbow-arch honeymooners collecting shells
*Alexis Rotella, from the sequence "(for
Bob Boldman)," Wind Chimes 7 (Winter 1983)*

Under a rainbow
girls with pigtails
jumping rope.
Alexis Rotella, Musical Chairs (2009)

Swine flu pandemic—
a rainbow arcs
the empty playground
*Barbara Taylor, Asahi Haikuist Network,
June 19, 2009*

tin roof
a rainbow arches above
the silence

Catherine J. S. Lee, Ambrosia 4 (Summer 2009)

Surely because of their shape and colors, serpents or snakes
are associated with rainbows in many cultures:

虹色のうろこを求め蛇泳ぐ
nijūiro no uroko o motome hebi oyogu

Seeking rainbow-colored scales a snake swims
Kamakura Sayumi, trans. Hiroaki Sato,
Japanese Women Poets (2008)

drought —
the snake coils
a rainbow

Susan Constable, Roadrunner VII:2 (May 2007)

If a single rainbow is associated with good luck, a double
rainbow must be an even better sign, a good omen and symbol
of transformation. The first rainbow is said to represent the
material world, the second the spiritual:

after the thunder storm
a double rainbow brings back
the divine silence

Adina Enachescu, Shiki Internet Kukai, May 2011

double rainbow promises promises

Jennifer Thiermann, Frogpond 40:3 (Autumn 2017)

double rainbow
giving him the benefit
of doubt

Beverly Acuff Momoi, A Hundred Gourds 1:2
(March 2012)

godless month
a double rainbow
spans the mourners

*Berenice Mortimer, The Heron's Nest 14:2
(June 2012)*

double rainbow
two more states
legalize gay marriage

Meik Blöttenberger, Prune Juice 11 (November 2013)

Blöttenberger's verse is remarkable in that it marks a step forward in social activism, suggests the spiritual and emotional impact on the gay community, and alludes to the rainbow flag of the LGBT pride movement.

hard rain one day piled on another

*Stuart Quine,⁵ Notes from the Gean 4 (March
2010)*

These problematic days we all know Bob Dylan was right when he prophesied, "It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall," yet in the same work he also wrote, "I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbow." Another Bob—Bob Marley—has joyfully announced, "Here is the rainbow I've been prayin' for / It's gonna be a bright, bright / Sun-Shiny day."

after the gale
gull pulls a rainbow
into the sky

LeRoy Gorman, Wind Chimes 2 (1981)

(Endnotes)

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 the Haiku Database, currently containing more than 447,000 entries. “Somewhere over the Rainbow” presents haiku indexed in the Database under “Sky & Elements: rainbow.” About 1,400 of these haiku were written originally in English, 80 are translations of Japanese haiku, and about 70 are translated from other languages. Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Comments and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please communicate by e-mail to trumbullc@comcast.net.

2 Formerly available online at <http://shiki1.cc.chime-u.ac.jp/~shiki/kukai.html>. Inoue was a member of the Shiki Team in Matsuyama, Japan.

3 <https://worldkigodatabase.blogspot.com>.

4 Yamamoto Kenkichi, comp., 基本季語五〇〇選 (*Kihon kigo go rei rei-sen*; 500 Selected Basic Kigo), 1989.

5 Stuart Quine, 1962–2020, R.I.P.