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HN 202: Global Haiku  
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### Jump Scare: The Fast-Paced Art of Horror in Haiku

There is such a unique perspective that one must take when approaching haiku, which is usually written to be emotive and catered to the human experience through universal ties in to nature and specific but vague moments that people can relate to, through a lens such as horror. I have loved getting to sit down and let that perspective wash over me as I read through all of the current issues of the online horror haiku collection *Otoroshi Journal*. For some, there was a simple general application to a horror trope or scary theme that was easy to appreciate and set a great tone for the collection. For others, I was caught so off guard and inherently revolted that their inclusion within this essay would have been disrespectful for the level of reaction I had upon reading them. And then for many there was a particular context that one needed in order to fully appreciate the haiku as it was presented, and, because I am either so well versed in the horror scene or just possessed the necessary context to get what the author was trying to say a little more, I was able to understand each context better than I would have had I not previously known what I did/do. Horror has heavily influenced me and the way I think as an individual, as an artist, and as an advocate for change, because horror is an excellent way to present and deliver a message, or even to tell a story, and I am pulled in by these methods because of how effective they are.

midnight  
the pitter-patter  
of doll feet

Greg Schwartz, *Otoroshi 1.1*, 15

One of the first haiku I read that stuck out to me in this issue of *Otoroshi*, I was immediately drawn into the memories I had of going into my basement as a kid – the air was quiet, still, and there was a looming threat that *something* was loitering in the darkness beyond the room I played in if I didn't turn on all of the lights. My dolls would sit in a bin on the floor and when I had to clean them up, I would have to turn out the light and race to the stairs in the dark. Sometimes I would just pause in the silence and stare into the stillness, as though waiting for something to follow me, or to move from where I had gently placed it away (because if there was even a slight chance my dolls were alive and autonomous like Toy Story and Goosebumps led me to believe, I wanted them to know I was a friend and treated them well). This haiku unlocked a lot of memories that have shaped my still irrational fear of the dark to this day, and even inspired me to write one in response with a similar concept:

as she follows  
porcelain eyes  
catch the glint of candlelight

The way the writer so delicately captured the irrational fear that comes from finding dolls creepy and spun it into a clever midnight haunting is eerie and brings back simultaneously fond and anxious memories that allows for a deliciously hair-raising reading.

unwrapped  
maggots crawl  
on my flesh

Tim Gardiner, *Otoroshi 1.1*, 19

millipede  
the feel of each leg  
down my throat

Bryan Rickert, *Otoroshi II.11*, 6

This set of haiku caused a visceral reaction in me upon each of their first readings – the thought of maggots alone is enough to make my stomach churn, much less the sight, but I have a clear memory of taking out the trash once and feeling a swath of those vile insects slinking out of the bag and onto my hand. It still makes me incredibly ill to think about, and reading this one too many times is sickening and twisted in the way it becomes more clear and easy to picture with every rereading. I have a very strong aversion to most bugs in general, but especially flies and larvae of any kind. It's the idea of the squirming and baseless crawling to survive and take a chance to stay alive without any direction besides following rot or decomposition that disgusts me so thoroughly.

In that vein, I also find anything with more than four legs at max to be horribly unsettling, let alone “a million.” I don't think anything with that many legs should exist (I can barely hold myself together with the thought of a spider on my skin or in a 20-foot radius of me), and the fact that it does is already horrific enough a thought. The distress that ran through me when I imagined feeling *that crawling down my throat* I gagged. It was horrible, and disgusting and nightmarish and everything I personally want in a short piece of horror writing to do – disturb and make me feel out of my comfort zone. Each of these haiku did that and more. I have had to pause several times while writing this comparison to collect my thoughts and not throw up, which is an excellent testament to the imagery each author manages to curate to conjure a terrible and vivid image, and works well to upset the reader in a way that I think most people can relate to in some way. Each one works to create a different image in the reader's head, but similarly take a very common base fear and dislike of insects or “creepy crawlies” that applies in a marvelously awful way.

worming inside  
pull the skin over  
to keep warm

As disturbing as the above haiku were for me, I was still inspired by them (and by the one below) to create my own that plays with the idea of infiltrating a place you shouldn't be, or crawling through something that is clearly dead and decaying, as disgusting as that is to imagine. To keep with the bug imagery, I started the haiku with “worming inside,” which I felt also served the idea of an unwanted presence being where it shouldn't. I wanted to humanize it a little bit more, though, because, again, bugs still make me wig out, so the intended reading is that someone has killed something (or another someone – up to interpretation) or come across the corpse of something and it is cold outside. The only option, then, for that someone is to climb inside the corpse of whatever it is they have stumbled across or killed in order to keep warm through the night. This was also inspired by a scene from a play script I read and watched performed in high school about some victims being held in a concentration camp climbing inside of a dead horse to keep warm in the middle of winter.

winter grave  
the deep chill  
within me

John Hawkhead, *Otoroshi I.1*, 24

I liked the way that this haiku wasn't particularly trying to fit into any specific horror trope or narrative and rather was written with only the intention (at least from my reading) of describing a feeling to the reader. It leaves a lot up to the imagination and is open for reader interpretations, which is a very nice way to set up

especially a horror haiku, because everyone's worst imagining of scary things is personal to them, and allows for a greater impact from the haiku itself if someone is left to their own devices with deciding how scary it is. I personally imagine this haiku as one that describes someone who has freshly been laid to rest and put into the ground in the middle of a cold and dark winter. This person isn't really alive, still, so it isn't anyone's fault that they are stuck roiling in the chill of their final resting spot – rather, I think of it more like a vegetative or dissociative state that the narrator has found themselves in, and is kind of numbly explaining that to the reader. Like a ghost still tethered to their corpse, I think is the best way I can describe it. With that interpretation comes the thought of “but what if they weren't dead?” which then leads to the terrible thought that someone has been buried alive and has been left to fester and rot beneath the earth's soil with no means of escape, ensuring a painfully slow perish through suffocation, hypothermia, or even starvation and dehydration. Many horrible outcomes play in the mind at the thought, which helps enhance the sinister nature of this haiku.

empty theatre  
a ghost light  
afraid of the dark

Lorraine Padden, *Otoroshi I.II*, 21

I thought this haiku was very clever! For people who don't know, a ghost light is a single exposed light that stands and lights up a theatre that would otherwise be completely dark when unoccupied. They're used in theatre and theatrical productions and look kind of like if a makeshift streetlamp was left in the middle of an empty auditorium... a friend of mine has a tattoo of a ghost light on her forearm and when I asked her about it, she told me all about them and why she loved them and theatre, which is why this haiku stuck out so much to me. If you don't know what a ghost light is, I think there can be an interpretation that details a ghost light as a literal ghost's light (or a lighter, more optimistic or maybe childlike/naïve soul) that is left afraid of the dark as they roam the emptiness of the theatre, they are haunting, which can also serve a very nice purpose for this haiku's sense of playfulness. Maybe it wasn't intended to be as such, but I really feel a light tone with this poem, or a sense of irony in that a ghost light is afraid of the dark. I can hear it being read aloud with a very flat or teasing affect that aims to poke fun at the inanimate light.

midnight diner  
his blue eyes dangling  
from their sockets

Jackie Chou, *Otoroshi I.III*, 7

I don't know what it is about eyes and violence or upsetting depictions of what can happen to them that draws me in so much, but I have always been very drawn to eyes. I'm very conscious of the idea that I am being watched or observed often due to the fact that I put myself in situations or positions where I have a lot of responsibility or eyes on me – be them for entertainment purposes, for direction, or for scrutiny, I am always being watched, and that thought sometimes causes me a great deal of anxiety as it sticks with me everywhere I go and hides in the back of my mind always. I think what draws me in with this haiku is the empowerment I feel at the thought of taking away someone's oppressive or dangerous stare through incapacitation. Was the waitress sick of being leered at? Is this a diner that collects suspicious drifters that wouldn't be missed? Did the man just sneeze too hard into his peppery soup and his orbital bones couldn't handle the heat and shot his eyes out of the kitchen? So many intriguing possibilities and all of them leave the reader with a vague sense of disturbed confusion, which is the best way for art to leave you... it's probably not great that eye trauma is so alluring or attention-grabbing for me, but I suppose it makes for great story-telling opportunities.

bag of mulch  
burying her ghosts  
in the rose bed

Deborah P. Kolodji, *Otoroshi I.II*, 16

hard to swallow  
eating all  
the evidence

Roberta Beach Jacobson, *Otoroshi I.III*, 15

Another set of haiku to match and compare, focusing on the topic of murder. I love how much variety can exist within the same general topic – the beauty of haiku lies in its ability to take a single topic and stretch it so many different directions while still being able to catch the essence of the same original thought or idea. For example, the two above haiku are expertly written in the way that they both encapsulate this concept. Kolodji's haiku takes on a more tame method of explaining how someone may have hidden a body or hidden evidence after having committed a crime against another human's form, or may simply be a metaphor for having pushed away or using a healthier coping mechanism to treat her negative and unwanted feelings about someone through the planting of roses in a garden. Realistically, I think the more literal approach to the theme is the appropriate interpretation as this is a horror haiku collection, and the literal image of a woman taking body parts she cut up or dismembered and using them as fertilizer in her rose garden is disturbing but absolutely possible to imagine.

As for the second haiku by Jacobson, the use of the "murder" theme is applied with the much more extreme and disgustingly taboo concept of cannibalism. The only way I feel this one can be read (both in and outside of the context of the *Otoroshi* issue) is literally, and it literally reads as someone eating the evidence of their violent transgressions against another human being. What really makes it as disturbing as it is comes from the first line which implies there is a quiet discomfort in the actor of this crime – the use of "hard to swallow" tells the reader that maybe this is not what someone wanted to be doing, that there isn't a joy very strong in the consumption of another individual's body parts, but it must be done. *Why* it must be done is beyond me, and the thought is disgusting and horrible in any context, but in that moment, there is only the right answer of getting rid of the evidence through eating it.

Both of these haiku implement a method where their first line comes across pretty innocuous, and then sweep in with their second/middle line to give more context to a situation that is then fully resolved by the final line. These haiku effectively tell a story for the reader through each line by establishing a beginning, a middle, and then an end in each phase. For Jacobson, the punch to the gut of "eating all the evidence" is so impactful because of how it is arranged and then presented to the reader; "hard to swallow" sets the tone and method for which the audience should approach the following lines, while "eating all" prepares the reader with a climax that resolves itself and closes out the moment with "the evidence," giving us the final answers we were aiming to discover after starting the haiku. Similarly, the haiku by Kolodji sets up its narrative with "bag of mulch" nicely by giving us context to where the author is, or where the reader is dropping in to look over, then follows through the remaining narration by telling us what is happening with the mulch as someone is "burying her ghosts" in a place she owns or frequents enough to be possessive over: "in the rose bed." There is an air of finality in that third line that phrases it as a closing statement, an announcement of fact, and it is incredibly disquieting to read and conjure up the mental images of both haiku.

in the butcher's cooler  
viscera lay in a heap  
bloody and wet

Upon my initial reading of both haiku, I felt a desire to also partake in the theme of murder, but wanted to also capture the subtlety of hidden violence previously touched upon by both authors, leading to the above haiku in the butcher's shop. Seemingly, this could be chalked up to the simple shavings of whatever was left of an animal that was carved up or displayed in the case, but similar to how the other two built up their narratives and used context clues to do so, I tried to leave it heavily implied that it was not an animal the butcher cut up.

old attic hush  
the jinn becomes alive  
from childhood stories

Hifsa Ashraf, *Otoroshi I.IV*, 27

This haiku grabbed my attention from the mentioning of the "jinn," which is an Arabic mythological creature that was believed to inhabit earth unseen to the average human eye – they could take on human forms and possessed great powers. They are similar to humans in their actions and thoughts or behaviors, but not quite like us in that they exist on a different plane and are spirits in their most base level interpretation. There are three types of jinni, and I assume that this haiku may be referencing the malicious variety, as their violence and anger can be taken out on humans and things humans can see or experience. I love the draw to all things spiritual or potentially haunted in nature, especially across cultures and referencing different degrees of folklore and mythology, and reading this haiku definitely brought that across while also establishing a sense of nostalgia in the narrator's attic. The commonality of the sharing of ghost stories and dark lessons to ward children off from misbehaving or making bad decisions is universal across cultures, and I don't doubt that the depictions of jinn in a mother's chiding tone is a scary image to have in your head as a child.

a heartbeat  
on the ultrasound  
morgue assistant

Jillian Callahan, *Otoroshi II.II*, 10

Something so terrifying is the assumption that something dead is not actually dead. There is so much content or media out in the world about things like zombies or blasphemous resurrections, or things coming back when they should have stayed dead that by this point it would be hard not to imagine at least one instance where you have thought about it. For me, this haiku especially stood out because once I graduate from Millikin, I am wanting to study to be a mortician's assistant and funeral director, and I think one of the worst parts of this job outside of handling the grief of other people as you take in and prepare their loved ones with the appropriate death rites, is the underlying fear that something... *other*, could happen. Realistically, that is nonsense, and logic dictates that once something is dead it stays that way. But in horror, anything can happen, supernatural or otherwise, and that checks out with corpses left to be taken care of in what is essentially a dark underground cooler.

I really love how this one starts out innocent enough – maybe a mother is going in to see how her pregnancy is coming along and the baby has a strong heartbeat! Then the kicker comes in with the third line, which changes the entire context of the haiku with two words, creating discomfort and unease at the thought that, in a morgue, you really shouldn't be able to hear the heartbeat of anything if it's properly dead. When I read this the first time, I was immediately reminded of a game called "The Mortuary Assistant," where you play as, you guessed it, a mortuary assistant preparing bodies for funerals, and a lot of terrible supernatural stuff happens both in the parlor you are working in and the bodies that you prepare – you see ghosts, shadows down the hall, hallucinate over stretched periods of time, sometimes you turn around and the body is sitting up or you watch it slowly crack out of rigor mortis and point in a direction you have to go in order to advance the game. All in all, it's a terrifying experience, and you have to try to expel the demon

in your parlor before the end of the night lest you get possessed by it in the morning when your boss comes back. It's a fantastic horror game, and really helps to enhance the experience I had reading this haiku.

peppering necrotic skin  
the delicate stench  
of rot

This haiku inspired me a little bit with its subject matter and the handling of bodies to write my own. It's a lot more heavy-handed in its initial lines, as I wanted the descriptors to be very clear, but there is a juxtaposition in long and fancy words that's meanings could be potentially lost on a reader until the last line, which is very short and to the point in its description. The main sense to focus on is smell, and I wanted that to be clear due to the smell of decay and death being very pronounced and recognizable even if you have never encountered it before. I also started with what I felt was more delicate phrasing, because when I imagine the word "peppering," I imagine a light smattering or distribution of, usually in regard to kissing (like peppering kisses on someone's face), which can then be interpreted or elaborated on however you want it to be (terrible things happen in mortuaries sometimes, is all I'll say on that).

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