

Briefly Reviewed

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Robert Epstein. *Haiku Forest Afterlife*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2014, 136 pp., perfect softbound, 5 x 8 inches ISBN 978-0-69221-2170-9. US\$13 from www.create-space.com and www.amazon.com.

As Epstein explains in a preface to his new (and fourth) book of solo poems, he long maintained an agnostic view concerning what happens after death. Yet, in his sixtieth year, he found himself exploring the possibilities of an afterlife. The challenge, as he understood it, was to look at death totally, without fear. As serious as the endeavor may be—and the cover art by Ron C. Moss sets the scene beautifully—in the poems collected here Epstein treats his subject in a light-hearted, playful, and ultimately innocent manner. How else to fend off the fear? Nearly every haiku gracefully distills a thought, an emotion, a wry observation that readers will recognize as uncannily like their own—which is to say, profoundly human. There is much that pleases, too, in Epstein's deft handling of a variety of haiku formats. Altogether a satisfying read for those who like a bit of wit with their solemnities: *comes a time / when the corpse pose / no longer is; dust* (after Cor van den Heuvel); *edge of night / coming and going / through the cracks*. ~MRB

Bob Lucky. *Ethiopian Time*. St. Paul, MN: Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014, 52 pp., single signature, hand sewn, 5.5 x 7 inches. 100 copy edition. US\$12 + shipping from www.redbirdchapbooks.com.

In this small collection, 29 haibun capped with haiku or tanka or, in a few cases, with no ku at all, deal with Lucky's four

years living in Ethiopia. The exercise, laced with the poet's habitual cynicism, humor, and pathos, evokes a foreign place experienced as surpassing strange, yet home, also, to the achingly familiar. "New Home," "Waiting," "An Update on the Class War," "Some Notes on Paradise," and more explore the paradox beautifully. What's more, where the veneer of his own cultural expectations rubs most raw, Lucky finds his greatest awareness of the world and self. In "Some Nights," when the electricity goes out, the poet sits in the garden and looks at the stars he knows "so little about." Real insight comes, however, when he realizes that the lights have come back on:

I'll get up and go into the bathroom or the kitchen and reflexively switch on the light, discovering I've been sitting in the dark needlessly. I quickly turn it off.

crescent moon
an alley cat tightropes
the garden wall

~MRB

John Gonzalez. *Crystal Clear*. Sutton Bridge, England: The Magic Pen Press with Hub Editions, 2014, 69+ pages, handmade softbound, 5.25 x 7.25 inches. ISBN 978-0-9576460-3-2. £6.50 from Hub Editions, Longhold, East Bank, Wingland, Sutton Bridge, Lincolnshire PE12 9YS, UK.

In this somewhat uneven collection there is nonetheless a felt energy in the poet's repeated use of butterflies, shadows, monastery paths, funerals, and fishing. Willy-nilly the reader engages with the overriding theme of death and the stay of death in poetry: *in the small hours / an owl's call / and the hint of a haiku*. An ex-monk and a practicing nurse, Gonzalez is especially touching in the many poems about the passing of his mother: *three days gone— / the old dog / sleeps by her slippers*. Despite the occasional repetition of poetic idea, an overuse of exclamation points, and more than a few typos, the poet's path lights up with poems all the more startling and insightful for the company they keep: *between / streetlamps / dark flowers*. ~MRB

Edward J. Rielly. *Spring Rain Winter Snow*. Brunswick, ME: Shanti Arts Publishing, 2014, 32 pp., 18 illustrations, hardcover, 9 x 9 inches. ISBN 978-1-941830-94-9. US\$19.99 from www.shantiarts.com. (Also available in ebook format.)

The contemporary format haiku in this engaging little collection hold images and surprises that children will appreciate, though the POV is decidedly “grandpa’s.” In the best haiga tradition, the lovely illustrations by Angelina Buonaiuto complement but do not repeat the poems. Altogether a welcome reprieve from the usual 5–7–5 directed at children. *Spring melt . . . / a baseball rises beneath / the forsythia; full autumn moon; / on an oak branch / owl slowly turns his head; midwinter thaw / our old friend, the ground / shows up again.* ~MRB

Ion Codrescu. *Something Out of Nothing, 72 Haiga*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2014, 162 pp., perfect softbound, 7.5 x 10 inches. ISBN 978-1-936848-35-5. US\$30 from www.redmoonpress.com.

In the footsteps of similar collaborations with French and German poets, Codrescu presents his visual interpretation of 74 North American haiku and one of his own, as well. A graphic arts instructor teaching in Romania, Codrescu is (in the words of Stephen Addiss) “one of the leading contemporary masters of haiku painting.” Utilizing the renku method of link and shift, he responds to the words of others with his own sensitive merging of painting and calligraphy. For the reader, absorbing a varied array of haiku moments through a singular artistic lens is a real and revealing treat. ~MRB

Renée Owen. *Alone on a Wild Coast*. Ormskirk, Great Britain: Snapshot Press, 2014, 72 pp., perfect softbound, 5 x 7.5 inches. ISBN 978-1-903543-34-4. £9.99, US\$23 (includes shipping) from www.snapshotpress.co.uk.

In her first book-length collection, Renée Owen is as “at home” on the page as she is on the wild coast of northern California. A widely published and award-winning author, Owen

illustrates a sensitivity for deepening and expanding a moment in which she seamlessly translates what she *sees* into what she *perceives*. At this junction, or “juxtaposition,” of natural and human landscapes, she invites the reader in: *a kingfisher calls / from out of nowhere / everywhere*. A mixed-media artist and psychotherapist, Owen “draws the reader into the interplay between a dynamic landscape and an interior coast, between our environment and intuited feelings” and she sustains this energy and insight throughout the collection of fifty haiku, twelve haibun, and a pair of sequences. A good number of her poems and linked forms reference the personal: *finding myself / in the night sky / star by star; my bottomless ache hollows fill with bird song*. In gems such as these Owen intuitively keeps the “I” in the shadows and lets the natural world sparkle. Even in those that seem to focus purely on nature images, the heart is aware: *autumn moon / the pale butterfly / with half a wing; wild madder root / forever searching / for something*. In her haibun, too, we witness a search for something, for some order in the chaos of this wild yet priceless existence:

Grand Moons

All week the new baby. Another link in our chain.
Watching her eat, sleep, cry. A few moments of play, a
smile, tiny fingernails, the soft toes. Then eat, sleep, cry.
Oh the order, in those first few months, as she opens to
life. And I—for her, I try not to close.

this bent cypress
beneath a half moon
what day, what year

“So Much of Life” and “Tidal Time”—a pair of sequences set in the center of the collection—recount the impending death of a loved one. The first link in the pair reaches out in an attempt to hold on to life: *making art / at your bedside / the vibrancy of blue*. The last link in the pair comes to terms with loss and lets go: *who am I to say / the world disappears / in ocean fog*. Bringing this fine collection to a close, the poet finds herself “alone on a wild coast,” at one with the universe: *one two three stars / I become stillness / then night*. ~FB

Gary Hotham, ed. *Take-out Window: Haiku Society of America 2014 Members' Anthology*. New York: Haiku Society of America, 2014, 124 pp., perfect softbound, 5.5 x 8.5 inches. ISBN 978-1-930172-12-8.

The 2014 HSA anthology features haiku and senryu by almost 300 members, selected and arranged by Gary Hotham, with book cover and sumi-e illustrations by Lidia Rozmus. There is much to please the ear and the eye in this collection. A favorite, the title poem by Cor van den Heuvel: *boardwalk rain / a wet ketchup bottle / at the take-out window*. ~FB

Steven Carter. *A Wilderness of Mirrors*, 2014, 164 pp. ISBN 978-1-910185-06-3. *Ocean in the Drop*, 2014, 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-910185-08-7. *The Heretical Owl: A Steven Carter Miscellany*, 2015, 120 pp. ISBN 978-1-910185-14-8. Uxbridge, UK: Alba Publishing, perfect softbound, 5.25 x 5.75 inches. £10.00, US\$15 each from www.albapublishing.com.

Three new titles by a prolific and award-winning author who is not afraid to experiment with range of subject matter and form. *Ocean in the Drop* is a collection of Carter's haiku and tanka; *A Wilderness of Mirrors* features his haibun. In *The Heretical Owl* we find haibun-like prose with a small selection of haiku on the final pages. Carter has a voice that comes alive on the page, as if he is having a conversation with himself as well as with the reader. Each of these collections comes with its own energy, one that probes mind, heart, and spirit as well as the complexities of the human and natural worlds. From *Ocean in the Drop*: *Warplanes loop the loop the same loop; One folded rose she makes up her mind*. ~FB

Jim Kacian & the Red Moon Editorial Staff, eds. *Big Data: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku 2014*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2015, 206 pp., perfect softbound, 5.5 x 8.25 inches. ISBN 978-1-936848-36-2. US\$17 from www.redmoonpress.com.

Always anticipated, with high expectations, the 2014 RMA *Big Data* is well worth the wait! Order a copy today. ~FB