

Net Kasen Renku: Summer Haze

Composed 13 May to 12 October 2000
by William J. Higginson,
Paul Terence Conneally, and Peggy Willis Lyles

summer haze
the horizon gone
with the rider

her icecream drips
on dad's shoulders

the little horse
shakes harness bells

topping a stack
of folded laundry
one red sock

behind the fence
a Good Humor truck
under bright lights

after mass
we chase two hats
into the bushes

on a taxi to the runway,
look to check the wind

they test their kites
over the wet grass

jagged potsherds
catch the last rays

are they out of practice
breath heaving like that

he consults
his book of dreams
for guidance

cherry blossoms
his story of dead men
softly told

the river swirls
an old frog clings
in determination

smiles
in a broken frame
above the bed

staggered echoes
from the other mountains
of a square-dance call

the crane stance held longest
by a Chinese acrobat

a dusty smell pervades
the dim library aisles

the faint sounds of a lute
butterflies rest on a rock

spiral stairs to the garret
where I watch and wait

I don't want to know
where time's gone off to

a crossword puzzle solved
under the full moon

in the rattle
of tills and trolleys*
I reach up high

we shimmy through
the quartz-blocked entrance
to the ruby mine

a slight shudder
and the boat docks
a freezing moon

his investments
novelty clocks and dolls
stacked in the loft

kneeling
beside the thinning scarecrow
Sherlock dusts a clue

she feels a tickle on her ankle
and winks into the abyss

they dissect owl pellets
for extra-credit points

earthworms sit out winter
under the putting green

chrysanthemums shine
over the earthquake fissure

a downy feather
in the groom's champagne halts
the bridesmaid's toast

a strong handshake
but he forgot to tell me
how much it would cost

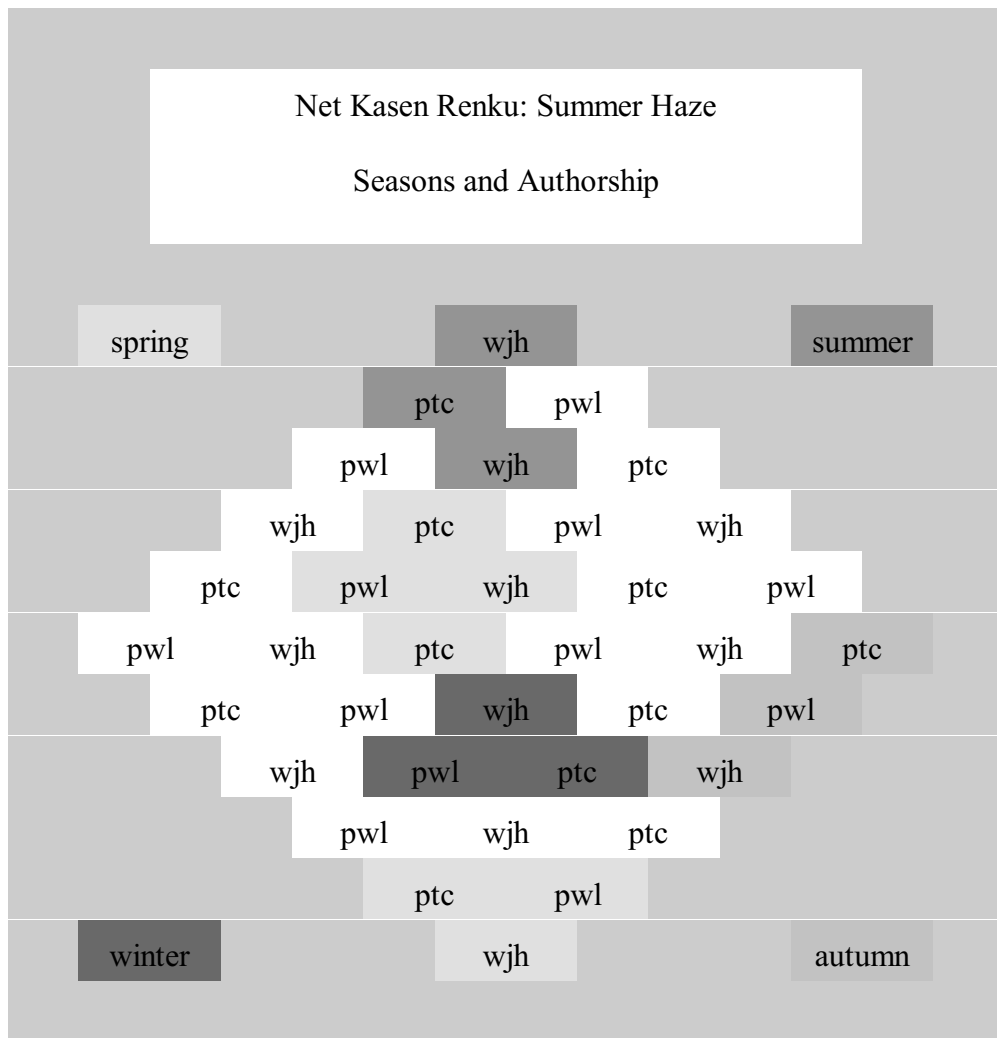
morning
three beers from the wood
return

spring rain on the old path
gives voice to a rainbow

if we should meet as poets
where the wild plum blooms

a moment of peace
before tomorrow's adventure
this lingering day

* "Tills and trolleys" (UK) = "registers and shopping carts" (US).



Background

Origins

Aside from the obvious connections of this work to the Japanese renku or haikai no renga tradition, its genesis begins in a composition called “Net Renga” composed by Cor van den Heuvel, Anita Virgil, and myself in 1976 and published in my *Haiku Magazine* that year. I suggested the format, which was similar to that used here, but only included 24 stanzas. In the accompanying material in *Haiku Magazine*, I suggested a number of other formats for various numbers of writers. Jane Reichhold and a few of her associates experimented with the form later on in the 1980s (documented in her book *Narrow Road to Renga*, AHA Books, 1989), and it seemed to go no further, until I invited Paul Conneally and Peggy Lyles to join me in creating the work featured above.

From “Net Renga” to “Net Renku”

When Cor, Anita, and I wrote “Net Renga” we didn’t really know a great deal about renga and renku. The Haiku Society of America was only just beginning to explore Japanese-style linked poems under the guidance of Tadashi Kondô, who had moved to New York City the previous year. In the tradition of linked poetry, they say that one must study and compose linked poetry for twenty years to really understand the genre. So, while the original “Net Renga” has many interesting features, some really fine linking and excellent verses, it seems properly titled as a “renga”—a poem loosely based on the Japanese linked poetry tradition. We have been using the word “renku” to mean a poem more closely based on the haikai no renga of Bashô and later poets. I felt it was time to try to achieve a greater representation of the full range of traditional Japanese renku characteristics in a poem that goes beyond the linear movement of one verse simply following another.

Format for three players. Hokku at top, with all three top verses in that season, if autumn or spring, or two of the top three if starting in summer or winter. The 7-verse cluster centering on “*c” on the left must contain at least three linked spring verses, including “*c”, while the 6-verse pyramid at extreme right apex must contain at least three linked autumn verses, including “b”. Except in poems starting in summer or winter, there must be only two each summer and winter verses, linked in pairs such that one pair is in the left half and the other in the right half. One of the two penultimate verses should be a blossom stanza, and two of the last three, at least, should be in spring.

Note that all verses in odd-numbered rows (or “tiers” as we called them) have three lines with the middle longest, and all verses in even-numbered tiers have two lines of roughly equal length, usually about as long as the middle lines of the three-line stanzas. Our ideal was a 2-beat, 3-beat, 2-beat rhythm for the longer verses, with a 3-beat, 3-beat rhythm in those of two lines, though a number of lines here and there are a beat shorter.

The Process

We started off with my three-line hokku at (a). Both Paul (b) and Peggy (c) wrote two-line responses. We worked the format one “tier” at a time, starting at the top. At each tier, we wrote the stanzas assigned to us without any knowledge of what others were writing for that tier, and linking to both stanzas immediately above ours on left and right diagonals. Thus, on tier three, my (a) stanza links with both Paul’s (b) and Peggy’s (c) in tier two. On tier four, just left of center, Paul’s verse links to both Peggy’s to his upper left and mine to his upper right; Peggy’s links to both mine to her upper left and Paul’s to her upper right. And so on, descending one tier at a time. Once the stanzas on a given tier were drafted, we shared them and made minor adjustments to avoid obvious infelicities or clashes. At one point, on tier 8, we switched Peggy’s and Paul’s verses to achieve better variety. As the leader, I gave instructions regarding seasonality and things to avoid as we began each tier. Paul kept a running chart of the topics we covered, to encourage variety by avoiding repeated topics. Peggy looked things over to see that we avoided some of the other unwanted types of repetition, such as grammatical patterns, families of related words, and so on. We did this all via e-mail, each tier involving several messages as we went from initial suggestions through composition, tentatively adding the draft verses, discussing and finalizing them, and then on to the next tier.

How Do You Read One of These Things?

There are several ways. As originally conceived, a reader could metaphorically pick up the net at any one of the knots, reading them in any order along the diagonals until the stanzas, or the reader, were exhausted. Another approach is to start at any corner stanza and proceed along one diagonal edge, wrapping inward once on completing each full turn, ultimately spiralling in to the center. Or, start at the top or another corner and work your way along diagonals to the opposite corner, then try starting again at the same place but go along different diagonals to the same destination, and repeating this process several times from each corner until all the verses had been read at least once. The coolest way would be to read it all from the top down, tier by tier, holding each stanza and its connections to those diagonally above in the mind at once, the way the great American composer Charles Ives was able to sustain nine different rhythms in his mind at once. For the rest of us, the most satisfying experience may be to read from the top down—or from another corner toward its opposite—one tier or column at a time, simply savoring each stanza and its connections to those on the diagonals immediately above (or below or to the side), then moving on to the next tier or column and doing the same. This method or the Charles Ives method have the advantage of giving you a sense of the seasonal clusters and love chains in their most appropriate sequences. However you read it, we hope you’ll have some fun along the way. We did.

Presentation on the Web

Part of what kept this poem out of the public eye for so long is that we intended that it appear on the web, and it has taken me this long to get to a point where I thought I could prepare it for presentation on a web page that would be relatively easy to read and understand. In doing so, aside from learning a good deal of HTML and web tricks new to me, I decided to center the lines of each stanza in their respective table cells. Although we wrote each of our stanzas initially flush left in their respective positions, centering each seemed the only way to get the proper visual relationships among the stanzas for the reader.

What’s Next?

Allowing for normal variations, I think we proved that a plan like this can work, and encourage others with enough intestinal fortitude to have at it! (You may wish to take note, however, that it took us five months to do it, and that we each contributed considerable time to the effort.)

William J. Higginson

First posted as <http://renku.home.att.net/kasen/summerhaze.html> 1 December 2005;
updated 3 December 2005. This PDF file posted 7 December 2005.

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