

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

Reviewed
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 Minnesota. 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*:

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

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

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Spring Lake god included

the pine tree over there
and the pine tree over here
both mentors
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The nature of the lake will cleanse all perception of what “I” means:

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on a park bench
in pine shade
I float away
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It is truly a homecoming for Epstein, reminding the reader, too, that nature at times speaks louder than words:

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donkey
not another word

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