

*After Image*, by Jim Kacian (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2017). 118 pages; 5" x 8". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-03-6. Price \$20.00 from [www.redmoonpress.com](http://www.redmoonpress.com)

*Reviewed by Philip Rowland*

It will come as no surprise to readers of contemporary haiku that Jim Kacian's first full-length collection in nearly a decade gathers poems of a consistently high quality. But the book aims to do much more than that, developing, as noted in the introduction, "a couple strategies that are perhaps new to haiku publication." Through careful sequencing and layout, as well as the inclusion of visual images and concrete typographical features, *after/image* rises creatively to the challenge described by Ron Silliman in his comments on Kacian's *long after* (2008): of "how to build something as substantial as a book from such a short [and essentially non-commercial] form" as haiku. In *long after*, Kacian resolved the problem by adding a collaborative, multilingual dimension; in *after/image*, he has created complex and multivalent contexts for the haiku. While the reader may dip in enjoyably—most of the poems previously appeared as freestanding pieces, some of them anthologized or award-winning—the book is designed to be read as such: in mind of the strategies brought to bear on the poems, in each of its three main sections, and as a whole.

The book begins with a "somewhat traditional," seasonally arranged series of haiku, featuring one, variously positioned, per page. Indeed, the principal challenge of this section arises from the decision to print each brief poem on an otherwise blank, unnumbered page. Although this is fairly common practice in haiku collections, it immediately raises the bar for each poem: to warrant the space granted it, as well as its relation to the next. Here, the challenge is successfully met. The opening poem, "bigger than i remember nature," immediately invites the multiple readings the one-liner—Kacian's favored form—allows, depending on where one "cuts" the poem in each (re)reading. As the meanings shift, the poem retains a remarkable simplicity—risking platitude, but rescued from it. Close comparison could be made with the haiku-oriented "nature"

poems of the late Marlene Mountain: “less is less nature is nature,” to cite one of many notable instances. Kinship could even be found with some of the arrestingly “simple” lines of Gertrude Stein. Which might seem far-fetched, but would not be out of keeping with the broadly allusive scope of this sequence, which borrows its heading (“world worlding”) and is prefaced by a quotation from an essay by Martin Heidegger, a philosopher for whom poetry was central. While “purists” may balk at this bold framing of the humble haiku (albeit with reference to a strand of philosophy which sought to undo “philosophizing”), others may hear the Heideggerian resonance and respond to the poetry also as “language” and “thought”—in short, taking it seriously. And why not? For the poems themselves are far from ponderous, and soon surprise with a very different echo, of Philip Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings,” the closing phrase of which, “somewhere becoming rain,” Kacian takes one simple but significant step further, into palindrome: “somewhere / becoming / rain / becoming / somewhere.” Each line is differently indented and generously spaced, with the words printed in successive degrees of definition, from very faint to normal, towards the bottom of the page. In this way they mimic the process of perception by which one arrives at a sense of being, more clearly, “somewhere.” Again, much is offered within a surprisingly small set of word-choices. The poem also illustrates Kacian’s theory of haiku as “anti-story,” reminding us that its effectiveness often has more to do with openness—the opening of space for the reader—than specificity of reference or imagery. Similarly, in the subsequent poem, “it won’t end and it won’t get better crow’s caw,” the “it” remains open in its implications for the reader, despite also referring to the “crow’s caw.”

With haiku such as these—and we’re only a few pages in—the book quickly gets us thinking on its poetics, particularly the idea, mentioned in the introduction, of “afterimage” as “residue of image.” The typographical effects which often enhance the text and help articulate this sense of “residue,” are not always, however, employed quite as successfully: the scabbed “scab” and faint “scar” in “late summer / after the scab / the scar” seems rather schematic. But finding the “right” balance in this regard is an aesthetic question that is likely to provoke interesting differences of opinion.

The second section of the book, “the social project,” is where things really start to get interesting, in terms of formal innovation. Here each one-line haiku overlays a faintly inscribed category, four to a page: “the political,” “the one,” “the others,” and “the future.” The poems may be read horizontally, according to category, as well as vertically, down the page, creating an “interlocking puzzle” of sorts. This can be intriguing: to go, for instance, along the horizontal axis of “the future” from “no there there dark matter” to “all the links go somewhere paranoid”; thence to “the large gone and in its place empty” and “airport lighting everything in the present tense.” Each of these poems creates a conceptual space with an “impossible” element: “no there there”; “somewhere paranoid”; “place empty”; “everything in the present tense.” (We may still be thinking of “the future,” with “the present / tense”). On the other hand, one can choose to go in the other direction: from “no there there ...” to “the political”: “with the same finger pulling the trigger or not”—a differently dark matter. Or from the darkly humorous “all the links ...” to “flatline an unknown unknown,” riffing on Donald Rumsfeld’s famously garbled justification, in 2002, of misjudged US policy in Iraq. Moreover, as “the social project” unfolds, “the various stages of a ‘process painting’” appear on each facing (verso) page, providing, as the introduction explains, “a visual analog for the main theme.” The evolving, abstract visual image seems to reflect the increasingly dense accumulation of interpretative possibilities, while also giving the text more room to breathe.

The final section, “after image,” returns to a poem-per-page format, but with a twist, a different kind of palimpsest. Cutting across each page-centered poem, at a bottom-to-top, left-to-right diagonal, is a fragment of text from the preceding poem, printed in white in a larger font resembling cursive handwriting. This creates “an echo effect,” which spreads evocatively across the sequence. For the fragmented phrase, or “echo,” allows new notes to be heard in both the source and primary texts. To take one small instance: “vaster even than the ocean thought,” cut across by the fragment “bigger than fear”—which returns us to thought of “the wave” in the preceding piece: “pacific paddle / the wave bigger / than my fear.” There is a lot going on here—too much to unpack in a review of this length—from the richly ambiguous “ocean thought” to the

strikingly enjambed “wave bigger / than my fear.” But both poems describe an encounter between the human and non-human—ocean and thought, wave and fear—reminding us again of how “nature” always exceeds our conception of it (is “bigger than” we “remember” it). The palimpsest heightens the effectiveness of the poems’ juxtaposition, folding the second back on the first, triggering, as it were, a backwash.

This is an adventurous book, one which explores possibilities for haiku beyond those we have come to expect, and rewards close reading. New strategies bring new risks, but it is well worth grappling with these; the poet knows what he’s doing. Indeed, few do as much with so few words, and to intertwine their poems—making *after/image* a remarkable discovery.

### BRIEFLY NOTED

*Three Blue Beans in a Blue Bladder*, by Hamish Ironside (United Kingdom: Iron Press, 2018). 152 pages; 4¼" x 5¼". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-995457-93-5. Price: £6.00 from [www.ironpress.co.uk](http://www.ironpress.co.uk)

Ironside wrote a haiku a day for a year, collecting the best into *Three Blue Beans*. The poems appear in a variety of styles, from haiku, senryu, witty aphorisms, to poignant statements. It is a joy to get to know a poet across a full year, through various seasons and familial settings, and especially through his poetry. This is a book best read slowly. The poems are separated into monthly sections by Mungo McCosh’s linocuts. Two poems:

Good Friday —	my joke is taken
A man mimes a cricket stroke	through to the bedroom
With an umbrella	for its autopsy