

## Nature's Classroom

### **Haiku at National Parks: An Interview with Brad Bennett**

*Questions Provided by Tom Sacramona*

**You were an artist-in-residence at Acadia National Park in Maine during the summer of 2021. Awarded the residency, you had 14 days' accommodation at the Park, as well as a requirement to complete a creative project. Yours involved haiku poetry. Can you tell us more about your project and how the residency helped you spread your knowledge about haiku to others?**

I was very grateful for the opportunity to be an artist-in-residence at Acadia National Park during the summer of 2021. I had visited the park several times previously and knew that its incredible beauty would provide exciting opportunities for haiku creation and exploration. As I planned for the residency, I thought carefully about when I wanted to spend my two-week residency at Acadia. I wanted to experience seasonal transitions, so I went for a week in early summer and a week in late summer. I spent much of each day walking the trails and writing. It was a remarkable experience.

When I first learned that part of the residency would include a public outreach component, I was eager to share my love of haiku with Acadia National Park visitors. However, because the residency occurred during the pandemic (in fact, it was postponed once from the summer of 2020), I couldn't share my haiku directly with visitors in the park (via haiku walks or workshops). Luckily, I was able to teach a workshop and give a reading at a lovely art gallery called Chapter Two, located just outside the park in Corea, Maine. The workshop and reading occurred in late August and viewers were able to live-stream it over social media.

**How many poems did you write at Acadia? If there is a way readers can view them on the National Park Service website, can you please provide the link here?**

I wrote around three hundred haiku at or about Acadia. (Some of them bubbled up weeks later.) I chose fifty of them for an Acadia National Park Artist-in-Residence archive page, which is part of an on-line catalog of artists. On that page, you'll also find a video excerpt of my reading at Chapter Two and an essay called "Haiku at Acadia: Finding Inspiration in Liminal Spaces." All three can be accessed here: <https://www.nps.gov/acad/getinvolved/air-bennett.htm>.<sup>1</sup>

the same sun  
that rose yesterday  
pink granite cliffs

Schoodic Head  
a gust from the harbor  
tugs at my cap

spindrift  
a gull's down feather  
caught in a fissure

Otter Point  
a wave slips over  
a rock

our steps  
quieted by fir needles  
reindeer moss

a buoy bobs  
on Frenchman Bay  
first star at dusk

**What did Acadia's landscape teach you about haiku, and what do you imagine your haiku taught you about its unique landscape? Can you liken this to your experience at other national parks? I'm curious if you can connect some of your haiku to particular parks.**

That first question is one that I tried to answer in my essay, “Haiku at Acadia: Finding Inspiration in Liminal Spaces.” Along with concision and the haiku moment, I believe that juxtaposition is among the three most important elements of haiku that set it apart from other poetry forms. And juxtaposition, by its very nature, needs two sensory images to tango. These kinds of interactions are much more likely to occur in transition zones, places with fluid boundaries, or what we might call “liminal spaces.” In nature, we’re talking about edge habitats and heterogenous areas. Acadia is rife with those natural liminal spaces.

First, and perhaps most famously, the park consists of 64 miles of coastline where land and sea meet. Constant change, constant movement, constant material for haiku. Acadia provided a front-row seat from which to witness *zoka*, the dynamic energy of nature that Bashō championed late in his life. Second, because Acadia is on the North American boundary between the northern boreal forest and eastern deciduous forest, it is one of the most ecologically diverse national parks. Third, one-fifth of the park is wetlands (saltwater marsh, freshwater marsh, swamp, and bog), another potent zone where water and land, and their native species, interact. Lastly, Acadia’s weather was constantly changing, sometimes more drastically than further inland. For instance, I witnessed several different emanations of fog during my time there. Acadia taught me much about liminal spaces as inspiration for haiku.

I am a big fan of U.S. National Parks. As writer Wallace Stegner said, “National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst.” (America can use all the democracy it can get these days.) My partner Barbara and I have hiked through many national parks over the years—we’ve been to almost half of the 63 total parks—and I have written haiku in every single one we’ve visited. Some parks are more homogenous (e.g., Arches National Park) and some are less (e.g., Olympic National Park), but they are all awe-inspiring and they all yield liminal opportunities of some kind. Seasonal changes, life cycles, weather patterns, action,

interactions, energy, dynamism, ecology, the water cycle, the rock cycle... I (and nature) could go on and on.

gnarly pine  
a nutcracker squawks  
at the crater rim

*Crater Lake National Park*<sup>2</sup>

high desert heat  
a juniper holds onto  
its dead branches

*Arches National Park*<sup>3</sup>

hiking a saddle  
one mountain takes over  
for another

*Glacier National Park*<sup>4</sup>

fresh lava flow  
heat waves wobble  
the horizon

*Hawaii Volcanoes National Park*<sup>5</sup>

**I know you have a fun story that involves a national park out west and another haiku poet from the Northeast. Would you care to share that story with us? And reflecting on it in this context of place, what does this story teach us about great haiku?**

In November 2015, I was reading an issue of *muttering thunder*, an excellent, short-lived, on-line haiku journal edited by Allan Burns, with art by Ron C. Moss, when I came across a haiku by Scott Mason that blew me away:

epochs in the making  
the box canyon's  
sudden chill

I had been enjoying Scott's haiku for years, but this one particularly resonated with me. Earlier that year, Barbara and I had hiked in Boynton Canyon (in the Coconino National Forest) in Sedona, Arizona. It's a box canyon with stunning views of red rock walls the whole way along the trail. It was a hot day, but at one point the temperature dipped suddenly and briefly, and we remarked on how refreshing and enervating it was. Well, I emailed Scott to say his poem reminded me of a canyon walk I had taken months before, but I didn't name the canyon. Scott replied that he had written the haiku in Sedona. Becoming increasingly intrigued, I answered by sharing the name of the canyon, and he confirmed that it was, indeed, Boynton Canyon that had inspired his poem! Great haiku transport the reader to places and settings around the world, even ones the reader hasn't visited. In this case, I had visited the setting where Scott's haiku had taken place, and the experience was expertly and uncannily communicated through the haiku!

**What attracted you to this form originally, and what do you continue to find captivating about haiku? How has editing the haiku and senryu section of *Frogpond* over the past year affected how you read or write haiku? Before our first issue together last spring, we sat down to discuss what makes a standard of excellence for haiku. Do you still feel the same about what makes for haiku excellence, or do you feel any of your haiku excellence attributes have since changed?**

I was attracted to haiku originally because of my love of nature and Japanese aesthetics. I remain attracted to the form because of those essential reasons, but also because of many others. I love the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of such a short poem yielding an infinite number of aspects for consideration. I learn something new about haiku every day, from historical Japanese masters, from contemporary haiku writers, from fellow writers, from colleagues, from my haiku groupmates, from my elementary school students, from my adult students, and from my mentees.

My experience as haiku and senryu editor of *Frogpond* has taught me much about this fascinating form. I learn a lot about haiku style and

technique from all the wonderful poets who submit. And I learn a lot from you, Tom, as well, as we select the poems for each issue. I have thoroughly enjoyed our many conversations about specific haiku submissions that have opened up new portals in our continually evolving journey into what makes a haiku excellent. That dialogue has certainly informed and consolidated my own thoughts about what I'm looking for when I am reading the submissions (and what I am trying to achieve in my own haiku). My first tier of criteria includes: resonance, effective juxtaposition, understatement, freshness, a haiku moment well-described, and some kind of rootedness in sensory experience. If a poem meets those criteria, then I move to my second tier. I consider accessibility, universality, euphony, concision, Japanese aesthetics, authenticity, effective ambiguity, surprise, an organic structure that fits the content, and whether the poem makes an important contribution to the field. Thinking about and trying to articulate my core beliefs about what makes a haiku special has helped me immensely in editing *Frogpond* and in my own writing as well. I encourage every haiku poet to create their own list of attributes they admire in haiku.

**Writing original haiku in English within the nature tradition is far harder now than it was during haiku's first hundred years in English simply because many topics have been written about so many times. In your opinion, what can we be doing as artists to continue moving our writing forward, as all generations of haiku poets before us have done?**

It is difficult to continue to write fresh haiku within the nature tradition, in no small part because our chosen form is so brief and because we're all living in the same world. For instance, I believe all of us will experience *déjà ku* at some point in our writing careers. But I love the challenge of creating fresh, resonant haiku inspired by the same, ordinary, natural world that we all share. That leads me to an important question: how do I keep my nature haiku fresh? First of all, I try to remain open to *zoka*, the beautiful, terrible, dynamic, creative, always changing energy of nature. Nature is continuously and constantly original and innovative, so if we let its novelty inform

and infuse our haiku, the haiku can't help but be fresh. Secondly, I am guessing that all of us fall into the trap of trying to be too clever at times. As poets, we love words, we love to play with words, we love to patch them together in fresh new ways. Trying to be fresh and new means that sometimes we might become too big a part of our haiku. I workshop with a group called the Sugar Maple Haiku Group, and we often ask each other, "Is my haiku too clever?" By clever, we mean, "Am I distracting the reader away from the haiku and the haiku moment with my cleverness?" Obviously, the writer can never excuse themselves from the poem; there is no such thing as a fully objective haiku. And we want our poems to be skillfully crafted. But I also don't want my haiku to lose their necessary and nourishing roots in concrete sensory experience. I love the challenge of using plain, accessible language that describes ordinary concrete experiences to craft fresh haiku that hopefully glow with *ma*, *yūgen*, and various other delights for the reader. I enjoy many different kinds of haiku, but the haiku that I keep coming back to are replete with freshness, resonance, and depth about our inspiring, exquisite, and natural world.

#### Notes:

1. "Haiku by Brad Bennett Artist-In-Residence," Acadia National Park Summer 2021. <https://www.nps.gov/acad/getinvolved/air-bennett.htm>.
2. *Off the Coast*, Fall 2013
3. *Modern Haiku* 49:2
4. *Akitsu Quarterly*, Summer 2015
5. *The Heron's Nest* 18:4

**Brad Bennett** teaches creative writing to kids and haiku to adults. He has published three collections of haiku with Red Moon Press: *a drop of pond* (2016), which won a Touchstone Distinguished Book Award from the Haiku Foundation; *a turn in the river* (2019), which was shortlisted for the Touchstone Award; and, most recently, *a box of feathers* (2022). Brad is a mentor in the HSA Mentorship Program and currently serves as haiku and senryu editor for *Frogpond*.