

Core Samples from the World, by Forrest Gander (New York: New Directions, 2011). 95 pages; 6"×9". Paperback. ISBN 978-0-811218-87-0. Price: \$15.95 from booksellers.

Reviewed by Roberta Beary

Core Samples from the World, a book of haibun (with photographs and other poems, including a madrigal) was one of two finalists for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and one of four for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry the year before. This is good news for haibun writers. There is no doubt that Forrest Gander is a skilled writer. But is he writing haibun?

The first of several accolades on the back cover of the book refer to *Core Samples* as a “magnificent compendium of poetry, photography, and haibun (a Japanese form of essay-poem.)” There’s the rub. Gander’s haibun are a kind of essay-poem, albeit with riveting and breathtaking photographs. *Core Samples* follows the poet to China, Mexico, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Chile. Each haibun bears the name of a specific city, town, village, or place. The prose describes a scene, and the haiku “finishes” the prose rather than more obliquely illuminating the insight or emotion underlying it.

The opening haibun, “Beijing,” describes “twenty poets speaking seven languages on a field trip to the outskirts of Beijing” on a trip to the Summer Palace. It focuses on Persian poet Emran Salahi, who, “dawdling in the corner of a side room, peers around a painted screen and discovers a white-haired man face-down on a table strewn with syringes.” This haibun ends with a statement written in the standard haiku three-line form, “Behind everything/ the foreigner sees, something he doesn’t / know how to look for.”

The second haibun, “Summer Place,” follows Salahi and poet Kazuko Shiraishi as a group of poets walks along the lake by the Summer Palace. The last two sentences read “Now Emran Salahi joins the group, nodding toward the useless boat docked forever at the shore. He tries out his minimal English.” The three-line haiku that ends the haibun

“That thing, he / says, it is / like a poem” again left me feeling a bit let down, like many of the haiku in the book.

The haibun from which the book’s title is taken, “Mexico: A Core Sample Through 24 Hours” is a seven-page haibun with many haiku interspersed throughout. I had high hopes for this piece based on the reviews. I was taken with the prose, including a section in which we find Gander (along with several others, including poet Mark Strand) listening to an impromptu piano performance played in a dark concert space: “No one can find the light switch. Nevertheless, Ysabel is persuaded to sit at the piano while the others . . . sit scattered in the darkness.” Two of the poets, “Jennifer and Victor get up.” The haiku continues the prose, “To dance across the stage, barely / visible, a satellite / trekking the night sky.”

Some of the work is outstanding, such as “Moving Around for the Light: A Madrigal.” The author’s statement at the book’s beginning rings true: “It is also a very personal account of negotiations across borders (between languages and cultures, between one species and all the rest, between health and sickness, between poetic forms, and between self and others).” By the end of the book, however, I was not convinced that the haiku were more than short sentences written in three lines, “Though the path to the bar reeks / of cat urine, the men’s room dispenser / serves chocolate condoms.”

Core Samples from the World is a useful guide, showing how at least one mainstream poet views haibun. One can only imagine how much richer this book might have been if Forrest Gander had immersed himself in haibun written by poets who have mastered the delicate balance between prose and poetry characteristic of the very best work.