

Making Sense

This year we have read essays by two of our tutors (Joan Coats, Mary Elizabeth Baldwin). Both pieces summed up the fine work they are doing as well as their own reflections on what their work means to them. The writing clarifies for tutors what they have learned from the experience of teaching, the changes they have witnessed, and it clarifies the progress that was made. Writing does that. It lets us see things clearly: patterns, successes, frustrations, etc. For some, a journal serves the same purpose. It becomes a way of reflecting or making sense of our work as a tutor. For myself, I make sense of my work (my observations) with prose and poetry. I write in a form of English called haibun which is a mixed form of prose and haiku (three line poems).

I see the haiku used in haibun almost as prayers that are written in the same moments as the prose yet instead of moving the story along in a linear line, they cause one to pause and think about the poems or prayers, to see in surprising ways, the unexpected or the unseen. An editor that I admire (Jeffrey Woodward) writes, “What is wanted, however, is harmony between prose and verse elements, a finished composition where every syllable has its proper place, where prose and verse are viewed not as ends-in-themselves but as subordinate parts of a greater whole, haibun.”

In this article, I enclose a haibun written about waiting for a student on a Saturday morning. I hope this piece will inspire you to learn more about haibun. I will include another haibun in the September newsletter.

Directions

On Saturday morning, the rear entrance to the corner building is locked, so I enter through the front of the coffee shop. It is early and no one is sitting around the small tables that look out on Third Street. Someone from behind the counter calls out, “Good morning,” but I don’t stop. Their coffee is strong and leaves a bitter taste that lingers for hours. The building was once a bank, and I walk quickly past the first vault with its heavy door left open—a manmade cave. I push open the door that reads Emergency Exit Only and pass the elevator that I will not ride and climb two flights of metal stairs that are dirty and spotted with coffee stains. I click on the hall light several times to get it to work and check to see if the restrooms are locked.

midnight—
on the second floor
homeless stir

Wood is peeling from the door to room 2C, and the doorknob feels loose as I turn it. There are no windows in the office that now serves as a classroom for adults learning how to read. Two gray tables line up like roads coming to a T, and donated pictures hang on the walls. I settle into a heavy wooden chair and read over the story I will be teaching, asking myself about names and places that might confuse a new reader. I wonder about her experiences, has she ever gone camping, does she know what the surf sounds like? The door is open and I listen for feet tapping up the metal stairs. I know it will be my first student wanting to understand a few more words so The Holy Bible will begin to make sense to her.

morning classes—
drifting through air ducts
the smell of burnt toast

* The quote By Jeffrey Woodward is taken from “Haibun Today” (March 2010).
* “Directions” first appeared in “Haibun Today” (November 2009)

Glenn Coats