

## **TRUSTING THE COMPASS OF STRANGENESS: PETER YOVU'S *SUNRISE***

*by Paul Pfleuger, Jr.*

Peter Yovu has made it no secret that he believes that poets writing in the haiku genre have to challenge themselves and each other creatively by producing less formulaic poems and also, in part, by indulging in individual strangeness to establish, perhaps reinforce, haiku's relevance in the 21st Century. He suggests in a *Modern Haiku* (39.1) review of *Big Sky: The Red Moon Anthology 2006* that: "Guided by the compass of strangeness (which points us past our comfort zone), we allow something other than what we want or determine to enter our poetry."

His more recently published poems clearly illustrate that he is taking chances and there is a sense of risk and modest peculiarity in his work. With the release of *Sunrise*—his first full book—he stands firmly behind his propositions, trusting in his own odd compass, as he offers an intense, off-kilter collection of new and recent work that is engaging on many levels. From the first poem, he makes it clear that he is not committed to general conventions in English-language haiku:

coming out of  
a hard house  
the flowering dawn

With the first line's break at "of" serving as something of a disruption to the rhythm, the fact that it lacks a descriptor, and his offering a house that is "hard," and a dawn that is "flowering," we know we are not in for the typical haiku commute.

Midway through *Sunrise*, the ride can get bumpy as it's established that the reader can expect to be jolted now and then and made to pay intimate attention to language, as Yovu employs disjunction and/or intentional disruptions, wordplay, syntactic ambiguity, or presents an interesting amalgam of natural, innermost and surreal imagery.

peels scattered throughout  
the grove: Osiris' es-  
sence drips from my mouth

a case of bird skulls  
my ears torn by such  
little scissors

And his commitment to allowing individual consciousness and strange unknowns to navigate the way finds him, at a juncture, getting inventive with words.

millionating beast  
quadramillion hooves  
drum down the groundskin

I suppose I find it somewhat peculiar that:

this word now this each  
word making a ghost of the  
last word now the sword

which takes as much from Language Poetry as it does from Surrealism, is followed by an entirely non-objective, gripping, shasei poem, the type of haiku that embodies Shiki's term:

start of day  
the butcher's  
white apron

But I suppose it's just Peter being Peter, and it does make for less predictable reading.

I dare to say that there is something for everyone in this book, and would like to single out one poem from *Sunrise* that speaks with a clarity I believe will engage many types of readers.

a falcon dives  
how completely  
I surround my bones

Here, I think of the peregrine falcon, the fastest animal in this world—which can be found in Peter Yovu country (the Vermont peregrine falcon)—and all it has endured as a species, at once brought to the brink of extinction due to pesticide use and, in particular, by DDT during the early to mid parts of the 20th century.

Being that this majestic bird can be found on nearly all corners of the globe, its drastic decline in population due to the modernization of America after World War II led it to become something of an international symbol for the early environment movement as greater knowledge of the effects of DDT were brought to light in the public sphere by concerned individuals like Rachel Carson and her publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962. After the banning of DDT in much of the developed world, the peregrine falcon has made a comeback in recent times, though its numbers are still venerable. Audubon Vermont tells that the bird was “. . . one of the first species to be listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, and the species' recovery is one of the Act's greatest success stories” ([http://vt.audubon.org/SciCon\\_VTPeregrineFalconRecoveryProject.html](http://vt.audubon.org/SciCon_VTPeregrineFalconRecoveryProject.html)).

Taking in the soar of this stunning “returned” bird in its rightful place, which can be seen as a symbol of spiritual yearning, breaking into its dive, imagine the nearly triumphant awe, the hope and splendor before him, while at the same time being struck with the

humbling unease that would come with standing there frozen in place on the ground in its trajectory like any of its prey.

To sense something deeply we say we “feel something in our bones.” Expressing that he “surrounds” his bones in this instance (with “completely” modifying this awareness), Yovu communicates a deeper sensitivity and consciousness, something that leaves him more venerable. It speaks about his calling for haiku poets to allow something strange and uncontrolled to enter haiku as he effectively reveals what he has been filled with here.

How much of a stretch would it be to put forth the notion that Yovu is displaying qualities of one who has been, at the very least, fleetingly, illuminated here, revealing something deep and spiritual found in the natural world akin to the haiku of Basho and Santoka?

Yovu pays particular attention to the body (breasts, mouth, skull, lymph nodes, bones, arms, etc...) and flight (bats, jets, birds, bees, mosquitoes, etc...) throughout *Sunrise*, and, for me, with “a falcon dives” the book reaches its highest moment of intensity and consciousness, as it effectively marries two of his major themes. His connection to the natural world is profound and appears to convey an almost animistic experience. That sudden awareness and sense that one’s flesh is completely surrounding their bones could very well have been a flashing taste of his wholly being animal. This haiku resonates on many levels, as do many found in *Sunrise*.

The following are some other poems that show Yovu’s range in this book. Readers preferring haiku/senryu leaning more toward the traditional will eat up:

you never showed up  
a mosquito  
on the mannequin

Something for those who feast on minimalism:

where am I here

between seasons  
only  
reality shows

And folks who like their haiku served up with the ambiguity allowed in one-line, and which make up about of quarter of the poems in *Sunrise*:

nothing to declare leaving a continent of smoke

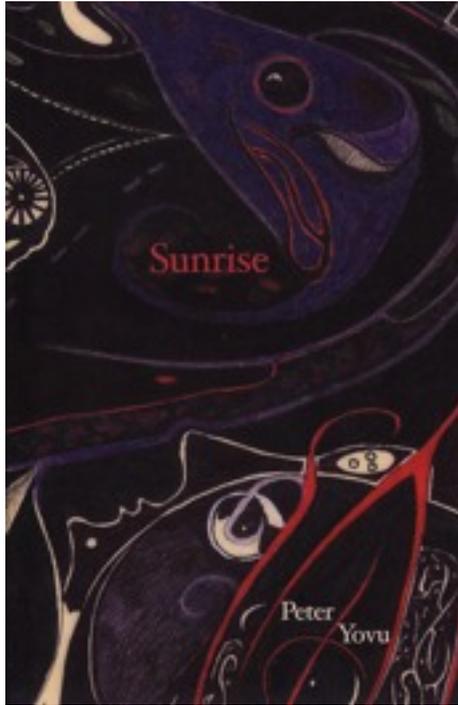
snow I know everywhere to touch you

And that select bunch wanting the whole shebang—a grand range of haiku poetics—will be more than amply rewarded in many ways.

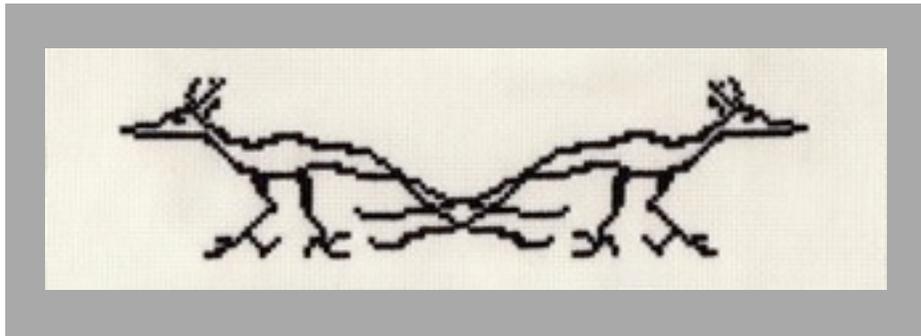
Though abstruse at times, Yovu's haiku are grounded in very real places and built around things of substance, even at his most abstract. The world he inhabits is filled with living symbols of security among the clutter of modernity, delicious discoveries, and also dark questions.

Much of what makes up this collection leaves obvious freedom to readers for interpretation, no matter how private in nature it can get. It all makes for one hell of a ride. Peter Yovu's *Sunrise* is a highly recommendable first full book from one of the most distinct and challenging voices in contemporary haiku. Think of it as the dawning of a poet that we can expect much more from in the years ahead. For where it got him, I'd say he owes his compass of strangeness a beer.





*Sunrise*, by Peter Yovu (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2010). 96 unnumbered pages; 4.25 x 6.5. Glossy four-color card cover, perfectbound. ISBN 10893959-97-2. Price: \$12.00 + s&h from the publisher at <http://www.redmoonpress.com>.



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