
REVIEWS

One Thread: Zoka in Contemporary Haiku, ed. Janice Doppler (Easthampton, Mass.: Privately printed, 2024). 233 pages; 6" × 9". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 979-8-335710-35-0. Price: \$25.00 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by Randy Brooks

Over the last couple of decades, it has been a common complaint that normative haiku are merely word pictures based on a naïve view of life and our world as objective reality. The complaint often refers to Masoaka Shiki's call for writing haiku based on *shasei* (poetry written from observations of modern life) rather than writing haiku from imaginary tropes and clichés of previous Japanese poetry. According to this complaint, too many English haiku are merely surface-level descriptions or observations of everyday reality. However, Shiki and most writers who have pursued haiku as a literary art have always valued poems that go beyond the surface level. For a haiku to be interesting and to draw the reader into its aura, it must suggest that there is more to the poem than what first meets the eye. There is something extraordinary in the ordinary when considered carefully. There is another, deeper level of meaning or significance that is implied for an astute reader to discover. Sometimes a haiku delivers a surprise or insight or gestalt of understanding co-created by the reader and writer. And for some writers, that something extra can be considered to be a moment of enlightenment, satori, or spiritual epiphany. This secondary or tertiary significance is not explained by the writer nor stated directly to the reader. It is understated employing literary devices such as hyperbole, oxymoron, and language which are necessarily symbolic. This significance is something to be sought, found, felt,

and constructed by the reader for themselves. The challenge of the best haiku is to appear to be simple and clear on the horizontal plane of what is happening here and now, while at the same time hinting at associations and connotations through words, images and language that there is an important vertical of heartfelt significance beyond that immediate sensory scene.

I start with this long overview of haiku poetics so that we can fully appreciate the answer to this dilemma in *One Thread: Zoka in Contemporary Haiku*. The editor, Janice Doppler, starts with the assumption that the concept of zoka (the creative, yin/yang, living/dying, becoming/transforming, turning of the seasons) provides that something extra beyond the surface level of haiku. In her summary she states that this book explores five questions: “What is zoka? What does it mean to follow the creative, to follow zoka? What is the thread that runs through the artistic ways? Is it as relevant to modern poets as it was for Basho who lived more than three hundred years ago? If so, what potential does it hold for deepening modern haiku?”

Doppler begins with a quote from Bashō as translated by Steven D. Carter in his book, *Matsuo Basho Travel Writings*: “The waka of Saigyō, the renga of Sōgi, the paintings of Sesshū, the tea of Rikyū—there is one thread that runs through them all. For it is the essence of art to follow the Way of creation, taking the four seasons as a companion. Do that, and what you see will never not be a flower; what you ponder will never not be the moon. To not see the form before you as a flower is to be like a barbarian; to not have a flower in your mind is to be like the birds and beasts. So, I say, go out from among the barbarians, separate yourself from the birds and beasts: follow the creative, get back to the creative.” Other translations by Bruce Ross and Robert D. Wilson end with the admonition to “follow zoka and return to zoka.”

Doppler provides a synoptic summary of ancient Chinese philosophy related to “The Ways of the Cosmos” including wisdom from three major texts: *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)*, *The Book of Changes / Yijing (I Ching)*, and *The Zhuangzi (The Chuang Tzu)*. She also briefly summarizes the emergence of Chan meditation practices and the emergence of Zen in Japanese society. Then she summarizes Bashō’s approach to haiku as a

follower of zoka, the creative. She also briefly discusses the poetry and art of predecessors he admired such as Saigyō, Sōgi, Rikyū, and the Chinese poets from the Tang dynasty including Li Po and Tu Fu.

To answer her question about the relevance of zoka to contemporary poets, Doppler invited twenty-six poets from around the world to “share their perceptions of what zoka is and how it connects to poetry.” The list of the haiku writers includes: Mimi Ahern, Don Baird, Jo Balistreri, Chuck Brickley, Robert Erlandson, Gilles Fabre, Nicky Gutierrez, Lakshmi Iyer, Arvinder Kaur, Ravi Kiran, Ryland Shengshi Li, Gregory Longenecker, Patricia J. Machmiller, Patricia McGuire, Emiko Miyashita, Ron C. Moss, Hiroyuki Murakami, Sean O’Connor, Vandana Parasher, Kala Ramesh, Wakako Rollinger, Bill Sette, Neena Singh, Debbie Strange, and Iliyana Stoyanova. Each contributor wrote a one-page response to the concept of zoka in haiku and how it relates to their own approach to writing haiku. In addition to these written responses, each poet provided about twelve examples of their own work and a short biography with publication credits. Doppler did not edit their prose responses nor select their representative haiku, so this is a compilation of what the poets provided. There are a lot of excellent haiku in this collection, and it is interesting to consider how the poets thought their examples connected with the concept of zoka. While this approach allowed each writer to feature their own presentation, the overall feel of the collection is similar to web compilations such as *The Living Haiku Anthology*.

While the poets relate to zoka in various ways, overall they embrace the life of haiku as a journey to be carried out in conjunction with forces or nature beyond themselves. I will share a few quotes from some of the responses. Don Baird, a long-time promoter of a Zen approach to haiku, writes: “Haiku are not simply poems of objects. They are poems of activity; they are witnesses to the continuum of being, the constantnowness of all things. As we go, we become; as we become, we are already going.” Here is one of Baird’s haiku:

teetering grass ...
just moments ago
a dragonfly

Emiko Miyashita explains that “my understanding of zoka is what is beyond human creation. My contemplation on zoka concludes to leave it as in the case of ‘haiku’ and ‘kigo.’ And, let it remind you that in the Eastern way of perception, nature and humans are one.” Quoting one of her masters, Emiko writes: “Haiku poets are here to capture the shifting moments in their lives, nothing more, nothing less.” Here is one of her examples:

a brother-and-sister talk
about Mother
shelling chestnuts

Ron C. Moss writes: “With the practice of haiku, it’s experiencing the wonders of being alive with every breath we take. I have long considered myself a student of the Zen arts.” One of his haiku:

night train
moonlight flickers
in the baby’s eyes

Chuck Brickley says that “Perhaps zoka is akin to the ‘stuff of life,’ an elusive yet unmistakable quality I find inspiring in the haiku of others and seek to capture in my own. ... Observe closely, neither overloading the experience with preconceived notions, nor striving to be unattainably objective. There is no more rewarding trait for a haiku poet communing with nature than empathy.” One from Chuck:

forsythia
the widow’s blinds
part slightly

Robert Erlandson notes that he has followed “the science of Chaos and Complexity since the 1970s” and he associates “the language of Chaos and Complexity with the creative energy and elements of zoka.” He further explains that “chaos is the creative force of nature (yang) that has the

spontaneous tendency to generate transformations. Fractal patterns are the responsive elements (yin).” One of his senryu:

unforeseen
consequences flow from chaos
another beer please

Patricia J. Machmiller writes: “My guide during my forty-nine-year journey of writing haiku has been the seasons. Without knowing the concept of zoka, through a process of discovery using season words as my North Star, I have uncovered its power.” One of her haiku:

kitchen faucet
the drip, drip, drip
of winter moonlight

Iliyana Stoyanova related to zoka as similar to a Bulgarian art movement called “nava” as promoted by poet Ivan Metodiev in her native country, Bulgaria. “According to Metodiev, to achieve nava is ‘to inhale and exhale at the same moment.’ It’s defined as ‘one sound, one image, one action.’ And here lies the parallel with zoka. Like nava, zoka suggests a meditative state in order for the mind to rise above everyday life and to open consciousness and perception. Only then can one fully realize that all things are inseparable, equal, and exist in the balance of opposites, connected by the same energy, a cosmic force that pulsates and gives life and form to the visible and the invisible.” Iliyana provided this as one of her examples:

tombstone in moss
inside the dewdrop
she almost smiles

Several haiku writers from India made connections between zoka and the Sankrit concept of Prakriti and related three *gunas*. As Neena Singh explains, “Prakriti, the Sanskrit term for nature or the natural world,

is responsible for the creation of the universe and everything within it through three constituent qualities (gunas): *sattva* (balance, harmony), *rajas* (activity, motion), and *tamas* (inertia, darkness). This concept embodies the idea of a primal, creative force, cosmos or universal consciousness.” She concludes that “Through haiku, we pause and contemplate the intricate dance of creation and decay that zoka signifies, finding beauty and meaning in the impermanence that defines our existence.” Here is an example of her haiku:

sighting a crab
the raised voice
of my grandson

One of the more unique responses comes from Nicky Gutierrez who embraces a Catholic Christian or what he calls “a sacramental cosmology where Creation has the possibility of pointing me back to the Creator. This is where zoka enters into my haiku practice.” He explains: “With reverent listening, I have meditated on zoka and incorporated it into my ‘haiku cosmology.’ This cosmology seeks to experience rather than force, at play in Creation and explore the inner workings of the cosmos through poetry and beauty. God created the world and put it into motion; I put this forward as zoka, and through haiku, I can participate and be in harmony with Creation. Zoka is made up of two words, ‘to create’ and ‘to change’ which invites me to participate in the creative transformation of the cosmos that God started.” Here is an example of his haiku:

temple shade
one more spider lily
blooms

When considered as a whole, none of these twenty-six haiku poets offers apologies for being objective. None embraces a notion of the world or their lives as “objective reality” and yet they write fairly traditional haiku. Collectively, they answer with an assured life-long practice that zoka, the creative forces of nature, are at play in their haiku. Clearly it is at least one

of the means of discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, of finding a higher level of significance or a heartfelt understanding of forces beyond our immediate observations and perceptions. My hat is off to thank Janice Doppler for asking her five questions and compiling the results of her call for twenty-six contemporary poets to consider zoka as “one thread” running through their haiku.

Shine Shadow, by Peter Yovu (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2024). 108 pages; 6” x 9”. Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-958408-51-3. Price: \$20.00 from www.redmoonpress.com

Reviewed by Scott Mason

Some five-plus decades ago, as a college freshman, I first encountered the curious and now widely-recognized work of the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher (1898–1972). While admiring Escher’s expert technique and sense of design, my visceral and principal reaction to his work was one, in rapid succession, of surprise, disquiet, and exhilaration. Escher offered a strange and, ultimately, exciting new way of seeing. Or, more accurately, here were exciting new *ways* of seeing, whether through the memorable inversions in his figure/ground patchworks (e.g., *Day and Night*, 1938), his captivating eternal loops (e.g., *Drawing Hands*, 1948), arresting depictions of simultaneous natural states (e.g., *Three Worlds*, 1955), the persuasive rendering of spatial impossibilities (e.g., *Belvedere*, 1958), or assorted other sleights of eye. Escher’s “illusions” subvert both visual convention and conventional thinking to suggest the very real possibility of other possible realities—made all the more plausible through his flawless draftsmanship.

This flashback occurred as I pored through *shine shadow*, Peter Yovu’s stunning new collection of haiku, haibun, and other short poetry. Of course, the comparison is imperfect. While Yovu’s poetic accomplishments in terms of imagery and language bear something in common with Escher’s clever visual conceits and masterful technique, and while both