

Beyond Rejection in Haiku

by Robert Epstein

“You have to know how to accept rejection and reject acceptance.”

—Ray Bradbury

Allow me to indulge a tongue-in-cheek fantasy: In my wildest dreams, every haiku or senryu I write would be welcomed with open arms by the editors of the journals I submit them to. The poems would be accepted for publication, showered with praise, and perhaps even showcased in some way. It is slightly embarrassing to expose my extravagant flights of fancy, but I suspect more than a few poets (or writers in general) harbor some variation of this exaggerated ideal.

The mature poet or writer is amused by the persistence of such wishful or magical thinking and leans toward more realistic expectations when it comes to their submissions. Yet I do want to highlight one distinct shortcoming associated with the fantasy of unconditional acceptance: it not only eliminates the specter of rejection; it would effectively obliterate the importance of quality and standards.

In real life, journals have standards, which are upheld by their editors however imperfectly or, rather, subjectively. This is how it is in the world of journal submissions, and poets need to make peace with this literary fact. Making peace with this means familiarizing oneself with the style, format, and kinds of haiku or senryu each publication prefers. Have you subscribed to the journal, checked out what they publish? Editors do have preferences, which they are entitled to, and some publications are independent while others are the outlet of an organization or society.

Based on the foregoing, it would seem that the possibility of acceptance, which naturally evokes feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, gives rise to the inevitability of rejection.¹ I have personally felt the sting of rejection following one or more acceptances. As we know, one acceptance does not guarantee or assure another.

I have found myself grappling with feelings of disappointment, frustration, self-doubt, and even a touch of indignation after rejections from journals where I have been published before. It dawned on me that I needed to work through these feelings in order to frame rejection in a different light because I was still writing poetry that *I* enjoyed. So what was the problem? In my reflections I discovered there was something I needed to get past.

Evaluating the notions of acceptance and rejection I held, I compared haiku journal submissions to dating, even though this is something of a stretch. But I found my way to a new relationship to rejection, which was freeing because it made things feel less personal when the poems I submitted were not accepted. I told myself that the poems were not well matched with the journal and/or the current editor. I even came up with an alternative term for rejection: the poems were simply *unchosen* or *unselected*, and both these words sounded much more impersonal than did rejection.

Framing things in terms of this “goodness of fit” took my ego largely out of the submissions process, which was a relief. Rejection was no longer synonymous with “failure.” This realization enabled me to hold on to my personal power and dignity. As a consequence, I felt freer to consider my alternatives: to submit the poem(s) to another journal or wait until a new editor took charge of the journal I originally submitted to.

Moreover, if I regarded the poem as good enough and publishable, I took heart in knowing that I could include the poem in a book of my own poetry. I am willing to confess here that the thought of publishing my own poems rejected by one or more editors gave me both a sense of independence and a devilish sense of satisfaction.

But still the question arises, especially if more than one editor has turned down the same poem: “Is there something amiss or awry?”

I think the mature and committed poet must consider this possibility. Without falling into self-judgment or self-criticism, it is

the responsible thing to do. Defiance or self-righteousness cannot be a cover for something wanting in a poem that needs more work or attention.

This is why it is helpful to share the poem in question one cares about with a fellow poet or group of poets whose opinion one trusts. It is important for poets to remain open and receptive to constructive feedback from capable, experienced poets.

Some journal editors, especially if there is an established rapport, may be more than willing to offer editorial suggestions or criticism that could be helpful. Not all editors do this, however, and one cannot rely on an editor's goodwill to provide feedback for any number of reasons. Editors are human, with their own priorities, time pressures, and responsibilities outside of journal editing, but it does not hurt to tactfully request feedback on one or two poems that the poet is particularly invested in.

Of course, the *hajiin* is responsible for doing his or her own homework before soliciting input. For beginning poets, especially, it is vital that one familiarize oneself with the kind of poetry that the journal seeks. Some journals publish only traditional haiku, for example, while others look askance on nature-based haiku and limit acceptances to experimental or *gendai* haiku, while still other print or online publications are intentionally eclectic in their choices.

It is also not enough to determine what a particular journal's predilections are. The tenor and tone of a given journal may fluctuate a bit from one journal editor to another. Consequently, an element of uncertainty or unpredictability is inescapable when it comes to submitting poems to the same journal over time, let alone submitting to different journals. Journal submissions, in short, call for the qualities of patience, tenacity, flexibility, and resilience (and this is not an exhaustive list).

I find it heartwarming to think of haiku as seeds dispersed hither and thither. I try to foster the conditions that are conducive to

sprouting in one journal or another. This may happen or it may not. If not, while I may be disappointed, I no longer take it personally.

I will look to see if I can strengthen the poem's prospects of sprouting by tweaking something or, if I consider it strong enough as is, then I will plant it in my own soil (a book, blog, or other venue). If it never sees the light of day, then so be it. This is the transcendence that writer Ray Bradbury points to in the quote at the head of this essay.

I content myself with knowing that the poems that never get published nonetheless enrich the earth as seeds do, serving as nutrients for the next generation of poetry, yet to be written. In other words, nothing is ever truly lost in the realm of poetry or life.

Before concluding with the thoughts and reflections I solicited from a few fellow poets and journal editors, I want to share what founding and longtime editor Stanford M. Forrester included in a recent issue of *bottle rockets*. He is one of the first to offer advice, not only about submission guidelines but also about a balanced perspective when submitting, which I appreciated:

In the end the only thing that counts is that you have written a good poem! Instead of worrying about getting published, spend the time and energy being true to your poem. If you don't like your poetry enough to reread it, who will? Write not to conquer the world; write to understand it and contribute to it. Editors are not always right. A good editor brings out the voice of the poet, not of the editor himself. Don't write a poem for an editor or an anthology. Write the poem because your heart tells you. How many editors does it take to accept one haiku? (This issue's koan.)²

In an unprecedented call for rejected senryu—that's right, rejected poems!—the founding editor of the online journal *Failed Haiku* devoted a whole issue (#66) to senryu that poets had been unsuccessful in placing elsewhere. This may well have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for poets to have a “reparative experience” for one or more poems they thought were worthy of publication. Below are a sampling of the “rejected” (or previously unselected)

poems that editor Mike Rehling included in the issue he dubbed “Back from the Dead.” The reader is encouraged to peruse the full issue and judge for themselves the quality of the poetry therein: <https://haikuhut.com/FailedHaikuIssue66.pdf>.

rookery the dark wings of a tenement³

soil erosion
now
he says he loves me⁴

morning coffee
we listen to a robin
instead of each other⁵

child’s drawing
a version of me
without the scars⁶

Rehling offers advice to poets:

Accept that if your poem is not selected it is no big deal and does NOT mean that your work is no good. No single editor is the final arbiter of what is good or bad. If you want to know ‘why’ something is not selected then feel free to ask. No editor should be too busy to communicate with a poet. Be sweet, don’t be ugly, but hell ask if you want clarification. It usually doesn’t change minds, but it should give you a sense of where you are out of sync with the editor, and we are happy to do it [at *Failed Haiku* for anyone].⁷

Via e-mail, I contacted a few haiku poet friends and current or former haiku editors, requesting their replies to two questions on rejection that I posed:

1. In what ways have you learned to cope with the disappointment (and/or other feelings) when poems you have submitted to journal editors have been “rejected”?
2. What advice or encouragement would you share with fellow poets about responding to rejection of their poems?

Adjei Agyei-Baah, a haiku poet and co-founder of the African Haiku Network, was the first to respond. He recently published a chapbook on the subject of rejection, *Finding the Other Door: Senryu*, which I very much enjoyed reading. I found myself intrigued by his affirmative and creative response to rejection:

Here are some of my unique ways of dealing with rejection. I try to revise [the] same haiku for the same editor, which I refer to as “finding the other door to the editor’s mind.” This I had succeeded with journals such as *Failed Haiku*, *Akitsu [Quarterly]*, among others. Also, I had gone back to the scene where the moment was born for fresh inspiration on the occasion, what I referred to as “going to the pine to learn from the pine,” quoting the master Bashō. Such revisits had help [in] giving the appropriate diction to rewrite the poem, and occasionally too had birthed a fresh moment.

Sometimes too, I take solace in the fact that my diction didn’t work out for the editor, and thus the editor may not have felt or resonated with the moment that I share[d]. In my Akan community, we say, “Who bears witness to the lone hunter’s story?” So, in such cases, I save that poem for publication in my book because I still hold that moment dear and unique to me.⁸

Francine Banwarth, a former editor of *Frogpond* and co-author with Michele Root-Bernstein of *The Haiku Life: What We Learned as Editors of Frogpond*, responded to the first question with these reflections:

This question always takes me back to my very first rejection in 1989, or as I like to think of it now “nonacceptance.” I opened the envelope, read the note enclosed, and in a huff crumpled it up and threw it into the trash. Within a few minutes I started to have a talk with myself that went something like, “If you want to pursue this art, then you are going to have to learn to deal with rejection, with editors who don’t think your work is worthy or a fit for their journal.” I walked back, retrieved the note, smoothed it out, and placed it in a file with the original submission. I still have it. Over the years I learned that I had to put some trust in the editors to whom I submitted. If work wasn’t accepted, I’d read everything I could find that the editor had published of his or her own work, as well as the work they accepted for the journal they edited. Sometimes I’d have to “double down” when my work was rejected multiple times by a particular editor. Of course, I still feel disappointment when work is rejected, but most often, when I reread the submission and consider it carefully, I come

to the same conclusion: it's just not quite there. Other times, if I really believe in the poem, I'll send it off to another editor and find success with that submission.⁹

And here is Francine's response to my second question:

Bill Pauly, my haiku mentor since I began to write haiku in 1989, would encourage us: "Find an editor worthy of your work." I've always believed in that premise, along with something I've learned during my editorship of *Frogpond*, "Send out work that is worthy of you." So often as I skim through my journal pages to put together a submission, I reject 90% of what I've written because it's not what I feel is my best. I'll often reread the journals' guidelines for submissions and the poems contained on the pages, and I belong to a couple of online kukai groups who provide excellent feedback. COVID put a halt to in-person workshops and haiku conferences, but again there are many groups meeting online and beginning to gather. Like any art, the art of haiku and related forms requires practice, persistence, passion, as well as an open mind and an open heart.

Randy and Shirley Brooks, longtime editors of *Mayfly*, a highly regarded haiku journal, shared these observations on the question of coping with personal rejection:

When I first started submitting to journals (back in the 1970s), I had a burlap-covered 5-gallon bottle. It was green. I would put the rejections in it. It got pretty loaded! But it was a fun way to move on. I've always assumed that the ones I submitted just didn't connect or stand out for the editor. It didn't mean that they were no good. I never really felt rejected . . . just more like those submissions haven't found their reader who loves them yet.

I guess I've always sought out some feedback from friends and a couple of writer-buddies so I have another way to see which ones hit and give readers a *STOP, what was that?* response.

Of course, it's always pleasant to get one or more accepted too. & once published get feedback from other readers. The only time that has NOT been true is when I realize the editor takes almost everything I submit or most of what I submit. I feel like they aren't being selective. They are saving me from getting a less-stellar poem published. Most editors don't do that.¹⁰

As for advice to submitting poets, the Brooks editors suggest:

A rejection is not a rejection of you or your work. It means that your haiku or submission just didn't connect with us. Or it did, but not at the level of resonance we wanted to publish.

When Shirley and I are editing *Mayfly*, we read all submissions during a month-long period. . . . What we are looking [for] is haiku that continue to resonate beyond the first reading. . . . Those are the haiku that we publish in *Mayfly*.

Roberta Beary, an award-winning haiku poet and longtime haibun editor of *Modern Haiku* shares contrasting means of coping with rejection:

I aim for 100+ rejections a year.

I recall the [Winston] Churchill quote my father drilled into my brain:

This is the lesson: never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense."¹¹

On advice for other poets submitting their poetry, Beary as editor observes:

I keep in mind that editors, most of whom are unpaid, are writers who send out their work and receive a plethora of rejections.

I don't take rejections personally which means I don't engage with editors about why they rejected my work.

In closing, I would like to encourage more dialogue (both public and private) between poets and journal editors. I believe that this would benefit both parties: poets might have a clearer idea of what is expected of them, which will encourage them to refine their submissions. This in turn may help editors make their selection process more fluid. The net result, I think, will not only be greater satisfaction for all involved but also a stronger, more robust body of English-language haiku.

Sources:

1. The inspiration for this essay originated in a brief discussion of rejection that I included in *New to Haiku* (July 2021), a Troutswirl feature coordinated by Julie B. Kelsey that appears on The Haiku Foundation website.
2. *bottle rockets* 44 (2021).
3. John Hawkhead. Failed Haiku 6:66 (May 2021).
4. Susan Burch. Failed Haiku 6:66 (May 2021).
5. Kristen Lindquist. Failed Haiku 6:66 (May 2021).
6. Bryan Rickert. Failed Haiku 6:66 (May 2021).
7. Mike Rehling, Failed Haiku Submission Guidelines, <https://failedhaiku.com/submissions-guidelines/>.
8. Adjei Agyei-Baah, personal e-mail communication, 7/12/21.
9. Francine Banwarth, personal e-mail communication, 7/22/21.
10. Randy and Shirley Brooks, personal e-mail communication, 7/23/21.
11. Roberta Beary, personal e-mail communication, 7/31/21.

Robert Epstein is a psychotherapist in private practice who has been reading and writing haiku for more than 30 years. He has published several haiku books and edited a number of theme-based haiku anthologies, including The Helping Hand Haiku Anthology. A new anthology, The Haiku Way to Healing: Illness, Injury and Pain, is forthcoming.