

Finding the Seasons in Our Haiku:

One Group's Experience

by *Ellen Compton*

Towpath haiku group has started to build a small collection of season words that resonate with the culture, landscape, and seasonal cycles of what we might call Towpath country—that particular place in which our poets live and write. The decision to do this grew out of discussions during haiku gatherings and workshops.

Towpath country includes the Washington/Baltimore corridor in Maryland, northern Virginia, and the Shenandoah. Our place is urban as well as rural. It is wetlands and the Blue Ridge mountains. It includes the Chesapeake bay—one of our nation's richest and most beautiful estuaries.

For Towpath poets, the collection is an opportunity for learning—for recognizing the local seasonality in our own haiku and haiku moments. Here, of course, the operative word is "recognizing," for the season word or phrase is to be an integral part of the haiku experience. (And note that the project is not directed to duplicating other collections, such as the Chesapeake *saijiki* under development by poet M. Kei.)

Let's take a moment to examine some of my own haiku for the seasonal references within

them. The four that follow reflect many seasons spent in a particular part of Towpath country: the Western shore of the Chesapeake.

outgoing tide

the sunset

in a beached jellyfish¹

"Jellyfish" is summer along our beaches, where the word has special summer significance for swimmers, owing to the clinging properties and painful stings of the critter in question. Only after I wrote the haiku, however, did I recognize that I had a season word. It was built into the haiku moment.

first oysters

shadows of seagulls reel

on the market wall²

In Japanese tradition "oysters" is a winter kigo. For this haiku, however, I saw that "first oysters" had to be autumn. According to the laws of the state of Maryland, the first boats may not gather oysters until sometime in September, and their return with the harvest is cause for celebration after a long summer doing without. It is said that Maryland laws are made to protect oysters, not people. Passions have run high regarding oysters and oyster

laws. In earlier times local, sometimes bloody, wars were fought over who could take oysters, and where, and when.

wide water . . .

flight of an osprey

shapes the evening light³

In summer the osprey is common along a narrow strip of mid-Atlantic rivers and shores. (It even fishes the Anacostia river, which flows through Washington city and into the Potomac.) Once endangered, the osprey is back in Towpath country in healthy numbers. We are grateful for its return.

the waves swell—

I empty another crab pot

of jellyfish⁴

Here it is not "jellyfish" but "emptying crab pots" that I see as the primary summer season reference. Usually beginning in June, setting and tending pots and gathering blue crabs are major summer activities and an important part of the economy on the bay and in many nearby rivers—an economy that is now threatened as pollution and climate change have seriously diminished the catch.

Now the seasonal references in these four haiku are from a single Towpath environment—the estuary. Towpath poets have written seasonal haiku from the mountain places and the river valleys. The Towpath collection contains haiku with some wonderful references to plants, especially those thriving in the countryside and along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.

Of course, as Tom has pointed out, a word or phrase might evoke a certain season in one place and a different season somewhere else. In the Mid-Atlantic region, the white-throated sparrow is a winter resident and stays around only until mid-to-late spring. I usually think of it as spring, because I most often hear its song when the days are warm and I can keep the windows open. Hearing the song from late spring through summer, however, Canadian poets might assign it the summer season. (In this context, we may want to consider whether we follow the Japanese poetic tradition—May the first summer month—or common usage in the West—May the last month of spring.)

Towpath country is rich in history, tradition, folklore. As is true for the continent as a whole, most of our waterways and many of our land places bear names given them by Native American peoples—Wicomico, Shenandoah, Potomac, Monongahela—and their stories linger. Who knows what we may find as we continue to explore and write about our world? Season words, like haiku, are a matter of discovery.

Notes

¹ *Modern Haiku*, 31:2, summer 2000.

² W. J. Higginson, *Haiku World*, Tokyo, New York, London: Kodansha International, 1996.

³ *late walk*, Jack Stamm Anthology, 2003. Chapel Hill, Queensland, Australia: paper wasp, 2004.

⁴ *Mayfly*, No. 29, July 2000.