

## the heart of a haiku

a space for a little poem  
to weave its magic!

part 4  
the cut-marker:  
*kireji*

I explained the importance of the ‘cut’, the *kire*, last Monday. The Japanese language has certain specific words like *ya*, *kana*, *keri* or *nari* to show this cut in haiku. When writing in English or in any of our regional languages, we need to use punctuation called the ‘cut-marker’ in place of such words.

Why the punctuation is called the ‘cut-marker’ and why is the *kireji* so widely used in haiku:

Punctuation shows the reader where the ‘cut’ occurs ... and the cut (as was explained earlier) is important for the juxtaposition, for marking the parts of the haiku resonate with one another to produce a new whole, a new meaning that gives completeness to the poem.

The cut-marker is known as *kireji*, and people sometimes feel it’s just punctuation – but no, it’s much more than that – if *kire* can be considered the soul in a haiku, then the *kireji*, which so closely abets the *kire*, can be considered the heart that encloses the soul ... if I can be a bit dramatic!

Without the punctuation, some readers would create their own pause. But many don’t, especially new swimmers in the haiku stream. So to make things clear for all, including punctuation is a valuable tool.

To explain *kireji* more technically, we can say it’s actually a sound (and word) in Japanese, as indicated by the ending “-ji” which means letter, mark, or word. A sounded grapheme in Japanese, the “-ji” is indicated by punctuation in English and other languages.

It might surprise you to know that punctuation is kept to a minimum in haiku, and is used as a highly nuanced tool. Haiku needs clarity, so if an idea or an image has to be conveyed to your reader in a few words, then that pause you show by adding punctuation should help the reader to get the meaning instantaneously. Nothing in haiku is cosmetic!

The various kinds of punctuation most often used in haiku are: ... (ellipsis); - (en dash); — (em-dash); : (colon); and in rare cases :: (double colon.) And of course some haiku are written without punctuation!

The ellipsis indicates a quiet pause and also suggests the passage of time.

starlit sky ...  
I touch a turtle before  
it enters the sea

— K. Ramesh

the fallen  
and the falling leaves ...  
ten years of war

— Karma Tenzing Wangchuk

ancient banyan ...  
an owl shakes the night  
off its feathers

— Anitha Varma

An en-dash ‘–’ is just there to show your reader the cut and actually does little beyond that! In some cases it shows a clear pause as in Lary’s ku below.

spring equinox –  
the toilet paper roll  
off-center

— Laryalee (Lary) Fraser

An em-dash ‘—’ is an emphatic dash and shows an effective pause, and this stronger break helps in creating the juxtaposition so important in haiku.

turbulent mist —  
all that is to become  
lost in becoming

— Hansha Teki

campfire sparks —  
someone outside the circle  
starts another song

— Billie Wilson

waiting for me  
to give it life —  
my death poem

— Karma Tenzing Wangchuk

thunderclap —  
the sleeping new born  
throws up her arms

— Chitra Rajappa

Please note: the *kireji* (cut-marker) is only a marker to indicate the cut, which should be intrinsic to the haiku. Without the cut (the *kire*), if you just add the *kireji*, it is merely cosmetic – something superficial, adding no value to your haiku.

The colon is not as popular as it was a decade back. What does it do? It gives the reader a peep into what comes next.

winter loneliness:  
the sofa she vacates  
holds her shape

— Kala Ramesh

Exclamation points are rarely used, but there are exceptions to all rules. Here is a beauty from Michael McClintock.

a poppy ...  
a field of poppies!  
the hills blowing with poppies!

— Michael McClintock

Some poets have mastered the art of ‘no punctuation;’ the mind can still read the pause because the kire is strong.

temple path  
the dust i kick up  
sticks to me

— ed markowski

a barking dog  
little bits of night  
breaking off

— Jane Reichhold

passport check  
my shadow waits  
across the border

— George Swede

And in some instances a weak kire allows the reader to create a break in different places, leading to interesting interpretations.

awakened  
by moonlight  
an old regret

— Bill Kenney

the river  
the river makes  
of the moon

— jim kacian

between the sky  
and the spin of the earth  
this falling leaf

— Laryalee (Lary) Fraser

A mid-line caesura: This is done using the same juxtaposition between images, as explained before — not too close or too far. Line 3 gives a surprise or a ‘aha’ moment as many haiku poets love to say!

wading through  
leaves ... with each step  
the thoughts

— Kala Ramesh

Then there is an interesting form of punctuation, rarely used — but after I encountered it I was hooked!

Grant Hackett writes: (in *Roadrunner* Feb 2009)

I began writing the one line poem about a year and a half ago—the day I found the double colon. The double colon is there to create an unweighted pause. A pause in the breath, a pause in thought. A pause that is different than the weighted or directional relationship our standard punctuation indicates. And that is also different than a hard line break. The two sides of the thought-pause may exist in harmony or in ambiguity. At the moment of the pause there may be peace or there may be tension. The thought-pause is a poetic tool, a poetic device, used poetically.

to the terrace  
whistling :: breathless  
the milky way

— Kala Ramesh

a breathtaking view now a dot :: on the map

— Kala Ramesh

We use punctuation very sparingly in haiku . . . why? My contention is that it detracts from how the reader can interpret the poem. It becomes a recipe demanding that the reader should pause here or there, show surprise when an exclamation is given, and so on. I could be wrong.

Punctuation, like many things in life, is actually very personal, and as we read more and more haiku we come to understand that it's a poet's preference more than a rule. Read your ku out aloud and see where you pause and how you carry it forward – then decide whether you want punctuation or not. I go through phases when I use no punctuation.

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starlit sky *The Heron's Nest VI.5*

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turbulent mist: *An Autumn Testament*

campfire sparks: *The Heron's Nest XII:2.*

waiting for me: *Parnassus Literary Journal Spring 1999*

winter loneliness: *Bottle Rockets #15 Autumn 2006*

a poppy: *Haiku Magazine 5.1*

barking dog: *From the Dipper. . . Drops, Humidity Productions 1983*

passport check: *Cicada 1978*

awakened: *The Heron's Nest V.15*

the river: *Ant Ant Ant Ant Ant 5*

between the sky: *Mainichi Daily News, November 2006*

wading through leaves: *Simply Haiku - Autumn 2009, vol 7 no 3*

to the terrace: *Presence Haiku Journal – Issue # 42 - September 2010*

a breathtaking view: *Frogpond 32.2 Summer issue, 2009*