

the field of why by Shloka Shankar (Yavanika Press, Bangalore, India: 2022) 72 pages, 5.25"x8". Matte four-color card covers, perfect softbound. ISBN: 9798427871860. \$14 from <https://yavanikapress.wixsite.com/home/the-field-of-why>.

A field can be a pastoral backdrop, but also the ground of a mathematical or scientific system. Shloka Shankar's preoccupation with the tension between natural objects and abstract structures are dominating themes in her latest work, *field of why*. Shankar collects both haiga and bare poems, predominantly monoku, a format the poet excels in.

The text reads like a microscopic creation myth, the poems moving from creation to specification into the individual, creating a picture of life as it is lived between the conscious and unconscious. It is the expression of a poet's mind turned in on herself until she loses herself to the unanswerable, followed by a reconciliation with the external, through the body, dreams, the communal, and the godlike, until a final dissolution.

The opening monoku serves as an axiom of Shankar's system of poetry—a source for the poet and the reader to derive meaning from. Invoking the act of creation, the poet becomes a god:

working material until Brahma created light

What came before creation? The answer lies beyond human ken, perhaps even beyond Brahma's own perception. Light often serves to signify the mental, but for Shankar, it is a materially creative force. The art grounding the haiga is filled with streaks of light, with pockets of undeveloped color like those that sometimes occur in a roughly handled polaroid. We do not know what darkness is until light appears, and with it, the world.

Considered as a monomyth, the collection follows the poet hero as she is faced with meaninglessness, and challenged to create a worldview, and with it, a world. Early in the volume, we find her stuck in place:

the routine of memory in a windowless room

On one reading, the poet is trapped in an endless circuit of rumination. In another, the poem's subject is a computer, without the need of external stimulation. Or perhaps it is a worker, life drained of color by an overcommitment to the constraining structures of capitalism and technology. Her call to action requires her to break free, to think on her own, and to venture into the external:

walking to think I happened

This appropriately Cartesian monoku serves as a tongue-in cheek rebuttal to the famous proclamation "I think, therefore I am—" thinking may be the ultimate proof of one's existence, but without the body, the mind would not exist. The less the body moves, the more sluggish thought becomes. We often need to move in order to jumpstart our thoughts.

The poem also calls to mind the famous challenge posed to Descartes by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia: if the mind and body are separate, how does one have an effect on the other? Shankar rejects the binary of mind and matter. Thought is substance. A thread of brute materialism connects Shankar's poems, the abstract yoked to concrete specificity:

2:1 the echo of reason fading

A ratio jumpstarts this poem, a concept of pure abstraction. On a first reading, the monoku seems to describe the rate at which rationality ceases—perhaps it is an indictment. Or perhaps it describes the lessening influence of an idea in a discourse. There is a certain synesthesia to the monoku, with 'echo' representing the audible and 'fading' representing the visual dimming. Given that so much of the book is preoccupied with the intersections of and spaces in between binaries, it is no surprise that Shankar explores the liminal:

as an aside I shape-shift into a key

Whether the poet refers to a key for a lock, a key on a board, or a musical key is unclear—the word itself may be something physical, something symbolic, or something auditory. This mutability may be the source of the poet’s unnatural transformation—but it occurs on the vestiges, on the side of a space, or a conversation.

Later in the collection, the poet hero reaches an ecstatic state, delivering the self-creation promised in her first poem:

spring rain . . .
soon, we become
our own gods

It is notable that in a collection with a generally individualized perspective, that Shankar finds the godlike in the collective. Meaning is not out there, waiting to be discovered—we create our own meaning, by ourselves, and through our social connections. Though slim, Shankar’s chapbook is a complete experience, but also full of promise. It serves as an exemplary introduction to experimental haiku. Shankar is a poet to watch out for. ◻■

BRIEFLY REVIEWED BY TERRI L. FRENCH

Dust and Rust haibun by Tayofeek Ayeyemi (Buttonhook Press, CA: 2022). 48 pages. Foreword by Rich Youmans. Available to download for free at <https://ojalart.com/buttonhook-press2022-chapbook-seriesmixed-formshaibun-tayofeek-ayeyemi-dust-and-rust-with-a-foreword-by-rich-youmans>.

In his debut book of haibun, *Dust and Rust*, Tayofeek Ayeyemi (Aswagaawy) introduces us to his family, friends, and lovers and celebrates the Yoruba culture of West Africa. The first few haibun center on childhood. We enter the writer’s modest home, where he and his siblings are taught respect, responsibility, and the suffering and rewards that come from hard work and diligence. But always his parents temper the harsh realities of life with love