

# Prosody for the Crystalline & Prosody of the Crystalline in English Verse

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## **Prosody for the Crystalline**

**DEFINITION:** The “crystalline” is a new haiku analogue; a seventeen syllable couplet that assimilates as much as possible from the Japanese haiku tradition into the English poetic tradition. A primary concern for the crystalline is the euphony of the verse.

**GUIDELINES:** The grammar (inflections and syntax) of the lines, which usually comprise one or two sentences in a couplet, should be relatively straightforward and natural. Unnaturally abbreviated or telegraphic grammar is to be avoided. The traditional omission of “understood words” is permissible (e.g., “Catch me.” rather than “You catch me.”).

Initial capitalization of the first word of a sentence, a proper name, etc., should follow common usage; do not capitalize the first word of the second line solely on the basis of its position. Terminal punctuation also should follow common usage. The versification of the poem into two lines, that is, the couplet form itself, serves the function of the Japanese kireji or cutting word.

All traditional English poetic devices (including, but not limited to, metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, allusion, rhyme) which can be used to advantage within the other rules and the set prosody are permissible. In such a short form, verbosity is to be avoided. Poets should strive for highly condensed and concrete imagery that enhances perception and understanding.

Transparency of meaning need not diminish the depth of poetic resonance.

While immediacy is highly desirable and, therefore, the present tense is normative, use of other tenses is not at all prohibited.

**PROSODY:** A crystalline is, ideally, a couplet of exactly 17 syllables. A couplet may be “regular” or “irregular” depending upon the symmetry of the lines. A regular couplet’s syllables are distributed 8+9 or 9+8. Other distributions are “irregular” but entirely acceptable if the verse works best divided unevenly.

A regular couplet is not inherently better than an irregular couplet. It is more important that the lines break where they should (remember the principles of kireji). The crystalline’s syllabic limit is consistent with the common western definition of haiku as a “seventeen-syllable poem.” A regular crystalline may be iambic or trochaic tetrameter, with or without one excess unstressed syllable, but a completely regular beat can be boring. Writing to a metrical formula will, predictably, yield formulaic, unsatisfactory, verses.

The harmony or beauty of sound that has a pleasing effect to the ear is achieved both by the selection of individual word-sounds and also by their relationship in the repetition, proximity, and flow of sound patterns. This is euphony, more important than strict metrics. Skillful word selection to modify the rhythmic pattern, i.e., modulation, is desirable.

#### LINKING CRYSTALLINES:

A crystalline is an untitled couplet, either a complete poem or a stanza, which follows a strict syllabic verse form, as described in the previous paragraphs. Several crystallines may be linked together as stanzas of a larger poem. In line with the renga tradition behind the development of haiku, alternating crystallines by different poets may be combined in a single poem.

This is not to debar a single poet writing a linked poem, which is entirely permissible. In any such linked crystalline, each

couplet must be autonomous, able to stand on its own, yet each couplet must be closely related to its following and preceding couplets; the internal links are substantial so that the whole poem has a poetic unity.

The rhyme scheme for linked rhymed couplets should have sufficient variety to avoid a cloying effect. Three adjoining couplets should not use the same rhyme. Some sample rhyme schemes for linked crystallines include: aa bb cc aa bb cc; aa bb bb aa cc dd dd cc; aa aa bb bb cc cc; aa bb cc bb dd ee ff ee. These are only samples; many other combinations exist.

Also, please do not take these examples to mean that linked crystallines must include 6 or 8 couplets. While 2 couplets (viz., a quatrain) is obviously the minimum, there is no necessary upper limit. The poets need to be able to recognize excess and limit the poem appropriately. Remember, rhyme is not required for a crystalline, but also is not prohibited.

**KEYWORDS:** The use of keywords (e.g., kigo and analogues thereto) is desirable in order to most succinctly establish a couplet's context, whether the context is a natural surrounding, time of year, or day, or phase of moon, a manmade surrounding, or even a situation.

The success of a poem's keyword depends upon whether it conveys essential information to the reader; it is not dependent upon compliance with a poetic canon of keywords, kigo, etc.. Nevertheless, the poet may be well-advised to consider canonical keywords and kigo precisely for their potential utility.

**CONTENT:** It is in content that the more fundamental difference from traditional haiku will be found. While traditional haiku value direct observation with the greatest possible degree of non-subjectivity, subjectivity is permissible in a crystalline. The poet's response to the object is admissible. The poet's thoughts and feelings are admissible.

The content of the poem is not of greater importance than the beauty of the language. As stated at the beginning of this article,

a primary concern for the crystalline is the euphony of the verse. Now, content is of great importance also, but not so great importance that the beauty of the verses should be sacrificed.

That having been said, poets are advised to keep the haiku tradition in mind, to consider natural elements for each couplet, to consider the poetic value of objective imagery, and to consider the concept of the poem as objective correlative of the emotional and perceptual content which the poet wishes to communicate to the reader. Poets are also advised to keep in mind other haiku techniques such as juxtaposition for resonance and the “third effect.”

In summary, three major characteristics of haiku, in western estimation, are the seventeen syllable limit, the kireji (cutting word) and the kigo (season word). The crystalline form incorporates all three of these characteristics. Furthermore, the haiku traditions of natural subjects and of objective imagery / the “objective correlative” are highly valued, albeit not enforced.

This new form is named the “crystalline” because the core value of the form is the highly condensed and concrete imagery of the couplet, transparent in its accessibility. The fact that the name breaks down to “crystal - line” is serendipitous.

## **Prosody of the Crystalline in English Verse** *A Revision of the Prosody – April 1, 2002*

This couplet variant is named the “crystalline” because the core value of the form is its highly condensed and concrete imagery, transparent in its accessibility. The fact that the name breaks down to “crystal - line” is serendipitous. A primary concern for the crystalline is the euphony of the verse. The technical criteria are really very simple. The hard part, the fun part, the real art, is developing a good ear for a euphonious verse. Nothing works here except practice. Of course, for those who are already accomplished poets and have highly developed ears for a pleasingly modulated line, the challenge may be simply in fitting a lovely line to this strict form.

A crystalline is a couplet, titled or untitled, rhymed or unrhymed, seventeen syllables in length, consisting in two lines of either iambic or trochaic tetrameter, with very minor variations permissible. The couplet must have exactly seventeen syllables, with deference granted the poet for dialectical variations in pronunciation.

The couplet must be complete in itself, not dependent for its meaning on additional stanzas. Even when linked (see below for linking), such autonomy is definitive for the crystalline form.

The couplet should consist in one or two sentences. Initial capitalization of the first word of a sentence, a proper name, etc., should follow common usage. Do not capitalize the first word of the second line solely on the basis of its position. Terminal punctuation also should follow common usage.

An essential is natural English diction, carefully modulated for euphony. The harmony or beauty of sound that has a pleasing effect to the ear is achieved both by the selection of individual word-sounds and also by their relationship in the repetition, proximity, and flow of sound patterns. This is euphony, more important than strict metrics. Skillful word selection to modify the rhythmic pattern, i.e., modulation, is desirable. The grammar (inflections and syntax) of the lines, which usually comprise one or

two sentences in a couplet, should be relatively straightforward and natural. Unnaturally abbreviated or telegraphic grammar is to be avoided. The traditional omission of “understood words” is permissible (e.g., “Catch me.” rather than “You catch me.”).

All traditional English poetic devices (including, but not limited to, metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, allusion, rhyme) which can be used to advantage within the other rules and the set prosody are permissible. In such a short form, verbosity is to be avoided. Poets should strive for highly condensed and concrete imagery that enhances perception and understanding. Transparency of meaning need not diminish the depth of poetic resonance.

Crystallines may be linked by one poet or by more than one poet. A crystalline in such a sequence is an untitled stanza, which follows a strict syllabic verse form, as described in the previous paragraphs, that is, several crystallines may be linked together as stanzas of a larger poem. Alternating crystallines by different poets may be combined in a single poem. This is not to debar a single poet writing a linked poem, which is entirely permissible. In any such linked crystalline, each couplet must be autonomous, able to stand on its own, yet each couplet must be closely related to its following and preceding couplets; the internal links are substantial so that the whole poem has a poetic unity.

Examples of crystallines from my first haiku collection, *Eight Shades of Blue: Haiku*.

## Crystallines

1

Day so bright, shadows seem like night.  
Cool veranda, dark within the light.

2

Buried at sea, our helmsman slips beneath the waves.  
Flying fish take flight.

3

Dead calm twilight sea.  
A dolphin leaps from black into the rosy blue.

4

Suddenly quiet, she gently hangs up,  
touches her father's photo.

5

On her letter is one last teardrop  
that marks the end and blurs her name.

6

Glittering black lake tonight,  
bright butter moon, your stunning yellow light.

7

In the treetops, the fireflies wink on and off.  
Distant thunder grumbles.

8

The graveyard's frozen hard.  
We must wait for spring to thaw both ground and grief.

9

In golden grove, leaves slide down sunbeams,  
a migrant bird's strange trilling song.

10

Windy, wintry day, the dead leaves fly.  
No birds will try this pallid sky.

11

Deep sleeping branches garner strength.  
Ice clad, they dream of April glory.

12

Late winter sky, lonely miles from you.  
The spruce hills turn a darker blue.

13

The mural on the mall's facade is  
festooned with butterflies at rest.

14

At the bottom of the wishing well,  
a thank-you note lies bleeding ink.

15

Whippoorwill wakens to the full moon  
rising clouds of delicious gnats.

16

Rain-soaked barnyard's a muddy bog,  
but amidst the muck, blooms marigold.

17

This primeval sea of prairie grass  
is grackle-peppered ... bison-strewn!

18

In banyan roots enwrapped,  
the granite Cross glows in the midst of lilies.

19

Turtle shell found on grandma's grave:  
vacant, yet it bursts with violets.

20

Amid myriad choices,  
we value voices who sing us a song.

## One Summer Day

Sequence, 21-27

21

From twisted sheets the new day rises,  
low sun dispelling fever dreams.

22

Watering my garden - with the green  
in the mist and steam, my rainbow.

23

In bright of day, mad dogs and I  
in maple-shade together lie.

24

New mown grass, wild onion scent  
console me through this torrid afternoon.

25

Ice tea pitcher breaks a beaded sweat.  
Steaming, we welcome thunder's threat.

26

Under soft black sky, the dark hills,  
the air filled with fireflies' fairy lights!

27

In the still night air, the ebbing heat  
provokes the gray tree frogs to sing.



28

Dazed, in the doctor's office;  
the foreign sound of laughter in the hall.

29

When she comes in, the whole room fades and  
becomes mere background for her eyes.

30

Green streak through desert drab;  
forty feet below, a lightless river runs.

31

Dawn forest afire - a lavender sky.  
No time for beauty today.

32

Motionless in high sun,  
I watch a thistle-seed ride the westward breeze.

33

Vintner's terrace dapples in warm rain.  
What fragrance from the mingled wine!

34

Black emptiness from the North Star to Orion -  
night clouds' silent flight.

35

In the clearing, a heap of vultures.  
Watching at woods' edge, a lone fawn.

36

Dirt brown hillside beneath a gray sky;  
two cardinals fly up the hill.

37

Tulips of a dozen colors  
wave gently in time with the cool breeze.

38

Perched upon each forest hilltop,  
houses in clearings with valley views.

39

Chasing away the neighbor's cat -  
my lawn is full of young birds walking.

40 September 11<sup>th</sup>

The dead and missing, countless souls -  
not one - no, none! - will be forgotten.

41

Highland cattle cooling down in the stream bed  
ignore the jumping carp.

42

A pitcher of iced tea sweats on the tablecloth;  
the wet circle spreads.

43

Low sun at late day; finally, a breeze.  
The lake glitters at its touch.

44

Harvested fields - the sight is bittersweet this year.  
Mother loved harvest time.

45

Below wind-whipped overhanging bank  
the rainbow trout swim slowly now.

46

The downstairs floorboards groan  
when everyone comes home for the holidays.

47

Your smile, so secret in the dark,  
is betrayed by your moon-flashing eyes.

48

Ebb tide turns and surges ashore.  
Meadow abloom glistens in sea mist.

49

Waiting for her at the clinic.  
Windows writhe with rivulets of rain.

50

Above the maple full of songbirds,  
two spreading contrails slowly drift.

51

Worming my way westward,  
I devour herds and flocks—I pass fertile fields.

52

Greybeard loon goes laughing down the lane  
astride a gust of passing wind.

## Sea Story

Sequence, 2, 3, 53-64, also called a “haiku sonnet.”

53

Sailor’s cliff-top home, with widow’s walk,  
is damp-dark on the seaward side.

54

The village schoolyard’s oak-lined lawn  
is sea-fragrant in the onshore breeze.

55

Sailor embarks before first light.  
His whimpering dog stays on the wharf.

56

The ship’s wake, spreading and fading,  
curves slowly out to the horizon.

3

Dead calm twilight sea.  
A dolphin leaps from black into the rosy blue.

57

Waves, rolling waves, waves rolling, rolling;  
the swinging cabin lamp keeps time.

58

A soft bed shared; flowers in a jar;  
farewells: another shore leave ends.

2

Buried at sea, the helmsman slips beneath the waves.  
Flying fish take flight.

59

In a distant port,  
a young man and his poor mother curse Sailor's name.

60

This final leg of his last voyage,  
Sailor carves several scrimshaw gifts.

61

Home appears high on the horizon.  
The widow's walk is empty, dark.

62

His dead wife's sister puts a teacup  
in Sailor's old rope-hardened hands.

63

Reflected in his milk-blue eyes,  
the sea is still in the cold, cold gaze.

64

His cliff-top home and its widow's walk  
are damp-dark on the seaward side.

