

史蹟
慈蕉庵跡

昭和五十六年十一月五日

真加代後十代公

EXCERPT

Renga

From *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*

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A Renga is a long, image-filled poem written in alternating stanzas of three lines and two lines, usually by a group of poets who take turns. In Japan, where renga originated as a party game, poets used to make renga of 1,000 or more stanzas, although 100 stanzas was the usual length. The great poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) preferred renga of thirty-six stanzas, and this continues to be the most popular length today.

Both *haiku* and *senryu* come from renga. A good renga combines the images and sensitivity to the natural seasons of haiku with the humor of senryu. Renga do not read like stories; each stanza “links” to the one before it, but not to the one before that. Writing renga allows poets to show off their skills at making images and seeing connections between seemingly unconnected things.

Renga began in Japan about a thousand years ago, where poets gathered for contests in writing the short poems called “tanka.” When the contests were over they relaxed by writing poems together. These poems were like chained tanka, and could involve from two to two hundred poets in writing one poem.

Because writing renga was a game, the results were often thrown away after the game was over. But some poets wrote books of renga rules, including many examples of “hokku” or “starting verses” and of linking one stanza to another. They also talked about the pacing of a

renga from beginning to middle to end.

Starting: The starting verse must include an image that suggests the season and place where the renga is being written.

Linking: There are many ways to connect, or “link” one stanza to another in renga. The most important ways involve writing down an image suggested by an image in the previous stanza, by making either a parallel image, a contrasting image, or a shift in focus onto another aspect of the same image. Other ways to link stanzas include paying attention to the words of the previous stanza, by repeating prominent sounds or by making a pun, or play on words. Finally, one can link a stanza simply by continuing or contrasting with the mood of the stanza before.

Pacing and ending: The first six or eight stanzas of a renga are like the beginning of a party, when people introduce one another, a bit formally. In the middle twenty to twenty-four stanzas the party warms up, with stanzas that include humor and the whole range of human emotions. A renga ends with six or eight stanzas that move quickly through closely related images, with simple, straightforward linking, like the end of the party, when everyone gets ready to go home. Traditionally, the last stanza has an image of springtime, indicating hopefulness and peace.

Sample excerpts from renga: The following groups of stanzas are taken from the beginning, middle, and end of different renga.

First are the opening six stanzas of “Cherry-Strewn Street.” (Note that “cherry-strewn” refers to the petals of cherry blossoms.)

**TADASHI KONDO, KRISTINE YOUNG,
SHERRY RENIKER, ROBERT REED, SACHIKO
KARASAWA, and KAZUYOSHI HIRAO**

bringing home
a friend from afar
the cherry-strewn street

the white cat lazily blinks
the long afternoon

teacher’s pet
cleaning the erasers
after school

thunder clouds
behind new leaves

after a shower
a sunbeam
on the garden stone

running out of the house
trailing the jump rope

New Jersey high school students included the following sequence in one of their renga:

**SUSANNE HOBSON, AMY GINNETT,
KAREN WATSON, BARBARA WATSON**

the corners of her mouth
trembling

the moon moves
the tide shifts
sand sinks into sand

the eclipse
a sliver of the sun

teeth marks in the pie
the dog
gets the rest

dentist’s office
the sound of the drill

the oil well
pumping
in the barren field

And here are the last six verses of “Ripe Cherry”:

**ELIZABETH SEARLE LAMB,
WILLIAM J. HIGGINSON, PENNY HATTER, and
RICHARD BODNER**

autumn haze
only a trickle of water
in the ditch

the adobe has faded
from pink to tan

she peels sunburnt skin
from his shoulders,
leaving white edges

under the bleached white bone
a grub

on the coyote fence
the first morning glory blossom
blue as sky

a single bee hums
in the morning stillness

The best way to get started with renga is to write haiku, then choose one as a starting verse. It also helps to read examples of renga, noticing the connections that link one stanza to another.

Looking back at earlier stanzas can make it hard for you to move away from images that have already been used in the renga, but it may be a good idea, to make sure you do not fall into writing a story or connecting a series of images that fit together too well. The point of renga is to move around. 🌀