

# FORMS AND FORMATS: ANCIENT AND NEW

Poetic forms and formats are constantly evolving and being re-invented to meet the needs of new generations and distant cultures. The People's Poetry Gathering explores the ways in which traditional poetry duels and contests from around the globe influence emerging formats for the enjoyment of poetry — and the ways in which a single ancient form is revisited, revised and adapted.

A discussion of African American poetry explores the deliberate reinvention of haiku to serve the needs of a new generation, while Head-to-Head Haiku demonstrates a new use of the ancient form in a competition derived from the slam. The Heavyweight Poetry Bout is an alternative new form, while the renga party turns the whole concept of competition on its head by emphasizing collaboration in literary composition.

## Renga Party

— Dee Evetts

A favorite event at the first People's Poetry Gathering, the Renga Party is a uniquely cooperative literary adventure based on an ancient Japanese tradition. *Renga* (also known as *renku*) is a poetic form several centuries older than its descendant, *haiku*. More than a thousand years ago, Japanese poets competed against each other in writing short poems called *tanka*. After the competition, the poets relaxed by writing collaborative pieces, which became known as *renga*. Some *renga* had as many as a thousand verses, although a hundred was the usual length. The renowned poet Matsuo Basho (1644 – 1694) popularized the thirty-six stanza *renga* common today.

At a typical *renga* session or party, a number of poets gather in groups of five or six under the guidance of an experienced *renga* poet. They take turns writing short stanzas, each of which links in some way with the preceding stanza. The first six *renga* are generally serious. Traditionally, the sake begins to flow after the sixth verse. Themes of human comedy, love, and calamity are all a part of the goal, usually together with references to the seasons and other cycles of the natural world.



Audience members holding up the scores at a teen slam at the 1999 Gathering

## Heavyweight Poetry Bout

The Taos World Heavyweight Poetry Bout was inspired by an event at the Oxford Pub in Chicago in 1981. A blues singer, Jim Desmond, became angered when poet Jerome Sala read a poem that parodied John Lennon, who had just died. The two got into a fistfight but eventually agreed to settle the dispute with a competitive reading.

In New Mexico, Annie MacNaughton and Peter Rabbit, two poets with roots in the communes of the 1960s, heard about the bout and thought it would be a good way to drum up a poetry scene in Taos. They started the Taos Poetry Circus and the Heavyweight Poetry Bout, the rules of which are adapted from the official rules of the Illinois Boxing Commission. Each fight has ten rounds; in each round, each of the two poets reads a poem lasting no longer than five minutes; in the tenth round, poets improvise a poem on a theme drawn from a hat.



Head-to-Head Haiku at the 1999 Gathering

## Head-to-Head Haiku Competition

— Daniel Ferri

Head-to-Head Haiku is a fast-moving and surprisingly quiet poetry competition. It focuses the readers and listeners through its rhythm of short spoken poems and the immediate feedback from the judges. It is much like a duel between a baseball pitcher and batter, with complex turns of art and skill between the contestants.

Head-to-Head Haiku began as an event at the Sunday night slam at the Green Mill Lounge in Chicago. Poet Daniel Ferri has hosted this event at the National Poetry Slam Tournament every year since 1995. The event begins as a joke, with hokey costumes and Headmaster schtick. But about half way through the competition, there is less laughing and more listening. By the final round the audience is leaning forward and hanging on each syllable.

In any round of Head-to-Head Haiku there are two haikusters, three judges, and a Head-to-Headmaster. One haikuster wears a red headband; the other haikuster wears a not-red headband. Each judge has two flags: a red flag and a not-red flag. First, the red haikuster reads, then the not-red haikuster has ten seconds to begin her and or his answering haiku. The judges then signal that they are ready to vote their preferences. They simultaneously hold up the flags of the haikuster whose poem they preferred. Two out of three wins a round. In preliminary rounds, 3 out of 5 rounds wins a match. In the finals, 9 out of 17 wins.

The Head-to-Headmaster wears a carpenter's nail belt with two pockets. In one pocket are wooden balls with holes drilled through their centers. The nail belt is red on one side, and not-red on the other. In the red pocket are red balls. In the not-red pocket are not-red balls. Sticking out of the Head-to-Headmaster's belt is a piece of wood with two dowels sticking up from it. Whenever a haikuster wins a round, the Head-to-Headmaster places a wooden ball of that haikuster's color on the appropriate dowel, so that the score is visible.

If we lived in a perfect world, there would be no difference between winning and not-winning. But since we don't, it is traditional for the champion to be awarded \$17, one for each syllable of the ancient and venerated poetry form he and or she has just eviscerated.

tick-tick  
of late night sleet —  
dog licking its paws

— Lenard D. Moore

## African American Haiku

During the last eighteen months of his life, exiled, mourning and in failing health, Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, turned to the traditional seventeen-syllable form of Japanese haiku. Disciplined and steeped in beauty, Wright's haiku conformed to the ancient tradition of linking the seasons of the soul to nature and its cycles. Through it he transcended, (though never abandoned or denied) the particularities of race and culture to address the relationship between the human and the natural worlds.

In recent years, African Americans have been adapting the form to speak urgently of their experience. Through these short, even staccato, visually precise poems, a new literature is being invented, one which seeks neither to transcend nor universalize experience but instead insists on the universal significance of the individual (and African American) perspective. So, for instance, Lenard Moore, writes:

night heat  
the blown-off arm  
still in fatigues

and

warm burst of rain-  
a woman marine at daybreak  
drawing in the sand