

# Haikuology, for Kara, after Sonia Sanchez

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## Abstract

Beginning with an autoethnographic reflection on my sister's obsession with writing haiku toward the end of her long struggle with cancer, this essay falls into a wider world of illness and confinement, death and grief, moving from the COVID-19 pandemic to the haiku practices of two modern innovators of the form, Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) and Richard Wright (1908–1960). As a mixed genre piece interweaving prose and poetry, it draws upon Renato Rosaldo's examination of culture, emotion, and rituals of bereavement, as well as his development of *antropoesía* as a form of ethnographic attention to emotional force. Survival, as the organizing principal of campaigns such as the War on Cancer, conditions us to privilege individuated cure and protection, with the body defended by promissory regimes of science and security. How do survivors of those lost to untimely death account for the harm this discourse simultaneously produces? The haiku moment—declarative and fleeting—sketches a map across time and place, of struggle and loss, intimate and global. Dwelling in the details of its reparative terrain provides connection to the joy and pain of yearning to be of the world, in spite of and because of the ways it tears us apart.

## KEYWORDS

*antropoesía*, grief, illness, ritual, survival

Sometimes the prospect of a sentence ending, its syntax running toward full stop, prompts silence instead. Months into an unproven prognosis of 1 year left to live, my sister signed up for a class called “Writing Your Way to Wellness.” The brightness of that promise, its florescent light flickering on white hospital walls, still makes me catch my breath. But all conventional cures having failed her, Kara was game.

Of all the instructor's prompts, what stuck was haiku. The idea of keeping a journal seemed possible to her, as it never had before, if all she had to do was write 17 syllables a day. As illness compressed time

and restricted movement, as the four walls of her bedroom closed in, she hit her stride within the limits of the form.

Desperate for any bridge across the chasm yawning open between us, of how far into the future we could imagine, I suggested we exchange haiku.

It was February. The days were short and cold, when we began in earnest, half a continent between us. I paced the gravel pathways of a grey city park, up and around the old concrete reservoir and back again, tapping my fingers one by one, inside a mitten, against my thigh. Back at my desk I typed three benign lines and hit send.

icicle flowers  
ring the fountain's snow white rim  
water springs beneath

She responded the next morning from the computer set up on the landing at the top of the stairs, just outside her bedroom door: "So funny ... I just sat down to write an email with my haiku to you. This first one is my excuse for not being more prompt."

been sick, out from work  
happy it's not the cancer  
just nasty yellow phlegm

While I clung to the themes of nature and seasonal change that make up the traditional canon of haiku, Kara went straight to the heart of the matter, of what had brought us together in our beginners' attempt at what Sonia Sanchez calls "this tough form disguised in beauty and insight" (2010: xiv).

Kara, an athlete by training, stroked the ice, schussed the snow, ran the miles now in breaths beat out one syllable at a time. I, an ethnographer by training, stilled the compulsion to fill notebooks with thick description of cancer's sociality. We pared life down to one line at a time, each a promise, for just one more.

Before that, during the months, then years, after her initial diagnosis, I'd written erratically. Like the atypical carcinoid in her left lung, tendriling around the aorta, its cells spreading with slow and unexpected stealth to distant sites. I wrote in what I came to think of as my cancer journal once removed, a few paltry pages here and there, sometimes skipping whole years. I forgot dates, I forgot facts, I forgot names, I forgot when tv trauma started to sedate, I forgot when her humor turned hangman, I forgot when I stopped remembering.

As I wrote or didn't write through the 6 years that Kara was living with the prospect of dying, I learned from her toward the end a form of correspondence, of belonging in the shared practice of counting, meditation, and making do. Haiku's three-line form required only short moments of focus, and the puzzle-like five-seven-five syllable count was perfect for a boggle-scrabble-sudoku master like my sister. Her subject line announced, "can't sleep—gone haiku crazy!" While taking a medication with the side effect of sleeplessness, she sometimes stayed up all night. In the morning, I would find dozens of new poems—tiny blasts of anger, humor, pain, and love—in my inbox. I struggled to keep up, sending back mine in exchange for hers. We traded litanies of pharmaceutical peril, televised escape, childhood joy, and brightly colored games of skill and chance.

drugs yuck I hate them  
sutent, temodar, keppra  
dexamethasone

but wait there are more  
kytril, zofran, marinol  
and VP-16

no more morphine no  
hate the nightmare dreams it brings  
no percocet either

*oprah oh oprah  
ellen ricki dr. phil  
regis and kelly*

*so who wants to be  
our next top reality  
star search survivor*

*you're my monk my house  
my crime scene cold case closer  
and law and order*

*etch-a-sketch lite-brite  
chutes and ladders candyland  
monopoly life*

spring days carefree sun  
shortcuts through neighbors' yards long  
for our kid days past

These simple, ordered lines helped us communicate what had become almost unspeakable. They cut to the quick. They provided respite along the way toward an uncertain end.

In her final fall before the hard, erratic winter and spring months to come, Kara threw herself an epic 36th birthday party. She wrote a haiku for every friend and family member invited. In return, as their tickets for admission, they each wrote one for her.

While she haiku party planned, I edited poems from our exchange. I divided them into four folios, formatted so that each could be printed on a single sheet of paper. I folded the sheets in half and half again, forming signatures that I then collated and sewed together into a tiny book. We titled it *Clasping the Wishbone*, after a 17-syllable memory of the holiday ritual, carved by our father from the turkey's breast. We faced off with secret wishes and pulled to see who would be left holding the bigger piece of bone.

At the entrance to Kara's send-off party—although only she really allowed that's what it was—each guest received the haiku she'd written for them, accompanied by a palm-sized book with a wishbone on the cover.

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Her death left me bereft. And angry. I was angry at the doctor who hadn't shown up to her final appointment, and at the assistant who appeared instead to describe further treatment options, the futility of which were clear. I was angry at the friend who ran from her apartment, too shocked by Kara's changed appearance to say goodbye. I was angry at the other who asked us, not long after her death, for a family recipe to include in a cancer cookbook fundraiser. I was angry at the suggestion that anger was a stage to work through. I was angry at the imprecision of language, at everything I hadn't been able to and couldn't yet express. I was angry that I'd ended up with the winning splinter of bone. That wasn't what I'd wished for.

This gut rage is what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo describes as emotional force, the feelings one experiences upon learning that the person who has just died is *your* person: your sibling, your child, your lover, your friend. As he explains in "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," the agony after his wife Shelly fell

from a cliff to her death, during fieldwork in the Philippines, enabled him to understand anew simple statements made years earlier by older men in northern Luzon about the cultural practice of headhunting, in a time before the state threatened to make it punishable by firing squad: that the act of severing and tossing away the victim's head helped them to throw away the anger of bereavement (2014: 117). While grief may be a shared human condition, the ways we grieve, in terms of ritual and the intense emotion that often exceeds it, are not.

While my rage was clear and specific, I had no acceptable way to vent it. The oncologist in question had worked long and hard, with and for Kara, to extend her life. Nothing in that one friend's relatively untroubled experience had prepared her to face a dying peer in the silence of her final days. The other poured love for a brother diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma into collecting recipes.

It was this excess of emotional force that eventually compelled me to toss away what I understood of survival, to turn the goal of survival on its head by examining the harm it simultaneously produces. As the organizing principal of the War on Cancer, survival has conditioned us to privilege individuated cure and protection, the body defended by promissory regimes of science and security. It has left us with an impoverished language for the everyday carcinogenic relations in which we live: the entanglement of medical and military R&D as the inheritance of imperialism, industrial production of toxic landscapes, pharmaceutical profit generation, and inequitable access to care. It has cut us off from other ways of flourishing, the collective critique and stories of those whose lives don't conform to a Cancer Moonshot script.

In coming to knowledge through anger, I also came to recognize this: in the absence of anyone to guide us through those hard, erratic months, Kara and I inadvertently made haiku our improvised ritual for finding language and taking care. It became everyday, processual, obligatory—everyone had to write one to get into the party. One might call it a version of *antropoesía*, Rosaldo's term for verse with an ethnographic sensibility (2014: 105–6). The spareness, not the thickness, of haiku distills description. It pulls us out of dense symbolic forests; it slows us down to focus closely on the *where*, the *when*, and the *what*. Its deceptively tough form channels, breath by breath, the ache.

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Almost exactly 12 years after Kara's death, at the height of COVID-19 lockdowns, a friend shared an essay by Christopher Benfey, “Richard Wright, Masaoka Shiki, and the Haiku of Confinement.” He writes that contrary to the common association of haiku with the legacy of seventeenth-century master Matsuo Bashō and his poem-journeys of nature observed from the open road, “some of the most moving haiku of the past century or so were written under conditions all too familiar to us at this present pandemic moment: illness, confinement, loneliness, and pervasive fear” (2020).

The friend who connected these dots was not just any friend, but the one who once sat with me and my mother at my dining room table in the dwindling light of a November day, as we methodically folded hundreds of sheets of yellow paper, pulled lengths of linen thread through a block of wax, and stitched signature after signature into tiny haiku books. A writer and a book artist, she was the one who taught me the half knot, kettle stitch, and dead knot of the stab binding we used. Now, in the video rectangle of a Zoom call, she turned to her bookshelf, retrieved a small handmade book, and brought it toward the computer camera until its yellow cover filled her screen.<sup>1</sup>

I had packed my copy away years before, so the sight of it wouldn't catch me off guard. That small object still had the power to unleash a flood of emotion. But here I was confronted with renewed appreciation for my sister's lay grasp of the thing—haiku's balance of living and dying—that would guide her through, as it had others before.

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Masaoka Shiki was born in 1867 in Matsuyama, a town on the island of Shikoku, 1 year before the Meiji Restoration ushered Japan into the modern era. The symbolic return of the Emperor Meiji to

the throne ended centuries of feudal shōgunate rule, under which Western powers, beginning with the US Navy in 1853, had forced Japan to sign unequal treaties. Sweeping political and economic reform, aimed at regaining control over foreign trade, shifted the country toward parliamentary government and rapid industrialization. Shiki's short literary career unfolded against this backdrop of sweeping social change. By the time of his death from tuberculosis at 34, he would be known as the modernizer of haiku.

His father, a low-ranking samurai, had lost his fixed income under the new Meiji order. An alcoholic with a mercurial temper, he was dead by the time Shiki turned five. His mother took in sewing to support the family, while his grandfather taught him Confucian classics. As a teenager, Shiki earned a scholarship to a government-run middle school in Tokyo, although a passion for poetry eventually eclipsed his formal studies. In his final attempt as a university student to review for exams, he cleared all stray papers and poetry notebooks from his desk. And yet haiku after haiku still sprang to mind. With nowhere to write them down, he covered his lampshade with verse. In a letter to a friend, Shiki included the following haiku on having failed out:

in the coolness  
of the empty sixth-month sky ...  
the cuckoo's cry<sup>2</sup>

He laughed at the time that it resembled a deathbed poem. The cuckoo had already become his symbolic namesake, as the setting sun would become Richard Wright's in his haiku. Only a few years before, when he'd first coughed up blood, he adopted the pen name Shiki, the Sino-Japanese pronunciation of *hototogisu*, a bird that in legend coughs blood as it sings. By 1897, *Hototogisu* would be the title of the leading magazine for new haiku as advocated by Shiki.

Through a comprehensive historical review of Japan's haiku tradition, Shiki declared it dead, having devolved into frivolous popular amusement. Amateurs who paid old-style masters for their hackneyed teachings further stilted the form through uninspired emulation of predecessors like Bashō. Shiki drew instead on the Western art practice of “sketching from life” to argue that haiku should do the same, through closely observed scenes of contemporary reality, heightened by imagination. Once a prolific essayist, the progression of spinal tuberculosis bent him toward the short forms of haiku and tanka. The titles of his three final diaries—*A Drop of Ink*, *Supine Notes*, and *A Six-Foot Sickbed*—capture the restricted parameters of his last 6 years of life, when he was almost completely bedridden and in increasingly unbearable pain. His mother and sister Ritsu attended to all his bodily needs, cleaning his festering sores and administering morphine.

old garden—she empties  
a hot-water bottle  
under the moon

In his observation of their labors to care for him—water pouring from a limp rubber vessel—*she* remains in service to his poetic need for a reflective surface on which to cast the moon's eternal light. As Shiki measures his distance from the life that could only be glimpsed through his window, he exudes both joy at the sight of snow and anguish over a fleeting summer night.

snow's falling!  
I see it through a hole  
in the shutter ...  
  
how much longer  
is my life?  
a brief night ...

On the September day of his death in 1902, friends gathered by his side. Ritsu prepared his ink. She held his writing board for him. Choking on phlegm, unable to speak, Shiki wrote out three final haiku, in which the dead man metaphorized as sponge gourd blooms: “See the Buddha.” This is where his story usually ends, with a hagiographic note on how he changed the nature and future of haiku. Even children in the United States now routinely learn the form.

I want to end by asking about Shiki's sister. While he acknowledges in *Supine Notes* that she served as nurse, kitchen maid, household manager, and secretary to him, that life without her would be impossible, he also excoriates her as obstinate and indifferent. He is incredulous at the hours she spends communing with a canary instead of him. He writes, “Ritsu is a heartless woman. She's a woman without sympathy or compassion, a woman made of wood or maybe stone” (Keene 2013: 181). Did his near loathing stem from a resentment that she would live beyond his literary ambitions cut short? I write *this* haiku to remember the depth of Ritsu's barely visible daily labors, which included absorbing, without a word, her brother's anger:

bloody cuckoo cry  
thin handkerchiefs spotted red  
soak in my wash tub

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Almost 60 years later, in the summer of 1959, a young South African friend introduced Richard Wright to haiku. In the months to follow, which would turn out to be his last, he wrote more than 4000. The son of a sharecropper and a schoolteacher, Wright had grown up in the Jim Crow South of Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. He honed his literary and leftist political pursuits in Memphis, Chicago, and New York. With the publication of his novel *Native Son* in 1940 and memoir *Black Boy* in 1945, he rose to international recognition for his uncompromising depictions of Black life generated amid white fear and violence. By the time he took up haiku, he had lived in exile in France for over a decade. The FBI hunt for links between African American cultural figures and communist politics placed Wright under government surveillance before and after his permanent departure from the United States in 1946.

Wright traveled in 1953 from his home base in Paris to the Gold Coast, the British colony that would become Ghana 4 years later. He documented his six-week journey in *Black Power*, an autobiographical travelogue published the following year. In it, he documents the trauma wrought by Western colonial exploitation and traces the rise of Kwame Nkrumah, future first president of Ghana. In 1955, he attended the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, where leaders from 29 newly independent nations met to discuss cooperative ways of countering the legacy of racism and colonialism, as well as the mounting influence of Cold War superpowers. Wright was driven to participate not in alignment with any nation-state, but as an advocate of global Black solidarity under the banner of pan-Africanism. In his report *The Color Curtain*, he recounts that upon first learning of the conference, he exclaimed aloud, “But this is the human race speaking” (2008: 15). His critique of US policy in Asia and Africa continued until the end of his life, as he lay bedridden with amebic dysentery, probably contracted during his trip to the Gold Coast. It was then, ailing and exhausted by financial and political pressures, that he turned to haiku.

An empty sickbed:  
An indented white pillow  
In weak winter sun.<sup>3</sup>

His daughter Julia remembers that during his final months, in the summer and fall of 1960, he was never without his haiku binder: “He wrote them everywhere, at all hours: in bed as he slowly recovered from a year-long, grueling battle against dysentery; in cafes and restaurants where he counted syllables on napkins; in the country in a writing community owned by French friends, *Le Moulin*

*d'Andé*" (Wright 2012a: vii). Even as his haiku dilate down to the wail of sirens, hospital lights winking out, a butterfly on the screen of a crowded movie theater, and furniture outside a brick tenement in snowfall, they also always circle back to crows and geese, magnolia and wisteria, buzzing bees and June bugs.

Dazzling summer sun!  
But the smell of the past comes  
With rain upon the dust.

These closely observed details may stem from the Normandy farm he and his family used as a retreat, where Wright liked to work in the garden. But delight in the abundance of nature—"...the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths..."—also shimmers throughout *Black Boy* (1998: 7). Not long before Wright took up haiku writing, his mother, from whom he'd been separated by exile, died. His daughter recalls that after receiving the news by telegram, he never spoke of the loss again. But she interprets the cycling seasons in his haiku as a return to his boyhood in the American South: "...these haiku not only helped him place the volcanic experience of mourning under the self-control of closely counted syllables, but also enabled him to come to terms with the difficult beauty of the earth in which his mother would be laid to rest" (2012a: xi).

A slow autumn rain:  
The sad eyes of my mother  
Fill a lonely night.

In the falling snow  
A laughing boy holds out his palms  
Until they are white.

Richard Wright died in Paris of a heart attack in November 1960, at the age of 52.

The darting fire-flies  
Are dragging the river along  
To where the sun went down.

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Sometimes a sentence is too much and not enough, especially when you are just trying to catch your breath. In my return to those days by Kara's bedside, as language fell away, a haiku journey, opening as it did during a period of worldwide confinement, unexpectedly moved me through distant scenes of death and grief. It attuned me to the haiku moment—declarative *and* fleeting—and sketched a map across time and place, of struggle and loss, intimate and global, 17 syllables at a time. Dwelling in the details of its reparative terrain provides connection to the joy and pain of yearning to be of the world, in spite of and because of the ways it tears us apart.

I see now in my beginner's attempts, in all those lists of things that help bide the time—drugs, tv shows, boardgames—a tendency toward *senryu* or "mock haiku." Its anxious humor, pointing out the incongruity of things, appeals more to logic than intuition. I also hear Kara now, the shift she makes as she responds with a longing that runs one line over into the next.

Herein lies the possibility of having words and their particular angle on the world returned to us anew, by those who are no longer able to speak, by those who are left holding the writing board, the haiku binder, the splinter of bone. As we mete them out, the deaths out of time, like stones from our

pockets, stones in our mouths, one at a time, to lay a path that returns us to an earth in need of repair. To heal in haiku requires paying attention to what's here, listening to who is and is not heard, guarding memory in the shifting light of another life.

does the whole city  
thunder struck ICU  
fall dark at once?

spiky brown seedpods  
raining from the old sweetgum  
punctuate the ground

a tuft of silken  
fur snagged on barbed wire  
quivers in spring sun

fake flower leis hang  
from sterile fan blades above  
spinning summer out

caressing the silence  
a single finger at dusk  
dances from the sheets

our dreams hum the night  
short dark and deep, loamy earth  
breathing soft and low

in the moonlit pool  
a small frog floats next to me  
we see eye to eye

it's July again  
the month of your departure  
and lightening bugs

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Wendy Call for her meticulous stitching—of pages, poems, and emotions.

<sup>2</sup> The details of Shiki's biography and all poem translations are from Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works* (2001: 16, 63, 65, 72).

<sup>3</sup> The poems included are numbers 425, 306, 565, 31, and 242, respectively, in Wright, *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon* (2012b: 107, 77, 142, 8, 61).

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