I traveled to Japan in January 2016 to complete a Special Project through the Horner Fellowship Program. I’m a working poet on the library staff of the University of Arizona Poetry Center, and I was interested in thinking about how libraries and museums help to preserve and sustain the poetic output of Japan: a place where poetry is both a venerable tradition and a popular, accessible art form, practiced by schoolchildren to corporate employees to professional authors. Here is what I discovered.

Before I begin, some heartfelt thanks are in order: to the Horner Fellowship Committee of the Arizona Library Association for their financial support of this project; to my home library, the University of Arizona Poetry Center, for strong support of my application, and for the gift of time; to the Japan Library Association for their generous hospitality; to Mr. Taro Miura of the JLA for absolutely invaluable assistance in making connections with key institutions, and for helping me to arrange interpretation; to Mr. Toru Koizumi for a warm welcome in general, and for the lovely book of photography; to Ms. Yuka Sugimoto, former Japanese Horner Fellow, for tracking down a truly hard-to-find book; to poets Sawako Nakayasu and Naomi Shihab Nye for taking time out of their schedules to talk poetry with me; to my colleagues at the many institutions I visited, who generously made time for tours and questions; to Professors Jesse Glass, Katsumasa Nishihara, and Bill Elliott for the wonderful conversations and the amazing books; and to Ms. Hiroko Tawara for her excellent interpretation and for her cheerful willingness to accompany me on an extremely long day of travel. Thank you all so very much!
The fellowship began on a thoroughly delicious and collegial note: members of the JLA International Relations Committee graciously hosted me at a welcome meal atop a skyscraper in Shinjuku, dispensing good advice and good sushi in equal measure. It was fantastic to meet them in person, after corresponding over email for so many months. Thank you again!

On the following day, I headed for the Museum of Haiku Literature in Shinjuku to meet with Professor Toru Kiuchi of Nihon University and Ms. Kaoru Fujimoto of the Haiku International Association. (There will, by the way, be quite a few museums featured in this report: the kind of work being done by my home library seems more frequently done in Japan by literary museums with a library component.) The Museum of Haiku Literature has an incredibly rich collection; because their scope is narrow, they are able to collect very deeply, both inside and outside Japan. I was particularly astonished by the number of English-language and other non-Japanese haiku journals in this collection: though the Poetry Center subscribes to over 250 current literary journals and has examples of many more in its archives, most of the American haiku journals that had made their way into this Tokyo collection were new to me. I was also able to view a copy of Japan’s oldest haiku journal (from 1897); a copy of Japan’s first women’s haiku journal; and (in the museum’s exhibition space) a number of hand-calligraphed and sometimes illustrated haiku, like the one shown at left.
Over lunch after touring the Museum of Haiku Literature, Ms. Fujimoto (whose haiku pen name is Hana) brought out a series of translations she was working on. As it turned out, she and Prof. Kiuchi were finalizing the translations of winning poems in an international children’s haiku contest, to be published in a bilingual Japanese-English edition later this year. She asked me a question about vocabulary, and before long we had ordered more coffee and settled in for an afternoon’s work, trying to render the haiku in English that captured the children’s voices and meanings accurately. I could not have imagined a more perfect way to spend a Saturday afternoon in Japan: I’ve served as a teaching artist in the schools before and am a very big fan of poetry written by children. The translations were nearly finished, and so the suggestions I was able to offer tended to be finer tweaks related to voicing (would a child say “marvelous” or “weird” when the connotation is “strange?”) I regret that I can’t share these translations here at this time, as they are in pre-publication status; I am looking forward to seeing the final, published product.

In the course of the weekend I also visited the Bashō Museum (which features a number of treatments of the famous haiku poet’s work) and the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, which was running a calligraphy exhibition at the time I visited. No photography was allowed inside either museum, but there was some beautiful calligraphy on display in both; I was particularly struck by the way these exhibitions highlighted the evolution of brushwork in Japan, beginning with tight, precise renderings of Chinese characters and gradually becoming more and more stylized, especially as the *kana* syllabic systems developed.
The National Diet Library has an incredible collection, as you might expect. A search for “University of Arizona Poetry Center” in their OPAC turns up the NDL’s copy of *Tahl*, a work by American poet Jeremy Ingalls which the Poetry Center commissioned in a new edition several years ago. I also got a kick out of seeing the full stack devoted to reference works on poetry in the Humanities reference room.

A subsequent visit to the underground closed stacks yielded some fascinating tidbits: the shelves and shelves of manga, for example, stood out in a shout of yellow and pink. I spent an inordinate amount of time gazing sideways at a shelf of periodicals advertising job listings in Tokyo: the weekly publication was hundreds of pages long in the early 2000s and abruptly got much, much smaller as the worldwide economic crash hit in 2008. I was told that this publication came out *every day* in the “bubble” economy of the 1980s. This is the kind of publication that likely is not preserved in many places, but it contains a fascinating historical and economic portrait—especially when lined up chronologically on a shelf.

Ms. Yukimi Ueda of the NDL’s Humanities section spoke with me about the NDL’s rare book preservation and digitization measures. I was especially interested to learn about the traditional practice of housing rare books and old paper in wooden enclosures and shelves. I read up on this later, and discovered that cedar in particular has a long and illustrious preservation tradition in Japan, where cedar boxes have been used (for example) in Nara’s Todaji Temple to house and preserve manuscripts for over a thousand years. Ms. Ueda showed me some thrilling specimens from their rare book vault, including an illustrated *utaawase-e* manuscript documenting a court poetry competition.

The NDL is also a leading proponent of digitization measures in Japan: Ms. Ueda told me that their digitization program began in 1996, and they have now digitized roughly 30% of their holdings. Scanning and digitization are done using overhead scanners by in-house, specialized staff who devote all their work time to this project. For an example of a poetry anthology digitized by the NDL, see above—or follow this link to view the manuscript on the NDL’s page, which includes zoom functionality (at the maximum magnification of 200%, you can see individual brush strokes).
Though I didn’t contact the Tokyo National Museum in an official capacity, I was able to visit informally mid-week; I was particularly eager to see their preservation and conservation measures in action, as this museum has a large number of crucially important cultural objects (including ancient poetry manuscripts, some of which are designated National Treasures) in their care. Fortunately, the museum has a small room devoted to educating the public about its preservation program, so I didn’t have to look far! Here I learned about preservation measures both familiar (integrated pest management, archival-grade enclosures, powder-coated steel shelving, RH and temperature control) and new to me (reinforced floor brackets and wire netting for shelves to prevent items from crashing to the floor during an earthquake).

I also thoroughly enjoyed losing myself in the Japanese (Honkan) Gallery. There I saw more exquisitely calligraphed examples of waka anthologies, ceramics, battle armor, textiles, and a particularly engaging exhibition on fans and their symbolic significance.
I had coffee and conversation with several Tokyo-based poets and translators during the fellowship period. It was an absolute delight to meet Jesse Glass, who regaled me with tales, took me book shopping, and donated a gorgeous pile of books for our library; Sawako Nakayasu, who made time for cheesecake and talked cheerfully with me about the plasticity of translation; and Bill Elliott and Katsumasa Nishihara, who gave me a stack of their translations for our library and took me out to an upbeat dinner with Naomi Shihab Nye. I treasure these conversations, and I hope they will continue far into the future.
I had the opportunity to visit Tōhoku near the end of the week. This area, in the northern part of Honshu, was devastated by the earthquake and tsunami of 2011. It was very sobering to pass through Fukushima and Sendai and think of those terrible events. The poet Wagō Ryōichi, a Fukushima resident, published a powerful series of Twitter poems in the aftermath of the disaster, selections of which can be found in translation here.

This was a truly flying trip: I spent six hours (round-trip) on bullet trains in order to visit two museums in the afternoon and return to Tokyo that same evening. (All hail to my interpreter, Ms. Tawara, for agreeing to this!) The reason for the trip was the Museum of Contemporary Poetry, Tanka and Haiku in Kitakami, an institution that Jesse Glass recommended to me very strongly in our correspondence prior to my trip.

On the way to Kitakami, however, we made a brief detour to see the Kenji Miyazawa Museum in the writer’s hometown of Hanamaki. I was fascinated by this small museum, which contained very detailed information and artifacts documenting the writer’s life and Renaissance-man intellectual range. This museum had an innovative twist to its exhibit text: all the interpretation was in Japanese, but there was also an extensive set of QR codes enabling English-speaking visitors to access very comprehensive and well-done translations. This gave me a much more immersive experience of the exhibits as a whole: I’ll be thinking about possible spin-offs for this idea in my own library work, especially in exhibits, and especially in terms of translation for non-English speakers.
The Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry, Tanka and Haiku was a revelation. I was profoundly impressed by the collection (between 1.1 and 1.2 million volumes) and the exhibitions, which were some of the best poetry exhibitions I have ever seen. This year’s theme in the main gallery was “Poetry Living Now (70 Years After the War)” and featured listening stations, standard displays of text in cases, a speaker broadcasting clips of news from all over the world, and a set of three huge doors plastered all over with Post-Its from visitors who had responded to a writing prompt. (When I asked about the doors’ metaphorical link to the exhibit theme, my host, Mr. Takeshi Toyoizumi, said it was open to individual interpretation...to which I said, “Thaaaaaat’s poetry!” and we all laughed.)

The museum also has a smaller gallery which, at the time I visited, featured the work of a single tanka poet. To read the tanka, visitors opened a series of small metal doors mounted on the wall. Behind each door was the poem, and then after about ten seconds, there was also something else: either a photo would light up behind the poem, or a series of silhouettes would start to move, or you could look through the poem into a kaleidoscope. The exhibit also featured pinholes at child eye height that revealed photographs of the poet and a wealth of biographical detail. It was an incredible mix of interpretation, in both the artistic sense and the museum sense; I’ve never seen anything like it, though the whimsicality in the exhibit had the flavor of some modern art museum installations I’ve visited. Some of the ideas I saw presented here would be very difficult to pull off in a small space and on a small budget; some would be easily portable; the out-of-the-box creativity on display here was the real star attraction, though. I’ll be thinking about those exhibitions for a very long time.
Clockwise from bottom left:

A listening station in the main exhibition gallery; custom shelving for current periodicals in the reading room; an interactive tanka exhibit. The Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry, Tanka and Haiku, Kitakami, Japan.
My final day was spent at the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature back in Tokyo. This museum is a major collector of contemporary Japanese literature; unlike some of the other institutions I visited, it is a private museum with archival holdings as well as a library. I had a fascinating discussion with the librarian there about archives, access, and privacy: the Museum generally grants university-credentialed researchers access to its archival collections, but restricts some materials indefinitely because of their private or sensitive nature. The Museum (unlike, for example, the NDL) is not funded publicly and is not fundamentally *public*. It is open to the public, however; generally, researchers pay a small fee to access the collections, and universities can also pay for a subscription to the Museum’s digitized content. Fascinatingly, this museum was founded and endowed by by a conglomeration of publishing houses.

The closed stacks yielded some wonderful gems, including private libraries of major authors like Natsume Sōseki, which were donated at the time of the museum’s founding and kept intact. The stacks, like those at the NDL, are in a basement facility; the Museum, which is about 50 years old, lacks mechanical climate controls, but the basement does keep the RH and temperature relatively stable! The periodicals in this collection were especially interesting: the librarian told me that researchers from several disciplines come to consult the women’s and children’s periodicals because of their historic cultural value (the women’s magazines, for example, often printed recipes and dress designs—records that are not always preserved in other repositories). I also saw a periodical from the Meiji period that included a now-scarce woodblock print; the prints have become collectors’ items and are frequently removed from these periodicals for individual sale as artworks.
Conclusions

I assembled quite a bit of food for thought in this whirlwind week.

One of my two central questions for this project focused on preservation: since Japan’s repositories are stewards for so many priceless artifacts, I wanted to learn about the preservation and conservation measures they employ. I was happy to discover consensus between Japanese and American practices in many instances (regulation of RH and temperature, data logging, acid-free enclosures) and fascinated to learn about where our practices differ (chiefly in the occasional use of wood in protective enclosures). We use Japanese materials (especially kozo paper) so frequently in American conservation activities, and it was wonderful to see these materials at the source and in their original contexts.

I also think, having seen the NDL’s digitization program in particular, that digital surrogates can be excellent “silent” advocates for physical preservation: they give the public increased opportunities to interact with manuscripts, even if in a condensed, two-dimensional form, and in the process aptly illustrate the value of original formats.

My other central question for this project revolved around poetry and outreach: since poetry enjoys a central role in Japanese culture, how do libraries and museums help to sustain that tradition and participate in the ongoing poetic education of Japanese citizens? I asked this question at nearly every institution I visited. Each one treats its outreach programming a little differently: the Museum of Haiku Literature offers training for teachers who wish to teach critical reading of haiku; the Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry, Tanka and Haiku sends staff into the community to deliver educational programming to high school students and also offers space for classes and class visits; the National Diet Library continues to make digital surrogates of priceless artifacts available online; the Tokyo National Museum hosts a robust field trip program.

The common thread, though, amongst all these varied and stellar outreach offerings, was *competition*. Nearly everyone I spoke to alluded to the poetry contests they run. The numbers were impressive: the Museum of Contemporary Poetry’s annual competition for high school students, for example, receives about 6000 entries annually and selects 150 for inclusion in a prizewinners’ chapbook. The Haiku International Association also receives entries in the thousands for the children’s haiku contest they run each year. There is something about this kind of “gamification” that may be especially appealing to young folks, and this is something I will bear in mind as I continue to advocate for poetry in my library work here in the U.S.
I will end this report with a recommendation, a tiny *omiyage*, and a thank you.

First, I would like to take this opportunity to urge my fellow Arizona librarians to apply for the Horner Fellowship! It is such a rare and rich opportunity to learn from our LIS colleagues overseas and to explore a taste of Japanese culture. Japan is majestic and quirky, ancient and ultra-modern, kinetic and still. There is truly something here for everyone. Consult your passions and propose a project; you won’t be sorry.

Second, I would like to present you with two poems I found:

And third: みな さま , 本当 に ありがとうございま した!