

# The Mondo

A Poetry Anthology and Workshop Guide

Edited by  
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The Mondo

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*Dedicated to the collaborative poetry tradition  
and all those who make an attempt at it.*



## Foreword

Collaborative poetry, or complete poems written by more than one poet is a major part of the Japanese classical poetry tradition. Their philosophy on the subject was that sometimes two or more poets combined can bring insight and philosophy to a subject much better than either could on their own. The classical Japanese poetry form (or *Waka*) the *Mondo* is the perfect example of how wonderful the writing can turn out.

The poems anthologized in this book were written during a virtual poetry workshop that took place during a period when we were all advised to be physically separate, but we were all yearning to still remain close. Thanks to the limitless boundaries of the internet, social media and email lists, it didn't take long to collect the group of 40 poets who would make up this workshop. Each one knowing they would be both starting and finishing a poem with a partner.

So the poets who signed up for the workshop were paired up randomly--most of them were from different states and with few exceptions, were not familiar with each other or each other's work before this project. But from the resulting poems, you would never know that--as each pair produced verse of a quality that was truly marvelous.

Having co-authored the book *Japanese Poetry Forms, a Poet's Guide* and having done many lectures at libraries, conventions and colleges on the topic of Japanese Collaborative Poetry across the East Coast of the United States, I've

seen up close many times the power that can come together with small groups writing together, but this session surprised even myself with how well the pairings of poets worked.

And for my own part, the exercise even broke through my own poetic writer's block--sometimes having someone else to bounce off of is a great thing for the creativity to get flowing.

We all value our own creativity, and love having singular control over our own muses (when the muse doesn't elude us!) but perhaps poetic culture should take a few lessons from the world of collaborative writing. Hopefully the lessons in this book and the examples produced from the workshop will inspire workshop leaders and professors to give a go at this exercise--and perhaps it will inspire you, the reader, to pair up with a buddy, or two, or more and work on some poems together.

~ James P. Wagner (Ishwa)

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# The Mondo

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The Mondo is a Japanese form of poetry that has a very long tradition. A form of *Waka* or Japanese classical poetry, some of the first Mondo go back over 1000 years.

The Mondo comes from the Zen practice of rapid question-answer between master and student. The poetic tradition of the Mondo is a collaborative verse written between two poets--with one poet asking a question and one poet answering the question. The answer of course should reflect the spirit of the Zen student taking understanding from nature.

In Japanese, the Mondo would be made up of linked *Katauta*, a poetic unit consisting of 19 onji, or sound unit (syllable for English.) But in languages other than Japanese this strict 19 onji requirement is not as strict so long as the stanza doesn't go over 19 syllables.

### *The Mondo Is:*

- Written by 2 separate poets, one asking a question, one answering the question.
- 2 stanzas of 3 lines each, 19 syllables or less, often 5-7-7, sometimes 5-7-5 is used for each stanza.
- The first stanza is the question, the 2<sup>nd</sup> is the response.
- Written in the spirit of Zen, responsive through meditation and observation of natural surroundings.

One of the key functions of writing a Mondo in practice is to not think too long for either writing the question, or in responding to the question. In connection with the Japanese principle of the mental state *Mushin*, or "no mind," the Mondo is supposed to be written through instinctive clarity.

The poems that follow in the anthology section are Mondo that were written in an online workshop to keep the spirit of connection despite distance. May they serve as examples for future writing of the form.

## Anthology

---

How can birds still sing  
in the hush that has become  
our world? Pandemic.

The bird's song just is...  
The world keeps spinning around  
The courage to live.

Do bees love honey...  
Do they pollinate with it?  
Pollinate all the flowers.

The way they do it,  
giving back to all the world.  
This sweet, vibrant life.

When the ocean roars  
Tossing, turning, revolting  
What is the message?

Under scarless waves  
Manatees swim untouched by  
Man's isolation

When time is finite  
And walls surround isolate  
How then can words soar?

Words, not bound by time  
Nor by walls built to contain  
Soar via sound waves.

Where will my footsteps  
direct me as I wander  
seeking out a goal?

Sometimes skipping can  
add weightlessness to a line  
that we must not draw.



Why did the white owl  
roost in the lavender bush  
at the curve in sidewalk?

I find my answer  
lies not in the question, why,  
but in the "who."

I'm afraid Mommy  
It's so dark.  
Where are you?

I'm scared too, my love,  
but simply open your eyes.  
I'm here, and so is the sun.

What will be revealed  
as each of us delves into  
the deep well of solitude?

A healing of wounded memory  
Gulping the oxygen of time

Since I know that some  
day I will die, then how should  
I live my life until then?

Fearlessly I stride.  
With my chest out and head high,  
I take on the world.

Virtual teaching,  
sign of the apocalypse  
or a passing phase?

It's a phase proving  
people who still crave knowledge  
will find ways to learn.

For whom waits  
The calm of waters  
The stillness of pines ?

I wait, like the bird,  
who hovers in the spring breeze  
over its nesting chicks.

Lynette Esposito & Anant Dhavale

---

How many leaves fall  
from the weeping willow tree  
at the start of fall?

And how many  
Make it to the ground  
Unscathed

Who will nurture us  
when it's man versus nature,  
the moon a witness?

Few shall nurture Man  
Naught but humankind itself  
Or their dearest best friend



Marc Rosen & Mary Langer Thompson

---

What lies at the core  
Of the dreaded global threat  
Known as humankind?

Time to make a choice--  
a mix of good and evil--  
all our hearts the same.

Do the starfish cry  
Because they do not shimmer  
Like the stars above?

I seem to recall  
When stars were incandescent  
And you swore you could eat them

A virus seeks to  
survive without longevity  
we ask why why why

Paused we survive  
with levity  
we try try try

When I discard fears  
amongst trees and Earth's creatures,  
what becomes of them?

They return to dust  
float gently on winds of grace  
silenced at long last.

Where does the time fly  
with vapor trails of tick-tock  
waiting for no one?

Up to the ether  
time achieves transmutation,  
becoming our dreams.

What, but, the feeling  
Of the weight of the grave  
Released in warm embrace?

My heart holds you safe  
beyond boundaries of  
this earthly universe.

Why do summer stars  
only twinkle for those  
who wish upon them?

A gaze of moon  
Soothes the forehead  
With pale springs  
Of light

Why do their eight legs  
cause women to flee in chairs  
while men find comfort with soles?

Imagination  
stirs women's sensitive souls  
to arachnid distraction.



Why is the moon shy  
when crowds of stars swarm the sky  
with their delightful laughter?

The moon is resting  
awaiting his chance to bathe  
and spotlight the newborn earth.

How long must the Earth  
Seek a sacred time of love  
While its people spin blindly?

To love is to heal  
Like love, the Earth is patient  
She awaits divine timing

When water ripples  
Does its eternal whisper  
Reveal an ancient language?

Waves of wisdom flow  
Water speaks in humming trills  
Unfurling flowers listen

Alone and waiting,  
which made up place do you go  
dreaming of escape?

In this world, the wise  
know we are never alone  
and that there is no escape

planted years ago,  
why do the white irises  
first bloom in this fearful spring?

To remind you that,  
life's beauty does continue,  
in spite of it all.

What window closes  
as new leaves expand along  
the dogwood branches?

Those called doubts and fears  
Flowering Tree your mystique glory  
Offers rebirth and love

Why is my laughter  
Mingled and followed by tears  
Overshadowed by scares

Leaf scars are left  
At the point of attachment  
Let go for new growth

Robert Fleming & Ushiku Crisafulli

---

a man i am Sam  
from sperm & egg, i am, Stan  
Sam & Stan, what makes a man?

A man is not made  
he forges himself through flame  
like a social Frankenstein.



Why do some souls scream  
while others meekly whisper  
a muted soliloquy?

To lure a lost lover  
a lover's call is called  
on all wavelength waves

Mindy Kronenberg & Megan Cody

---

Where is the sound of hope  
when the world is stunned  
into open-mouthed silence?

Within the fire  
Warming our hearths  
Kindled by survival

Megan Cody & Mindy Kronenberg

---

Stars, with all their twinkling brilliance,  
create our heavens.  
Where does theirs reside?

They glint from the dark  
of antiquity, buoyant  
worlds shadowed in the past.

What do you see there  
underneath all those layers  
of flesh, skin, and bone?

Instinct tells me  
that somehow love still  
moves, beats, and breathes

Where are the words that  
slipped away gasping  
like ghosts to be heard?

They have disappeared  
lost forever in the mist  
like her love for me

I dream of your soul  
how could I sneak into there  
and host my sorrow?

Like a scrap of paper  
with a phone number written  
in eye liner--and folded over.

How many days  
wasted to the screen,  
hands at The QWERTY keys?

"Wasted" the keyword  
Let's move step by step, go forth!  
Try UIOP

May a mind's fine  
electricity be gratified  
with quixotic musings?

Listening to nature's  
sonata grace rustle leaf buds—  
we, they, dance once more.



When the blue-jay lands  
to gaze at me from her branch,  
what does she discern?

A curious soul-bird  
ready to fly from silver  
birches to azure seas.

How much potential  
Energy, never kinetic  
Has been wasted?

Potential held cannot  
be wasted. Each moment-  
endless possibility

How long must I wait  
Before the waiting  
Becomes wasting?

How quick can action  
Deliberate and focused  
Change everything?

## Mondo Workshop Writing Exercises

---

The forty poems in this book were written in the span of one week through an online workshop where poets from all over the United States were paired up to answer each other's questions in poetry form. Everyone involved loved the experience and the results, and a Mondo writing workshop can be a great idea for any poetry group. There are a couple of different ways to go about it.

### **The Pair Up**

Simple and straight-forward, this way of course works best with an even number of poets, whether that is two, four, forty or four hundred. Everyone gets a partner, and everyone writes both sections of the poems.

Poet 1: Writes Question -----> Poet 2: Answers Question

Poet 1: Answers Question <----- Poet 2: Writes Question

And you end up with two complete poems per pair. You can do this multiple times with each pair if you want.

## *The Roundabout*

If you don't have an even number of poets in the workshop, or if you have a smaller number, this method can be fun and creative as well. In the roundabout, a poet will write the first part of the Mondo, and pass it around to everyone else in their group. The other poets will all write a different answer to the Mondo, resulting in several different poems all with the same first stanza.

Poet 1: Writes Question -----> Poet 2: Answers Question  
Poet 3: Answers Question  
Poet 4: Answers Question  
Poet 5: Answers Question

In this set up each person in the group will take a turn writing the first stanza and having it replied to by the other poets in the group. It is very interesting to see the different responses to the question from different poets. However, the more people in this version of the exercise, the more complicated and time consuming it will be to manage it.



## About the Editor

James P. Wagner (Ishwa) is an editor, publisher, award-winning fiction writer, essayist, performance poet, and alum twice over (BA & MALS) of Dowling College. He is the publisher for Local Gems Poetry Press and the Senior Founder and President of the Bards Initiative. He is also the founder and Grand Laureate of Bards Against Hunger, a series of poetry readings and anthologies dedicated to gathering food for local pantries that operates in over a dozen states. His most recent collection of poetry is *Everyday Alchemy*. He was the Long Island, NY National Beat Poet Laureate from 2017-2019. He was the Walt Whitman Bicentennial Convention Chairman and teaches poetry workshops at the Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site. James has edited over 60 poetry anthologies and hosted book launch events up and down the East Coast.



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