
REVIEWS

emoji moon, by John Stevenson (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2018). 72 pages; 5¼"×7½". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-31-9. Price \$15.00 from www.redmoonpress.com.

Reviewed by Eve Luckring

emoji moon is John Stevenson's sixth haiku collection, his fifth with the stalwart Red Moon Press. What strikes me most about all of Stevenson's books is his relaxed pithy voice: exacting and yet vulnerable, a paradoxical mix of amused irony and open-hearted wonder, often laced with a self-deprecating humor. A voice I can rely on like an old friend.

someone
we can trust
with winter

All five of Stevenson's Red Moon publications contain a mix of haiku, tanka, and haibun, in varying proportions over the years. This helps to create one of the attributes that always makes Stevenson's books such a pleasure to read—his attention to the rhythmic flow of a succession of poems. Though this is partly generated by the slightly longer form of tanka and the fluid prose of haibun sprinkled amid haiku, Stevenson's consideration of the cadence and lineation of individual poems, along with how these stress patterns are sequenced, is fundamental to his achievement. This skill may come from his long practice of writing renku, with its multi-verse structures and rules ensuring variation. For me, the recurrence of too many poems using the same meter, one after another, is something surprisingly overlooked by many poets putting together haiku

collections. Perhaps this is due to the inherent brevity of haiku and the tendency to fall into formula (presenting an image in the first line followed by a cut). Whatever the reason, Stevenson's publications provide great examples of how to construct a reading experience that avoids a monotony of rhythmic pattern. Here are some examples of his range of phrasing in *emoji moon*:

my shadow
in wet
cement

if glass breaks easily a bird

a blonde, a brunette
and a redhead
leaf viewing

—the last of which works with a set-up one might find in a Groucho Marx joke!

A plain-talking conversational tone is a hallmark of Stevenson's writing. His humor, sensitivity to the human condition, and rhetorical framing might cause some to classify much of the work as *senryu*. (Could this possibly be the reasoning behind *emoji moon*'s rather curious and vague subtitle: "haiku and related text"?) For me, the distinction between haiku and *senryu* simply isn't very meaningful for 21st century writing outside of Japan. Nevertheless, it is ironic that it may be the very aforementioned qualities of Stevenson's voice that inspire me to mention here the notion of *karumi*, most often translated as "lightness." This approach was advocated by Bashō in his later years, and is therefore lauded as the pinnacle of haiku quality by many English-language poets who have dedicated the majority of their practice to writing in the genre. It seems to me that many of Stevenson's poems embody its semantic buoyancy and colloquial music—according to scholar Haruo Shirane, sound and rhythm is a key feature of the seemingly effortless nature of *karumi*.

winter trees
how small
a small town gets

Karumi is sometimes interpreted as a principled avoidance of any attention to poetic device, to the imaginary/conceptual, or to the way language mediates experience. However, this way of thinking removes Bashō's ideas from their historical and cultural context and the specific poetic conventions that he was reacting against, particularly with regard to haikai no renga. A contemporary example of the type of vernacular Bashō was encouraging with *karumi* might be found in Stevenson's title, *emoji moon*. It could be argued that a word like "emoji," as well as the acronyms and slang of electronic messaging and social media, represent the vernacular of our moment. However, emoji themselves tend to function quite differently than words do in poetry. As Michael Kennedy points out in *emoji moon*'s preface, emoji usually direct, flatten, and narrow a reader's response. They are often used to nail down any potentially problematic ambiguity and erode the potential of open-ended, multi-layered interpretation. Not exactly the stuff of poetry (unless one uses them playfully outside of their conventional applications). Yet, as Bashō taught, language is a living and "ever-changing" medium. How might we more creatively embrace the instrumental shifts of electronic communication, especially since much of our daily conversation is increasingly shaped by the ubiquity of mobile devices? Stevenson doesn't really answer, and maybe he never intended to do anything more than prompt a question. After all, there is no poem in the book using the phrase "emoji moon" or otherwise referencing emoji, texting, tweeting, et al. So, whether we hashtag our seasons, or trendjack sus FOMO word-bling, or keep the moon in the pines... perhaps it is *emoji moon*'s epigraph, from anthropologist Gregory Bateson, that is more to Stevenson's point: "We live in our descriptions of reality." This might offer one of the most constructive ways to understand Bashō's philosophical progression towards *karumi*; it certainly elucidates why I so readily trust Stevenson's voice.

They're sending
 someone over.
 I don't know who.
 Someone blue
 to sky it all up.

The Silence Within, by Juanito L. Escareal (East Bay, Calif.: Haikukuru Publishing, 2018). 120 pages: 5½" × 9". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-7202-7456-8. Price: \$16.00 from www.amazon.com.

Reviewed by Patricia J. Machmiller

This is a different haiku book from most that you will read. It is mostly haiku, but it also offers nine tanka, a long haibun, and a few free-verse poems at the end. The haiku section, however, is the primary focus of the book and so that will be my focus also.

The haiku section is arranged by season; the poems are presented in groups of five on two facing pages with a single haiku on the left page and four haiku on the right. This presentation tends to encourage reading the five poems as a group. In addition to the poems there is commentary on each page; some of the comments are by the Australian haiku poet Dhugal J. Lindsay, who lives and works in Japan and is a mentor to Escareal, and some are by Escareal himself.

Here are some haiku that I am particularly struck by:

departing spring —
 if I had a kite
 I'd tie it down

the car thief
 also took with him
 plum petals

procrastinating...
 the chayote climbs
 an unfinished trellis