

## Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY FRANCINE BANWARTH

*My Red: The Selected Haiku of John Stevenson* edited by Randy & Shirley Brooks (Brooks Books, Taylorville, IL: 2021). Foreword by Jim Kacian. 160 pages, 6.25" x 9.25". Clothbound. ISBN 978-1-929820-21-4. \$24 plus \$3 postage from <https://brooksbookshaiku.com>.

*My Red* is John Stevenson's seventh collection published in the last 25 years. Four of his previous publications by Red Moon Press received the HSA Merit Book Award and/or Touchstone Award for excellence in haiku. This volume of selected haiku published by Brooks Books is one in a series of editions that feature "the very best haiku by an author who has spent a significant portion of his or her life's work in this genre." The process for inclusion began with the author who selected 774 of his favorite haiku from the 2,183 published by summer of 2020. A team of readers, all accomplished haiku writers and editors, carefully reviewed and chose the 196 poems that rose to the top in the selection process.

The author's introduction to *My Red* opens with his thought: "Maybe art is, fundamentally, the product of failure. It is always attempting something impossible and, however perfect an act of art can seem in certain moments, the impossible holds sway in the end."

never touching  
his own face  
tyrannosaurus

The book's cover portrait by Jessica Seabok is cast in red with an "overlay scribble" that reminds me of a red correction pencil. It is an invitation to read the author's face, much like we'd read the river with its currents, wingdams, and driftwood deposited on shore after a high water mark. As I turn the pages, I find myself

asking, 'Are we, each of us, the mistakes of our own lives that we keep trying to edit into something better?'

under the  
blackest doodle  
something unerasable

The color red has a range of symbolic meanings, which the author bears witness to through his everyday observations of the natural world and human nature:

life and health—

almost spring  
she tells the whole story  
in a single breath

mint condition  
an autumn day  
still in the wrapper

love and passion—

one of your sighs  
has stayed with me  
forty years, so far

dark studio  
the dancer who is always  
first to arrive

courage and vigor—

after midnight  
getting some of my thoughts  
into the lifeboat

nude beach  
his enormous  
sandcastle

anger and war—

pulling weeds  
the angry back  
of her knee

more automatic words about weapons

The title *My Red* comes from his monoku, *pretty sure my red is your*

*red*. I sense an air of confidence mixed with a margin of uncertainty and vulnerability. I think of red capes and warning signs, traffic lights and tail lights, red balloons and roses—the multitude of ways red speaks to us every day. I notice the prevalence of R-like sounds, which are defined as liquid consonants, and how they create tone, tension, alertness, and an awareness significant to the color red. Just 15 poems do not contain the letter “r,” which makes me wonder if it is the most-used consonant in our English language. I tap into the current and flow of the 196 haiku and senryu on the pages. I travel his storied landscapes of longing and loss, of wit and wisdom, of relationships and isolation, and everything in between. These poems are the bittersweet dramas of daily living, where we are separate but bound together in our common humanity.

Jim Kacian classifies John Stevenson as one of the few poets “speaking so perfectly to their time that their work seems to be an embodiment of it.” Stevenson describes his own eclectic approach to haiku as inspired by clear sensory imagery that stimulates intuition. It is that ability to bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind where we find the intuitive “heart” of his poems. Combining his interest in the visual arts and background in theater, he gives voice to his haiku in a “Cinematic Experience,” a video reading accessed through the publisher’s website: [www.brooksbookshaiku.com](http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com).

As past editor of *Frogpond* and current managing editor of *The Heron’s Nest*, Stevenson reminds us that no one can tell us what an English-language haiku should be. “This is an open question and still in the process of being answered.” To that, I might add my deep gratitude for John Stevenson’s approach to haiku and for his body of work, with this paraphrase: *your poems / have stayed with me / thirty years, so far*. ◻■

#### REVIEWED BY KRISTEN LINDQUIST

*her deep-rooted scars haiku, monostiches, cherita* by Hifsa Ashraf (Alba Publishing, Uxbridge, UK: 2021). In English and Urdu. 94 pages, 5.75" x 8.25". Glossy cover, perfect softbound. ISBN 978-1-912773-38-1. \$16 from <http://www.albapublishing.com>.