

Random
Rocks

haikai no renga



Random Rocks

Haikai No Renga & Commentary

The Miner School of Haikai Poets



bamboo leaf studio

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Keith Kumasen Abbott



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(Keith Kumasen Abbott, Pat Nolan, Maureen Owen, Michael Sowl)



General Comments

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Foreword (or Afterword) on Random Rocks Renku

As renku master for *Random Rocks*, I provided a Buson translation for the first stanza. The impulse for this particular choice flowered from multiple sources. During this period I had been reading Makoto Ueda's *The Path of the Flowering Thorn, The Life and Poetry of Yosa Buson* and that provided me with the impulse for this opening. I always loved Buson's rock compositions and remembered fondly his screen of five stones at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. Then, during the composition of *Random Rocks*, the Denver Museum featured the Kimiko and John Powers Collection with its two marvelous Buson rock paintings and these provided fresh inspiration. The larger, a folding screen from 1783, held groups of rocks in Buson's stunning economy, while a smaller scroll depicted two stacked rocks with their shadows highlighted in light red gray.

Random Rocks composition took about eight months. As in the Japanese *haikai no renga* AKA *renku*, our linked verse developed in improvised ways as intended by some of its formal restrictions. Our writers seemed to take the random part of our title to heart. The poem opened with seasonal subjects proceeding from winter to spring to summer stanzas. Then, in our renku's middle section, the poets launched into more topical subjects that alternated miscellaneous cultural and love stanzas while pursuing surprising and exciting tangents.

The situations also veered from dramatic to pastoral to erotic and then recycled around again in different combos. My agile renku mates created an Indie short feature of constantly shifting domestic, dramatic and natural scenes. Whenever I received their latest links, I marveled at their variety, emotions and/or flash. And I was grateful for their challenge to imagine a link that acknowledged the last stanza's principles and yet morphed its elements into some new drama, scene or camera angle.

Random Rocks observed the traditional "fast close" finish, cycling in rapidly paced links from winter to autumn to summer (where childhood baseball heroes, New York Yankees' Joe DiMaggio and Phil "Scooter" Rizzuto, made cameo appearances and their nicknames automatically called up summers past)¹ and then *Random Rocks* ended with images of spring.

In Ueda's book he speaks of Buson's excellence in creating a narrative form that "tempts the reader to weave a fictional story around it." He also calls attention to where "dramatis personae [act] out the climaxes of their plays" in these short poems, "leaving the reader to imagine the psychological process that lead to that moment." Several of *Random Rocks* links possess these two qualities also. Michael

Sowl's "from inside the bus/I wave at you but your mind/ is somewhere not here" connects to those dual qualities, as does Maureen Owen's "due to circumstance/houses idle mold spores thick/who can return home" which invokes Hurricane Katrina and that site of a disaster now empty of human beings.

My colleagues also enjoy employing farce in turning a social observation into comedy (what Japanese *haikai no renga* scholar Earl Miner labeled *haikai humor*) as when Pat Nolan links my stanza on puppy love to a feline domestic crisis:

little brother's voice has changed
two flirts leaning on your gate
 "didn't you hear that?"
neutered or not her cat's yowl
 sends her to the door

Keith Kumasen Abbott
January 16-31, 2007

1. We've been joking about assembling a *kigo* or seasonal word dictionary for American haiku writers. Any mention of baseball immediately invokes summer; snow tires, shovels or hockey winter; income tax forms for spring, etc. The Japanese appear to have a short list of such words, though poets like Basho and Buson seem to be quite inventive in using place names and activities for their seasonal association.

“Bare willow tree”

My renku partners seemed ready for a new poem, so I decided to play renku master and find an opening verse. This haiku by Buson came to mind when rock hunting in Colorado. For my garden I was scavenging marble and glacial rocks at the site of an old Swedish church parsonage, recently demolished for a new development. The parsonage was on the top of a glacial moraine. Glaciers deposited interesting rocks and the cemetery added fragments of marble slabs busted up by ice. This ground yielded several exciting finds. With great anticipation I walked up the adjoining dry creek bed. I crawled under a tangle of dead debris only to stand up and see a few undistinguished stones in deep sand.

Keith Abbott

“fir forever”

I took Buson's dry creek bed into early winter -- no color but always the evergreens. Co-author, P.N. Thanks, Pat!

Michael Sowl

“tiny bit of fluff”

I linked to the colorlessness of Michael's landscape though there is implied sunshine, blue sky, and the sparse white of cloud. *Pat Nolan*

Bare willow tree
dry creek bed random rocks
dotted here and there
-- *Buson*

Bare willow tree
dry creek bed random rocks
dotted here and there
fir forever green -- all else
gray landscape starved for color

Fir forever green -- all else
gray landscape starved for color
tiny bit of fluff
the only cloud in the sky
still it hides the sun

“two cups white navy pea beans”

Felt a need to include some notion of the quotidian -- what are the folks doing today. Nothing like a recipe for baked beans to bring in the human element.

Maureen Owen.

“in tall shadowy grass”

Maureen’s recipe removed me to a rowdy party in a country house kitchen where I was listening to our cooks talk. I looked out the window. Under a bright moon the children were going ape in high grass beyond the lawn.

KA

“he gotta wattah”

Keith's bobbing kid's heads. I thought of old days when I was planning to learn Pacific languages. The quote is Pidgin English for wacky behavior. Not a judgment, just an observation. *MS*

Tiny bit of fluff
the only cloud in the sky
still it hides the sun
two cups white navy pea beans
one-third cup dark brown sugar

Two cups white navy pea beans
one-third cup dark brown sugar
in tall shadowy grass
her kids’ heads bob and duck –yeah
full moon grabass –

In tall shadowy grass
her kids’ heads bob and duck – yeah
full moon grabass –
“he gotta wattah topside”
vapor lock in the brain box

“remote Iraq war”

Bush’s terrible Iraq war that has killed so many! I’m putting a satire spin on the devastating death count with the idea that if the reporters have been killed who can report the war to us now. This is of course tongue-in-cheek as Bush controls the news media and we aren’t getting accurate reports from the news anyway. Still there are brave reporters trying to tell us what is really going on -- one can catch them on the BBC but rarely on American channels. *MO*

“single leaf caught on gossamer”

The enormous implications of Maureen’s stanza required, in my mind, grounding in the simplest of statements. *PN*

“from inside the bus”

Riffing off Pat's leaf stirred by the breeze -- I spend alot of time on the bus. Seeing someone I know, even in this small town, is rare. Waving like an idiot -- my friend didn't see me -- but everyone on the bus did -- “they all moved away from me on the group ‘W’ bench.” The next stop too far -- but I was this close! *MS*

“He gotta wattah topside”
vapor lock in the brain box
remote Iraq war
64 reporters killed
what news can come now

Remote Iraq war
64 reporters killed
what news can come now
single leaf caught on gossamer
stirred by a passing breeze

Single leaf caught on gossamer
stirred by a passing breeze
from inside the bus
I wave at you but your mind
is somewhere not here

“little brother’s voice has changed”

Michael Sowl’s portrait of a missed connection due to deep thought intrigued me. I imagined that this thinker was a parent and the bus rider has some vital information about a teenage son’s current temptations.

KA

“didn’t you hear that?”

Being near deaf, I don’t hear much in the upper register. The adolescent change of voice in Keith’s love stanza reminded me of the modulation in a cat’s yowl and, subsequently, the possible mating confrontation of our nocturnal fuzz ball, flirting by the gate. PN

“still slaves to biology”

Biology controls the planet. Every living thing is slave to it. So obsessed with procreation we miss what is going on all around us. It’s the trap of the beautiful robe -- we are led astray thinking only of our bodies’ biological demands and not of our mind’s intelligent purpose on earth. Our real purpose whirrs unnoticed by us into the dusk and darkness. MO

From inside the bus
I wave at you but your mind
is somewhere not here
little brother’s voice has changed
two flirts leaning on your gate

Little brother’s voice has changed
two flirts leaning on your gate
“didn’t you hear that?”
neutered or not her cat’s yowl
sends her to the door

“Didn’t you hear that?”
neutered or not her cat’s yowl
sends her to the door
still slaves to biology
what whirrs by in the twilight

"thing you always want"

listening to Maureen's "whirr" -- so many times ya got so much -- it ain't enuff. *MS*

"the harvest moon shines bright"

The intensity of Michael's conversational link reminded me of nature documentaries on television. For those in the food chain above the players, mating season creates rich pickings. *KA*

"due to circumstance"

Impossible to top Keith's stunning link that is one-with-the-essence-of-haiku in its rarest and truest form. But as usual my Midwest sensibilities and practical-ness draw me to the devastation in New Orleans where citizens have been dispersed to all corners of the U.S. and are unable to go home as their houses have been ravaged by flood and destruction and are rotting with mold. A Catch -22 -- the people could start to rebuild if they could return -- but the government has declared the situation in New Orleans unlivable. Of course the government is to blame for the flood in the first place. Desperate, sad stale-mate as people want to come home and put their lives back together in the place they love. *MO*

Still slaves to biology
what whirrs by in the twilight
thing you always want –
it's just *that* you do not have
right at this moment

Thing you always want –
it's just *that* you do not have
right at this moment
the harvest moon shines bright
above the hidden shark's head

The harvest moon shines bright
above the hidden shark's head
due to circumstance
houses idle mold spores thick
who can return home

“a cloud of gnats frolics in”

Even in the devastation of flood damaged abandoned homes, life flourishes. I linked the imperceptible spores that thrive in the damp dark and the near invisibility of gnats except in oblique sunlight. *PN*

“those cut lilac twigs”

Pat Nolan’s frolicking gnats of spring made me look up at where the lilac limbs are framed by my writing room window. A wannabe flower stanza. *KA*

“end of July”

Keith's lilacs cut. . . . Usually by this time, mid-May, where I live, the lilacs are out and the fishing season is open and I'm on a secret lake trying to catch a rainbow. Secondary, of course, to seeing the world born anew. This year no fishing and no loons past July. *MS*

Due to circumstance
houses idle mold spores thick
who can return home
a cloud of gnats frolics in
late afternoon's oblique rays

A cloud of gnats frolics in
late afternoon's oblique rays
those cut lilac twigs
once so bony
now show buds

Those cut lilac twigs
once so bony
now show buds
end of July already
haven't heard a single loon

“water beaded curve”

I decided to pull up an old Minnesota wooden deck chair
and have a drink with Michael on the lake dock as we
listen for loons. *MO*

“unaware she bares her forearm”

Maureen Owen’s remarkable ice cubes and implied
romance took me to a friend sitting in a languid daze
after a weekend with a new lover. It was around 10 a.m.
of a Monday and she was beyond late for work. She
raised her hand to touch her hair -- still a mess -- and
her sleeve slipped down, showing the inside of her arm.
When she caught me watching her (with perhaps more
than idle amusement), she stuck out her tongue. *KA*

“pinpoints of fine rain”

Keith’s stanza was impossible to link with so I had to go
to the renku bone pile, as one does in dominos, to find a
stanza that would at least make a transition. About all it
has going for it is the alliteration. *PN*

End of July already
haven't heard a single loon
water beaded curve
floating ice cubes bump inside
tint slender glasses

Water beaded curve
floating ice cubes bump inside
tint slender glasses
unaware she bares her forearm
bruises -- her new fierce love

Unaware she bares her forearm
bruises -- her new fierce love
pinpoints of fine rain
pock the pea gravel path
rattle of bamboo rake

“is this the mainstream vision”

So disgusted with the war and the Bush administration scandals and where the Cheney Rumsfeld Bush administration (no health care, low wages, loss of jobs to off shore multi national companies, all the money and tax breaks going to the rich, all the contracts going to Halliburton and Bush/Cheney cronies, etc.) is taking the country I feel like mad carnival pitchmen are in control of our lives. *MO*

“head full of peat moss”

Stopped at my local after work for 2-3-4-5 beers. HAPPY HOUR! Such a fine early evening I decided to have one more while porch sitting as the sun went down. Luckily (?) didn't have to drink alone. Two friends showed up w/ a 12-Pak. They left when the air got cool and the beer was gone. I went inside with Maureen's carnie barker and circus music in my head. Couldn't recall the exact lines or where I'd left her link, so went on a search mission. Standing in the middle of each room, looking around, like each was a new island come out of the sea off Iceland. Brains an alcohol swamp. *MS*

“breakfast of brains scrambled eggs”

I pictured Michael's link as taking place in the morning and so keyed on breakfast. I'd heard about the western delicacy of having a breakfast of sheep brains scrambled in with eggs. And scrambled is generally the mental condition of being drunk. *PN*

Pinpoints of fine rain
pock the pea gravel path
rattle of bamboo rake
is this the mainstream vision
dressed like a carny pitchman

Is this the mainstream vision
dressed like a carny pitchman
head full of peat moss
wandering through the whole house
accidental drunk

Head full of peat moss
wandering through the whole house
accidental drunk
breakfast of brains scrambled eggs
a taste of mortality

“that stranger changes”

Pat Nolan’s country style breakfast and meditation on mortality sent me down my street to an old cemetery I pass regularly. Once I noticed a gentleman placing varied and gorgeous flowers on a woman’s memorial. Something about his attitude and the unseasonable lushness of the bouquet turned him into a stranger to her family in my imagination. *KA*

“the majestic church bells ring”

A slice of life in this Southwest town while I was putting on the storm windows this sunny Sunday morning. *MO*

“how can I sleep”

What can disturb your sleep? Distant sounds? Those close by? Every tiny squeak of existence is a momentous boom as I toss and turn, obsessed with forging a good link. *PN*

Breakfast of brains scrambled eggs
a taste of mortality
that stranger changes
flowers on mother’s grave
each Saturday

That stranger changes
flowers on mother's grave
each Saturday
the majestic church bells ring
echoed by a choir of dogs

The majestic church bells ring
echoed by a choir of dogs
how can I sleep
loud rumble as the old
refrigerator defrosts

“thin ice skin on mud puddle”

Pat's noisy fridge. . . . Walking to the school bus stop when I was 7 or 8. Early spring potholes in the dirt road - - ice-covered every morning. I'd break the ice with the toe of my green rubber Pack boot -- listen to the Sounds. Once I broke one and suddenly I could *smell* the mud. Springtime! I think it was the first time I realized that I was alive. Of course, I was much shorter then, didn't smoke a pack a day. Satori in Elementary school. *MS*

“Moonfaced You & I”

Michael's link so brilliant I had to go out and talk to the moon and get her advice. I determined to hold onto Michael's vision for a moment -- so shiny and still -- what better way than to join/look into the ice and silence myself so that we are both aglow, reflected in the moon's light. *MO*

“along the river's snowy mound”

Maureen's ecstatic moon stanza and its silver home started me painting it in my mind. I saw the moon rhymed with the roundness of a snowdrift riverbank. Using an expensive Chinese brush I often like to add in the snow “kiss up” little flicks for new shoots. *KA*

How can I sleep
loud rumble as the old
refrigerator defrosts
thin ice skin on mud puddle
eighth of an inch of silence

Thin ice skin on mud puddle
eighth of an inch of silence
Moonfaced You & I
O Zone of radical light
Silver home tonight

Moonfaced you & I
O Zone of radical light
Silver home tonight
along the river's snowy mound
blips of fresh willow shoots

"Scooter: Joe D"

Keith's snowy river. . . . "Can the fish see it snowing?" -- as Dylan Thomas once asked. The willow shoots. . . couldn't make a decent bat outta willow -- grain's too gnarly. The quote is from "DiMaggio's Bat" in the book, "O Holy Cow! The Selected Verse of Phil Rizzuto", which I was reading when Keith's lines arrived. The coda reads: *"June 5, 1992 Detroit at New York Scott Sanderson pitching to Lou Whitaker Fourth Inning, two outs, two base runners Tigers lead 4-1." MS*

"rain drips from eaves"

This stanza is a passing stanza as in a game of cards when you pass your turn because you got "nuthin'." There is a tenuous link between the voice in Michael's stanza and the illusion of conversation from the overflow of rain. *PN*

"walk along the dock"

Pat Nolan's wonderfully neutral transition stanza -- so calm and mundane -- reminded me of a Japanese film where our heroine's ghost looks through a window. Then the camera pans out in the distance as her husband's family discusses something illegible and, while tidying up their lake front property, turn into ghosts themselves. *KA*

Along the river's snowy mound
blips of fresh willow shoots

Scooter: Joe D's bat
"being an old fisherman
he knew about the trees"

Scooter: Joe D's bat
"being an old fisherman
he knew about the trees"
rain drips from eaves
distant voices in conversation

Rain drips from eaves
distant voices in conversation
walk along the dock
steering an empty boat
with a rope

“that was the reason I bought”

Keith’s existential image reminded me of that powerful, visionary movie, *Juliet of the Spirits*. There is a scene where she is walking on a beach in heavy fog and a man appears holding the end of a large heavy rope. As she comes close to him he turns and hands her the rope and disappears in the fog. I can’t remember if he says anything, but the rope is attached to a huge ship, which has now suddenly become Juliet’s responsibility. I had recently bought a transparent shower curtain with tall bamboo printed on it in robust green like a forest. Standing in the shower watching water running down the bamboo, I was thinking of Keith’s link and about the intense visual similarity between the two. That was when I realized why I had bought the bamboo shower curtain.
MO

“at the merest touch”

I had to stretch to link with Maureen (probably why I threw my back out). I took my cue from the word “shower.” This is the last flower stanza of the renku, which traditionally should contain the word “blossom.” I would think that the focus on language as a means of linking rather than emotion or sensory impression also makes it a literary stanza. *PN*

“where the black rock fell off”

Sheer accident -- gravity accumulates so Pat’s blossoms fall and the spring rains turn the ground soggy. The rock hunting habit that brought me to Buson’s haiku at the start returned me to a favorite quarry site in Wyoming where black slate streaked with white and crimson quartz is found. One bright spring afternoon, very tired from loading my Subaru with stone I sat down and, after a long time, this happened. *KA*

Walk along the dock
steering an empty boat
with a rope
that was the reason I bought
the bamboo shower curtain

That was the reason I bought
the bamboo shower curtain
at the merest touch
flurries of blossoms cascade
onto the bright grass

At the merest touch
flurries of blossoms cascade
onto the bright grass
where the black rock fell off
a sunlit cliff -- steam curls up

*Started March 6, 2006,
Finished December 22, 2006*

General Comments by the Miner School of Haikai Poets

Pat Nolan: Keith, as renku master, tried really hard to throw everyone a curve. I feel that in this session we were being tested. As a result some excellent links were forged. The link beginning “from inside the bus” is particularly nice. The run of stanzas beginning with Keith’s “the harvest moon shines bright” and ending around my “pinpoints of fine rain” sizzles. Maureen is to be commended for artfully dodging the “shark’s head” thrown at her. Michael’s link to my “how can I sleep” with his “eighth of an inch of silence” is genius. Maureen and Keith’s link beginning “Moonfaced You & I” really sings. And of course the master saved his best for last with a “walk along the dock”.

Keith Kumasen Abbott: As usual, Pat was being too modest re: his link. His visual intuitions seem to be at work in this poetic slow panning shot.

unaware she bares her forearm
bruises -- her new fierce love
 pinpoints of fine rain
pock the pea gravel path
 rattle of bamboo rake

Often the pores of someone’s skin inside a mild bruise shows first as points in the fading colors. This line might also be seen as a fleeting match shot that in its next visual and aural images soon morphs into something allusive of the Zen monk, *Kyogen Hsiang-yen*, who achieved enlightenment via the sounds of a bamboo rake: “*When you see plum blossoms, or hear the sound of a small stone hitting bamboo, that is a letter from the world of emptiness.*”

Maureen Owen: Turmoil felt afoot in the world during our Random Rocks Renku. Bush's bullying hubris cranked the war to ever more human destruction; Hurricane Katrina's victims were ever more victimized by the Bush administration. Keith's brilliant "harvest moon above the hidden shark's head" seemed to be the caveat needed to keep us in mind of lurking unseen danger and to set the tone for the mighty zig-zaging backbone our links created. On the zag of Keith's zig Michael and I plopped down on a beat up Minnesota lake dock and listened for loons and Pat, in what can only be topped by the incredibly powerful opening scene of pounding torrential rain in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, listened to the rain softly dripping from the eaves like distant voices in conversation. Our links made quick right angled snappy turns on each other. We began in a dry creek bed and ended in steam from a black rock falling off a cliff embodying in our momentary illuminations the attributes of that Tarot card The Fool.

Michael Sowl: I think we keep getting better -- the links going past just the words. Or maybe we've just done enough of them that we "get" the connections where a reader might say, "Whaa??" Any who, I liked the flow and the sudden 90's or 180's. Also liked the noise -- we got some LOUD rocks -- Pat's rain and cat yowl, Maureen's bells and dogs, Keith's "little brother's voice" etc. With lots of still lifes in between. And Keith's echo of Buson's hokku -- revisiting the dry creek bed with "the river's snowy mound" -- willows still there. Loved Maureen's answer to the loon silence. And Pat and Keith's not quite quiet ending -- beautiful.

Random Rocks

Kasen (36 verses)

Introduction (jo)

1. Keith Abbott, After Buson
2. Michael Sowl
3. Pat Nolan
4. Maureen Owen
5. KA *Moon*
6. MS

Development (ha)

7. MO
8. PN
9. MS
10. KA
11. PN
12. MO
13. MS
14. KA *Moon*
15. MO
16. PN
17. KA *Flower*
18. MS

19. MO
20. KA
21. PN
22. MO
23. MS
24. PN
25. KA
26. MO
27. PN
28. MS
29. MO *Moon*

Fast Close (kyu)

30. KA
31. MS
32. PN
33. KA
34. MO
35. PN *Flower*
36. KA

Random Rocks

is a limited edition
haikai no renga
presented to friends
of the haikai poets



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