haikuKATHA

unfolding the story within



Prakash Thombre

Issue 59 September 2026

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haikuKATHA is the official monthly publication of Triveni Haikai India. It publishes the best in contemporary English-language haiku, senryu, tanka, haibun, tanka-prose, tanka-art, and haiga.

A team of editors assembles each month's issue by selecting poems from the previous month's prompts posted on the Triveni Haikai India website. The magazine is copyrighted by Triveni Haikai India.

**

This 59th issue of haikuKATHA marks the 5th Anniversary of Triveni Haikai India!

To commemorate this occasion, we bring you a thought-provoking essay by Jacek Margolak on a Japanese aesthetic: Mujō.

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Issue 59
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haiku, tanka, tanka-prose,
haiga and tanka-art

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for providing
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for his brilliant ink sketch,

our contributors
for sharing their poems.

Editors' Choice Commentary: by Suraja Menon Roychowdhury
Editor's Choice: tanka by C.X. Turner

between stations
the darkened window
gives me back
the face of someone
who has been loved

C.X. Turner

This beautiful tanka caught my eye as soon as I read it. It is a fine example of a sentence tanka in which the last line brings an extraordinary revelation.

The first phrase "between stations" instantly places the speaker in transit. This moment could have been literal - they caught sight of a face in the darkened window glass, or it could have been an introspective moment in which they had an insight.

The window 'gives me back/ the face of someone / who has been loved' asks the question: whose face is it? The speaker sees someone in the window glass. It is perhaps their own face, or the remembered face of another — through this reflection.

The phrase "who has been loved" may mean:
- The face belongs to someone the speaker once loved.
- The face belongs to someone who was loved by others.
- The speaker recognizes themselves as someone who "has been loved"— a tender, consoling realization, perhaps after loss or loneliness. I like this third interpretation best.

In a transient moment, they are reassured of their worth and history: love has shaped them. The poem captures a gentle consoling event when ordinary travel yields an unexpectedly joyful moment of insight.

boston ivy —
the nail technician suggests
red tips

Alicia Samson

nettles by the path —
welts on the skin
that summer

Artur Zieliński

Father's Day
the same cloud overhead
all the way home

Arvinder Kaur

Rodin sculpture
overthinking
the garden

Barrie Levine

dockside café
cappuccino hearts
with a hint of marriage

Barrie Levine

blackberry stain
the summer
I learned to lie

C.X. Turner

quinoa khichdi —
Ma adds ghee tadka
to my weight-loss journey

Debarati Sen

last snow
toes itching
for grass

Dinah Power

first frost —
the imprint of an apple
in tall grass

Jacek Margolak

closing credits —
popcorn salt
on my fingers

Jacek Margolak

another spring —
the cup mark
on the windowsill

Jacek Margolak

whispering in the dark
over our snoring grandma
cousins

Jennifer Gurney

Onam Sadya
the cat goes vegetarian
for a day

K. Ramesh

saree cradle ...
under a tree
full of nests

K. Ramesh

harvest moon
the sickle still smells
of hay

Kalyanee Arandhara

billowing cloud
passengers on the bus
peeling peanuts

Kanjini Devi



image and ku: Marilyn Ashbaugh

moonlit night
a homemade apple pie
wrapped on the table

Keiko Izawa

petrichor —
the potter's wheel
shapes a lamp

Lakshmi Iyer

longest monsoon ...
mother counts
her undried inner wear

Lakshmi Iyer

setting sun —
a sycamore seed
spins into autumn

Lori Kiefer

burnt-out car
catkins soften
the track

Lorraine Haig

another fuyusame ...
pugmarks intact
on my cement patch

Malabika Mitra

winter haze —
rice kheer simmers
on the mud stove

Mona Bedi

mango season —
our pockets
full of stones

Nalini Shetty

day's end
a cleaning woman empties
the votive tray

paul m.

end of summer
scraping stickers
off the suitcase

Rupa Anand

flower meadow —
the quivering butts
of honey bees

Rupa Anand

mountain trail
a halo
of mosquitoes

Soumya Mukherjee

turning off
mom's life support —
a leaf falls

Souvik Chakraborty

monsoon ...
a millipede explores
our living room

Sumitra Kumar

field of wildflowers
i lose
my hard frown

Vikram Kolmannskog



image and ku: Milan Rajkumar

one-line haiku

the train dog rests her head summer deepens

Alan Summers

one-sided glass the sunflowers losing their orbit

Alan Summers

cat on a ~~hot tin~~ wet balcony

Alfred Booth

peeling the tail end of summer crayfish

Alicia Samson

monsoon clouds it aches before the rain

Disha Upadhyay

scudding clouds
a mayfly changes shadows

Marilyn Ashbaugh

late autumn —
one persimmon
left on the branch
growing softer

Jacek Margolak



image and ku: Milan Rajkumar

hiding the moon
with a sensu ...
how easy to
ignore existence
on a mere whim

Anjali Warhadpande

stained apron
a pocket full of crumbs
in an old cupboard
only the moths
have something to eat

Artur Zieliński

family album
everyone looks younger
than I do
even those
who are no longer alive

Artur Zieliński

the car ride home
is always in silence
until the phone pings
boarded, love you
and we both let out a sigh

Baisali Chatterjee Dutt

boisterous shuffling
of mahjong tiles -
old stories come alive
around the table of four
as the East wind blows

barbara olmtak

between stations
the darkened window
gives me back
the face of someone
who has been loved

C.X. Turner

tanka

late August
blackberries
collecting
a little of everyone
who passes

C.X. Turner

in midsummer
water the seed
tend it gently
a fig tree somewhere
cracks stone to reach the light

Fatma Zohra Habis

my childhood home
sold to strangers
I drive past
the tree I climbed
now lower than the roof

Jacek Margolak

the faucet drips
its own rhythm
all night —
I wait for the gap
where it forgets

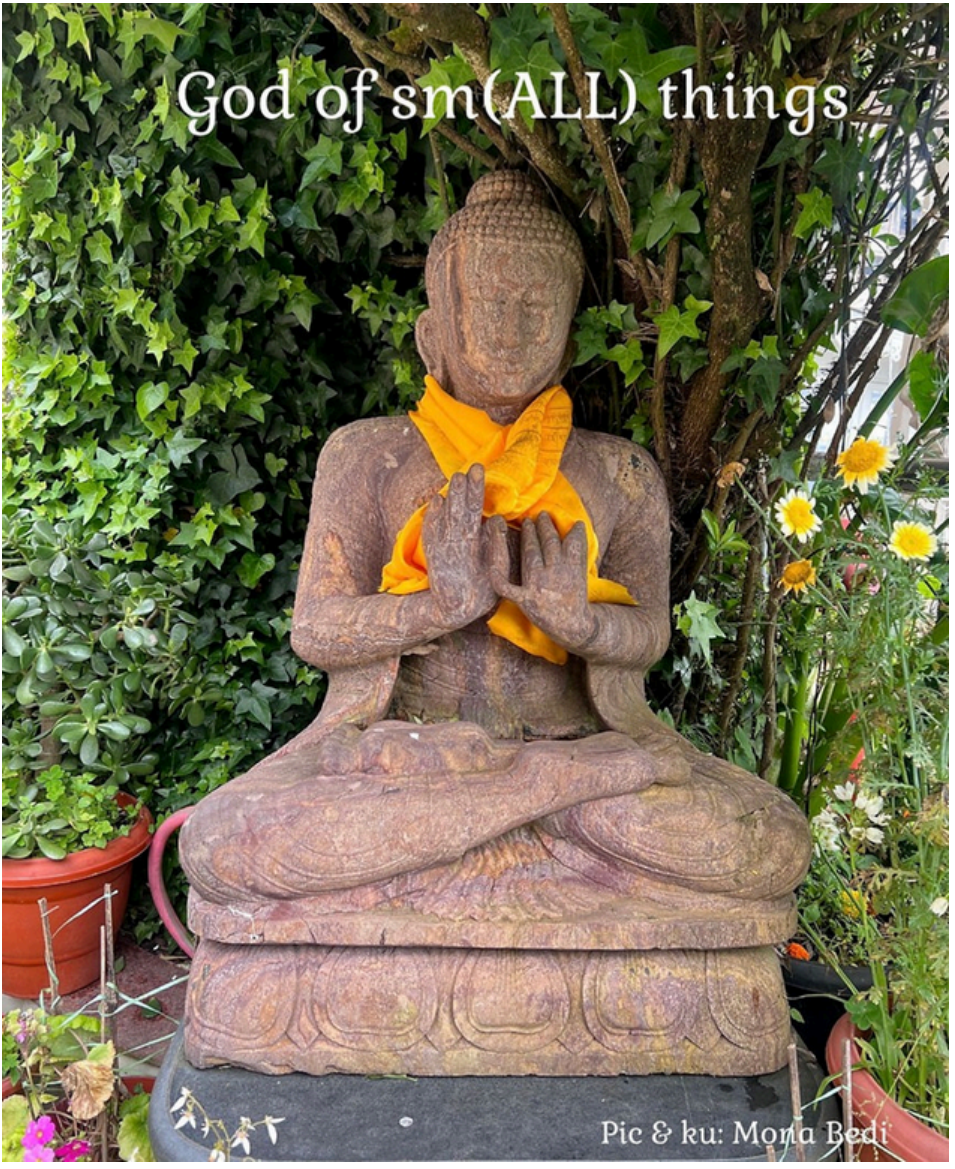
Jacek Margolak

starling flight
in the same hour
of each evening
we fold ourselves
back into dusk

Joanna Ashwell

jumping
on the latest
bandwagon
her grimace as she bites
into a grapefruit

Kanjini Devi


God of sm(ALL) things
Pic & ku: Mona Bedi

walking tour
a coffee house
with a pen
draft poems on a napkin
in the recycle bin

Marilyn Ashbaugh

deep
into winter ...
a passing train
tracks back
to ancestral homelands

Marilyn Ashbaugh

the parijat blooms
as generously here —
only my heart
keeps returning elsewhere
forgetting this fragrance

Padma Rajeswari

tanka

dim the stage lights,
taper off the music ...
in the autumn
of my life no roles
that matter await

Priti Aisola

empty swing
waiting in silence —
a shaft of sunlight
to nudge
you and me

Rashmi Buragohain

a dried ring
where he slammed his cup down
finally
the transgression
I couldn't forgive

Suraja Menon Roychowdhury

that fragrance
when i put out the wick
of an oil lamp
a holiness envelops me
that has no name

Suraja Menon Roychowdhury

a wet spoon
dipped into the sugar box
do's and dont's
dissolve into memories
of mother making coffee

Suraja Menon Roychowdhury



image: Anne Ygard and ku: Tejendra Sherchan

Alfred Booth

The Hourglass is Not Big Enough

The wind and the trees have been trying to send me a message for weeks now. I know the songs of each tree, and the north, south, east, and west dances of the wind. Their peaceful harmony has become mysterious and foreboding, as if something will soon shatter. There is a new age spot on my right forearm.

I sit
in the shadows of life
it has been
one hundred days
since I heard your laugh

Alfred Booth

The Days We All Dread

I am now much too old to find pleasure in a solitary life. There are few reasons to get out of bed. The cat is just as lost. We are both losing weight. I have never met your young colleagues who ring the doorbell to take away your vast library for new generations of archaeologists to consult. I have emptied your wardrobes, both in the city and in the country. I do not know which of the many beautiful objects representing your life merit being kept, although many hint at stories I might easily imagine. I slowly forget details of our life together, maybe you told me once in our youth. Heartache is a lousy companion. It alone cannot sustain life.

no rain
but flowers on your grave
clothes will dry
folding them into neat piles
as another storm brews

Arvinder Kaur

The Claimants

The stove, freshly pumped, flares blue and gold. Mother handles it with practiced ease. A tawa settles over the flame while she stuffs rolled dough with spiced potatoes and pats it flat. We gather around her, drawn by the aroma. As the paratha puffs, she spoons desi ghee over its surface. Before it is done, our hands shoot up.

"The first one reserved for me" All three of us shout in unison

Mother laughs and slides the paratha onto a thali, a cube of butter already melting across the top.

"You decide among yourselves."

Most often, my brothers let me win.

winter morning
steam softens
the kitchen glass
our fingerprints
clear a little sky

C.X. Turner

A La Carte

I take yesterday's seat and order without opening the menu: yoghurt parfait, multigrain toast, French press coffee.

Already, I know things about this place.

How hard to push the plunger. How the linen feels. That the butter comes in perfectly round, soft curls.

Across the room, another woman is eating alone.

I notice this in the way we notice someone wearing the same coat.

somewhere downtown
a siren changes pitch
then disappears
I lick orange marmalade
from the side of my thumb

The waiter passes and asks if everything is good.

I look at the empty chair.

“Yes,” I say.

And, for the length of breakfast, it almost is.



image and ku: Jacek Margolak

C.X. Turner

Second Lives

I never intend to look for sea glass. Once I did and never found any, so now I let the pieces find me.

Somewhere among the shingle, one catches the light.

At home, I imagine they recognise one another in the jar, swapping stories of tides I never saw and winters I slept through.

late afternoon
one cloud
drifting into
the shape
of somewhere else

Fatma Zohra Habis

Conscious Loss

The door creaks as it has creaked for twenty years. No one fixed it, no one complained. My mother enters the kitchen before me, always, as if her body knows the way before her eyes do. I set two cups on the table, one cools before the other.

The bookshelves are still arranged by her hand, not mine.

light wind
passes through the garden
stirs a fallen leaf
no hand to push
the rusted swing

Jacek Margolak

The Night Watch

The security guard recognizes me because I am the only one who looks at him. Every morning, I say good morning, and every morning, he nods, surprised. Today he tells me his name is Robert and that he paints landscapes in his booth during the night shift. I look at his canvas: a mountain that does not exist in this city, a lake too blue for anywhere real. He says he has never been outside the county. I wonder if the mountain exists because he watches the parking lot, or if the parking lot exists because he watches the mountain.

night shift
I leave my cup
in the shadow
of something
just out of sight

Jacek Margolak

Stationmaster

My son packs his own bag for the overnight train. One plush elephant, seven plastic soldiers, a stone from the backyard, and no socks. I tell him we are going to my sister's for two days. He looks at me with the patience of a stationmaster correcting a confused tourist and asks, "What if there's a war?" I remember my own hold-all — comics, one toothbrush, shorts for December. My mother had sighed too.

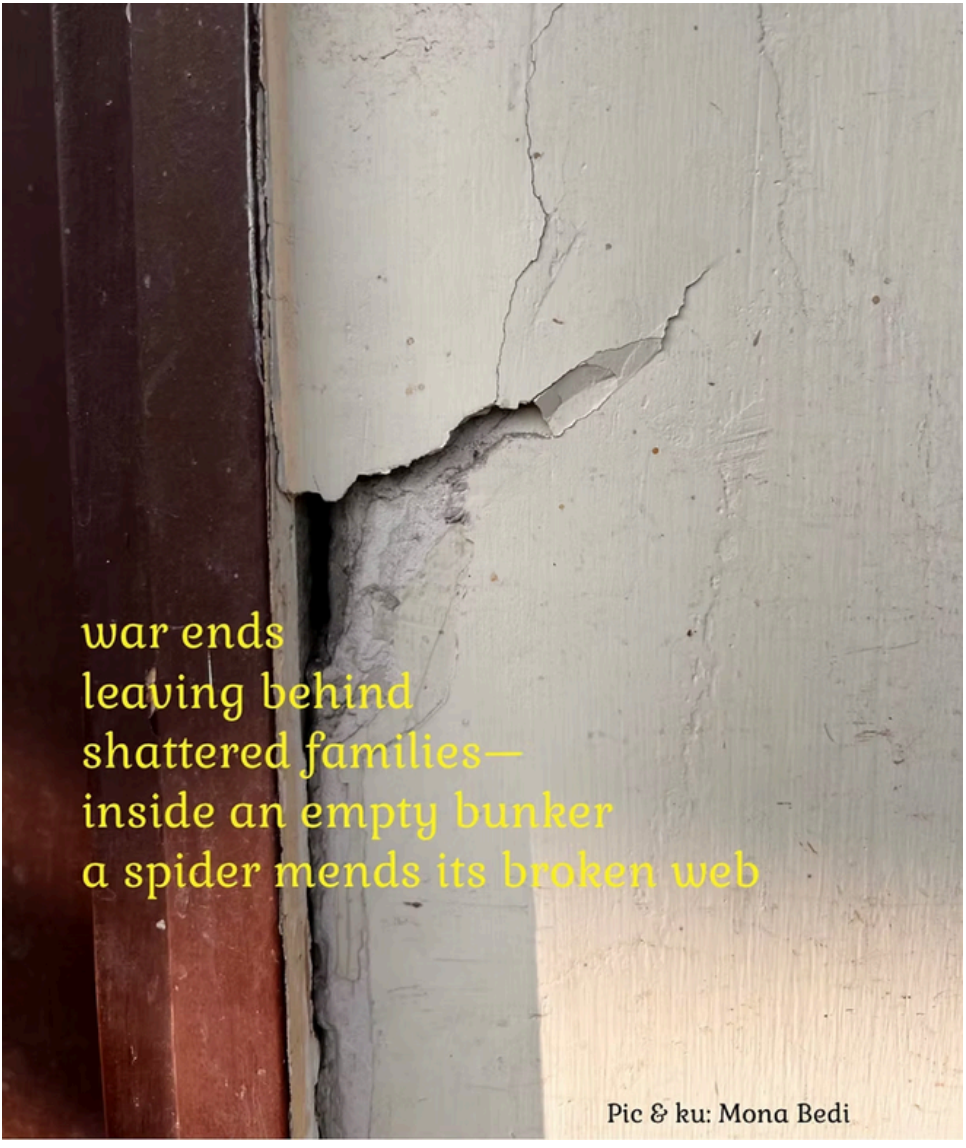
twilight tracks —
he counts the fireflies
like passengers
I keep a seat free
for whichever glows next

Jacek Margolak

The Key

I still have the key to her apartment. The building was torn down five years ago. The key lives in my drawer, next to batteries and rubber bands. Sometimes I take it out and hold it until it warms.

old address —
rain fills the cracks
one weed
beside the pavement
where the doorway was


war ends
leaving behind
shattered families—
inside an empty bunker
a spider mends its broken web
Pic & ku: Mona Bedi

Joanna Ashwell

Melody Lane

I realise that I've become my parents. Slowly but surely I no longer connect with music of the day. They always hark back to the 60's, the Golden Era in their opinion. I now gravitate back to the 80's and 90's, my feet tapping to an old cheesy tune. I remember how upset I was when hearing that Top Gun 2 would be made. How could they do this without 'Danger Zone' by Kenny Loggins. Fear allayed, they found a way to get it into the sequel. Those old film soundtracks that were played over and over. It's funny what holds a memory or a moment of joy.

the tap, tap
of dancing shoes
footloose and free
words back in time
finding a way to stay

Nalini Shetty

A Small Problem with Gravity

The guavas in the backyard have developed unusual manners. Instead of falling, they pause halfway down as though waiting for applause. The squirrel bows first. The crows refuse. By evening everyone agrees the tree has become a theatre.

empty swing
still moving
after sunset ...
a bat brushes past
without touching the dark

Sathya Venkatesh

Her Open Palm

Every evening, I see her in the small park where I walk, a worn bag filled with henna cones beside her. She smiles at passersby, asking if they would like their hands decorated. Some stop and stretch out their palms; she fills them with intricate patterns, humming softly.

One evening, a lady who wished to have her hands decorated admitted she had no money. "It's okay, pay me later," she said. She had so little, yet trusted so freely. As I waved goodbye, she asked cheerfully, "Shall I put henna on your hands?"

evening breeze —
a vine spirals
around a branch
trust blooming
where least expected

Sathya Venkatesh

Finding Our Voices

My mother was determined that her three daughters should learn to sing, so we sat obediently whenever the music master arrived.

He sang a line and we sang it back, though the notes rarely agreed. The master listened with a blank face, while my second sister and I caught each other's eye and burst into giggles. Our eldest sister, the serious one, played referee and reminded us to behave. We were young schoolgirls then, easily distracted by the slightest glance.

Eventually, the master stopped coming. My sister and I were relieved, while our eldest continued learning in another class. My mother's musical ambitions for the younger two ended there.

morning sun —
sparrows scatter
across the garden
each carrying
its own little tune

Sathya Venkatesh

Breathing Room

When I was younger, I would get jittery whenever something was out of place. Towels had to be neatly folded, shoes tucked into the rack, books returned to their shelves.

Now, I smile at a towel tossed over a chair, a shoe lying askew, or a book left open. I recall my late uncle's words: "A home need not be a museum; it should feel lived in." I find myself drawn to open windows, a few green plants, and the freedom to let things be. With age, perhaps, comes the wisdom to make room for life.

early autumn —
a weaver bird
builds strand by strand
its half-woven nest
swaying in the breeze

TRIVENI AWARDS 2026

Contest Judges:

Billie Dee and Vandana Parashar

First Place:

Sheila Windsor, East Sussex, UK

forget-me-nots
one red ranunculus
breaks the rules

Second Place:

Alizetta Dawson, NSW, Australia

winter sunlight -
an old man smooths
a train ticket

Third Place:

Ewan Rourke, Willunga, Australia

another scorcher -
the bird bath
out of sky again

TRIVENI AWARDS 2026

Contest Judges:

Billie Dee and Vandana Parashar

Honourable Mentions (in no particular order)

paul miller, Florida, USA

nothing old
or new to the mayfly
stone bridge

Erin Castaldi, Mays Landing, NJ, USA

almost the end of me bent water lily

Debbie Strange, Winnipeg, Canada

adoption papers
the empty egg cases
of common whelks

Cherie Hunter Day, New Hampshire, USA

thin membrane
in the throat of a frog
spring rain

TRIVENI AWARDS 2026

Contest Judges :

Billie Dee and Vandana Parashar

Alizetta Dawson, NSW, Australia

open window —
crumbs crossing
a shaft of sunlight

Nicholas Klacsansky, Washington, USA

towhee's call —
not able to find a name
for god

Raju Arockiasamy, Trichy, India

midday heat
in the well's depths
a cool sky

Lori Kiefer, London, UK

evening star —
the silversmith
lowers his shutters

Relational Mujō: Continuity, Encounter, and the Unchanged Object

by Jacek Margolak

Prologue

Impermanence is one of the oldest ideas in Japanese aesthetics. Every student of haiku encounters *mujō* sooner or later, usually as an awareness that nothing remains fixed. For years I understood it in that familiar way: blossoms fall, insects die, winter becomes spring, and every moment gives way to another.
Yet after many years of writing haiku, another pattern slowly began to emerge. The feeling of impermanence did not always arise while watching something vanish. Sometimes it appeared only when I came back to something that had quietly remained.

A familiar smell released by freshly cut paper.

The resin on tomato vines that would not wash away.

The scent of wet wool after the first frost.

None of these things seemed to carry memory. They simply remained what they were.

The paper still smelled the same. The mullein still resisted the dry soil. Wet wool still carried the same scent after frost.

It was the person returning who had changed.

Gradually I began to understand that the experience was not located in the object alone, nor entirely within memory. It arose in the encounter between something that appeared unchanged and the person who had changed.

This essay is an attempt to understand that encounter.

I am not proposing a new form of *mujō*, nor a new aesthetic category. The more I have thought about these experiences, the less certain I have become that they stand apart from the traditional understanding of impermanence.

Perhaps what I was noticing was something more modest: a particular way in which an awareness of *mujō* can become perceptible.

For convenience, I have called this perspective ***Relational Mujō.***

The name is provisional.

The experience is what interests me.

I. Classical Mujō

The Japanese understanding of impermanence did not begin with haiku. Long before Bashō, *mujō* had become a central Buddhist and literary understanding, expressed through literature, poetry, and the arts. It does not merely mean that things come to an end. It points to the absence of anything fixed or permanently lasting. Change is not an interruption of existence; it is part of existence itself.

The word *mujō* itself points toward this condition. *Mu* (無) suggests absence or lack, while *jō* (常) refers to permanence, constancy, or an unchanging state. *Mujō*, therefore, is not simply the disappearance of things that once seemed permanent. It points more fundamentally to the absence of permanence itself: nothing exists in a permanently fixed state.

Perhaps no literary text expresses this awareness more memorably than the opening of the *Heike Monogatari:*

The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline.

The passage joins sound, nature, human power, and decline in a single movement. The bells fade. The flowers bloom and wither. Political power rises and falls. Nothing escapes change.

A century later, Kamo no Chōmei carried a similar understanding into the *Hōjōki*:

The flow of the river is ceaseless, and yet the water is never the same.

The river remains recognisably a river, yet its water is continually replaced. Continuity and change are therefore not opposites. The river's persistence depends upon continual transformation.

This distinction between what remains recognisable and what is continually changing will become important later in this essay.

Dōgen developed the understanding of impermanence in a different direction. Rather than treating *mujō* simply as something that happens to beings over time, he placed impermanence within the nature of existence itself. In the *Shōbōgenzō*, particularly in *Uji* ("Being-Time") and *Genjōkōan*, time is not merely an external flow carrying beings toward disappearance. Being and time are inseparable from continual change. Impermanence is therefore not simply the loss of something that once appeared permanent; it is part of the reality of being.

If impermanence belongs to the nature of being itself, then it cannot be confined to visible changes in the external world. Human beings are not observers standing outside this process. Their bodies, emotions, relationships, fortunes, memories, and perceptions are themselves subject to change. The self is not a fixed point from which impermanence is merely observed; the observer also belongs to the impermanent world.

This becomes important when considering mujō in relation to *mujō-kan*. The two terms are closely connected, but they are not identical. *Mujō* refers to the condition of impermanence itself: the fact that nothing remains permanently fixed or unchanged.

Mujō-kan refers to the human sense or awareness of that impermanence—the feeling that arises when impermanence becomes perceptible to us.

Mujō therefore does not depend upon our noticing it.

Mujō-kan does.

A season changes whether or not anyone reflects upon it. A person ages whether or not that aging becomes meaningful to them. Relationships change, circumstances alter, and living things are born, grow, decline, and die regardless of whether these transformations become the subject of conscious reflection.

But when such change enters awareness, something different happens. The condition of impermanence becomes an experience.

This distinction does not separate the human world from *mujō*. On the contrary, it places human experience within it. The awareness of impermanence is itself part of an impermanent existence.

This broader understanding also leaves room for something that became important to me only later: impermanence need not become perceptible solely through an obvious change in the world around us. The changing observer is already part of the same process.

This understanding became deeply woven into Japanese literary and aesthetic traditions. Cherry blossoms became powerful seasonal images not despite their brevity, but partly because their beauty and their passing could not be separated. Autumn wind, evening cicadas, melting snow, and morning dew similarly became ways of encountering change within ordinary experience.

Yet *mujō* is not limited to decline or disappearance. Birth, growth, renewal, changing relationships, and the transformation of human lives also belong to an impermanent world.

What changes is not only what is lost, but also what comes into being, develops, and gives way to something else.

The awareness of impermanence can therefore arise from many different directions. A blossom may fall. A child may grow. A friendship may change. A political fortune may reverse. A familiar place may disappear. A person may return to the same place years later and discover that the person returning is no longer quite the same.

The external event may differ, but the underlying condition is the same: nothing remains fixed.

Haiku inherited and transformed this sensibility. Bashō rarely explains impermanence directly. He allows it to emerge through observation. Buson finds it in stillness. Issa discovers it within ordinary human life. Shiki often brings it close to the smallest physical event.

The poems themselves reveal how this awareness can take different forms.

And this distinction will become important for what follows.

The haiku cited in the next section do not all express *mujō* in the same way. Some evoke decline, disappearance, or loss. Others suggest emergence, growth, or renewal. Some make change visible in the natural world; others bring attention to human relationships or to a shift within the observer.

What they share is not a single emotional response, nor a single aesthetic mood, but their participation in a world in which nothing remains permanently fixed. Sometimes mujō becomes perceptible through visible change.

Sometimes *mujō* becomes perceptible through what that change awakens in the person who encounters it.

And, as I will explore later, there may be another possibility: an apparently unchanged object may also make impermanence perceptible—not because the object has escaped change, but because its continuity can reveal how much the observer has changed.

II. Mujō in Haiku

Classical Masters

Few haiku express classical *mujō* more directly than Bashō's reflection on history:

summer grasses —
all that remains
of warriors' dreams

— Matsuo Bashō

The grasses have quietly replaced an entire human history. Battles, ambitions, victories, and defeat have vanished without explanation. Nature has not interrupted history; it has simply continued after it. What remains is not a monument to the warriors but vegetation growing on the same ground.

Impermanence is revealed through transformation: human history dissolves into

nature's continuity.
Bashō approaches the same awareness from an entirely different direction:

on a withered branch
a crow has settled —
autumn evening

— Matsuo Bashō

Relational Mujō: Continuity, Encounter, and the Unchanged Object

by Jacek Margolak

Nothing happens except the presence of a crow on a withered branch. Yet the bare branch, the season, and the approaching darkness create an atmosphere of transience. Here *mujō* is not an event but an atmosphere—the sense of a world already moving toward change.

Issa discovers another dimension of *mujō*:

melting snow —
the village
full of children

— *Kobayashi Issa*

The snow disappears, but its departure is not simply loss. It releases noise, movement, and laughter back into the village. Winter gives way to spring, silence to voices, stillness to play. Renewal itself becomes evidence of impermanence.

Here *mujō* appears not as decline but as the movement from one state of life into another.

Shiki brings impermanence closer to the human experience:

after killing a spider,
how lonely I feel
in the cold of night!
— *Masaoka Shiki*

The change is small and immediate. A spider is gone, and the speaker suddenly becomes conscious of his own loneliness. The natural world has not merely changed; the speaker's relation to it has changed as well.

The poem therefore approaches *mujō* through an emotional response to a brief encounter. The impermanent event and the awareness it produces become inseparable.

Mujō in Contemporary Haiku

Contemporary haiku continues to encounter *mujō* through ordinary experiences of loss, renewal, identity, and change. The forms and circumstances differ, but the underlying condition remains the same: nothing exists in a permanently fixed state.

For example:

monsoon over
moss covers
mother's maiden name

— *Roberta Beary*

Here natural change gradually alters what remains of a human identity. Moss spreads across a gravestone, obscuring a mother's maiden name. Nothing dramatic occurs. Nature simply continues its patient movement, while a small piece of personal history becomes less visible.

Across these poems, *mujō* appears in several directions: history disappearing into grass, an autumn scene already moving toward darkness, winter giving way to children and spring, a small act producing an unexpected loneliness, and moss gradually obscuring a name.

They do not share a single emotional response. Nor does *mujō* require one.

What they share is an encounter with a world in which nothing remains permanently fixed.

Sometimes impermanence becomes perceptible through disappearance.
Sometimes through renewal.

Sometimes through a change in the observer's own experience.

The question that gradually emerged in my own writing was a different one:

Can the same awareness arise when the world has not visibly changed at all?

III. The Question of Continuity

For many years I assumed that impermanence required visible change.

Falling blossoms.

Aging faces.

An abandoned house.

The first autumn wind.

Like many haiku poets, I instinctively looked for moments when the world itself revealed transience. I understood *mujō* through things that changed before my eyes: something falling, fading, ageing, disappearing, or giving way to something else.

It never occurred to me that continuity itself might become the place where impermanence reveals itself.

Then, gradually, another kind of experience began to appear. Rather than watching something disappear, I found myself returning to ordinary things that had quietly remained.

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A familiar smell released by freshly cut paper.

The resin on tomato vines that would not wash away.

The scent of wet wool after the first frost.

Nothing in these encounters announced impermanence. Nothing was ending.

Nothing was disappearing. Yet each encounter carried the unmistakable feeling that something irreversible had happened.

The object had simply continued.

The observer had not.

At first I regarded these moments as exceptions. They seemed too ordinary to belong to the philosophical understanding of *mujō*, and too personal to be explained simply as nostalgia or memory. But the more often the experience returned, the less convincing that distinction became.

The object did not preserve the past. It did not remember me. It simply remained what it was — recognisable and steady, while the person encountering it had undergone countless changes: physical, emotional, relational, and perceptual.

If *mujō* belongs to the nature of existence itself, an unchanged object cannot truly stand outside it. The object's continuity does not create impermanence; it simply makes another form of it perceptible. The object does not say *you have changed*; the awareness arises in the encounter itself.

This made me reconsider my use of the phrase ***Relational Mujō***. I had initially imagined it as something set apart from classical *mujō*—beginning with continuity rather than external change. But perhaps that distinction was too sharp. What I was trying to describe was not a new category of *mujō*, but a particular way in which *mujō-kan* can arise.

A familiar object becomes a quiet mirror — not because it carries our memories, but because it has remained long enough for us to notice the distance between who we were and who we have become.

Could continuity itself become one of the ways through which *mujō* becomes perceptible?

That question eventually led me to a conversation that changed not only the way I understood the term, but also the way I read my own haiku.

IV. The Conversation That Changed My Reading

My earlier understanding of *mujō* had been shaped largely by what could be seen: blossoms falling, seasons turning, and the visible transformations of the natural world.

Then, during Keiko Izawa's lessons on Japanese aesthetics, held on **the haikaiTALKS** blog as part of **Triveni Haikai India**, a simple haiku unexpectedly opened another path. It was not the poem alone that mattered. It was the conversation that followed.

spring frost —
our fingers brush
the railing

— Jacek Margolak

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by Jacek Margolak

When I wrote this poem, I believed that the frost functioned as a classical seasonal image while the brief contact between two people allowed another kind of impermanence to emerge. I attempted to describe this intuition with the term ***Relational Mujō.***

What followed was one of the most valuable conversations I have experienced as a haiku writer.

Keiko Izawa did not reject the intuition itself. Instead, she questioned its emphasis. In her response she described the poem as "closer to a human-centered *mujō*" and noted that "the sense of *mujō* feels much more subtle here." Her comments suggested to me that what I was sensing might already belong to the wider understanding of *mujō*, although expressed through a different balance of elements.

To clarify the distinction, she offered one of Shiki's poems as an example:

> *I go*
> *you remain ...*
> *two autumns*
>
> — *Masaoka Shiki*

Her comparison immediately revealed something I had not fully understood. Shiki's poem does not describe a fleeting contact. It begins after separation has already occurred. Impermanence arises through an irreversible change in relationship and in time itself. The same season can no longer be shared in the same way. One person leaves; one remains. Even autumn divides into two different experiences.

My own poem attempted to begin elsewhere. Not with separation. With contact.

The question, for me, became whether impermanence might also be sensed within the instant when two lives briefly meet before continuing apart.

That distinction became the turning point of our discussion. Rather than defending my original reading, I rewrote the poem:

spring frost —
where fingers brushed
damp steel

Keiko's response to this version became equally important. She observed that "the change is implied in the damp steel, which quietly suggests what has already passed."

That single sentence stayed with me. The poem no longer depended upon the human gesture itself. The encounter had already vanished. Only its trace remained. The frost had not become the symbol. Nor had the touch. The damp steel quietly carried the trace of a moment already gone.

At this point, Keiko introduced another perspective that shifted my thinking. She drew my attention to Hideo Kobayashi's *Mujō to Iu Koto* ("On Impermanence"), particularly to a passage in which an encounter with something that has remained unchanged brings an awareness of one's own transformation.

I was struck by how closely this came to the experience that had originally led me toward the idea of *Relational Mujō*. Yet the reference also made me reconsider the idea itself. The apparently unchanged object did not constitute a new form of *mujō* at all. Its continuity simply made the *mujō* of the observer perceptible.

Keiko's distinction between *mujō* and *mujō-kan* gave me a new lens: impermanence was not something that came into existence because I noticed it; the encounter simply allowed that specific awareness to surface.

The reference to Kobayashi showed me that I was not discovering a new territory, but realizing the original territory was far larger than I had thought. Looking back, this conversation was never a debate over terminology—it was an invitation to observe more carefully.

The question was no longer whether ***Relational Mujō*** existed as a separate category.

The question became far simpler—and far more difficult:

Where does impermanence become perceptible?

From that moment onward, I found myself reading my own poems differently. And gradually, the phrase *Relational Mujō* began to feel less like a claim and more like a question.

V. Learning to Read Again

The conversation with Keiko Izawa did not convince me that I had discovered a new aesthetic. It did something far more valuable: it taught me to read my own poems again.

Not as attempts to describe *Relational Mujō*, but as moments where the feeling itself was arising.

I began to notice that several poems written over the years were not primarily concerned with visible change. They depended upon encounters in which an ordinary image opened into something I had not noticed before.

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One of the earliest examples appeared almost unnoticed:

first moth —
metal shavings
dull

Originally I saw the poem simply as an image of seasonal transition. Later I began to see that it was not really about the moth. The workshop had not changed; the metal still lay where it always had. The first moth simply made the familiar place visible in a different way.

Another poem revealed the same movement differently:

cherry petals —
one caught
in a spider thread

Nothing dramatic occurs. A petal is briefly held by a thread, suspended between falling and continuation. The transience is not simply in the falling petal—it appears in the temporary relation between two ordinary things whose meeting cannot last.

Even a poem that I had initially read as a straightforward image of absence began to reveal another possibility:

dry well —
a bucket
hits the stones

At first I saw only the missing water. Later I noticed the sound. The stones had always been there, and the bucket had always followed the same path. Without water to interrupt its descent, the meeting of bucket and stones became audible.

The poem had not changed.

My reading of it had.

Looking back, I no longer see these poems as exceptions within my writing. They are evidence that my understanding of *mujō* had been changing long before I found words for it.

The poems arrived first.

The idea followed much later.

Perhaps that is what the conversation with Keiko ultimately taught me: not to search for a new aesthetic, but to look again at what had already been present in the work.

VI. Conclusion: The Unchanged Mirror

I did not write this essay to propose a replacement for the classical understanding of *mujō*, nor to suggest that the falling of cherry blossoms or the fading of autumn light have lost their power.

What I have tried to trace is simply another way the same awareness may enter our lives.

Sometimes impermanence is revealed through what disappears.

Sometimes it becomes perceptible through what remains.

When we return to a familiar object or place, it may appear almost unchanged. Yet the person encountering it again is no longer quite the same.

The object does not explain this difference.

It simply remains.

Perhaps this is all I mean by ***Relational Mujō*:** not a new aesthetic principle or a separate category of *mujō*, but a way of noticing how *mujō-kan* may arise in the encounter between continuity and change.

Whether the name survives is less important than the experience.

The unchanged object does not tell us that we have changed.

Sometimes, simply by remaining, it allows us to see it.

Dear Readers
thank you for being with us.

See you once again on 22 October 2026
with many more fine poems
from our contributors!

Team: *haikuKATHA*