

Then I read the second version of the book (book 2) but I suspect I would not have read most of it had I not agreed to review the book. Nevertheless, it has an important conceptual function, even when one reads only enough of it to realize how it relates to book 1. The author says in her introduction, “My hope is that the images and observations in Books 1 and 2 together allow readers to discover less conscious or apparent parts of themselves in the process of experiencing my attempts to uncover my own.” It succeeds in this way for me, though book 2 is more of a presence than an act of communication. And to establish this presence, I need only to have read a few pages.

*Elements of a Life* may remind certain readers of *4.48 Psychosis*, a play by British playwright Sarah Kane that is composed of twenty-four sections having no specified setting, stage directions, or characters. The staging of this play varies wildly from one production to another. The “staging” of Rebecca Lilly’s book seems to be the heart of its meaning. She could have used the same material but arranged it differently—in three parts, for instance, in which the effect of books 1 and 2 might be followed by a third part representing some kind of synthesis. But I presume that this would not have seemed truthful to the author and the co-equal standing of the books is her statement.

It seems to me that, in *Elements of a Life*, Rebecca Lilly is showing us what it’s like to be in pain and what it’s like to be standing one step (or maybe a half step) back from pain.

*Haiku: The Interior and Exterior of Being*, by Don Baird (Burbank, Calif.: The Little Buddha Press, 2014). 212 pages; 6"x9". Glossy black and white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-304-67843-0. Price: \$14.95 from online booksellers

*Reviewed by Robert Epstein*

The intelligent reader will not want to mess with Don Baird’s new book of poems, *Haiku: The Interior and Exterior of Being*. The martial arts expert was inducted into the Masters Hall of Fame in 2009. Although Baird isn’t explicit about the interface between haiku and martial

arts (that is the subject of a previous book, *Haiku Wisdom*), his kung fu training sparked an interest in Asian poetry and philosophy many years ago.

The unpaginated book (of 212 pages; one poem per page) startles the reader with an unusual format for the Preface and Introduction: Both are short and arranged poem-like in vertical phrases without punctuation. After a reading of the poems, a return to the Introduction reveals how succinctly it contains an overview of the book's content:

from tragedy to butterfly  
 wrapped bodies to priests' tears  
 transcendence of the moon  
 .....  
 this journey  
 a chaos  
 through it all

Baird makes no apologies for the serpentine, dreamlike journey through life that is, as he readily acknowledges, chaotic; not ordered. Nor does Baird shy away from the dark side of life. One unflinching example is how the poet peers into the belly of the whale of war:

wrapped —  
 but not held together,  
 her tiny hands

Another:

hunkered down;  
 the dust of someone  
 blows overhead

The same courage—the root of which means heart—that Baird draws on to face the horrors of war enables him to touch with poignancy its aftereffects:

PTSD —  
this one daisy,  
the world

The interior and exterior of being, to invoke Baird's subtitle, meet not only in the realization that in living with trauma a single daisy can encapsulate the world, but that the haiku itself mirrors the sacred truth of interbeing (a word coined by the Vietnamese Zen teacher and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh).

A Taoist influence on Baird is discernible throughout the pages in the poetic appearance of opposites. Taoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy founded by Lao Tzu, posits that living in harmony with the Tao (or Way) of Nature entails wholeheartedly embracing the polarities of life such as chaos/order, light/dark, birth/death, war/peace, masculine/feminine. An unselfconscious fortitude emerges in these pages, suggesting that Baird's many years of martial arts training has enabled him to face life's (perceived) harsh and cruel sides without, at the same time, closing his heart.

Haiku purists eschewing philosophy in haiku may fault Baird for this, but it is evident to this reviewer that his Eastern predilections enrich his poetic perspective. Early in the book, which includes a combination of one-line and three-line haiku, a lovely poem juxtaposing Taoist polarities appears:

found  
in the living will —  
cherry blossoms

Being a martial arts master doesn't mean that Baird has become inured or insensitive. On the contrary, weathering the hard knocks of life appears to have heightened the poet's sensitivity, as in the following poem, which

calls to mind the Zen poet-priest, Ryokan:

on the sleeve  
of a priest's robe —  
his tears

Perhaps sleepless due to ruminating about the slings and arrows of human existence, this sweet-tasting poem comes to Baird:

3 a.m.  
the taste of a  
lemon moon

A hint of (black) humor hovers around the macabre in the poem below that mingles love- and war-making:

— between bombs...  
an evening of love  
and body parts —

It's a creative challenge to invoke one's sensitivity without veering into the sentimental. The reader is left to wonder where the following poem falls on the continuum:

Jersey shore;  
even a stuffed shark  
is homeless

Or this:

umbilical —  
the astronaut returns  
on mother's day

As with many haiku collections, Baird's contains some repetition which editing could have pruned back:

tsunami shore;  
a child's hands washed  
in blood

tsunami's tug...  
a rolling whale lost  
in debris

Despite the recurrence of themes and scenes (which similarly reappear in our dream lives), perhaps the poet is underscoring the devastation that natural disasters wreak for both human and nonhuman mammal alike. From a planetary (or Taoist) point of view, we are all one, after all. Two more poems very similar in focus:

autumn clouds —  
the moon folds  
into a frown

upside down —  
the sudden frown  
of the moon

A number of prosaic poems find their way into the poet's dreamscape, though perhaps this is unavoidable:

minuet ...  
the things I see  
in clouds

fallen leaves the many faces of memories

long sunset ...  
 a shadow filling  
 the pond

Such ho-hum haiku don't necessarily detract from the book's overall impact. Appreciating the Taoist perspective as I do, they may serve as counterpoints to the poet's sharper insights and sudden realizations. The ordinary in no way negates the truth. Too, the quotidian can be shoveled back into the soil of intuition and turned into compost per chance for future revelations by poet or reader.

Baird writes about the stars (and moon) in a number of poems. He might have concluded the book with any number of these poems, as they aptly symbolize what we as human beings aspire to, in and beyond, life:

cupping hands —  
 the ocean slips back  
 to the stars

— an old bear;  
 slowly through the marsh  
 into the stars —

The book concludes with another poem-like Afterword followed by an Addendum of twelve slightly longer haiku-tinged poems that reverberate with the themes covered in the body of the book of haiku. In some ways, these longer poems are more succinct but in the end they echo what the poet has learned and lived: beyond all violence, death and polarities, Nature and humankind are one—a truth more than a few haiku poets understand.