

## Reviewed

**Robert Epstein.** *Checkout Time is Noon: Death Awareness Haiku.* Shelbyville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2012, 78 pp., perfect softbound, 6 x 9. ISBN 978-1-60047-750-8, US \$10 (includes domestic shipping) from taylor/epstein@earthlink.net or US \$12 + shipping from Amazon.com.

**Robert Epstein.** *A Walk Around Spring Lake.* Shelbyville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2012, 65 pp., perfect softbound, 6 x 9. ISBN 978-1-60047-729-4, US \$10 (includes domestic shipping) from taylor/epstein@earthlink.net or US \$12 + shipping from Amazon.com.

by Marjorie Buettner, Chisago City, Minnesota

Before my mother died she confessed to me that she was being called home. This statement reminded me of an old Chinese proverb: All of life is a dream walking, all of death is a going home. Two collections of Robert Epstein's haiku, *Checkout Time is Noon* and *A Walk Around Spring Lake*, resonate deeply with this proverb. Many of Epstein's haiku center upon an awareness of death and share that tender perception which comes with seeing the finite in all things. In fact, Epstein coined the term "death awareness haiku," using the most intuitive poetic form (as he said in the preface of *Checkout Time is Noon*), in order to "see more vividly what life has been about."

In this "death awareness haiku" Epstein has given himself a Blakean freedom to "see the world in a grain of sand":

sun-bleached sand  
no beginning  
no end

We are, in this world of dew, a world of dew:

a single raindrop  
in a single puddle  
evaporating

And yet, and yet, beauty abounds:

deathbed window  
moonlight through  
trembling aspens

For Epstein, death is a coming home:

when it's time

open the window I'll follow  
the songbird home

In this homecoming the poet realizes that both life and death  
are present, both beginning and end are here:

on the same branch  
a blooming and a dying rose  
never touch

indigo night  
in the cricket's song  
no birth no death

Epstein steps outside of ordinary time and listens to the beating  
of his own heart; it is the pulse of the world:

listening to water  
lap against rock  
I'm ready

Here in the pulse of the world lies the ineffable beauty of life  
itself, of light itself:

no sky bluer this dying day

And yet there is still something of life to live by, to count on,  
to celebrate:

it won't last  
I won't last  
blue moon

tonight  
I become a button hole  
the wind passes through

We inevitably become wind, become a shaft of light, become  
a morning star; can it ever be erased? Our butterfly dreams  
will reveal the mystery:

shaft of light  
I look around and see  
my shadow gone

morning star  
lighting the way for  
butterfly dreams

*Checkout Time is Noon* is a fine collection of haiku to add to  
your personal library; you have nothing to lose and everything  
to gain.

nothing to lose  
I ferry across the river of dreams  
and disappear

*A Walk Around Spring Lake* describes another kind of going  
home; it is that second place of birth, as the Chinese say—one  
of your own predilection. For me it is Green Lake in Minne-  
sota. Robert Epstein's second place of birth—which is always  
a homecoming—is Spring Lake. There he is able to meditate  
and converse with nature, entering into a conversation with  
the soul as well. As a dedication to Thoreau, Epstein cites a  
passage in *Walden*: "The lake is the earth's eye into which the  
beholder measures the depth of his own nature." Spring Lake  
is a refuge for Epstein where he can go home and be himself,  
where he can explore the depth of his own nature and find

himself, in his own words in the preface, “closer to some kind of inexpressible truth.” That truth is much like his death awareness haiku in *Checkout Time is Noon*:

in pine shade  
for a while I forget  
this life will end

There we realize that life is a gift—temporary and transient—yet beautiful nonetheless. Embracing this truth allows us to breathe more deeply, allows us to live more fully:

breathing in  
breathing out  
the lake

This truth that Epstein comes closer to at Spring Lake is inexpressible and yet we listen, look, and learn:

Spring Lake      god included

the pine tree over there  
and the pine tree over here  
both mentors

The nature of the lake will cleanse all perception of what “I” means:

on a park bench  
in pine shade  
I float away

It is truly a homecoming for Epstein, reminding the reader, too, that nature at times speaks louder than words:

dragonfly  
not another word

that woodpecker  
knocking on a nearby pine  
knows I’m home

And in this ineffable beauty the poet and reader understand  
and appreciate that second chance, which only a walk around  
the lake can give:

cut grass  
I too am ready  
to start over

August acorn  
I too am ready  
to be planted

again the lake  
did something—not sure what—  
with my grief

In *A Walk Around Spring Lake* Robert Epstein helps us to understand the hidden truths of nature. The lake is alchemical magic shaking our complacency, helping us to see that life is circular—it is that snake biting its tail—and the beginning and the end are one. Epstein celebrates this truth in his new collection of haiku and it is something we can celebrate, too:

Spring Lake  
in September . . . for sure  
death is not the end



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