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Better Than Sex?

Masaoka Shiki's Poems on Food

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter analyzes the food passions of Meiji-era poet and inventor of the modern haiku Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902). Bedridden for his final five years, he continued to obsessively consume and write about choice morsels he demanded from his family and disciples although his body was no longer capable of digesting them. The chapter illustrates the deceptive simplicity in Masaoka's poetry and prose on food, and how his use of descriptive minimalism, lists, and personification worked to impart the "essences" of food and the (homo)social relationships evoked by eating. It suggests that Masaoka employed minimalism because language was insufficient to wholly convey one individual's sensual experience to another.

Keywords: Masaoka Shiki, modern haiku, choice morsel, poetry, prose, simplicity, descriptive minimalism, sensual experience

In this well-known 1897 haiku, the poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the primary theorist and practitioner of the haiku in its modern form, weaves together his three great themes of mortality, poetry, and eating.¹

After I Am Dead

tell everyone
he was a persimmon eater
and a haiku lover

Waga shinishi ato wa

kakikui no
haiku konomishi to
tsutau beshi²

Despite its extreme brevity, the poem manages to encapsulate what is most important about Shiki. He loved to write and read, and he loved to eat. Over the course of his short life he composed almost 24,000 haiku.³ He wrote prolifically in other genres as well. His collected works run to twenty-five thick volumes of poetry, criticism, novels, diaries, and essays, which he managed to produce despite dying prematurely at age thirty-four after a long and painful battle with tuberculosis of the spine that left him bedridden for the last seven years of his life. That Shiki lived even this long, many readers believe, was thanks to his quite literally death-defying appetite. Shiki ate, and wrote about eating, perhaps more than any other Japanese writer.⁴ Many of his best poems describe the taste and texture of food and the sensual and convivial pleasures of eating. This chapter discusses what food meant to Shiki and what his **(p.221)** writing about food says about him as a poet and a person. It argues that Shiki's fixation on food was not merely a biographical fact recorded in his writing, but that it had a profound impact on the kind of writer he became.

So what did food mean to Shiki? Shiki's interest in food did not have much to do with acquiring the kind of "culinary capital" discussed in the introduction to this volume. He did not see it as a means of expressing class distinction, nor was it tied to his national identity as a Japanese, as would be the case with many later writers. As a literary critic, Shiki famously argued that a good poet should not limit him- or herself to one genre, but should be well versed in the composition of haiku, *waka*, and *kanshi* (poetry in classical Chinese), as well Western forms of poetry.⁵ This cosmopolitan attitude extended to food as well. He enjoyed all kinds of foods and did not dwell on their national origins. In this he was a typical Meiji cosmopolitan—just as happy with a beefsteak as he was sashimi, a lover of hot cocoa and green tea, of Asian pears, of ice cream, and, most famously, persimmons.

In the first instance Shiki saw food as fuel: it literally kept him alive by providing the energy and nutrients his body needed to defend itself against the disease that was slowly killing him. Food fueled his poetic imagination as well by inspiring him to stretch the descriptive powers of language to capture nuances of texture and taste. At the same time, by translating the sensuous pleasures of food into words, he was able to appreciate and savor what he ate more fully. His ability to intensify his pleasure in eating by writing about it became increasingly important as his health deteriorated, making chewing and eating more difficult. Writing about food also offered a way to relive past culinary pleasures in his imagination, a practice that may have had a curative effect on him.

Shiki never married or had any romantic relationships with women. In a typically half-humorous essay written in 1889 when he was twenty-two, he declared that all human beings have the same quantity of desire, but that it is apportioned differently depending on the person. Whereas some people experience powerful sexual desire (*shiki-yoku*), he himself was unburdened by it. In his case, he wrote, 70 percent of his desire was directed toward reading (*dokusho*) with 15 percent going toward eating (*shokuyoku*), and the remaining 15 percent toward “miscellaneous desires” (*zatsu-yoku*).⁶ It’s unclear what would be included in this mysterious third category. In any case, few readers have taken Shiki fully at his word on this matter. One famous argument claims that his “obsession with eating was a compensation for the loss of his libido or at least his inability to satisfy it as a result of his illness.”⁷ This seems a plausible enough explanation, although illness may not have solely prevented Shiki from satisfying his sexual libido. In fact the closest relationships he had were not with women but with men, with whom he formed powerful homosocial **(p.222)** attachments. Given the increasingly heteronormative atmosphere of Meiji-era Japan, these relationships tended to be mediated by something other than sex.⁸ The end of this chapter discusses how one such relationship was conducted through the exchange of food and writing about food. Food, for Shiki, I argue, was a powerful mediator of his connections to others: a lively nexus of material, cultural, and social values that offered him the incitement to write and to imagine and inhabit novel forms of sociality and intimacy.

Shiki’s Appetite

Shiki always had a strong appetite. He was especially fond of fruits, a fact that is indelibly tied to the way he is remembered by Japanese readers. Years after his death in 1902, Shiki makes an appearance in novelist friend Natsume Soseki’s 1908 novel *Sanshirō*. When *Sanshirō* first meets Professor Hirota on the train to Tokyo in the opening chapter, the professor impresses the young *Sanshiro* with having known Shiki and regales him with the following anecdote about Shiki and food.

The man spoke of the poet Shiki’s great liking for fruit. His appetite for it was enormous. On one occasion he ate sixteen large persimmons, but they had no effect on him. He himself could never match him, the man said.⁹

This is just one of many similar stories recounting Shiki's outsized appetite. Remarkably, his appetite never seems to have flagged even as his body succumbed to tuberculosis. Shiki was first diagnosed with the disease after coughing up blood in May 1889, when he was twenty-one. He remained relatively healthy for the next six years, but an ill-advised trip to China to work as a war correspondent in the Sino-Japanese War severely weakened him. He came close to death on the ship that brought him back to Japan and never really recovered. Beginning in the spring of 1896, the disease had begun to attack his spine, making it difficult for him to walk. His condition worsened progressively until, by the spring of 1902, he could no longer sit up or even turn over in bed. Most of what he wrote had to be dictated to others. And yet, even in these last months of his life, with his back and buttocks covered in painful sores, and his gums oozing puss and blood, Shiki ate with gusto. He kept eating fruits even after the tuberculosis bacteria had ravaged his digestive tract to such an extent that they could pass through almost wholly undigested.

Most people who are this sick find it hard to imagine wanting to eat at all. But Shiki continued to eat and also to write about what he was eating. His **(p.223)** private, handwritten journal *Stray Notes While Lying on My Back* contains meticulous records of everything he ate on a daily basis over the last year of his life. September 10, 1901, almost exactly a year before his death, has this typical entry:

Shit my pants Bandages changed

And then, without missing a beat, in the very next line:

Lunch: Three bowls of rice gruel with potatoes, bonito sashimi, miso soup with onions and eggplant, tsukudani, two Asian pears, one apple.¹⁰

This is an enormous amount of food for the lunch of an invalid, but it was not unusual for Shiki. A typical day's menu comprised approximately 3,800 calories. Of his total household income of about fifty yen per month in his final years, 65 percent went to pay for food, the vast majority of which was consumed by Shiki alone, while his mother and sister got by on much less. As one scholar has pointed out, this ratio of total income to food expenditure is equivalent to that of an average household amid the devastation of immediate postwar Japan.¹¹ In the case of Shiki's household in the early twentieth century, the skewed ratio indicates not grinding poverty but prodigious consumption. Another scholar has calculated that Shiki spent as much on sashimi every month as he did on rent.¹² Shiki's appetite for food was legendary among his circle of family, friends, and disciples, who recognized in it his fierce desire to survive and keep writing. As his contemporary Ioki Hyōtei recalled, it was Shiki's appetite that enabled him, "even after being confined to a six-foot bed for seven or eight long years, to keep fighting, never yielding in his battle with a cruel, atrocious, almost unmanageable monster of an illness."¹³

It is no doubt true that Shiki's appetite helped him keep living. Food provided Shiki with crucial nutritional and psychological nourishment. In the April 20, 1901, entry in his diary, *A Brushful of Ink*, which he published on a daily basis in the newspaper *Nippon*, Shiki begins by thanking his many readers for suggesting various remedies for his illness. While he is grateful for their well-meaning advice, however, he informs them that his disease "is not only incurable, but has also reached the final stage such that not even the most miraculous treatment or magical medicine would do any good. It is even beyond the reach of God at this point." He continues:

The only treatment that I do have available to me is "eating tasty things." As to what is "tasty," I determine this based on many years of experience and on my mood at the moment. I don't allow anyone else to tell me what is good and what is not. Things that one only eats **(p. 224)** rarely are good, but I can eat sashimi every day and never tire of it. Fruits, pastries, and tea are delicious even if you can't digest them. Skipping breakfast makes lunch taste better and dinner is better if one's fever is low. But I usually eat even if it is running high.¹⁴

Although difficult to render in translation, Shiki's sense of humor comes through here in the way the slightly overblown formality of the epistolary *sōrōbun* style contrasts with the colloquial phrase "eating tasty things" (*umai mono wo kū*). The latter phrase is set off by scare quotes as if it were a rare and little-known treatment in need of explication. It is true that at this time there was no treatment available for tuberculosis, so getting enough to eat was crucial. But something else is going on in this passage as well. Just as was the case with his taste in literature, Shiki had very strongly held opinions about food.¹⁵ Expressing himself so firmly on matters of taste was a way of constituting and fortifying his sense of self even as his body rotted away. At the same time, telling his readers that "tasty things" were the only cure was his sly way of getting his readers to send him care packages of food, and many of them gladly took the hint. Friends, disciples, and readers across the country responded by sending Shiki food to cheer him up and to help in his recovery. His diaries and correspondence in his last years overflow with haiku and thirty-one-syllable tanka written to express his gratitude for these gifts of food, as in this poem from 1901:

For the sick one
a gift of sea bream
on a rainy day in May
Byōnin ni
tai no mimai ya
satsuki-ame

As Miyasaka Shizuo, one of Shiki's most sensitive readers, has observed, the sea bream is an auspicious fish, meant for celebratory occasions, so there is something incongruous and poignant about a gift of sea bream for someone as sick as Shiki was at this time. And yet the easy rhyme between "tai" (sea bream) and "mimai" ("paying a visit on a sick person") makes it seem appropriate despite this incongruity, while expressing the cheering effect the gift clearly had on Shiki. The use of the Sino-Japanese term *byōnin* (translated here as "the sick one") to refer to Shiki himself is typical of his characteristic tendency to see his own situation from a third-person point of view and with a self-deprecating sense of humor that helped him to cope with an increasingly miserable situation.¹⁶

(p.225) But food offered Shiki more than just nourishment for his ailing body and good cheer from his friends and readers. He often claimed that it enabled his writing more directly. In an essay titled “Fruits,” written in 1896, the first year he spent mostly confined to his bed, he begins with elaborately crafted descriptions of the taste of pears, peaches, strawberries, persimmons, and other fruits, and then discusses how fruits fuel his writing. “Beginning this summer,” he writes,

I have started to crave fruits, and I eat them whenever I sit down to write something. Once I start writing, if I feel like giving up, I eat more, and I feel cool and encouraged; the thoughts come easily and my brush flies. My writing owes a great deal to fruits.

This is followed by five poems featuring the act of reading or writing haiku in conjunction with eating. The following two, each of which associates writing implements with food, are typical:

this little knife
for sharpening pencils
And peeling pears
Kogatana-ya
enpitsu wo kezuri
nashi wo hagu
On my red ink stone
skins of grapes
scattered about
Shusuzuri ni
budō no kara no
sanran su¹⁷

Another of many examples of poems where fruits seem quite literally to fuel Shiki’s writing is this well-known 1897 haiku, which is preceded by the headnote “Upon reaching the bottom of my haiku box late one night”:

After reading and
ranking three thousand haiku
two persimmons
Sanzen no
haiku wo kemishi
kaki futatsu¹⁸

(p.226) The “three thousand haiku” mentioned here could refer to poems Shiki was reading in his capacity as the editor of the haiku column for the newspaper *Nippon*, which ran large-scale haiku contests for its readers starting in 1893 that attracted thousands of entries.¹⁹ The poem could also refer to an evening spent on his life’s work of collecting and categorizing seventeen-syllable poems by earlier poets. By the time he died in 1902, Shiki had collected more than 120,000 poems into a massive index known as the *Haiku bunrui* (Haiku categorized), an invaluable resource for poets in the genre that still remains in print today.²⁰ He had also eaten many thousands of persimmons.

But perhaps the most important way in which food mattered to Shiki as a poet was in the specifically writerly challenge of describing the taste of food in words. This challenge might be described as a variant of what I shall term the “cooking show paradox.” Viewers watching *Top Chef* or *Lydia’s Kitchen* or *The Barefoot Contessa* are cut off completely from the tastes and smells on the television set, and yet those very tastes and smells are precisely what these shows are supposed to be about. Unable to convey them directly, the best the cooking show can do is help viewers imagine them through a set of proxies that can be conveyed audiovisually. That people do watch cooking shows and enjoy them as much as they do is testament to the fact that the producers have come up with many clever ways of conveying the taste and aromas of food without ever having access to viewers’ taste buds and noses: the sounds of simmering sauces, the crunch of fried foods, the fresh colors of a salad, and the look on the judges’ faces as they chew and swallow. Poetry about food presents an even greater challenge, since poets have only words on the page at their disposal. But Shiki took on this challenge enthusiastically, especially in his later years. As his teeth fell out and his digestive tract was destroyed by disease, he was increasingly unable to enjoy the foods he loved, so he wrote about food as a way to supplement his enjoyment of it, as in this poem from *Stray Notes While Lying on My Back*:

I sink my teeth in
and overripe persimmon goo
drips all down my beard
Kaburitsuku
jukushi ya hige wo
yogoshikeri²¹

The persimmon here is a gooey mess, with sweet, gelatinous insides. The five syllable in the verb *kaburitsuku* (“to sink one’s teeth into something”) takes up the whole first line, suggesting that the poet is taking his time with this **(p.227)** messy fruit. The initial sharp “k” sound yields to a softer “b” as he bites into the persimmon. The beard makes the mess seem even stickier and renders it more visible. At the time he wrote this poem, Shiki was so sick that he did not have the energy to raise his head or clean the persimmon off his beard. And yet he lists not one but “three persimmons” among the items he ate for lunch that day.²² The action of biting into the persimmon would not have felt the same as it once did when his mouth was healthy. But in writing the poem, he intensifies his pleasure in eating it, while also conveying that pleasure to his readers. The poem is a good example of Elaine Scarry’s discussion of how authors use “instructions” to readers on how to imagine “the actual structure of production that gives rise to the perception” to achieve a “vivacity” in verbal description.²³ It is hard to read this poem without imitating the action of biting into the persimmon, and imagining how it would feel and taste.

If this poem focuses on the sensuous texture of the persimmon, in others Shiki focuses on the visual appeal of fruits, as in this poem

deepest purple
unto black
this bunch of grapes²⁴
Kuroki made ni
murasaki fukaki
budō kana²⁵

Published in the newspaper *Nippon* on September 9, 1902, this haiku also appears in *Stray Notes While Lying on My Back*, where Shiki often jotted down early drafts of his poems alongside the lists of what he was eating. In the last months of his life, Shiki would take a shot of morphine and use the pain-free moments to paint and write poems about the fruits and flowers in his sickroom, so *Stray Notes* includes many watercolor paintings and sketches alongside haiku. In this poem he seems to be thinking about how to mix just the right color to paint the grapes. The poem uses the more angular katakana phonetic characters instead of rounded hiragana, creating a kind of visual staccato that accentuates the five “k” sounds in the first two lines.²⁶ The angular lines of the katakana and plosive “k” sounds contrast with the lusciousness of the voiced consonants and rounded vowels in the word for “grapes” (*budō*) in the last line. The combined effect of this passage from sharp to soft is like biting into a cool grape bursting with juice. (In the English translation, I have tried to approximate this with the “t” and “k” in “unto black” leading into the softness of a “bunch of grapes.”) If the reader can almost taste the grapes thanks to these techniques, it is because the poem captures both their appearance—their **(p.228)** “deepest purple” color—and what it would feel like to bite into them, in a way that is similar to the poem quoted earlier on the gooey persimmon.

The focus in these poems on the act of eating in all of its sensual immediacy was something new in Japanese poetry at the time. As Takeshi Watanabe points out in his chapter for this volume, works of classical Japanese literature such as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* rarely mention food, and when they do, they display little interest in how it tasted.²⁷ One critic Watanabe cites suggests that this was because “Heian cuisine tasted awful, and food was not something to be enjoyed.”²⁸ In his book on the culture of the seasons in Japan, Haruo Shirane offers another plausible explanation. “In the classical poetic tradition,” he writes, “sight, sound, and smell were considered to be elegant sensations while taste was regarded as vulgar.”²⁹ For these reasons texts in the high classical tradition rarely mention food. It was only in the Edo period, when political stability and burgeoning national trade routes brought about the growth of a richly diverse gastronomic culture, that food items fully enter the lexicon of Japanese poetry. Shirane notes that by the nineteenth century one popular poetic reference manual for seasonal terms (called a *saijiki* in Japanese) contained “as many as 480 food words out of around 3400 seasonal words—that is, some 14 percent of the total.”³⁰ But if food had at last become a legitimate topic for poetry in this period, it tended to feature in poems not in its immediate materiality, but as a social symbol of one kind or another. Thus food items tended to appear in occasional poems written in thanks for gifts of food, as indices of wealth or poverty, or as indicators of the season. The following well-known poem by Yamaguchi Sodō (1642–1714), on the sights, sounds, and tastes representative of early summer, is a good example:

Green leaves for the eyes
in the mountains the cuckoo’s cry
the first bonito
Me ni wa aoba
yama hototogisu
hatsugatsuo³¹

A classical poet would have been more than content with the first two of this poem's three seasonal words: the visual reference to green leaves and the sound of the cuckoo, both of which were well-established indicators of early summer in the classical tradition. But Yamaguchi's inclusion of a third seasonal word, the "first bonito," locates this poem squarely in the context of the Edo period's commercial gastronomic culture. The phrase refers to the bonito (also known as "skipjack") fish caught just as it comes into season in early summer, typically (p.229) brought by runners direct from the Kamakura to market in Edo. For an Edo-ite the "first bonito" was the quintessential indicator of this season. Its presence here marks the poem as a good example of the vernacular *haikai* tradition; the contrast between the first two lines and the third would have given contemporary readers a little thrill as the poem comes down to earth and shows its rootedness in local Edo culture.³² The poem also has a hint of class snobbery typical of the Edo sophisticate: only the relatively well-off connoisseur could afford to purchase the first bonito of the season. While such poems in which food items served as markers of season or class were common in the Edo period, it was less common to see poems describing the appearance, taste, or texture of food itself, as in Shiki's gooey persimmon poem.³³

Shiki's innovative focus on the taste and texture of food in his poetry can be explained partly by his protracted illness. He was especially aware of the sensual pleasures of eating both because he had always been an enthusiastic eater, and because in his later years he began to lose the ability to chew his food. In an essay on Shiki's relation to food, Kurosawa Tsutomu, a literary critic and dentist, notes the crucial importance to one's mental and physical health of the ability to chew food properly. Kurosawa quotes the following passage published in another of Shiki's public diaries on May 9, 1901, in which he reflects on what it has meant to him to have a strong bite. "I have realized something lately," Shiki writes.

Even though I have been confined to my bed for so long now, the fact that I have still been able to digest most kinds of food must have to do with my strong jaw muscles. It is surely no coincidence that I have long had the habit of continuing to chew my food when it has already been chewed, of further softening what is already soft, even the rice in a bowl of congee. It is perhaps because I tend to chew and chew like this (*kaku kami-kami taru tame ni ya*) that my top and bottom molars, which are most important for manducation, have finally been damaged such that now they cause me great pain, making it impossible for me to bring my top and bottom teeth into complete alignment. Now that it has come this far I have no choice but to swallow without chewing even the softest of foods. Swallowing without chewing not only makes it hard to taste what you are eating, it also causes one's stomach to ache and cramp. I have thus been robbed in one fell blow of both the nutrition necessary for my health and of one of my greatest pleasures in life. As my body thus weakens and I continue to suffer in anguish night and day, the question suddenly occurs to me: "For what reason do human beings hold on to life?"³⁴

(p.230) The question is of course rhetorical, and as long as Shiki is asking it and writing about his suffering, the reader feels that he will indeed "hang on to life." But the passage makes clear how crucial the pleasures attached to eating were to him. Shiki ends the essay with a long poem (*chōka*) in the archaic lyrical style of the eighth-century *Man'yōshū*, the very earliest collection of Japanese poetry. The poem reads:

my back teeth
that once twittered like birds
and crushed like mortars
seem to have rotted away
I cannot eat
the grains of the fields
or the fish of the sea
biting into a fruit
causes me pain
and the sweet and bitter greens
of Musashino
I must boil
into a slurry of rice gruel
so the days pass by

as each breath I draw
grows thinner

saezuru ya
kara-usu nasu
oku no ha wa
mushibami-kerashi
hatatsu mono
io wo mo kuezu
ko no mi wo ba
kamite mo itamu
Musashino no
amana karana wo
kayujiru ni
mazete mo
nineba
iya hi ke ni
ware tsuku iki no
hosori yuku ka mo³⁵

(p.231) Kurosawa argues that Shiki responded to his loss of the ability to chew food by writing poems in which he imagines or remembers himself eating. This so-called memory therapy (*kaisō ryōhō*), which is currently used in Japan as a way to prevent dementia in elderly patients, was a way of reliving the pleasure of eating foods that he could no longer enjoy.³⁶ In her book on food in Japanese literature, Tomoko Aoyama notes (modifying a quote about literature from critic Terry Eagleton) that food, like literature, “looks like an object but is actually a relationship.”³⁷ In Shiki’s case, he would often write about important memories in his life connecting food with people he was close to, as a way of dealing with the isolation caused by his illness. His many haiku on fruits and other foods are often inspired by his relationships with other people. In yet another essay titled “Fruits,” serialized in the journal *Hototogisu* in March and April 1901, he relates beautifully written anecdotes having to do with memories of eating fruits. In each one, a barrier of some kind is overcome and Shiki manages to gorge himself on some delicious fruit. The focus is not on the taste of the fruits themselves, but on the whole experience of acquiring and eating them. And yet, by the time he does eat them, he has built up so much anticipation in readers’ minds that they can almost taste the fruits. The following passage recalls a memory from the summer when he was hospitalized after coughing up blood while on the ship that took him back from a short stint as a war reporter in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and his two favorite disciples, Takahama Kyoshi and Kawahigashi Hekigotō vie to bring him strawberries.

I went into the hospital in Kobe in late May 1895. Kyoshi came and then Hekigotō came too, so I was well taken care of. But I was extremely weak and could hardly drink a cup of milk or soup. The doctor gave permission for me to eat just a few strawberries, so I had some every morning without fail. The strawberries in the stores were not fresh, so Kyoshi and Hekigotō took turns picking some for me directly from the fields. Lying in my hospital bed, I pictured the two of them gathering those strawberries in a strawberry field sloping gently upward. Before long a basket of strawberries was set upon my bed. I never forgot those strawberries, so when I came back to my house in Tokyo I took great pleasure in planting a Western strawberry bush on the fence of my garden.³⁸

Shiki had already written of this memory once in his 1896 essay on fruits cited earlier, in which he described how fruits fueled his writing.³⁹ In writing this passage five years later, he would seem to be eating these strawberries over **(p.232)** and over. He anticipates their arrival as he imagines Kyoshi and Hekigodō picking them, savors them when they arrive, and then remembers them for years after. The taste of the fruits is clearly enhanced by his affection for the two young men who went to such trouble to bring them to him. But just as the past cannot ever be fully recaptured, the object of one's desire can never be fully attained. In the following poem written in 1900, Shiki describes food in a situation where it is inaccessible, thus invoking desire—and recapitulating what I called the “cooking show paradox,” whereby food is seen but not tasted.

The cakes on the altar
look beautiful
winter solstice
Butsudan no
kashi utuskushiki
tōji kana⁴⁰

The “altar” in this poem is sometimes translated as “household altar,” or “buddha shelf,” where it is customary to place food as an offering to one's deceased relatives. The word I have translated as “cakes” (*kashi*) is a broad category that can encompass both sweet and savory, so has no exact equivalent in English. I chose “cakes” because of the poem's emphasis on the appearance of these treats, rather than their taste. Clearly Shiki chose the word “beautiful” (*utsukushiki*) because these are cakes you can see but not eat. The image encapsulates what it is like to have lost someone, to have memories and feelings associated with the person but to be unable to touch him or her physically. The poet can't have his cakes and eat them too and the seasonal reference to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, further intensifies this awareness. This day, the poem seems to say, is painfully short, and the shortness makes the cakes more beautiful and the feeling of loss more acute.

In Shiki's second essay on fruits, he addresses the fact that not everyone likes the same fruits. Most people like fruits in general, he writes, but when it comes to which ones are best, no one can agree.

Some people like persimmons best, but others dislike them because they are not tart enough and don't taste like fruits. Other people like Asian pears, while still others will eat any fruit except Asian pears. Some like strawberries, others praise grapes. Some like peaches for their elegance, while others say there is no fruit as delicious as the apple. To each his own.⁴¹

(p.233) This passage, in the middle of a long and rambling essay, seems relatively mundane on first reading. That not everyone likes the same fruits is true enough. On multiple readings, however, the passage speaks to something more profound: the impossibility of ever experiencing the world as someone else does. Differences in taste, and the concomitant failure of language to convey just how a particular fruit tastes to a particular person, is both a reminder of our final separation from each other and a spur to try harder to bridge the gap. Shiki was perhaps even more acutely aware of this because he lived with pain and illness for so long. Physical pain, like the taste of food, is an intensely subjective experience. Only the sufferer can understand it directly. Writing cannot in itself communicate taste or convey exactly what it feels like to be in pain. But it can come close, and in doing so, it can lessen our sense of separation from others.⁴²

Two years before his death in 1900, Shiki met the poet and future novelist Nagatsuka Takashi. Nagatsuka had been deeply impressed by Shiki's call for a new and more realistic style of poetry in his *Letters to the Waka Poets* (*Utayomi ni atauru sho*), which was then being serialized in the newspaper *Nippon*. He traveled to Tokyo from his hometown in Tochigi prefecture and showed up at Shiki's home in Negishi on March 27 intending to ask Shiki for his guidance in writing tanka, a form of classical poetry in thirty-one syllables that Shiki is credited with updating for the modern age.⁴³ Seeing a rickshaw parked outside Shiki's home on that day, Nagatsuka lost his courage to knock. But he came back the next day when no other guests were visiting, and Shiki received him warmly.⁴⁴ Nagatsuka, who was just shy of his twenty-first birthday, was quite beautiful, and according to an account by their mutual friend and fellow tanka poet Itō Sachio, Shiki fell hard for him. Donald Keene draws on Itō's account in his recent biography of Shiki, noting: "It was clearly not a physical relationship—by the time that Shiki and . . . Nagatsuka . . . became intimate friends, Shiki was a hopeless cripple confined to his sickbed. But, Itō wrote, it gave Shiki great pleasure to impart to Nagatsuka not only his knowledge of tanka composition but also his philosophy, and he showed Nagatsuka a warmth that went beyond that of teacher and student."⁴⁵ While Keene refers to Shiki's "love" for Nagatsuka, Itō has a harder time coming up with the right word to describe their relationship. It was "too idealistic to be that between father and son" and "too emotional to be that between a teacher and his disciple."⁴⁶ Like the taste of a delicious food that evades verbal description, the nature of their relationship was known only to the two who tasted it.

One can, however, get some sense of their relationship from the eighteen extant letters Shiki sent to the Nagatsuka in the last two years of his life that have been included in Shiki's collected works.⁴⁷ Sixteen of these are thank-you notes (**p. 234**) for an item of food that Nagatsuka sent to Shiki; one is an offer to Nagatsuka to come and take some scrap writing paper that Shiki has collected. The last is a letter in which Shiki encourages Nagatsuka to open a school and educate the farmers in his hometown, which is said to have inspired Nagatsuka to write *The Soil*, a novel about farm life in his village that would make him famous years later.⁴⁸ Thus all eighteen letters have to do in some way with food or writing. The list of food items that Nagatsuka sent to Shiki shows great thoughtfulness and inventiveness. Most are local specialties from around Nagatsuka's hometown in Tochigi prefecture, including angelica tree shoots (*tara no me*), thorny olives (*nawashirogumi*), chestnuts, mulberries, hachiya persimmons, a hare, two pheasants, three snipes, plum *yōkan* jelly from Mito, and a "mountain" of freshwater minnows (*yamabe*). Shiki's letters express his appreciation for the gifts and his affection for Nagatsuka. "Thanks for the sparrows," he writes in early February 1901, "I ate them the day before yesterday, yesterday, and today."⁴⁹ Often he includes poems as well. On September 27, 1900, in thanks for a gift of chestnuts he writes:

when I think that these
chestnuts are a gift from you
they taste great!
Kimi ga kureta
kuri da to omou to
umai yo⁵⁰

A year later, having received the three snipes, he writes:
my loneliness
just decreased three whole birds' worth
snipes in autumn
Sabishisa no
san'wa herikeri
shigi no aki⁵¹

Remarkably, several of Shiki's letters mention that the food item that Nagatsuka has sent him has been damaged or spoiled on its way to him. The fact that he feels comfortable telling Nagatsuka this suggests how close the two men felt to each other. The chestnuts received on September 20 are full of bugs, the mulberries are crushed, and the *yamabe* minnows are crawling with maggots. Shiki takes the damage in stride. He gives Nagatsuka some advice on better techniques of packing and preservation, and he writes in each case that he has eaten some of the food anyway (even the maggot-filled minnows). Shiki was **(p.235)** used to living with decay. He knew how to take what he could of the unspoiled parts of life and get the most out of them. In the following haiku, he suggests that the bugs in the chestnuts make Nagatsuka even more dear to him:

a heartfelt gift
of bug-eaten chestnuts
arrived today
Magokoro no
mushiguikuri wo
moraikeri⁵²

It is highly likely that Nagatsuka sent even more than sixteen packages of food to Shiki over these years and that Shiki was either not well enough to write thank-you notes or the notes do not survive. The long poem I discussed earlier in which Shiki laments the loss of his ability to chew food concludes with two envoys, one of which mentions another gift that most likely came from Nagatsuka. The poem uses the ancient name for the region in Tochigi prefecture where the town of Yūki is located, where Nagatsuka grew up.

spring quails
sent from the town of Yūki
in Shimōsa
How desperately I wish
I had teeth to eat them with
Shimōsa no
Yūki no sato yu
okurikoshi
haru no uzura wo
kuwan ha mogamo⁵³

This envoy takes the form of a thirty-one-syllable tanka, the poetic form in which Nagatsuka had apprenticed himself to Shiki. Tanka are traditionally associated with romance between men and women, but this one is clearly expressing Shiki's love for Nagatsuka and perhaps also his painful awareness that he will never be able to express it physically. The poem's four "k" sounds suggest the strong bite that Shiki has lost to illness, fading into the mush of the word "mogamo" at the end, an archaic particle indicating desire characteristic of the poetry of the *Man'yōshū*. While this word lends the poem an antique tone, the use of the colloquial word "kū," for "eat," makes it modern, and very much in line with Shiki's efforts to update the genre. Whereas other words in Japanese for "eating" (such as *taberu* or *itadaku*) derive etymologically from (p.236) words for "receiving" food from a social superior, *kū* refers directly to the physical act of eating. It was a favorite of Shiki's, no doubt because of its crisp "k" sound and its more primal connection to the act of eating. It features in many of his best poems, including this one, far and away the most famous of all modern Japanese haiku, and the one for which Shiki is best known:

I bite into a persimmon
and the temple bell tolls
at Hōryūji
kaki kueba
kane ga naru nari
Hōryūji

The poem has Shiki doing what he liked best: biting into a persimmon, back when his bite was still healthy in the fall of 1895. Most scholars agree it was written on October 26 of that year, when he stopped in the ancient capital of Nara on his way back to Tokyo after having spent that summer and fall recovering in Kobe, Suma, and finally in Matsuyama from his ill-fated his trip to China. The implied cause-effect relationship between the act of biting into a persimmon and the booming of the temple bell adds a humorous note to the poem, as if the persimmon contained a switch inside it that caused the bell to go off, startling the poet. The persimmon here is not an overripe persimmon as in the previous poem, but rather a small round “palace persimmon” (*goshō-gaki*). These are known for their crisp flesh, more like an apple, and are produced around Nara, where the great seventh-century Hōryūji temple complex is located. The four “k” sounds in the first two lines evoke the crunch of the persimmon and perhaps the crackling of fall leaves underfoot, while the long vowels in “Hōryūji” mimic the sound of the temple bell. Once again, there is a combination of hard “k” sounds with softer sounds, suggesting what it feels like to bite into the fruit. That persimmons were Shiki’s favorite fruit may well have had something to do with the satisfying “mouth feel” of these two “k”s—and perhaps also with the fact that the word “kaki” is a homonym for “writing” in Japanese.

All poetry functions in the space between words and things, but there is something about forms like haiku and tanka that awakens the reader in a particularly intense fashion to the vibrant materiality of language and the world-making power of words.⁵⁴ This may have to do with their extreme brevity, which makes every syllable of every word count, or with the way they articulate the world into aesthetically satisfying, “bite-size” fragments of seventeen or thirty-one syllables.⁵⁵ These aspects of haiku and tanka seem to have provided **(p. 237)** Shiki with a sense of secure connection to the world, even as his physical body rotted away.⁵⁶

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, some critics have claimed that food took the place of sex for Shiki. As Donald Keene writes, Shiki's "lack of interest in women . . . puzzled his disciples."⁵⁷ Robert Tuck notes that Shiki's love life is "one of the minor unsolved mysteries of Meiji literary history."⁵⁸ But rather than trying solve this "mystery" as his disciples and many critics since have done—by scouring his archive for signs of a woman with whom he might have been involved⁵⁹—it may be more productive to think of the ways in which Shiki's "sexuality" is not such a "mystery" at all, but something right there on the page, in the words he uses, in the evident delight he takes in them and the relationships that they mediate. This is especially clear in his many poems about food, as they express the pleasures both of eating and of connection with others. Food, after all, is a lot like sex, and a lot like poetry too: never just word or thing, but something in between.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful and candid critiques of this chapter in its earlier form. Thanks also to Nancy Stalker and to Susan Ferber for their careful editing and for their patience.

Notes

- (1.) This chapter is dedicated to Professor Donald Keene.
- (2.) *Waga shinishi ato wa* Masaoka Shiki, *Haiku: 3*, vol. 3 of *Shiki zenshū*, 25 vols. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975), 88–89
- (3.) The Kodansha *Shiki zenshū* (*Collected Works of Shiki*) lists 23,647 haiku written by Shiki, including 18,191 included in his notebooks and/or published, 3,372 that he crossed out, and 2,085 "gleanings" (poems that were either first drafts, were published but then left out of his diaries, etc.). See *Shiki zenshū*, 3:729. All of Shiki's haiku have been conveniently compiled in a searchable database by the Shiki Museum in his hometown of Matsuyama. It can be found here: <http://sikhaku.lesp.co.jp/community/search/index.php>.
- (4.) Shiki is discussed prominently in a number of books on food and Japanese literature, including Tomoko Aoyama, *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); and Kōzaburō Arashiyama, *Bunjin Akujiki* (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 2000).

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- (6.) Masaoka Shiki, "Dokusho-Ben," n.d., http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000305/files/3608_17700.html.
- (7.) *Reading Food* Tsutomu Kurosawa, "Byōja No Bungaku: Masaoka Shiki Ni Okeru Yamai No Bungaku III: Gyōga Manroku Kō," *Ijigaku Kenkyū* 9 (December 10, 1994): 1-70, p. 45
- (8.) Keith Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity: Homosocial Narrative in Modern Japanese Fiction*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 352 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2012)
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- (13.) Donald Keene, *The Winter Sun Shines In: A Life of Masaoka Shiki*, Asia Perspectives: History, Society, and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 20
- (14.) Masaoka Shiki, "Bokuju Itteki," in *Zuihitsu 1*, vol. 11 of *Shiki zenshū*, 91-227, p. 168
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(24.) Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2002), 98

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(28.) Kiyoyuki Higuchi, *Taberu Nihon Shi*, Asahi Bunko (Tōkyō: Asahi Shuppansha, 1996)

(29.) Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

(30.) Shirane, *Japan and the Culture*, Kindle locations 4282–4283.

(31.) Faubion Bowers, ed., *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996), 12

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(35.) Masaoka, "Bokuju Itteki," 184.

(36.) On this, see Kurosawa, "Byōja No Bungaku."

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(38.) Masaoka Shiki, "Kudamono," in *Zuihitsu 2*, vol. 12 of *Shiki zenshū*, 491-501

(39.) Masaoka, "Kudamono."

(40.) Masaoka, *Haiku: 3*, 366.

(41.) Masaoka, "Kudamono," 494-495.

(42.) Christina Crosby, *A Body, Undone: Living on after Great Pain*, *Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12

(43.) *waka* Robert H Brower, "Masaoka Shiki and Tanka Reform," in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald Shiveley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 379-418

(44.) Wada Katsushi, ed., *Shiki no isshō*, vol. 14 of *Shiki senshū* (Nagaizumi-chō Japan: Zoshinkai shuppansha, 2003), 534-535

(45.) Keene, *Winter Sun Shines In*, 191.

(46.) Sachio Itō, "Masaoka Shiki-Kun," in *Kaisō No Shiki*, in *Bekkan 2*, vol. 23 *Shiki zenshū*, 98-101

(47.) Between April 13, 1900 and August 19, 1902.

(48.) Takashi Nagatsuka, *The Soil*, trans. Ann Waswo (London: Routledge, 1989)

(49.) Masaoka, *Shokan 2*, , 610.

(50.) Masaoka, *Shokan 2*, 558.

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(54.) chapter 3 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)

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(56.) Yoshiharu Suenobu, *Masaoka Shiki, Jūgunsu*, Shohan (Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 2011), 97

(57.) Keene, *Winter Sun Shines In*, 190.

(58.) Robert Tuck, "The Poetry of Dialogue: Kanshi, Haiku and Media in Meiji Japan, 1870-1900" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1034267673/>, 120

(59.) Horiuchi Tsuneyoshi, *Koi suru Masaoka Shiki* (Matsuyama, Japan: Sōfūsha shuppan, 2013)

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