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Spamming Spam: The Dead-Meat Poets Society

aarts@large / By MATTHEW MIRAPAUL BIO

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The first time we kissed:
Your cheeks flushed a deep Spam pink,
Your lips soft, hungry.

John N. Cho created this and almost 200 other haiku devoted to the rosy-hued processed pork product. When it comes to mixing meat and meter, he is not alone. Since Cho established the Spam Haiku Archive last June 14, he has logged more than 2,400 additional efforts from dozens of contributors.

A small sampling:

Split the Spam atom
Enormous pink mushroom cloud
World covered in pork.
-- Thomas C. Elliott.

O.J.'s innocent
Spam is made from the finest pork.
Which would you believe?
-- Chris Fishel.

Spam haiku Web site --
Creative spirit awakes,
wasting a morning.
--Tommer Peterson

Primarily text-based, the archive is arranged chronologically in 100-haiku units. While a few entries are obscene, sacrilegious or just plain tasteless, most are clever, funny or profound.

Sometimes they can be all three, as in this offering from Fishel:

Descartes on pig parts
Says 'I'm pink, therefore I'm Spam'
Deep philosophy.

For those who find 2,600 Spam-based haiku a bit hard to digest in one sitting, Cho has thoughtfully created topical subdirectories, including these entries from the prolific Fishel on art:

Jackson Pollock drips
Spam grease on canvas, creates
"Number Twenty "

. . . on literature:

Herman Melville eats
Spam, starts writing about a
really big pink whale

. . . and on jazz:

Gershwin devours Spam,
looks at a can, writes "Rhapsody
in Blue and Yellow"

To date, there are almost no mentions of "spamming," the notorious practice of mass e-mailings that takes its name from the Monty Python comedy routine that repeats the key word ad nauseum.

Virtually every poem in the archive follows the rule, taught to millions of schoolchildren, that a haiku must have five syllables in its first line, seven in the next, and then a concluding five.

The poems also appear to meet the requirement that a haiku contain a reference to nature.

A haiku requirement: each poem must contain a reference to nature. According to Hormel, Spam is "made from pure pork shoulder and ham, which comes from a pig, which is as natural as it gets."

Spam is "made from pure pork shoulder and ham, which comes from a pig, which is as natural as it gets," said a spokesperson for Hormel Foods Corporation of Austin, Minn., which has been marketing the sandwich specialty since 1937.

Originally, the site included a section devoted to serious attempts at haiku, but it attracted only 23 poems and Cho eventually removed it, conceding that "the dearth of serious or orthodox haiku has been disappointing."

Still, some experts question whether it is possible to craft a true haiku about a canned, gelatin-encased meat chunk.

Gary L. Warner is a technology analyst at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., who is chief editor of Dogwood Blossoms, an electronic haiku journal with

600 e-mail subscribers and a Web site. He readily acknowledges the appeal of haiku and its built-in rules among those who surf the Web: "Programmers are big on standards."

But one night, when he was "really bored," Warner sampled the Spam Haiku Archive.

"It has nothing to do with haiku,’’ he proclaimed. "Some of those people try to submit 17-syllable trash, and I have to say that’s not haiku. There are beautiful haiku about drinking tea. They don’t focus on the tea, though; they focus on the experience."

Others say that if a haiku is humorous, satiric or not about a nature, it rightly should be called a senryu.

Dhugal J. Lindsay, who publishes his Haiku Universe home page from the University of Tokyo’s Ocean Research Institute, said, "I didn’t find a single haiku (in the archive). It should be termed the Spam Senryu Archive."

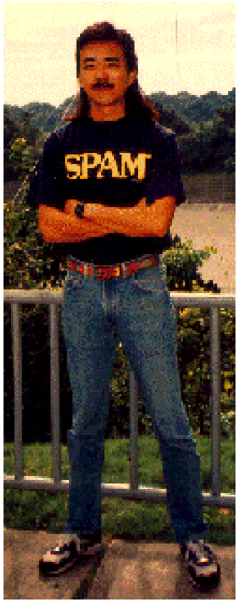
Michael Dylan Welch, a San Francisco-based poet and editor who serves as the California regional coordinator of the Haiku Society of America, said, "There is much misunderstanding about haiku."

While purists may insist that true haiku must be written in Japanese and follow the 5-7-5 rule, Welch said, "The English syllable is not like the Japanese ’onji,’ ours being far more variable in length and sound value.

"Merely applying the number of 5-7-5 syllables to English was a mistake made by early translators, a mistake that is perpetuated in haiku instruction still. A more appropriate equivalent is about 10 to 14 syllables. The 5-7-5 form only applies to traditional haiku in Japanese, and even in Japan, many non-traditional schools thrive."

Welch added: "Seasonal references are typically optional in English, also. A lot of people think of a haiku as a pretty nature poem. That’s a misconception. Theoretically, it could be about anything, including Spam."

Cho, 32, was raised in Tokyo and Tacoma, Wash., and his first language was Japanese. A research associate in atmospheric sciences at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, he said he has received a few negative comments from haiku purists.



He agreed that "it's clear that the 5-7-5 syllabic restriction is going to produce completely different effects in different languages, but if you remove the restriction altogether, then that would also produce a different poetic form. Therefore, there is no true haiku outside of Japanese haiku. But I don't object to the appropriation of certain aspects of haiku to produce 'haiku' in other languages. Spam haiku is just another such attempt."

The bottom line, he insists: "Poetry will survive."

Cho has not eaten the "mysterious and irresistibly repulsive food product" in 15 years, but he became interested in Spam haiku earlier this year when a friend from graduate school forwarded a few examples and he found them very funny.

"On the other hand, they were quite narrow in scope and technique, and I was immediately motivated to write some myself," he said. He sent them to a former college roommate, who sent back 15 of his own and a suggestion to start a Web site, which now receives "several hundred" hits each week.

"For most people, creating something original is a very fulfilling experience," Cho said. "In this age of MTV attention spans, most don't have the patience and discipline to channel their creative impulse into a sustained and coherent art form."

The haiku form, he said ":is perfect for our culture."

"Adding the Spam element," Cho said, "has the effect of collapsing serious and pop art. People who would have been too intimidated to write haiku feel comfortable with Spam haiku because it's camp. The archive is a place where people can let loose and submit the stupidest or grossest or most offensive haiku, or something dead-serious, and still have it come out in 'print' with their name attached to it."

Mr. Cho's contributors agree.

Kenneth S. Zuroski, an instructor of technical communication at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, said his poems "are serious attempts to create haiku that are as good as can be. They're not so much about eating the Spam as the essence of Spam. It's not even Spam per se. It seems to be a place holder on the page. It's an opportunity for critical thinking. It's a form of meditation."

Rex A. Jones, a programmer/analyst at Mississippi State University in Starkville, said he wrote almost 40 Spam-based haiku before, "I must have gotten burned out and lost the muse."

Although Jones admits he wrote them because he enjoys making fun of "gross food," one of his efforts -

> *Leaning to kiss her,*
> *Smelling her breath, I thought of*
> *Love and luncheon loaf*

-- provoked a positive reaction from Welch, who also responded well to Steve Garrigues' haiku:

> *Sunset placid pond*
> *where campers often linger --*
> *rusted can of Spam.*

"This is a very good example of where you can use the word 'Spam'," he said. "There's an innate humorous reaction." He felt that it contrasted nicely with the suggestions of autumn and impending death that he associated with the words "rusted can."

"Of course, you have to understand that my feeling for Spam haiku is much like my feeling for Spam," Welch said. "I'm a vegetarian."

Meditating on the 2,600 poems might also lead one to think that, in its own way, the haiku archive is itself a form of Spam. But one erstwhile poet, Alex Dunne, has anticipated that thought:

> *Spam's own irony*
> *Is that its haiku's never*
> *Worse than Spam itself.*

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- **The Spam Haiku Archive**

- **Cho's Editorial Haiku Page**, featuring three-line poems on timely topics.
- **The unofficial Amazing Spam Homepage**, replete with chunks of Spam history and trivia.
- Devotees of traditional haiku are directed to the **Shiki Internet Haiku Salon**, and to:
- **Dogwood Blossoms**, an on-line haiku journal.

Matthew Mirapaul, at mirapaul@nytimes.com, welcomes your comments and suggestions.
