Haunted Haiku

by Bonnie Stepenoff

> *"I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men. It is a sound admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized."*
> —Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*

> *"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream."*
> —Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

While grounding their work in nature, the seasons, and sensory experience,[1] haiku writers have occasionally ventured into areas that some readers might consider paranormal. In this essay, I will focus on a selection of haiku that stretch the limits of the senses, exploring non-material connections between the present and the past, humans and other living things, the earth and the universe. With heartfelt respect, I call them "haunted haiku."

In the late seventeenth century, Matsuo Bashō visited many temples and historic sites, keeping journals of his travels. The following haiku has been widely quoted:

summer grasses . . .
traces of dreams
of ancient warriors[2]

On a warm day, in an open field, the poet envisions a long-ago battle. In an invisible but somehow perceptible way, this historic event has left a mark on the landscape. The soldiers who fought there were young men, filled with dreams, and Bashō expresses a sympathetic connection with these long-dead men—their youth, their struggles, and their hopes.

Tan Taigi, an eighteenth-century poet, specifically and spookily mentions disembodied spirits in this haiku:

It lightens and thunders!
From sunken ships,
The voices of the ghosts.

Discussing this poem, in his *History of Haiku*, R. H. Blyth explains that sailors of this time period believed in hauntings, in which a ghost would call out, "Give me a dipper!" The master of the ship would respond by throwing a bottomless dipper into the sea. If he failed to do so, the ghost would scoop water into the ship and sink it.[3]

The past can come back in unsettling ways. In this twentieth-century haiku by Rod Willmot, there is a strong suggestion of ghostly visitation:

the mirror fogs,
a name written long ago
faintly reappears[4]

The poet leaves many things unsaid. Whose handwriting is this? How did it materialize? Does the name belong to a friend, a loved one, a child? Is it a person who has died or someone who has simply gone away and might come back? The poem conveys a feeling of loss and a disquieting sense of uncertainty.

Yosa Buson, writing in the eighteenth century, broached the question of life after death:

Only after the peony
Had scattered and fallen
Did it stand there in its glory.

Blyth describes this as "a most remarkable verse." The poet, gazing at the remains of a flower, sees not the faded ruin but the perfect and unblemished bloom. As Blyth observes, when the flower is gone, it can finally become "its eternal self."[5]

A similar perception informs this poem by Garry Gay:

Navajo moon
the coyote call
not a coyote[6]

Anyone who has ever heard a coyote wailing in the night knows how sad and other-worldly the sound of its voice can be. The call seems to have an existence of its own, separate from the unimpressive animal you might see in the daytime. The coyote, in the poet's mind, becomes something other than what it is, something like "its eternal self."

This recently published poem by Meera Rehm suggests that there is a separate existence apart from the body:

flowering garden
she shows me
an empty cocoon[7]

The springtime setting suggests renewal and rebirth, while the "empty cocoon" reminds us of mortality. There has been a kind of death, but in fact, we know that what has really occurred is a transformation. Something beautiful has emerged from this hollowed-out shell.

Nicholas Virgilio, who flourished as a haiku poet in the 1960s, has given us this startling tribute to life and its renewal:

the incoming tide:
a tiny crab emerges
from a deep footprint[8]

The tide sets the scene. It would be no surprise to see ocean animals washed up on a beach. But the crab rises up from a mysterious footprint. Who made that mark in the sand? Where did that person go? From where did that crab really come?

Richard Wright, the novelist and author of thousands of haiku, finds a spiritual connection between human life and the natural world. He expresses it poignantly in this poem:

> Why did this spring wood
> Grow so silent when I came?
> What was happening?

Yoshinobu Hakutani, a student of Wright's haiku, suggests that this is a dialog between the poet and the forest. The natural world seems to be responding to a human presence. Wright wants to know why the wood is so silent. The answer, according to Hakutani, is that silence is a human virtue. Perhaps the silence comes from inside the poet, rather than from the wood. However, in many ways, the "spring wood" and its sudden silence remain a mystery, and the answer is just another question.[9]

Similar reflections arise from this poem by Shirao, a poet of Buson's time:

> At night
> In the dark garden,
> How quiet the peony!

Blyth observes that this poem "gives perhaps slightly a sinister meaning to the great flower." From Buson we have learned that the peony does not become fully itself until it dies. In Shirao's "dark garden," the flower keeps silent. Is it hiding something from us? What could it be?[10]

Wallace Stevens, closely observing nature, finds that it leads to many mysteries. His well-known sequence of poems, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," includes this remarkable haiku:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.[11]

In these lines, the poet admits that he cannot follow the bird to wherever it is going. The point at which the blackbird disappears marks an ending and a beginning, the edge of a circle, connected to many other circles, expanding outward into the universe.

The sense of mystery appears also in the following poem by John Tagliabue:

A child looking at
    ants; an elephant looking
        at universes.[12]

The fascinating aspect of this haiku is the contrast between things that are very small and things that are very large. In either case, there is the sense of awe, in the child finding something smaller than himself, and in the elephant finding something vast.

There is a profound strangeness in this poem by Gary Hotham:

rightsizing
the universe
drifting cherry blossoms[13]

In the context of the universe, the cherry blossoms are infinitely tiny, and they have an ethereal quality. They seem almost unreal, and yet they feel the tug of gravity.

This poem by Hilary Tann weaves mystery into a simple human activity:

evening walk spirits of former dogs[14]

The mood is one of loneliness, placing this one-line poem squarely in the classical tradition of haiku. But the poet, taking an evening walk, is not alone. Accompanying her are pets she has loved and continues to cherish. The emotion here is strengthened by the sparing use of words.

In this haunting poem, Billie Wilson discloses an equally deep connection with a pet that has died:

midnight sun
the dog's presence everywhere
he used to be[15]

The opening line conveys a sense of wonder and mystery. In the second line, the word "presence" carries enormous weight. The dog is here, now, not just in memory, but in the physical world, and not only here, but "everywhere."

The possibility of an enduring spiritual presence finds eloquent expression in a poem by Kobayashi Issa. He composed this haiku at the gravesite of an earlier poet named Bako:

Look! this lonely grave,
With the wren
That is always here.

Issa, who produced a large body of work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, had a great love for small creatures, including insects and birds. When he observed this wren at the burial place, he sensed that the bird, or the essence of the bird, would be there always as a source of comfort to the poet who had been laid to rest.[16]

Poems like these can evoke not only impressions of strangeness and awe but also a feeling of joy. This brief haiku by Raymond Roseliep combines a suggestion of the paranormal with a sense of whimsy:

flea . . .
that you,
Issa?[17]

Issa wrote many haiku about insects, including fleas. Roseliep, a prominent twentieth-century poet, recalls that fact in a brief encounter with Issa in spirit, proving in a humorous way that haiku, including this last one that follows, draw inspiration from many different sources:

the hoot-owl
the way he yammered all night
to Thoreau.[18]

Works Cited:

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4. *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, edited by Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 48.
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14. *Dust Devils: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku 2016*, edited by Jim Kacian (Winchester, Virginia: Red Moon Press, 2017), 81.
15. *Modern Haiku* 52.3 (Autumn 2021), 106.
16. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku IV: Autumn/Winter* (Brooklyn, New York: Angelico Press, Ltd., 2021), 342–343; British Museum Haiku, 86.

17. *Haiku in English*, 73.
18. "the hoot-owl," previously unpublished haiku by Bonnie Stepenoff.

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