

Rebecca Lilly. *Elements of a Life*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2014, 112 pp., perfect softbound, 4.25 x 6.5 inches. ISBN 978-1-936848-34-8. US\$12 from www.redmoonpress.com.

by Michele Root-Bernstein, East Lansing, MI

Rebecca Lilly's new book is a puzzle, a challenge, a work of art that abides in mystery and creative verve.

The slim volume begins from both ends, which is to say, the back cover is in actuality the front cover for a second book. Where to start? Cover 1, designed in black on white, opens with an introduction and a set of haiku chosen from Lilly's corpus by the editor Allan Burns. Cover 2, designed in white on black, opens to a complementary set of "haiku" in which Lilly responds to the poems chosen by Burns with "a deeper more expansive awareness beyond an initial observation"—and with an experimental style all her own. The reader may enter where he/she will, cognizant, of course, that, figuratively as well as literally, notions of haiku experience, composition, and comprehension are shortly to be turned around and upside down.

Thus, a Book 1 poem:

His short life . . .
crows flocking northward
from the windy rise

is mirrored by the Book 2 poem,

Crows	on a summit
still	distant short
caws	crosscurrents

or, rather, by two "parallel" poems, the second in this instance,

transiting aspects	of
Jupiter	house lords
a life	flying northward

What is one to make of all this? Though I count myself a fairly experienced reader of haiku, the Book 2 poems initially threw me for a loop. I am accustomed to haiku featuring (usually) two images or image plus thought, but these poems featured three, even four ideas within the same spare number of words. The cognitive fragmentation had me worried that here was a poetic world for which I would find no entry. How was I to relate two inaccessible poems to one I might “understand”?

Thankfully, Lilly’s introduction proved an invaluable resource and guide to her purpose and her process. As she explains it, Burns suggested organizing his selection of her haiku around the four natural elements of water, earth, air and fire. Intrigued by the symbolism of this categorical device, Lilly immersed herself in the “ancient, esoteric systems” of tarot and astrology, in which earth represents the material body, water the emotions, air the rational mind, and fire the intuitive self or spirit. Her interest in these elements, singly and in combination, lay in the illumination they might cast on the human psyche. What she set out to do in her “parallel” poems, then, was to “uncover the deeper psychic roots behind the observations captured in the poems in Book 1.” She did so by reimagining the original haiku and moving her observations away from their apparent subject to the surrounding sensory “field.” The task of capturing these field impressions called for a different compositional style, she found, one “with less adherence to syntax, linear apprehension, and the rules of grammatical construction.”

As I soon realized, the task of reading these sensory fields also called for a different way of entering and exploring the poem. Indeed, it struck me that these experimental haiku might be mindfully approached as verbal analogues of the visual image in haiga or as the associational prose poem of a haibun written, so to speak, for the right brain. This notion was liberating.

Consider the following complex of haiku and parallel poems:

Ice-cased conifers—
the inner work
left undone

Dusk conifers stone-
rooted twisted in
knots the ice breaks up

from mystery always
under creeping slowly
on stone toward sun

“Ice-cased conifers” appears last in the first section of Book 1, titled “On the Tide Break.” “Dusk conifers” and “from mystery” appear last (and on the same page) in the first section of Book 2 titled water. Given Lilly’s framing of the work, we know that these water poems will certainly explore emotion—as, indeed, the juxtaposition of ice-cased conifers and “inner work / left undone” quite clearly signals. In and of itself, this first haiku successfully inserts itself within a well-recognized corpus of contemporary ku joining natural phenomenon to mental states.

Yet Lilly has more to say, or rather, to urge towards consciousness in her two companion pieces—for in “Dusk conifers” and “from mystery” the first thing one observes is the deliberate breakup of linear (verbal) logic. The poems “read” in multiple fragments that never fully cohere into phrase. Moreover, given the open layout of words, the eye is free to link different fragments *across* lines, reading left to right, but also top to bottom, which adds to the possible number of fragments and, of course, the dissolution of linear thinking. For instance, “stone- / rooted twisted in / knots” exists in the same conceptual space as “stone- / twisted in / the ice breaks up.” This second vertical phrase is additionally energized by an ambiguity of action: is it the stone or the ice that breaks up? Both, each providing a concrete image for the vague abstraction of “the inner work / left undone.” Similarly in the poem “from mystery,” the fragment “creeping slowly / on stone”

shares simultaneity with “creeping slowly / toward sun.” Again, both images speak to the original ku, suggesting an emotional movement, a doing of the work so far left undone. In short, there is a melting—or perhaps a repeated cycle of freezing and melting—that finally breaks up the stone and releases its twist of knots.

If haiku and parallel poems speak to each other within a single triplet, each triplet speaks to every other in the collection. Despite their nominal categorization into water, earth, air, and fire, the haiku and their complementary poems reveal an interpenetration of elemental images. The psyche is not just made up of emotion, but of body, mind, and spirit. Lilly evokes this interplay by masterfully manipulating symbolic images throughout the text. And attending to these symbolic complexes the reader gains entry into a highly original wordscape that explores, in her words, “less conscious or apparent parts” of an “ordinary mind-based personal self.”

The following set of poems offers example:

In fields the purple
flowerwhorls careful
eternity’s from here

A rise crows valley
evergreens a stream
winds flowers of ice

field & stone mountains
violet foolishly the mind
works the light mined

“In fields” appears last in the section titled “Star Decals”; “A rise” and “field & stone” appear last in the section titled “fire,” nominally representing “the intuitive self or spirit.” (In fact, these are the final poems of Books 1 and 2, which meet and merge, like night and day, in the center of the volume.) In this triplet of poems, fire is most obviously manifest in the final fragment, “the light mined,” and the associated spirit in

“eternity’s from here.” Yet the element surfaces elsewhere in these poems, as well. Lilly’s evocation of fire throughout “Star Decals” touches not just on light, but on heat, energy, and other manifestations of forceful action, intent, or expansion. Within this context “flower whorls” and the undulation from “a rise” to “valley” take on the aspect of an immanent dynamic. Equally relevant are the signs of water: “a stream / flowers of ice”; of earth: “field & stone mountains”; and of air: “A rise / evergreens / winds” or “foolishly the mind / works.” Matters of the spirit are inextricably bound up with matters of body, mind, and emotions.

In the repeated use of certain images, along with their associations, Lilly brings her abstractions home. Stone, rise /mountain/summit, ice, wind, crows, still/stillness, stream/flight/rustle—all these sensory phenomena carry symbolic meaning that will be familiar to many readers of haiku. The purple flower spirals in its growth just as the cosmos (or our perception of it) spirals out from the here and now. At the “careful” center of awareness is our recognition of the inevitability of death: the crows that fly down from the heights, the stream that winds its way to ice or that flowers with ice. The emotional response to mortality is a heavy stone, a mountain to traverse, yet the body perseveres in its instinct to live, just as “the field violet works.” Lilly deals with some of humanity’s darkest thoughts, yet is not immune to the “foolish” consolations of mind and spirit. Indeed, these are the moments her poetry strives to distill. “I’m / in lilac” the narrator of “monks walk here” proclaims, I am a being of sensory experience, subject to all its perturbations. Yet a certain calm abides in the clear sense of a “divine still rustle.” In that paradoxical awareness of motionless movement lies the eternity in now.

It is Lilly’s hope that by sharing attempts to uncover less conscious or apparent parts of herself with her readers, they, too, may open to the same deepened experience in themselves. Certainly for me, walking the unfamiliar path charted in *Elements of a Life* has been well worth the effort. For one thing, I appreciate as never before the associative play of spare

images in a psychic field. For another, I see how Lilly offers contemporary poets a novel, meaning-making template that reaches well beyond the typical grounds for haiku. I do not mean that haijin should necessarily take up astrology or tarot. I mean, rather, that by attending fully to the sensory or symbolic fields of their poems, they may push words that much further to say what cannot be said, but only felt.¹ Turning the world of haiku experience, composition, and comprehension on its head, Lilly dares take the first step in offering creative direction for the genre. The next step belongs to her readers and to those she will surely inspire.

Notes

1. Borrowing from Ursula K. Le Guin, who wrote, “The artist deals with what cannot be said in words. . . .The artist whose medium is fiction does this in words.” In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace Books, 1976), introduction.



With one foot in the humanities and social sciences and another in the arts, Michele Root-Bernstein studies creative imagination across the life cycle. Her most recent book in this field, Inventing Imaginary Worlds: From Childhood Play to Adult Creativity, is featured at www.inventingimaginaryworlds.com. Her haiku have appeared in a number of North American journals, A New Resonance 6, and Haiku 2014. Currently she serves as associate editor of Frogpond.

