

# Sample *Haiku*

These examples include Japanese translations and some original Western poems.

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## **Bashó** (Matsuo Munefusa 1644-1694)

The name *Bashó* (banana tree) is a sobriquet the poet adopted around 1681 after moving into a hut with a banana tree alongside. He was called *Kinsaku* in childhood and *Matsuo Munefusa* in his later days.

Bashó's father was a low-ranking samurai from the Iga Province. To be a samurai, Bashó served the local lord Todo Yoshitada (Sengin). Since Yoshitada was fond of writing *haikai*, Bashó began writing poetry under the name Sobo, later changing to Bashó.

During the years, Bashó traveled through Japan, especially the northern regions. There, he wrote *Oku No Hosomichi* (1694). He is considered the "Shakespeare" of Japanese poetry.

*Furu ike ya*                      An old pond  
*Kawaza tobikomu*            A frog jumps in  
*Mizu no oto*                    The sound of water

*Samidare wo*                    Collecting all  
*Atsumete hayashi*            The rains of May  
*Mogami-gawa*                  The swift Mogami River.

*Yagate shinu*                  Cricket, from your cheery cry  
*Keshiki wa miezu*            No one would ever guess  
*Semi no koe*                    How quickly you must die.

The sea darkens;  
The voices of the wild ducks  
Are faintly white.

Ill on a journey--  
My dreams wander  
Over a withered moor.

Near the brushwood gate  
Furious tea leaves scribble  
Nothings on the storm

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## **Yoshi Mikami Issa** (Kobayashi Nobuyuki 1762-1826):

*Katatumuri*                    O snail  
*Sorosoro nobore*            Climb Mount Fuji  
*Fuji no yama*                  But slowly, slowly!

In my old home  
That I forsook, the cherries  
are in bloom.

A giant firefly:  
That way, this way, that way, this --  
And it passes by.

Right at my feet --  
And when did you get here,  
Snail?

My grumbling wife--  
If only she were here!  
This moon tonight...

A lovely thing to see:  
Through the paper window's hole,  
The galaxy.

A man, just one--  
Also a fly, just one--  
In the huge drawing room.

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**Ryunosuke Akutagawa** (1892-1927):  
Akutagawa wrote "*Rashomon*," "*The Nose*," "*The Handkerchief*," "*Hell Screen*," "*Flatcar*" and "*Kappa*." He didn't start writing *haiku* before 1919, when he used the pseudonym **Gaki**.

Green frog,  
Is your body also  
freshly painted?

Sick and feverish  
Glimpse of cherry blossoms  
Still shivering.

Harvest moon:  
Around the pond I wander  
And the night is gone.

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**Takahama Kyoshi** (1894-1959):  
Notice Kyoshi's deviation from the normal syllable count:

*Aki kaze ya*                    Autumn wind:  
*Ganchu no mono*            Everything I see--  
*Mina haiku*                    Is *haiku*.

## Western Poets Using *Haiku*

While many Japanese *haiku* have been translated into English, with varying degrees of success, there are Western poets now attempting the genre. Far too many of the resulting poems are quite bad, or miss the point of the genre, or actually clever *senryu* rather than *haiku*. However, we have had some successes. Here are some Western poets who have either captured the essence of the original *haiku*, or who have adapted the tradition in unusual but effective ways.

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**James Kirkup:** (contemporary)

This one is particularly Zen and traditional.

In the amber dusk  
Each island dreams its own night--  
The sea swarms with gold.

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**Michael R. Collings** (contemporary)

What's happened to nature in this haiku?

Freeway overpass--  
Blossoms in graffiti on  
Fog-wrapped June mornings.

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**Scott Alexander** (early twentieth century)

By an ancient pond  
A bullfrog sits on a rock:  
Waiting for Bashó.

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**Joy Shieman** (contemporary)

Two leaning tombstones  
Took seventy years to touch--  
Mist and peace dwell there.

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**James W. Hackett** (contemporary)

In my opinion, Hackett is probably the best non-Japanese *haiku* poet the west has produced. Here are four of his most frequently anthologized *haiku*.

Half of the minnows  
Within this sunlit shallow  
Are not really there.

Deep within the stream  
The huge fish lie motionless  
Facing the current.

Two flies, so small  
It's a wonder they ever met,  
Are mating on this rose.

This garter snake  
Goes in and out of the grass  
All at the same time!