

Hushpuppy, by Kelly Moyer (No place [Winston Salem, N.C.]: Nun Prophet Press, 2023). 117 pages; 6" × 9". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 979-8-850099-5-72. Price: \$4.03 from on-line booksellers.

Reviewed by Cherie Hunter Day

The title *Hushpuppy* has several references. It's a Southern side dish of crispy fried cornmeal balls that originated in the Carolinas and is a menu staple in seafood and barbecue restaurants around the country. "Hushpuppy" is also a euphemism for stopping a growling stomach and a slang term for silencing someone or covering up misbehavior. All these various renditions are at play in Kelly Moyer's debut collection of short form poetry.

Moyer's uses the term "short form poetry" in the subtitle. The standard definition of short form is any poem nine lines or less, or any poem that uses sixty words or less. Such poems are huge relative to haiku. Micro-poetry may be a more accurate term: poems characterized by extreme brevity. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the shortest poem is Aram Saroyan's three-humped m, which looks like the melding of the letters m and n. Composed in the 1970s on a typewriter, the letters were spliced together.

In the introduction of *Hushpuppy* Robert P. Moyer mentions the author's frustration with language. This frustration with language isn't new. Saroyan, who was a photographer, wanted a poetic form that had the same immediacy as a photo without a reading process. Words are clunky and unwieldy. It's difficult to corral meaning and flesh out experience.

All or most all the poems have been previously published in the leading haiku journals and blogs. Her style and subject matter place these poems towards the innovative end of the haiku/senryu continuum, so why call them short form poetry? Say "haiku" to most mainstream journal editors and they immediately recite the description of haiku as three-lines, 5-7-5 syllables, poem about nature. Moyer may want to avoid the confines of the old-school definition and gain a wider audience for her work. Integrating haiku into the larger literary cannon is a laudable task. However, I'm here to talk about her poems as haiku/senryu.

In the collection there are 111 poems presented centered, one per page, without sections. Poems written in one line outweigh the poems written in three lines by a ratio of 2:1. Use of the single-line format is now commonplace in haiku journals, so Moyer's treatment isn't particularly inventive there. The sparse layout on a generously sized page provides plenty of thinking room.

These following examples are accessible, albeit somewhat confessional:

tinder the most beautiful parts of me

moonquiver not a diagnosis but a disposition

These poems offer a tease of clarity. Other poems are in the absurd category like the following examples.

gulf oysters more a philosophy than a flamingo

self-preservation muting the barrel-aged bluebird

unicorn hunting a three-way potato

A certain amount of playfulness is appreciated but these poems raise the question, "How much non/sense is tolerated in haiku?" I immediately think of Ban'ya Natsuishi's poems written in Japanese and translated into English. Some readers are up to the challenge of dealing with something intentionally opaque without an easy resolve. After all, astonishment may be adjacent to annoyance. For others it is a major test of the reader's tolerance for puzzle-solving. Cleverness, wordplay, soundscape may initially work to deliver a gotcha moment, but the experience diminishes on subsequent readings.

Some of Moyer's poems don't offer enough of a payoff:

aquanet taming early mammals

godless whiskers on the persimmon

hour by hour the hang of a curtain

The following poems do hold up on repeat visits.

eden holding space for the rain

leaf litter phylum without family

dusty leaves
a chill
on the speculum

There is one example of a pwoermd in the collection:

cervixen

Geof Huth is credited with the origin of the term “pwoermd”—a single word represented as a poem that explores the relationship between looking and reading. Huth describes his work as “a spark to make the imagination move.” Bob Grumman uses the term “microherent” when discussing Huth’s work. Coherence is an integral part of haiku/senryu, which may operate at the level of intuition rather than logic. Haiku has that spark as well, which moves the imagination.

The collection includes a two-word poem:

bone brothel

I find both minimalist poems to be among the most successful poems in the collection. They show Moyer’s artful wordsmithing with unexpected juxtapositions. The objects change meaning by their proximity and create a new experience. This minimal treatment is effective in small doses to punctuate a collection, and this is what Moyer has done in *Hushpuppy*.

I do have a pet peeve about the choice of typeface for the collection. The blocky, bold outline in a 14-to-16-point font with a dot screen fill blurs the letters. I found it a distraction. The type competes for atten-

tion with the subject matter of the poems. A clean, stark typeface would lessen the hurdle to unpack the poems. Letterform is an important consideration, especially in micropoetry.

Overall Moyer does a good job with her stated intention: to find her voice and not be silenced. I hope this collection opens discussions on the trajectory of English-language haiku—its strengths, and limitations. I get the feeling that Kelly Moyer is just warming up to deliver more.

Home Again, by Rick Tarquinio (No place [Bridgeton, N.J.]: Odd Duck Press, 2023). 110 pages, 5" × 7¼". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. No ISBN. Price: \$20.00 from <https://ricktarquinio.bandcamp.com/merch>

Reviewed by Randy Brooks

*H*ome Again is Tarquinio's third collection. In this book he invites you to journey out into the world in the spirit of Bashō. While in the natural world, he also invites us to find ourselves at home in the constantly changing seasons. Perhaps his *ars poetica* haiku is this one:

to be that no one
Basho spoke of...
autumn road

When he ventures out to discover what's happening in this place at this time, he lets the haiku find him, not the other way around. The haiku is not about his ability to wrest significance out of the landscape. It is not about trying to use nature to express his inner struggles. He is not writing haiku that twist words around to show his facility with the language. He writes from a sense of wonder and seeks insights about being at home, again, in this ever-changing world in rural, southern New Jersey. This is evident in the title poem: