

John Stevenson. *d(ark)*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2014, unpag., perfect softbound, 5 x 7 inches. ISBN 978-1-936848-27-0, US\$12 from www.redmoonpress.com.

by Michael McClintock, Clovis, CA

Prolific and far-ranging, John Stevenson is one of the most sagacious poets writing haiku today. His poems are consistently fresh, original, and entertaining. Few other living American haiku poets come close to his aptitude for the memorable line or his mind for being present in the unforgettable moment. This modestly sized collection of 60 haiku, 8 tanka, and 3 haibun fully meets the expectations we may have for a poet of such authentic finesse and savvy.

What is the “ark” in *d(ark)* about? In his introduction to the book, Scott Metz writes, “In relationship to John Stevenson’s poetry, the ark is at play in various ways: the ark as symbol of body, mind, and psyche; the ark as poem; and the ark as a collection of poems—perhaps even as a symbol for how Stevenson views his entire oeuvre of work, or how any poet may view their own work for that matter.”

Metz has taken time in his introduction to put together an intelligent, appreciative essay about Stevenson’s work and why it succeeds, time and again, as path-breaking American haiku. Metz’s comments and observations are good preparation for the reader who may wish to experience more deeply the textual body of Stevenson’s poetry, or better understand the many connections it makes to the culture outside, and surrounding, the boundaries that are commonly associated with haiku literature.

Stevenson’s haiku are suffused with the personality and autobiographical details of their author. As such, and in full awareness of their influence, his work is at the core of the American-Canadian-United Kingdom evolution and development of the modern haiku in English, wherein the focus is not nature but the psychology and behavior of man—primarily the individual, the self:

it's winter now
people have stopped saying
it's winter

His subject is people, is human behavior, within a world that is ever-changing and ever the same, and what we do, think, and say determine the world we experience.

Nevertheless, nature exists as an element that impinges upon or frames the emotional human landscape that this poetry explores and observes, in objective and subjective modes, as in this poem about being away from home:

my house
without me
autumn wind

If that were a summer wind, the feeling and meaning would be entirely different. Additionally, here the sound of the spoken voice delivers and amplifies the sense of this poem in parallel to the meaning of the words used. In fact, sound and sense bind or fuse meaning and form into one seamless experience, or aesthetic whole, in the assonance of *house*, *without*, and *autumn*, reinforced by the double “*wi*” of *without* and *wind*. In the sameness of sound there is, in effect, a diminishment of sound variety—a diminishment of texture and materiality—which augments the poem’s meaning and bare imagery. The haiku becomes a poem about physical death and the return of all things belonging to us to the natural world, which consumes them back into itself. Those encroaching forces of entropy are here embodied in the “autumn dusk,” sound and sense in poetic fusion with its advance.

Following are a few more prime examples of Stevenson’s voice and vision:

a candy wrapper
joins the leaf pile
autumn dusk

Pure, modern haiku! The rule-bound haikuist might argue that “leaf pile” and “autumn dusk” constitute a double-*kigo*, a redundancy. Redundancy, however, is the point. The discarded candy wrapper is a kind of *kigo* in itself, and is *about us* and the life we both live and lose here. Our debris is one and the same with the leaves of autumn. The candy wrapper becomes a vivid symbol of human existence and all that we use up and discard while we are here. Said Forrest Gump, “Life is like a box of chocolates.”¹

A similar theme is treated in this haiku:

transit lounge
the toppled suitcase
left that way

The contemporary language is something we hear every day, and the words are simultaneously symbolic and *inside* the actual, concrete present.

Here are two of my favorites. Stevenson places us in the moment as well as inside his skin and mind:

putting them away
I hope my clothes
were good enough

Saturday morning
a pat of butter
in the skillet

That pat of butter is what puts our daily life in motion, and where we find the courage (is it courage?) to face it: we are simple creatures of appetite.

Here is a poem that reads like a proverb:

winter night
the irrational
is where the warmth is

This hybrid of haiku and senryu expresses the skeptical attitude toward Western rationalism and the abstract that R.H. Blyth expounds and illustrates at length in *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*.² Blyth repeatedly points to an orientation to reality in haiku literature that is fundamentally in contrast and opposition to the intellectual morbidities and habits of mind that prevail in Western arts, humanities, and sciences.

Stevenson's tanka are made with the same careful, exacting chisel that is used to make his haiku:

outside
the cinema
a line
of people waiting
to be shot

The five lines of the tanka unfold/uncoil this poem in a way not possible in the three-line haiku format. Stevenson has mastered an idiomatic language that contains within its cadences and accents—the sound and the pauses—each poem's inevitable (or so it feels) form. We can see it in his one-liners, too, as in the dry, skeptical humor of the following:

as I always say spontaneity

The stark horror of the event alluded to in “outside” is not so much a contemporary depravity as it is truthful observation of the human condition and circumstances that have existed through all history.

Stevenson is a master at folding American idiom into a haiku. The sound of the language in poems like those cited above (and they are typical of this collection) carries all of the mood and tone, and much of the meaning.

If there is a great bell in the House of Haiku (I think there is), John Stevenson is frequently the one who rings it. Echoes

bounce, ripple, and ricochet through every room—for months, for years. That has been the effect of his earlier books, *Something Unerasable* (1994), *Some of the Silence* (1999, 2008), *Quiet Enough* (2004), and *Live Again* (2009). This collection will do the same, and will do so without being “like” any of the others except in the confidence and sureness of the voice in the poems, and in the clarity of the mind from which they originate.

A book having so many revelatory moments and strengths is tough to summarize, but one word about its author does persistently resonate in my mind: genius!

Notes

1. *Forrest Gump* [film, dir. by Robert Zemeckis], (Paramount Pictures, 1994). Based on the 1986 novel of the same name by Winston Groom.
2. R.H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1942).



Michael McClintock's lifework in haiku, tanka, and related literature, as both poet and critic, spans over four decades. His latest haiku collection, Sketches from the San Joaquin, is from Turtle Light Press (2008). He resides in central California's San Joaquin Valley with his wife, Karen.

