

*red*. I sense an air of confidence mixed with a margin of uncertainty and vulnerability. I think of red capes and warning signs, traffic lights and tail lights, red balloons and roses—the multitude of ways red speaks to us every day. I notice the prevalence of R-like sounds, which are defined as liquid consonants, and how they create tone, tension, alertness, and an awareness significant to the color red. Just 15 poems do not contain the letter “r,” which makes me wonder if it is the most-used consonant in our English language. I tap into the current and flow of the 196 haiku and senryu on the pages. I travel his storied landscapes of longing and loss, of wit and wisdom, of relationships and isolation, and everything in between. These poems are the bittersweet dramas of daily living, where we are separate but bound together in our common humanity.

Jim Kacian classifies John Stevenson as one of the few poets “speaking so perfectly to their time that their work seems to be an embodiment of it.” Stevenson describes his own eclectic approach to haiku as inspired by clear sensory imagery that stimulates intuition. It is that ability to bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind where we find the intuitive “heart” of his poems. Combining his interest in the visual arts and background in theater, he gives voice to his haiku in a “Cinematic Experience,” a video reading accessed through the publisher’s website: [www.brooksbookshaiku.com](http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com).

As past editor of *Frogpond* and current managing editor of *The Heron’s Nest*, Stevenson reminds us that no one can tell us what an English-language haiku should be. “This is an open question and still in the process of being answered.” To that, I might add my deep gratitude for John Stevenson’s approach to haiku and for his body of work, with this paraphrase: *your poems / have stayed with me / thirty years, so far*. ◻■

#### REVIEWED BY KRISTEN LINDQUIST

*her deep-rooted scars haiku, monostiches, cherita* by Hifsa Ashraf (Alba Publishing, Uxbridge, UK: 2021). In English and Urdu. 94 pages, 5.75" x 8.25". Glossy cover, perfect softbound. ISBN 978-1-912773-38-1. \$16 from <http://www.albapublishing.com>.

An award-winning poet, editor, and activist from Pakistan, Hifsa Ashraf is known for her powerful works that focus on what she describes as “bold social issues.” She was recently cited, in a presentation on poetic voice for the Haiku Society of America’s 2021 Annual Conference, as an exemplar for her strong and memorable feminist voice that speaks out on subjects of mental health and cultural oppression. This collection, *her deep-rooted scars*, demonstrates well how she exercises this distinct voice on behalf of women, sharing the interior stories of Kashmiri half-widows in Indian Administered Kashmir. These women are *half-widows* because their husbands are missing, perhaps abducted or killed during the decades-long humanitarian crisis in the region but not legally declared dead. With no proof of death, the women have no recourse for support as actual widows and are left with the emotional burden of grief and uncertainty in addition to their struggle for survival.

But even if one dives into the poems without understanding this specific socio-political context, a clear sense of emotional pain and loss, along with Ashraf’s deep empathy, comes across clearly. As Mike Rehling says in his *Foreword*:

Often when we see injustice or hurt inflicted on others it moves us to shy away, to avoid the situation...But [Ashraf] runs to it, and embraces it, and writes poetry that exposes it to us again and again...She could easily focus on flowers and birds in the sky, and yet she has *chosen* to show the pain in the eyes of others.

Ashraf doesn’t flinch from trying to understand and inhabit the pain of the half-widows. And through the medium of her poetry, she elicits empathy in her readers. This is activist poetry at its best; she has not sacrificed her poetry at the altar of her cause. Far from ignoring “the flowers and birds in the sky” for the sake of promoting socio-political awareness, she simply and beautifully harnesses traditional haiku images such as flowers, birds, insects, and weather to convey her larger purpose:

tiger lily  
life after  
#metoo

raven's shadow submerged in the lake   her dilated pupils

night curfew  
the thrumming of cicadas  
outside her room

And what's more traditional in haikai than the moon? Long considered a symbol of the feminine, the moon is a strong presence in several of her poems, although not always a comforting one. The reader comes away with a sense of many long nights spent looking out the window:

midnight  
wolves howling  
outside the *zoon-dub*  
  
when the shadow  
of her shattered self  
eclipses the moon

(We learn from her helpful glossary that a *zoon-dub* is a traditional Kashmiri balcony for moon-viewing.)

lurking moon . . .  
the uplifting waves  
of her room's curtains

While masterfully employing juxtaposition and sensory details, her haiku also don't shy away from emotional directness:

lingering melancholy  
she walks barefoot  
on the shale path

As with tanka, the *cherita*'s longer form allows more room for narrative detail, metaphor, and explicit feeling, establishing an ebb-and-flow cadence of emotion that carries the reader from one poetic form to the next. This was a favorite poem that also illustrates her use of details that root these poems in a specific cultural space:

clay oven

she leaves the door ajar  
with this thought

he will come back  
by following the aroma  
of *desi roti*

Ashraf calls this collection her “small tribute” to the Kashmiri half-widows, but her small poems speak with a big heart. Her presentation is relentless but compelling. We take in the women’s stories through finely-crafted poems rich in image and detail: these are Kashmiri women wearing *pheran*, traditional Kashmiri dress, or hijabs, drinking noon *chai*, breathing in Himalayan snow, following Kashmiri butterflies, walking on Kashmiri carpets, experiencing monsoons.

dinner alone  
the aroma of *garam masala*  
mixed with fog

In this way, we become the witnesses she wants us to be—to the half-widows’ plights, but also to the inner strength that has enabled their survival, albeit with lasting emotional wounds and deep-rooted scars (the focus of not one but two title poems):

later winter sky

a cluster  
of dim stars

remapping  
her deep-rooted  
scars

blind-spot mirror   her deep-rooted scars

*Profits from the sale of this book will be donated by the publisher to women's rights organizations. □■*

#### REVIEWED BY GARRY GAY

*Just Dust and Stone: a split sequence collection* by Peter Jastermsky and Bryan Rickert (Privately printed: 2021). 64 pages, 6" x 9". Glossy cover, perfect softbound. ISBN 979-8748272759. \$12 from online booksellers.

In *Just Dust and Stone*, we are introduced to a new poetry form by Peter Jastermsky and Bryan Rickert. It seems Jastermsky was one day writing some new work in haiku and senryu and thought it would be interesting if he were to experiment with the different ways that he could arrange his work instead of the traditional way down the page, as a standard haiku sequence would flow. He broke up the form of the original haiku by placing a haiku between each line of the original poem. So, the line format is 1/3/1/3/1/3. This is a very fascinating concept. There was a flow to the way a haiku sequence might evolve when slowed down by the starting verse split into three parts. Like many sequences, there is a subject that connects all the verses, yet you have to pause to read the broken-up starting verse and see how it relates to the following haiku. Then, as you see the subject emerge, you can't help but look at the playfulness of the way the three lines relate to every following verse. Here's an example from the book: