

lives lie in fragments.” We are left with partial recollections that are not only fragmentary, but the fragmentary only tells it partly. This is the realm of the haiku poet: we use the shards to signal the shape of our vessels. Luckring nicely juxtaposes a larger fragmentary text that unfolds piece by piece, as meaning develops in each of these fragments that begin the chapters. Only later what is suggested becomes clear, and the *Tao Te Ching* and the poems come to a unity so that by now the reader should be able to answer the question: “These contours, are they me or we, ‘the same source but different names?’” Taken altogether, *The Tender Between* is a very effective collection of poems in wholes and fragments, vessels and flow, in an assemblage in which the title poem names this remarkably:

in the skin of a tiger stalking the tender between

The Penguin Book of Haiku, ed. and trans. by Adam L. Kern (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2018). 451 pages; 5" × 7¾". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-140-42476-8. Price: \$18.00 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by Michele Root-Bernstein

Let's get something out of the way at the start, shall we? This volume covers premodern Japanese linked verse, mostly up to the year of Shiki's death in 1902. So why is it not titled, *The Penguin Book of Haikai*? To make the point, no doubt, that haiku is not really haiku.

Literary historian Adam Kern draws a careful distinction between haiku (purposefully un-italicized and pronounced “high-coo”) as we know it today and *haiku* (purposefully italicized and pronounced “hah-ee-coo”) as the collaborative linked verse usually called *haikai no renga*. And in a sixty-page introduction to his compilation of newly translated *haikai*

verse, he proceeds to paint a history of the haiku form(s) that will be revelatory for many of his readers. Indeed, he expects a lot of us to be “in for shock” as he explains why haiku was never “pristinely Japanese,” never just a nature poem, and never just drawn from experience of the moment.

Firstly, Kern argues, when Shiki reinvented the first stanza in *haikai no renga* as a standalone haiku, he incorporated elements of Western individualism, scientific objectivity, and photorealism that were in fact quite foreign to Japanese literary tradition:

precisely *because*
the gods are invisible
they are believed in (Shinpei)

Secondly, the thousand or so *ku* Kern extracts for our delectation from a variety of collaborative verse capping games are largely characterized by a “wildly popular type of verbal repartee” that ranges in content from the silly to the satirical, the scatological to the sensual. Consider a typical example.

The challenge verse:

however grim
it was also funny! (Author unnamed)

The response verse:

even while
my father lay dying
farts kept ripping! (Yamazaki Sokan)

In *haikai*, it seems, the *bareku* (dirty sexy verse) and the *senryū* (comic verse) reigned supreme, along with the erotic, the comic and the crude—and it is time, Kern avows, to “reclaim those lowbrow elements that ... have too long been denigrated or expurgated by traditionalist accounts of modern haiku:”

throughout town,
her husband alone
in the dark (Author unnamed)

seventy-five days
of postpartum abstention
up the wazoo (Tessen)

Thirdly and finally, Kern compares the spontaneous composition of *haikai* to jazz improvisation. Imagination and memory played much more of a role than actual experience, he asserts. “The notion that the modern haiku is a verbal snapshot of an actual experience as it unfolds is dubious in the premodern *haiku* [ie. *haikai*].” The tendency to parody would seem to make this clear:

my, oh my, oh my!
all to be said of the blossoms
on Mount Toshino (Teishitsu)

my, on my, oh my!
all to be said of the headlice
through a microscope (Author unnamed)

This is not to say that the experiential is non-existent among the vast corpus of *haikai*:

challenge:

staring and yet ...
staring and yet ...

response:

shelter from the rain —
the inscription on a plaque
learned by heart (Author unnamed)

For its many revisions to our understanding of *haiku*/haiku, if nothing else, this is an invaluable book. Kern's translations may not always inspire aesthetically—particularly when compared to other well-known English-language versions of iconic poems by Bashō, Issa, and Buson. Consider one of Bashō's most celebrated verses, *natsugusa ya / tsuwamonodomo ga / yume no ato*. Kern reworks it as

summer grass!
in the wake of dreams
of legion warriors

This in contrast to Makoto Ueda's

summer grasses
where stalwart soldiers
once dreamed a dream

Or Robert Hass's inimitable

Summer grass —
all that's left
of warriors' dreams.

Kern notes that *ato* in the original can mean 'ruins' as well as 'after' and that the last phrase in the poem suggests waking from a dream. Arguably, Ueda better captures the literal translation and Hass the poetic sentiment. Nevertheless, Kern's commentary in this instance and elsewhere calls our attention to subtleties in the original language or to other, similarly themed contemporary texts that provide us with long-overdue context.

For anyone even remotely interested in the origins of haiku and the claims of tradition, and for the sheer variety and scope of, yes, *haikai* that stand well enough on their own, this extraordinary tome is a must-read.