

Evaluating Haibun

by Bruce Ross, Ken Jones and Jim Kacian, editors, *Contemporary Haibun Online*

Evaluating a work of art is problematical, as any who have done so will attest. It is not simply a matter of ascribing these difficulties to subjective response, though this does play a factor, and sometimes a considerable one. There are many objective factors which much be considered, and even these can be subject to widely disparate interpretation. The editors of contemporary haibun online thought it might be useful to our readers to have a look at the way we evaluate and achieve consensus in accepting or rejecting a piece for publication. We have selected Martin Gottlieb Cohen's haibun "Untitled" [box below] to illustrate this process. This example does not follow our exact process, which is a good deal less formal and more seamless, but suggests the issues we consider for every work which comes before us.

Untitled

Martin Gottlieb Cohen

The night air is wet and still. The scent of pine trees settled in the leaves near the cabin. My mother took us children to visit my aunt on Halloween. We entered the darkened room and on the table is a hollowed out pumpkin with a lit candle in it. Tobacco smoke passed over the pumpkin's cut off top and the smoke's shape changed as it rose to the ceiling beams. Light came out of holes for eyes and a big grin from the dark pumpkin. The scene reminded me of a room lit by a prayer candle, a glass half full of wax with a lit wick that projected the flickering light on the walls. My father would sit on a small wood bench fasting and praying for his father who had died in the night. I walk across the room and see a picture of my father as a child. My aunt tells me of how he fell on an electrified rail and survived.

Jack O'Lantern

shadows pass through each other

There are three elements to be considered in each haibun: the prose; the haiku; the relationship between them. Each of these elements may be considered in further detail as well. Here is how the editors of cho evaluated each of these elements in the present example.

Prose

Ken Jones : So far as the prose is concerned I find it an attractive haibun, which succeeds within the modest limits set for it. The imagery is quite memorable; there is a theme which is well managed and sustained; and there is some feeling, which engaged me as reader. However, I would delete the final sentence, which is distracting and irrelevant.

Bruce Ross: Poor writing, particularly of establishing different tense markers of past and present, particularly the connection of the jack-o-lantern and prayer candle. Perhaps minimize the melodramatic affect of the jack-o-lantern. Overall poor writing, rather unpoetic and plodding. Should concentrate on the prayer candle and what follows.

Jim Kacian: While the prose is rough, it holds promise: the theme is interesting, well-conceived and reasonably pursued. Its major failings are in its finished quality: tense irregularities, a slight choppiness of diction, a too-sharp transition between the two subjects (the jack o'lantern and the prayer candle).

These are all easily repaired.

Haiku

Ken Jones: The main weakness lies in the haiku, which too much repeats the prose theme. I take the point about the "shadows" metaphor, though find it rather laboured, and the haiku somehow unfinished. So it is the haiku that needs to be reconceived so as to give us a new perspective on what has gone before, instead of merely rehearsing it.

Bruce Ross: The haiku [is] not bad. Would prefer 3 lines, though.

Jim Kacian: This haiku probably would be the lesser standing alone: it relies somewhat upon the atmosphere of the prose to attain its resonance. That said, it holds up well enough within that context. I would prefer the second line be divided into two parts: "shadows pass through/each other"

Relationship

Ken Jones: Ideally I would wish to see the haiku radically recast so that it adds something new to the haibun, giving it a further twist and raising it to a new level. However, if the present haiku were made more effective, as the three liner suggested by Jim, and the prose tidied up, I'd be happy to see this one published.

Bruce Ross: The haiku, in this case, intensifies the (subjective) atmosphere of the prose, which seems a fair choice here.

Jim Kacian: The prose and poem both work towards the same emotional effect, and while this isn't ideal in all cases, it works well enough here. The haiku is clearly not simply an extension of the prose, nor a repetition of the subject material to be found there. There is sufficient disjunction between these elements to create a satisfying response and resonance.

Suggested Revision:

Untitled

Martin Gottlieb Cohen

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