

create, but many of O'Connor's senryu contain deftly conveyed, heartfelt, human emotion: 3 AM / I hold my breath to hear / your breath. Overall, O'Connor writes of real, poignant, challenging moments with vulnerability and compassion. We are grateful for the lessons he teaches us in *Natural Consequences*. □■

REVIEWED BY RANDY BROOKS

A Silence or Two by Jennifer Hambrick (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2024) 150 pages, 4.25"x 6.5". Four-color card covers, perfectbound. ISBN: 978-1-958408-42-1. \$20 from redmoonpress.com.

Jennifer Hambrick's collection, *A Silence or Two*, does not arrive with an author's introduction nor does it provide an overview of intentions. In short, the collection presents itself in silence and the reader has to find their own way into and through the poems. Based on reactions, some readers have primarily focused on the tone and recurring images found throughout. For example, from blurbs on the back cover, Cherie Hunter Day notices that the collection "is shot through with shadow and grief, longing and loss." Richard Gilbert sees the collection as a narrative journey "into body and soul with shockingly fresh directness and vulnerability, elucidating moments and living narratives as embodiments of love and loss ..." In a recent review, Paul Miller primarily reads the collection as an example of an abstract approach to haiku where writers create "linguistic hurdles for the reader ... that in some cases they add meaningful layers." While not necessarily appreciating this approach, Miller praises Hambrick as one of the "finest practitioners" of it. In this review, I will consider these three reading approaches and conclude with an appreciation for Hambrick's synthesis of traditional haiku techniques, narrative stances, and avant-garde micro-poetry goals.

Reading the Poet's Tone and Voice

If we consider a quick word-cluster study of the collection for commonly used words, phrases, and images, it is easy to see why Cherie Hunter Day says that the collection “is shot through with shadow and grief, longing and loss.” Several poems reference darkness and a loss of light and warmth: *frozen world, clouds eye-level, full of night, starless night, dark nebula, ice flowers, night, broken stars, blood nebula, darkened sea, darkest hour, dark stars, and deep midnight*. The speaker's voice is a “forbidden whisper” to the self, as if the collection is a confessional memoir or dream diary. The narrator speaks of dark secrets, hidden things, and forbidden thoughts: *secret life, obscured vision, untamed thought, reaching for euphemism, broken promise, expelling words from my lexicon, an etymology of this secret*. The speaker's voice is confessional in that she is “speaking my dark.”

These poems are not about a consciousness of the contemporary world or nature, but rather a cosmic self-creation myth within the speaker's inner world. The poems convey a consciousness of a broken and scarred body with anatomical images such as: *blood, pulses under my skin, frozen ovary, uterus, ovum, endometrium, o negative, umbilical cord, lost zygote, wound, scars, unvoiced labials, my throat, cord blood, wombscape, bone, corpse, my marrow, the bruise, and frayed fallopian tube*.

The collection can be read as a continuous “tone poem” with an emphasis on an ominous sense of loss and personal apocalypse. The collection is full of images of a dark post-apocalyptic nightmare: *runeshadow, the underworld, dark folds of history, howling at the moon, fugitive song, Pleistocene, ancient rain, used to be a sky, polar night, glass acid, antimatter, broken gods, cosmology, bitter cold, dry season, dead water, the prison, sea monsters, wombscape, shroud, shape of infinity, the dead zone, this generation, cosmic snow, and my creation myth*.

Ultimately, these poems are the speaker's way of dealing with loss and the longing to shape a new identity in this personal cosmos of suffering. Where there was once love — *a candle in the night, a chrysalis in me, the yes of love* — by the end of the narrative, there is the tragic tale of a possible motherhood gone wrong. The images of the lost pregnancy are described poetically as: *airless night, planting children past tense, scraping endometrium, umbilical cord, lost zygote, open womb, water's broken, two wombs ago, afterbirth, birthing and unbirthing*. The collection draws to a close with images of being alone: *in cemetery, his absence, stillness of his winter, reaching for each other, ice flowers, tundra*. There is a loss of self expressed as: *an ocean, someone else's skin, they erase me, identity sheds its skin, not future mother, womb became a fossil*. The book closes with a "hidden hush" or silence under the moonglow of now.

Connecting the Dots to Read the Poet's Story

When reading a collection of haiku by a single author, students in my haiku class often start "connecting the dots" in order to see an imagined story of the writer's life. I often ask them to consider the "genesis" of an author's haiku, which means simply, where do you think their haiku come from? How do they find things significant to write about? Why do they organize their collection in such a way to suggest or imply threads of significance? Do the individual haiku become a memoir or can they be read as a short novella of the author's life? As I noted before, evidently, Richard Gilbert views Hambrick's collection as a narrative journey "of love and loss." Let's consider this approach to reading the collection.

The book starts with a thematic and tonal prelude:

blood dusk
the sign language
of memory

The first section opens with darkness and romance and possibilities . . .

quiet evening a candle flame in the imperative

There are haiku about starlight, dreams, a moonflower, moonlight, and heat shimmer. Just like the famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, her life's movie transforms the poems from shadows into full color:

2 p.m. breeze
where the film goes
into color

And our haiku speaker is in a frozen world of "star flower" and "this longing to become." She is "reading birdsong" in a cemetery and has her head in the clouds:

let's be honest clouds at eye level

While there is still room for dark thoughts, like a "glance back to the underworld," the haiku speaker also considers "a swath of future."

The next brief section of poems are full of light and love and possibility. It starts with this one liner:

chrysalis what he sees in me

And the somewhat erotic:

the curve of his hand where midnight used to be

The romance haiku are full of lightness, touching, caressing, and dreams. There are a few dark and cold poems as well, such as:

still reaching
for each other . . .
ice flowers

Then there is a significant change in climate when she writes:

silent between him speaking my dark

Which is immediately followed by a haiku referencing the last great ice age:

frozen ovary
the Pleistocene
between us

The book's title poem appears at the very center of the story:

broken stars
deep in the sonogram
a silence or two

In this haiku, Hambrick employs all of the dominant images and darkness of the collection. The poem starts with a "broken star" which I take to mean that the speaker's hopes and wishes have not come true. Instead of light and dreams, we get brokenness and darkness. The word "sonogram" brings body awareness and the possibility of a pregnancy. The speaker invites readers to look over her shoulder at the sonogram's light and dark images. What we see is "a silence or two" referring to both her witnesses and the quietness inside her womb. There is no heartbeat. Just silence and loss.

Immediately after that haiku, we get one reminding us of what has been lost:

skyglow
a uterus full of new
ideas

Pregnant with life, with hopes, with possibilities, the sky glows instead of just being dark. She has so many ideas about the future. About changes. About becoming. Then we get more haiku about the experiences of a lost pregnancy, a miscarriage, and aborting the fetus. The next haiku refers to “planting children in the past tense.” Employing a distancing abstraction, the following haiku is a very vivid image of the process:

dead crescent
the steady scraping
of an endometrium

The speaker’s entire cosmology has turned to antimatter, blood nebula, and acid rain:

lost zygote —
a cosmology divisible
by zero

The universe is becoming and unbecoming. Later she writes:

nautical twilight
birthing and unbirthing
the undertow

In the aftermath of her loss, she writes about the darkness and loss of joys, such as music:

floating
in a darkened sea
my dead song

And she writes about the loss of not only the child, but of herself:

dry season
an identity sheds
its skin

In the final section, the author writes about scars, broken promises, and “two wombs ago.” Except for the metaphorical drowning, here is a fairly traditional haiku expressing her state of being:

deep midnight
dark stars drowning
in my wake

There are several poems about rebuilding identity and the language we use to tell our own stories. Some of these are written in more typical avant-garde approaches:

expelling it from my lexicon afterbirth

And another language-based poem:

slicing the noun out of the future mother

Toward the end of the collection, she writes about scars and ongoing grief beneath the surface. Her story has become past tense:

ammonite when my womb became a fossil

This is an appropriate image and has symbolic significance. The ammonites are extinct, but when they were alive, they could suck their bodies into their shells for protection. The metaphor of the womb becoming a fossil fits the loss of possibilities for future pregnancy. She will not be a mother.

Near the end of the collection, Hambrick refers to the narrative in this poem:

the frayed end of a fallopian tube love story

And the very last haiku returns us to a glow in the night:

nightglow
the hidden hush
of our now

Although the collection does not have to be read as a novella, it does appear that Richard Gilbert's approach brings an added context to each haiku, senyru, or postku in the book.

Making it New – An Avant-garde Approach

In his brief review of the book, Paul Miller primarily reads the collection as an example of an abstract approach to haiku where the author writes poems that “move beyond the simple, everyday language of ‘traditional’ haiku and use instead abstractions to point at things.” In an interview with Tim Green, published on *Rattlecast* (episode 256, originally streamed on August 4, 2024), Hambrick explained her approach to writing avant-garde haiku. I will summarize. She began by discussing some of her traditional haiku and how they usually have a seasonal reference and the cut or ‘kire’ which separates the two parts of a haiku with a blank for the reader to fill in. She notes that in her new book, most of the poems employ deliberate kire. However, unlike traditional haiku, her cut is not always between two elements in this world. They are often a cut between a section from this world AND the world of imagination. The cut is between different types of consciousness. She uses the opening haiku as an example:

blood dusk
the sign language
of memory

She liked the tone of heavy consonants in the first line but asked, “What is blood dusk? We don’t know.” She also said that “I don’t know what ‘sign language of memory is’ either.” So, this poem has intuitive instead of literal leaps. She says that traditional haiku tend to be based or rooted in some objective realism, but avant-garde tradition steps away from that, but not entirely.

Although written with poetic license and abstract images, I believe that Hambrick’s avant-garde haiku work by retaining certain aspects of traditional haiku. She employs the haiku cut carefully, and she also provides enough context from some suggested lived experience so that her poems are not entirely abstract. In the case of this collection, *A Silence or Two*, it is the narrative thread that provides an ongoing context of love, hope, pregnancy, loss, and grief that keeps the poems real. Individually, several of these poems would succeed at providing a reader with enough context to understand their emotional or psychological significance. Although written with abstractions, extended metaphors, and a confessional personal voice (me, my, our, I), this collection holds together for a satisfying literary experience. Her avant-garde haiku are both poetic and emotionally realistic at the same time. They provide openings to the imagination and the heartfelt human experience treasured so much in all haiku. While the overall tone might be dark, apocalyptic, and heavy with grief, they constitute a literary truth telling we all can appreciate. ◻■

BRIEFLY REVIEWED BY JACOB D. SALZER

Sine Qua Non: Haiku and Tanka by Elliot Nicely (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2024). 108 pages, 4.25" x 6.5". Perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-958408-44-5. \$20. Order from the poet directly at: elliottnicely@yahoo.com.

This is a collection of 80 haiku and six tanka by Elliot Nicely. The poems are organized by the following sections: Natura, Tempus, Deus, Mors, and Amor, which correspond to the following meanings/definitions: Nature, Time, God/Deity, Death, and Love.