

Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY RANDY BROOKS

Witness Tree haiku by paul m. (Snapshot Press, Ormskirk, UK: 2020). 96 pages, 5" x 7.75". Two-color card covers, perfect bound. ISBN 9781-903543-51-1. Available from snapshotpress.co.uk or \$20 USD from the author at modernhaiku@gmail.com.

An experienced author and editor of *Modern Haiku* magazine, it is not surprising that Paul Miller has a clearly-established understanding of his own approach. This is his eighth collection, and in the introduction to *witness tree*, he explains:

While haiku can be speculative, or even surreal, my haiku tend toward the realistic. The simple explanation is that I continue to be awed by the world we inhabit, with its subtle relationships, emphasis on the present moment, and personal meaning. I intend my poetry to be a bridge—a way to reconcile myself to a larger creative nature.

Make no mistake, these are not merely nature poems. They are miniature stories bearing witness to life. Miller's haiku are chronicles of interaction with nature. For example, feel the enthusiastic urgency in this haiku:

daffodil tips
the tensions
in her leash

And the sense of discovery in this one:

with a hop
a tree frog reveals itself
glacial valley

This haiku starts with the tree frog hop, but expands into the life of the valley, shaped eons ago by a glacier.

Other times, Miller chronicles a more immediate change:

honeybee
acre after acre
of burned forest

In the introduction of *witness tree*, Miller explains that he seeks to engage the world with a “beginner’s mind” . . . “a state of perception that focuses on the here and now, without preconception, without judgement.” Here, Miller admires the serendipity of a butterfly:

field of yarrow
a butterfly’s path
could be more efficient

Sometimes, the interactions require a soft touch in order to not cause harm:

replacing
it
more
gently

than
I
picked
it
up

sea
star

While Miller appreciates the wonders and gifts of nature, he also bears witness to the limitations of our own natures as in this haiku:

cancer spreading . . .
my cell phone's
single bar

And this one, too:

bulbs dividing underground
we talk of children
we cannot have

Miller notes:

The term 'witness tree' describes trees that have witnessed significant events, such as the Sickles Oak, which saw brutal fighting at Gettysburg in the American Civil War; or the Ankerwycke Yew in Berkshire, England, which witnessed the signing of the Magna Carta . . . However, the term originally referred to trees that helped surveyors map property boundaries when a more permanent marker couldn't be placed because the boundary existed in a lake, marsh, or on other impermanent ground.

Here is the title poem:

extended drought
a staghead
on the witness tree

He further notes:

The poems in this book are my witness trees and, as such, they serve both definitions. Some act to solidify a particular

moment in memory that continues to reverberate strongly for me. Others mark more tenuous discoveries, where—if I may borrow from Spiess again—‘language falls into silence and thinking has no way to follow.’ These poems are intuited relationships.

Several of the haiku from the last portion of the book deal with death and dying, such as the following:

grave shopping . . .
the one with a nearby tree
for climbing

The book ends with a sense of stories the witness trees could tell beyond our short lives. My favorite from this collection is this haiku of the power of bearing witness to life:

an inch of snow
a story about my father
I’ve not heard before

A New Resonance 12: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku edited by Jim Kacian and Julie Schwerin (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). 176 pages, 5.5" x 8.25". Four-color card covers, perfect bound. ISBN 978-1-947271-79-1. \$20 from redmoonpress.com.

A New Resonance 12 features the works of seventeen poets who represent a variety of approaches and individualistic voices. Below is a brief sampling of one haiku by each poet.

Mary Jo Balistreri is a musician and painter. Her haiku celebrate the joys of creative perception:

harmonizing
with the hemlock wind . . .
winter wren