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Firefly Haiku

No matter the author's country of origin, the firefly is a topic that recurs in haiku. At first glance, fireflies seem to be a definite thing with a singular meaning. They are, after all, insects, so by their very nature, it seems difficult to interpret them any other way. However, I have found that in firefly haiku, this is not the case. In the haiku that I've read, fireflies are interpreted differently depending on the author. This is, of course, the beauty of haiku itself. As the reader, we are able to see what a singular thing means to multiple people.

lights out
. . . the firefly
inside

Lyles, *THTR*, 108

This haiku by Peggy Lyles explores the emotional meaning behind the word firefly. This haiku does this by first establishing the imagery of darkness. The phrase "lights out" means that it is completely dark. There is not a hint of light. This can translate as both a physical and emotional feeling. A place can be dark, but a person can also feel darkness. For example, a person can experience the darkest time of their life and feel that to their core. In these moments, it's difficult to feel positive.

In dark times, it feels like times will always be dark. This is represented in this haiku through the use of ellipses. The ellipses indicate a pause, so the reader rests in that moment in complete darkness. However, ellipses can also indicate continuity. In this case, while keeping in mind the traditional structure of haiku, the reader knows that this moment in darkness is not the end. After the ellipses, Lyles introduces the image of a firefly in the haiku. Traditionally, when thinking of the image of a firefly, one thinks of the light at the backside of the insect. Lyles ties this image of the firefly to the inside. This indicates that there is hope. Even if it is a minuscule amount that equates to the size of a firefly, there is still hope for better days. What Lyles has done in writing this haiku perfectly captures the meaning of the saying "It's always darkest just before dawn."

illuminating
the silence between us . . .
firefly

Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 103

The firefly mentioned in this haiku is unique because of its implications. It doesn't necessarily indicate something singularly emotional or physical. This firefly represents a limbo of sorts. It represents the words not spoken. The first line indicates that the unspoken words are not necessarily negative. The word "illuminating" gives the reader a warm and comforting feeling. When thinking of items or actions that relate to the word "illuminate," the first thing that comes to mind is the action of flipping a light switch. When a person flips a light switch, that light fills the room. The firefly in this haiku by Swist operates in the same way. The firefly, although it is small in size, fills up the space between the two people. In this situation, having words unsaid are fine because the words do not need to be spoken. The light of the firefly fills that silence.

Seen in plain daylight
the firefly's nothing but
an insect

Basho, *Intro to Japanese Haiku*, 3

In writing this haiku, Basho shows his playfulness. He does not take himself too seriously. While haiku traditionally has a strong focus on interpretation, specifically the interpretation of the reader, Basho strays from this. He tells the reader what to think, which is very uncommon in haiku. Basho tells the reader that the firefly is simply an insect. He doesn't want the reader to think too much about what the firefly means, because in this haiku it doesn't have a meaning.

This has a lot to do with the traditional image that a person sees when they think of a firefly. Typically, when a person thinks of a firefly, they think of the light of a firefly after dark. However, in the first line of this haiku, Basho establishes that there is daylight. Fireflies glow at night, which helps identify them as a firefly. During the day, they are like every other insect. There is nothing unique or magical about them. Basho captures this feeling in his haiku. Through his telling the reader how to view the firefly, he removes the magic from this haiku, although his playfulness remains.

yuruyaka ni kite hito to au hotaru no yo

wearing my kimono loosely
to meet him
firefly night

Katsura Nobuko

In this haiku, the image of a firefly is explored in relation to the theme of romance. The speaker of this haiku is meeting a lover at night. The way that the speaker is wearing her kimono serves as a way to set the mood or attract her lover. Fireflies operate in the same way. The reason why fireflies light up after dark is that they are trying to attract mates. Male fireflies typically do this to get the attention of the female fireflies.

Katsura changes the narrative. According to her mannerisms, the female speaker is the male firefly. She is in complete control of the situation. In the same way that male fireflies initiate the mating process by lighting up, the speaker is initiating the relationship between herself and the "him" mentioned in this haiku. She is the one waiting. Not the other way around. So, while the "him"

mentioned in this haiku does have power in some way, being that he has the option of whether or not he comes to meet the speaker, she holds more power than he does. She is the one that initiated the relationship and she is the one that initiates that first act of attraction. It's refreshing to see women empowered in this way.

Firefly leaves a jar,
Lands dark on my toddler's arm—
Smile turns to screaming

Calvin Olsen, *Ten Thousand Haiku*

Olsen is playful in his haiku in a way that is different from Basho, whose commentary on reader interpretation in haiku held some humor. Olsen is not speaking on a larger scale in the way that Basho was. Basho made the reader think about the structure of haiku itself, while Olsen remains very grounded in what he leads the reader to ponder.

Fireflies are beautiful at night, there is no denying that. The way that they light up is truly magical. However, at their core, fireflies are insects. Not everyone likes insects. In fact, most people are either indifferent to or despise insects. In this haiku, while in the jar, the firefly is a magical being. This is somewhat sad taking into account the reaction after the firefly is released from the jar. A firefly should be seen as most beautiful when it's in its natural habitat. This is simply not the case. While still keeping a playful tone, Olsen comments on the captivity of animals. This same situation happens to almost any given animal at the zoo. They are seen as interesting and beautiful when they are in captivity. However, when these animals are in their natural habitat, they are treated like they are outsiders. They are hunted and their land is destroyed. They are seen as a threat for living according to their nature.

The firefly in this haiku is treated in the same way. The toddler is scared of the firefly after the firefly flies out of the jar into nature, which for a toddler, is an ordinary response. So, while on the surface, this haiku is funny and cute, there is an underlying message that Olsen also tries to communicate to the reader.

No fireflies tonight
Deer blood on a dark highway
Half fills the right lane

Calvin Olsen, *Ten Thousand Haiku*

Olsen uses an interesting method to describe feeling within the context of this haiku. Rather than the presence of the firefly bringing emotion to the haiku, the lack of firefly in the haiku is what brings the emotion. Fireflies have brought a multitude of emotions to haiku, such as feelings of romance, happiness, and magic. In this haiku, Olsen wants the reader to feel none of this.

The night that Olsen writes about is devoid of any light. There is no hope. There is no light. There is no love.

Sticky summer night
Croquet mallets, fireflies
Teach a kid to cheat

Calvin Olsen, *Ten Thousand Haiku*

What is interesting about Olsen and his firefly haiku is that, although he includes the same image, they never mean exactly the same thing. Olsen has taken on a playful tone in his firefly haiku before, but always in different ways. The playfulness in this haiku borders more on mischievousness. The fireflies act more as hobgoblins than they do fireflies. Like hobgoblins, the fireflies influence the outcome of this haiku.

The way that they behave somewhat reminds me of Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck is a major contributor to the mood of the play and he also significantly influences the events of the play. The fireflies serve the same purpose in this haiku. In their own way, they teach the children how to cheat at croquet, which influences the outcome of the game.

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