

## Somewhere Over the Rainbow

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*<sup>1</sup>

Charles Trumbull

Hiromi Inoue, in his *kiyose* (structured list of *kigo*),<sup>2</sup> and Gabi Greve of the online *World Kigo Database*<sup>3</sup> 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 niiji 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 senses 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 C. Trumbull, unpublished*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 niiji* (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 niiji 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)<sup>4</sup>*

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 niji 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 niji*

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 niji*

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 niji*

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,<sup>5</sup> 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)*

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(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](mailto: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.