

IT BREAKS YOUR HEART

Haiku and Senryu on the 2023 New York Mets

JAMES KNIPPEN • DANIEL SHANK CRUZ

Edited by Jamie Wimberly



The concept of baseball haiku doesn't exactly come out of left field (as readers of Cor van den Heuvel know well), but Knippen and Cruz have pitched a perfect collection! Never content to walk to first, the poets swing for the fences with every verse, capturing a wide assortment of moments, both intimate and iconic. Well worth the read!

—Edward Cody Huddleston, author of *Wildflowers in a Vase*

This tender, funny, smart collection about baseball is also a collection of love poems that, yes, can break your heart. In their haiku and senryu, James Knippen and Daniel Shank Cruz direct our attentions—in the embodied images of their chosen forms—to the very specific excitements and disappointments that comprise love. I attended these poems as a devoted fan might, showing up to discover and rediscover how a complex love might look, taste, and feel even as “the field / haunted by ghosts” inevitably brought me to “the season’s slow end.”

—David Wright, author of *The Small Books of Bach* and *Local Talent*

If dreams begin reality, the 2023 Mets were having nightmares. Not so for haiku poets James Knippen and Daniel Shank Cruz, who provide a delightful romp from opening day until the final out!

—Tom Painting, associate editor of *The Heron’s Nest*

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REDHEADED PRESS

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First published by Redheaded Press in 2024
Alpharetta, Georgia, USA

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This book is dedicated to Elizabeth and Miki with love.

FOREWORD

I freaking detest the Mets but am a life-long baseball fan. When James and Daniel proposed publishing a book combining haiku and baseball, I didn't hesitate to say yes. Baseball, after all, represents a series of haiku moments in a long season, bringing us joy and grief in equal measure.

James and Daniel have written an intimate account of the Mets' 2023 season, which began with much hope but fizzled early on. The book reads like a play in haiku, with a cast of characters and scenes throughout the season. Although the references can admittedly be a bit esoteric, the cadence and rhythms throughout this fine book will resonate with all baseball fans.

The book also serves as a stepping stone to introduce the New Haiku project as an attempt to broaden the audience for haiku. You will be seeing many types of collaborations with other creatives around these poems in the coming months.

One final word about the detested Mets. Last year, the Mets (foolishly) brought on two of my favorite pitchers, Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander, from my days growing up with the Detroit Tigers. So, everything comes full circle eventually.

There is beauty in that.

Jamie Wimberly
Editor

PREFACE

“It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall all alone.”

—former Major League Baseball commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti

Daniel Shank Cruz

James Knippen

Even though I grew up in the Bronx, which is generally Yankees territory, I became a Mets fan because my father is a Mets fan—he was a boy living in Manhattan when they played their first two seasons there at the Polo Grounds in 1962 and 1963. He took me to my first Mets game at Shea Stadium when I was five years old. The grass was the greenest green I had ever seen, way brighter than it looked on television. The crowd, approximately 30,000 people, was the largest gathering I had ever been a part of. Dwight Gooden pitched brilliantly, Darryl Strawberry hit a grand slam, and the Mets beat Atlanta 16-4. I was hooked. Other than my family, the Mets have been the most consistent thing in my life since then, a steady presence through four academic degrees, two marriages, moves to six different states, and even the pandemic.

I didn't become a true fan of baseball until I was 35 years old. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, I had been obligated as a child to pick the Cubs or the White Sox as my team of choice. Having been to games at both Wrigley and Comiskey, I chose the Cubs. My decision wasn't informed by any knowledge of players or the game itself, but by the respective atmosphere of the stadiums: whereas Comiskey was filled with echoes of fans airing frustrations via a plethora of obscenities that might feel at home in a dive bar (but not in a third-grader's ears), Wrigley felt like a big block party. It was odd that Wrigley felt so welcoming given the Cubs' persistence at failure over generations. I had no idea when I sided with the Cubs that I was preparing to hop from one historically hapless fandom to another.

The next season, 1986, the Mets won the World Series. Then, in those pre-Wild Card years, they won their division again two years later, so I assumed that playoff appearances and championships would be a regular occurrence. Instead, the team experienced a decade of futility. Since their loss to the Dodgers in game 7 of the 1988 National League Championship Series (NLCS), the Mets have only made the playoffs six times. Their losses in the 2016 Wild Card game to San Francisco and the 2022 Wild Card Series to San Diego were merely infuriating, but their losses in the 1999 NLCS to Atlanta, the 2000 World Series to the Yankees, the 2006 NLCS to St. Louis, and the 2015 World Series to Kansas City were all crushing in ways that still leave me replaying the final moments in my head late at night when I can't sleep.

When I was young, it was common knowledge in Chicagoland that the Cubs were cursed and would never again win a World Series. When they finally won in 2016 (108 years after their last victory), I was watching from Texas, where I was pursuing my MFA in poetry. I hadn't seen any other games that season, but as my cheers dissolved over the dark prairie behind my small house, I couldn't help but feel a little sad. While the win marked the end of an era of hurt for many people, it also meant the end of the ghostly aura surrounding the team's long history of loss. Never again in my lifetime would Chicago know the deathly hilarity of a fan bringing a live goat to Wrigley in an attempt to lift the curse that William Sianis, owner of the Billy Goat Tavern, placed on the Cubs in 1945 after he and his goat Murphy were removed from the park. Watching the Cubs win the World Series that November was like seeing the depiction of an exorcism on film: once the demon is gone, the relief is huge, but the movie is over, and you can never watch it again for the first time.

During the summer of the Mets' 2016 playoff run, I discovered haiku. I noticed a copy of Cor van den Heuvel and Nanae Tamura's anthology *Baseball Haiku* at a library sale, and decided its \$1.00 price tag was worth it because of my fandom.¹ The genre's form felt perfectly suited to the sport and vice versa because of how both are profound and ephemeral at the same time. Baseball is a game of waiting briefly interrupted by moments of action and beauty, much like a haiku moment interrupts our mundane everyday existence. Reading the anthology inspired me to begin writing poems of my own. It gave me a lineage I could fit into.

The following year, with baseball being the furthest thing from my mind, I moved to New York for a position at Utica College, where I became friends with Daniel Shank Cruz, a colleague in the English Department and life-long Mets fan. The Utica area feels like Yankees territory—Mets-wear doesn't provoke any trash talk or violence, but it's a rarer bird in a skyful of magpies, and there isn't much reason to start rooting for the Mets unless one is given to you. It wasn't until Daniel left Utica in 2021 that I started watching the Mets as a way to continue my friendship with them after they moved to New Jersey, just a quick train ride from Citi Field. I was immediately gripped by the seasonal fates of Francisco Lindor, Pete "Polar Bear" Alonso, Jeff "the Squirrel" McNeil, and others. Incidentally, one year earlier, Daniel had also spurred my greater interest in haiku by recommending me for the Haiku Society of America's 40 Under 40 program (funded by Jamie Wimberly).

¹ Cor van den Heuvel and Nanae Tamura, eds., *Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written About the Game* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

In March 2023, with Spring Training a few weeks old, James got in touch with Daniel to talk about a project: documenting the Mets' 2023 season via haiku and senryu. The Mets were coming off a 101-win season, the second highest total in their history, and during the winter had made numerous high-profile additions that resulted in their roster having the highest payroll in baseball history. It looked like a magical season in the making, so why not spend it highlighting some of its notable happenings in poetry?

Alas, the season was anything but magical. After going 14-7 in their first 21 games, the Mets went 61-80 the rest of the way, falling out of serious playoff contention by July and stumbling to a fourth-place finish in the National League East. The season was marked by untimely injuries and confusing, frustrating personnel moves.

Nevertheless, baseball marked our lives every day, and it was comforting to document the haiku moments that occurred during this daily practice. These poems inhabit a space between “desk haiku” and traditional experiential haiku. They were written in the moment as a record of our emotional experiences of fandom, inspired by real events, but these events were observed from afar via television. However, as Bill Higginson argues, “the ‘aha’ moment that we are all looking for sometimes comes in the original experience of nature and at other times in the making of the poem itself.”² In writing these poems, we tried to capture the mystical nature of what happens between fans and the action on the diamond.

In reality, the reason that the Mets' 2023 season ended so tragically is this book, which spelled doom for the team from its conception. This is, of course, the same ridiculous logic that leads a superfan to think, *Dammit! We would have won if only I had been wearing my lucky hoodie!* (Or perhaps that leads a Cubs fan to wear a shoe on their head, as in “Cubs down 9”). But our argument is evinced by the spirit of the haiku moment itself: shouldn't it occur naturally, like an epiphany? Is it not a sort of sacrilege to go searching for haiku moments on television as part of a rigidly defined book project about one baseball team? Our argument is further supported by the fact that if the Mets had won the World Series, this book would have been of some capitalistic value, not only because baseball teams become immediately beloved upon winning, but because haiku, as far as poetic forms go, may be the most globally recognizable poetic form today—even the poetry-phobic can recognize haiku and upon seeing this book might have thought, *Aha! The just-right stocking stuffer for that literature-loving sports enthusiast I know!* But isn't this kind of capitalistic mindset antithetical to the impetus behind, and even the aesthetics of, haiku? So, even though our book predestined the Mets to a losing season, we take heart that we will not meet the same fate as Steve Bartman, who had to go into hiding after interfering with a play that contributed to the Cubs losing game 6 of the NLCS in 2003, continuing the long Curse of the Billy Goat, because despite the popularity of haiku as a poetic form, the number of demented Mets fans that read this book will be far too few for alarm. Of course, we are being facetious, and also completely serious.

Here, then, is the tragedy of the Mets' 2023 season in haiku and senryu.

² Quoted in Lee Gurga, “Normative Haiku and Beyond,” *Modern Haiku* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 35.

CAST OF CHARACTERS IN THE POEMS

“Baty”: Brett Baty, the Mets’ rookie third baseman who began the season with the minor league Syracuse Mets.

“Buck”: Buck Showalter, the Mets’ manager who was fired at the end of the season.

“Cabbage”: Trey Cabbage, first baseman for the Los Angeles Angels.

“Cookie”: Carlos Carrasco, a Mets starting pitcher.

“Escobar”: Eduardo Escobar, a Mets’ third baseman who was traded midway through the season.

Buck Farmer: Relief pitcher for the Cincinnati Reds.

“Francisco”: Francisco Lindor, the Mets’ everyday shortstop.

“Gary”: Gary Cohen, the Mets’ everyday television play-by-play announcer.

“Gelbs”: Steve Gelbs, the Mets’ television sideline reporter and occasional play-by-play announcer.

“Guillorme”: Luis Guillorme, a Mets utility infielder.

“Keith”: Keith Hernandez, one of the Mets’ television color commentators and a star of the 1986 World Series champion Mets.

“Max”/“Scherzer”: Max Scherzer, a Mets starting pitcher who was traded near the trade deadline in late July.

“McNeil”: Jeff McNeil, everyday Mets infielder/outfielder.

Bob Murphy: Mets radio and television broadcaster from 1962-2003.

“Nimmo”: Brandon Nimmo, the Mets’ everyday centerfielder.

“Ottavino”: Adam Ottavino, a Mets relief pitcher.

“Ortega”: Rafael Ortega, a Mets outfielder.

“Pete”/“Polar Bear”: Pete Alonso, the Mets’ everyday first baseman.

“Peterson”: David Peterson, a Mets pitcher.

“Raley”: Brooks Raley, a Mets relief pitcher.

“Ronnie”: Ron Darling, one of the Mets’ television color commentators and a star of the 1986 World Series champion Mets.

“Ruf”: Darin Ruf, a Mets utility player who was cut from the team during Spring Training.

“Senga”: Kodai Senga, a Mets starting pitcher whose most famous pitch is his “ghost fork.”

“Starling”: Starling Marte, a Mets outfielder.

Steve Cohen: The owner of the Mets and the wealthiest owner in the Major Leagues.

The Truck: The behind-the-scenes crew for Mets television broadcasts.

“Vogey”: Daniel Vogelbach, a Mets designated hitter.

For further details about the individual games referenced by the poems, please see Baseball Reference’s webpage of the Mets’ 2023 schedule and box scores:

<https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/NYM/2023-schedule-scores.shtml>

SPRING

pitch clock
a fan shouts numbers
out-of-sync

3/4/2023

0 for 4 the pitcher's smirk

3/13/2023

Ruf rainbows a foul
caught at the wall—
ugly green hats

3/17/2023 (St. Patrick's Day)

infield dust storm
Darin Ruf hitting .600
in his head

3/24/2023

brilliant sunshine Vogey steals the base

3/25/2023

Opening Day

Opening Day Scherzer's stubble

the bunting has been hung—
first stolen base
Starling's
—after Gary Cohen

0 and 2
the shift
in McNeil's face

3/30/2023

first challenge lost “IMPACT OF NEW RULES”
—after The Truck

3/31/2023

Vogey's out
but Pete's stache—
in vogue
—after Gary and Keith Hernandez

4/1/2023

roof closed
the field
haunted by ghosts

4/2/2023

ghost pitch
a black bat
goes flying

4/2/2023

Cream City Cookie crumbles

Milwaukee, 4/3/2023

first stolen third
Oakleys explode
into a kneecap

4/9/2023 (Easter)

mound meeting
the low roar
of an airplane

4/9/2023

Escobar on the interstate
Baty still in Syracuse
#TwitterDrama

4/14/2023

elephant hats green boas the circus is over

Oakland, 4/14/2023

Ottavino strands two silent bongos

4/15/2023

bases loaded for Baty commercial break

4/17/2023

homerun Gary doing the Count's voice

4/20/2023

Cadillac speakeasy Escobar shoots a triple

4/26/2023

rain delay
everybody eating
cupcakes
—for Gary’s birthday

4/28/2023

Gelbs in the booth
the shape
of Peterson’s slider
—after Keith

5/9/2023

over-the-wall catch—
a girl gazes into
her popcorn box

5/10/2023

Buck Farmer pitching to Brett Baty baseball names

5/10/2023

afternoon baseball
sunbeam on
the subway seat

5/11/2023

balls falling into
cherry blossoms
hand-drawn

Washington, DC, 5/12/2023

Cubs down 9
a fan with a shoe
on his head

5/25/2023

rubber game nuns in the front row

6/11/2023

SUMMER

side retired the mustard on Max's fastball
—after Keith

6/24/2023

sun and shadow
the prayer
in Raley's cap

6/24/2023

wildfire smoke Steve Cohen's money

6/29/2023

another error

a fan f

a

l

l

s

onto the field

7/2/2023

America...
Max throws two pitches
and gets a strikeout
—after Gary

7/4/2023

golden clouds
Guillorme wins it
in extra innings

7/16/2023

Fenway's green beauty YANKEES SUCK

7/22/2023

92

in the shade
the fans' fans

7/27/2023

high and away
SENGA
in Sonic letters

7/27/2023

monsoon rains
tractors weighing
the tarp down

7/27/2023

rain delay
the warning track
sweeping away

7/27/2023

heat waves ripple
across the moon
Scherzer's sweat

7/28/2023

Max traded the rain the boos

7/29/2023

trading deadline the rain washes the air
—after Bob Murphy

8/1/2023

Boog's Barbecue the bullpen falls apart

Baltimore, 8/4/2023

the correct route
not taken—
Ortega makes the out

8/6/2023

deuces wild
in the sixth
a couple eating nachos

8/8/2023

another moonshot
Polar Bear
devouring the Cubs

8/9/2023

the Arch's shadow

Nimmo's

diving

catch

8/17/2023

Cookie pitches to Cabbage puns aplenty

8/26/2023

FALL

the season's slow end
fast forwarding
through PIX commercials

9/24/2023

six scoreless Ronnie in Keith's tie

9/28/2023

Buck's last game the length of Francisco's hug

10/1/2023



James Knippen is a poet and mushroom identification expert living in New York's Mohawk Valley. He is the author of *Would We Still Be* (New Issues, 2021) and co-author of *Between Falling Leaves and Their Shadows* (Redheaded Press, 2021). His poems have appeared in *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Frogpond*, and elsewhere.



Daniel Shank Cruz (they/multitudes) is a queer disabled boricua who grew up in the Bronx and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Multitudes is the author of a book of literary criticism, *Queering Mennonite Literature* (2019), and a hybrid memoir/literary critical text, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* (2024), both published by Penn State University Press. Their writing has also appeared in venues such as *Frogpond*, *Kingfisher*, *Modern Haiku*, *Religion & Literature*, *Your Impossible Voice*, and numerous essay collections. Visit them at danielshankcruz.com.



Jamie Wimberly is a poet and painter. Jamie's work has appeared in numerous poetry publications and haiku journals. His first book of poetry, *Before I Forget Them*, was published in 2020 by Redheaded Press. He has collaborated with Casey Stein, Marquelle Young, and other filmmakers to produce award-winning "haiku movies." In addition to poetry, Jamie's artwork has been widely recognized, including a nomination for the Whitney Biennial.

No seasonal sport is better suited to haiku than baseball, from spring training to the fall classic. These poems revel in the subtleties and complexities of patience and presence necessary for both baseball and haiku. This collection focuses on the season that wasn't, standing in for any team's passionate effort that falls short, and how fans might love the team anyway. For many poems no special knowledge is needed, except the empathy to know how baseball can break your heart.

—Michael Dylan Welch, creator of Graceguts.com

Knippen and Cruz have curated a unique collection that combines tradition and innovation while using baseball season as kigo. Set up almost like a play in three acts with a cast, these intricate moments contain such detail the reader feels like they're watching from the stands, and these poems are so skillfully crafted, even someone who doesn't know sports (like myself) can keep up with the games.

—Rowan Beckett, Founder and Editor of *#FemkuMag*

