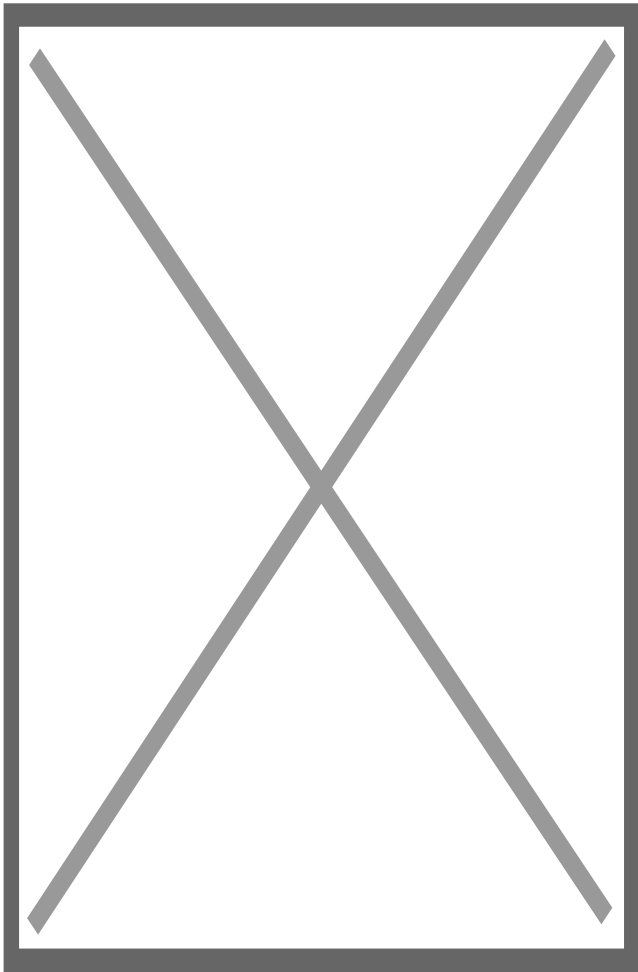


Bearing witness in three lines

Frustrated with the limits of journalism, former war correspondent Rick Black turned to haiku.

by [Robert Hirschfield](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue  
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## In Review



## Two Seasons in Israel

A Selection of Peace and War Haiku

by Rick Black  
Turtle Light Press  
[Buy from Bookshop.org](#) ›  
RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

At 67 years old, Rick Black turned from journalism to poetry. In last year's *Two Seasons in Israel: A Selection of Peace and War Haiku*, the former *New York Times* correspondent uses haiku as his primary medium to highlight single moments in the ordinary lives of people caught up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I remember once being sent to the West Bank to cover a demonstration," he told me in a recent conversation. "This was during the First Intifada. There was an angry clash between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, like the clashes all over the West Bank. Leaving to go back to Jerusalem, I noticed that all the almond trees were in blossom," Black reflected.

*just buried soldier—  
too soon for his mother  
to notice the crocus*

It was an act of seeing that marked a beginning. A beginning of what poet Patricia Donegan would call the "haiku mind," which connotes a mind that is able "to pause and to be present to the details of the everyday."

"I saw a deep connection between the almond trees in blossom and what was going on in terms of the conflict," Black told me, "but I was not able to write about it in a way I really wanted to because of the limits of the newspaper trade. The editors just weren't interested in any mention of or connection to nature. They just wanted the details about the demonstration: what was going on, how many people were killed or wounded, etc. I was not able to convey the sense of what was going on."

One of Black's war haiku bears a striking resemblance to a poem by the great 17th-century haiku master, Matsuo Basho-. Here is Basho-'s poem:

*summer grass—  
all that remains  
of warriors' dreams*

And here is Black's:

*spring picnic:  
by old command headquarters  
forgotten battles*

After October 7 and its bloody aftermath in Gaza, Black decided to publish *Two Seasons* as the world's eyes were turning toward the conflict. The two-sided surge in savagery convinced him, as it did others, that peace was further away than ever. His journey as a haiku poet began when his career as a journalist ended. Someone gave him *The Haiku Handbook*, by William Higginson and Penny Harter, which is widely considered the beginners' haiku Bible. There he found the poems of a fellow New Jerseyan, Nicholas Virgilio, who was to become his guide.

"I read all the elegiac poems he wrote about his younger brother, Larry, who was killed in Vietnam, and how it affected him and his family," Black said. "Their grief! It just kind of hit me: If he could write his haiku about Vietnam, maybe I can use the genre too to write about what I saw and experienced in Israel."

Black expressed his thanks to the deceased Virgilio in the form of a book consisting mainly of Virgilio's poetry and essays, titled *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* (published in 2012 by Turtle Light Press, Black's publishing

company). The poems are, like Black's, a weave of keenly detailed, deeply humanistic threads. Black included a remembrance by Virgilio's parish priest, Michael Doyle of Sacred Heart Church in Camden, New Jersey, who recalled how at mass, during the peace, the poet would whisper his new haiku into women's ears.

One of Virgilio's best-known elegies is displayed across the book cover:

*deep in rank grass,  
through a bullet-riddled helmet:  
an unknown flower*

Part of the power of Black's haiku is juxtaposition. People and their lives occupy the foreground. War, in defiance of journalistic tradition, is relegated to the background. It forces one to look at the old conflict from a new angle.

*triplets fast asleep:  
the scent of baby powder  
in the bomb shelter*

*Muslim Quarter:  
boys keep playing soccer  
despite the gunshots*

Black maintains that "there are differing ways to write about violence and trauma," as he told literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman in an interview. "My sense is when your approach is overly graphic for the sake of being direct, you risk losing your readers. I am not sure if I was consciously or unconsciously influenced by the poet Yehuda Amichai." In considering his relationship to Holocaust imagery, Black remembered Amichai's pictures of Jewish victims at Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memorial to those lost in the Holocaust. "The pictures in Yad Vashem are the most devastating," he said. "The written record is as terrible as pictures. But pictures, the faces of young children, really, you can become aware of it through pictures of one person, but the heaps of corpses are beyond understanding." The "one person" Black referred to was Anne Frank. There was no need to mention another.

In Black's introduction to *Two Seasons*, he writes, "I struggle to reconcile haiku's non-judgmental approach to life with my own deep-seated need to protest against life's injustice. I suppose that I have an ongoing argument with God about the world's imperfections—about people's cruelty to each other—as well as nature's cruelty and seeming indifference to us. Simply to accept the world as it is, as Zen philosophy requires, does not come naturally to me. I have always found it difficult to accept a Japanese poetic form whose philosophical underpinnings contradict my Jewish sensibility."

Among Black's early influences were Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim and their post-Holocaust questioning of the notion of a God in history. As we talked, Black noted that a lot of his questioning and engaging the "tradition of arguing with God" began in the mystery of God's absence when God's presence was most needed. But after allowing haiku into his life, Black noticed a change: "In a certain sense, haiku has forced me to put aside my own sense of life's injustice."

Black has come to admire the Japanese haiku poet Saito- Sanki, who wrote about the wartime catastrophe in his country free of a theistic context. Sanki wrote with a detachment that pulsed with deep levels of meaning and understated emotion:

*At Hiroshima  
when I eat a boiled egg  
I open my mouth.*

The simple act of eating an egg is a reflector of all the incinerated mouths of Hiroshima. The word *open* brings to mind Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, a cry of a humanity skinned beyond consolation.

Referring to his own work, Black writes, "Ultimately, I realized that the poems were divided between two seasons: peace and war. In fact, these are the main seasons of life in Israel." Careful as he is to avoid being judgmental, there are instances where implied judgment is inescapable, the undervoice of blame inevitable.

*smashed Arab gravestones  
wild caper blossoms  
go rampant*

Amid destruction, nature pursues its riotous agenda of creation. The two exist side by side in haiku's penchant for holding opposites in tension.

Black's background makes him an odd candidate to be a war correspondent. He graduated from New York University in 1979 as a classics major and went on to study Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University. He is also the creator of art books, including *The Amichai Windows*, a display of 18 of the poet's works in Hebrew and English, each wrapped and folded into a triptych and set inside a window-like structure through which the poet looks out at the world.

The homage is an arduous undertaking. Published in 2017 as a limited edition, it is aesthetically as far from the world of the news media as you can get.

*impossible  
to see all the gravestones  
Mount of Olives*

In this poem, the journalist is subsumed by the empathic witness. The haiku's empty spaces invite readers to feel, each in their own way, the significance of all the deaths and suffering that go unseen beneath the rancor born of preconceived notions stuck in time.