

Dan Schwerin. ⊕RS. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2015, (unpag.) 80 pp., perfect softbound, 4.5 x 6.5 inches. ISBN 978-1-936848-35-5. US\$12 from www.redmoonpress.com.

by Charles Trumbull, Santa Fe, NM

From the very outset the reader of this book, Dan Schwerin's first collection of haiku, is confronted with a multilayered conundrum, both how to pronounce the title and how to understand it. "⊕RS" is a triple and perhaps even quadruple entendre. At its simplest one might read it ORS, suggesting that the book comprises poems with alternative interpretations. However, the painting used for the cover (artist unnamed) is of decoratively painted OARS against a black background, suggesting another meaning: a journey across stygian darkness.

I make my peace
behind hogs on a truck
moon-viewing

the oars at rest
where I am
becomes clear

The circled plus sign has a meaning in logic, as is explained in the preface: "⊕ is the logical operator for exclusive disjunction, when A or B but not both are true, a juxtaposition that points beyond." Seen as a cross in a circle, the sign resembles a Celtic cross, evident in many pagan, Native American, and, of course, Christian traditions and symbolizing a wide variety of things. This is quite appropriate for Schwerin, whose day job is United Methodist minister.

becoming less
little by little
the cattail winters

Lent is over
a bartender flips
a coaster

Many layers of meaning here. Very much in the haiku mode.

These are not easy haiku, certainly not hearts-and-flowers verses or classic Kyoshi-style “flower-bird-wind-moon” haiku. They are mostly mood pieces, I’d say, in which Schwerin demonstrates an uncanny skill in evoking the emptiness, loneliness, and isolation of the landscape, physical and psychic, that stretches from where we are to the distant horizon and on into the boundless:

home hospice
a prairie sky
at the window

you let it go
too far
winter stars

the loss of our farm land keeping the moon

The poet imparts a sense that things happen in this world without our ken or control, for example, these two related haiku:

all the changes
while we prayed
snow covers the lot

while she works the flakes taking her street corner

A master of juxtaposition, Schwerin can eloquently imply one thing by specifically mentioning another:

Sunday’s bread
in many little pieces
slowly falling snow

stage four
his boys put up
a snow fence

About a quarter of Schwerin's haiku employ Christian images, usually in novel and audacious ways:

what a snake did between us still original sin

a casino table bolted to the floor Lenten evening

Clearly, these are serious haiku. Humor and double entendre are not prominent in Schwerin's work but are not entirely absent either; for example:

the poison surprises some monkshood

bee in a daisy
the tattoo relationship
behind her

and, probably, the "flakes" haiku cited earlier as well.

Though well grounded in the classics, Schwerin's recent work veers toward the *gendai* in enigmatic and even surreal verses. Of the 55 haiku in $\oplus RS$, another quarter are one-liners in the now fashionable mode, for example:

a cornered raven in my chest Sunday night

not as green as the grass has been saying

No ifs, ands, or buts: Dan Schwerin's fine collection will reward a deliberate reading. Stop and burrow deeply into each haiku; you'll be amply, delightfully rewarded.



Charles Trumbull is retired from research, writing, editorial, and publishing positions at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Encyclopædia Britannica. He is past president of the Haiku Society of America and retired editor of Modern Haiku. His chapbook Between the Chimes was published in 2011, and A Five-Balloon Morning, a book of New Mexico haiku, appeared in June 2013.