

Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY JOSHUA GAGE

Runagate by Crystal Simone Smith (Duke University Press, City, Country: 2025). 104 pages, paperback (additional formats available) ISBN: 978-1-4780-3181-9. \$24.95 from online and local booksellers.

Runagate is a collection of haiku sequences, tanka sequences, tanka, haibun, and related Japanese short forms centered on the experiences and narratives of fugitives from the American Slave Trade. Crystal Simone Smith is Instructor of the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University and current president of the Haiku Society of America. She is the author of three chapbooks of poetry and the full-length collection, *Dark Testament: Blackout Poems*. As both a collection of haiku and tanka sequences, as well as book of poetry, *Runagate* advances previous experiments with form, research, and biographical imagination to create one of the most haunting and inspiring collections of haiku ever.

What sets *Runagate* apart from most other haiku collections is the source material. Crystal Simone Smith is a talented and acclaimed academic and researcher. Building off a class on slave narratives she created for Duke, Smith began researching the ways nature was represented to enslaved people in the United States. This research led to databases and collections of slave narratives, recordings, museums with physical artifacts, even former plantations that were steeped with the ghosts of the past, all begging for voice. Using her skills as a poet, specifically her skills as a tanka and haiku poet, Crystal Simone Smith gave those spirits a voice and told their stories.

one pair of shoes
worn out & tied up
with strings—
where we walked we left
bird-like tracks

Christmas Eve
 Daddy told me
 I was a free man
 and that was all
 he had to give me

Readers may be familiar with similar sequences from authors like Sonia Sanchez, who wrote a series of haiku sequences that work as praise poems and elegies for her familial and cultural ancestors. Also, Lenard Moore, former president of the Haiku Society of America, has written two book-length sequences of African-American haiku. Both Sanchez and Moore, however, focused on topics, events, and people who were well known, if not famous. What Smith does with *Runagate* is builds on that lineage, but focuses on the stories of the unknown, the extraordinary stories and voices of those left out of the history books but still vital to the great narrative of history, especially as testament to the horrors of the American Slave Trade.

Anderson

winter morning—
 the auction block's
 gathered crowd

the auctioneer's
 echoed cries for bids

our family of four
 sold off the purchasers
 separated forever

this lone journey
 I memorized curves
 of the river bend

almost Christmas
I count the leafless trees

no matter the lash
I'll return my arms—
one final goodbye

To further ground these poems in reality, Smith pairs every sequence with an actual fugitive advertisement from the Freedom on the Move database. These records of history, of which there are thousands, provide the perspectives of slave-owners as a vile, dehumanizing contrast to the voices Smith summons in her poems.

Runagate is a complex literary masterwork. As a document of research, it provides a very human voice to an easily abstracted or theorized shame of United States history. As literature, it is unfortunately necessary. Smith celebrates forgotten heroes, some who may have no story or voice left beyond those that she created. Still, there is an authenticity that permeates this collection, an anthologized choir of unique voices with a common history and experience, all singing a hymn to freedom. To ground this book in the contemporary, Smith bookends her collection with two haibun, both of which are achingly personal yet defiantly resolute, illuminating parallels between the weight of history and the current socio-political climate. This book is all but required reading for anyone interested in contemporary English language haiku and tanka. Beyond that, anyone interested in history and the ongoing fight for freedom, equality, and social justice in society will benefit from reading this collection. □■

REVIEWED BY ALLYSON WHIPPLE

The San Francisco Haiku Anthology: Volume 2 edited by Susan Antolin, Garry Gay, and Carolyn Hall. (Spare Poems Press: 2024). 251 pages, softcover (ebook version also available). ISBN: 979-8-