

---

Vizenor, Gerald. *Favor of Crows: New and Selected Haiku*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014. 168 pp.

<http://www.upne.com/0819574329.html>

“The first to come / I am called / Among the birds. / I bring the rain. / Crow is my name” *Song of the Crows*, Henry Selkirk

Gerald Vizenor poses a hefty 26-page introduction that gives insight into his fifty years of working with the form. “My very first literary creations were haiku scenes, and since then, that imagistic sense of nature has always been present in my writing. I may never know if my haiku are right by nature, only that the scenes are my best memories. In this way, my sense of presence, haiku creations, and survivance is in nature and in the book.”

Books such as this are fortunate to have introductions in them. They give direction. They are a map of where the book is going. A history of where the form has been. Giving the reader a handle on more than the reader knew would be there.

Recently I have had to rethink my idea of nature. The native ideal of the earth as a living being, a relative, is still true. But I’ve also seen another side. I live part-time on a county road in rural Texas to help a part of my family. The dust, drought, heat, hot wind, occasional cats abandoned on the road, the litters born from them. The animal fights I hear in the night. The grasshoppers, red ants, a multitude of small brown ants, bugs and spiders—large brown fiddle-back spiders. The harshness.

“from the half / of the sky / that which lives there / is coming / and makes a noise” [an early Anishinaabe song recorded by the ethnographer, Frances Densmore].

Occasional intense storms come across the land with nothing to hold them back. It must be a cumulative hardship I pick up in the air. A historical longing, hunger and need. The horses in the field pull up roots of grass as they eat, making a ripping sound.

I think of haiku as a clutter of fragility with a wham of recognition on rice paper. The termites would eat them here. Words would be gulped. But haiku is sturdy enough in Vizenor’s hands to handle the hardness of the Texas terrain.

This one—“dusty road / horses at the rusted gate / scent of mown hay” Of course, the smell of the diesel tractor and the roar of mowing is implied in the smell of hay. And maybe the desire of horses to leave the enclosed field.

And another—“ant mounds / flooded in a thunderstorm / restored by morning.” Yes, that is exactly the way it is.

The vibrancy of haiku lives in Vizenor's new collection. The crows have brought their blessing—the distant likenesses, the reverberations, the tenuous link of one thing to another, the bright and unexpected connections.

It was Vizenoresque to find the word “tease” on the first line of the introduction. The haiku is a tease of nature. The winnowing of an impression. The opening of an image. The haiku on the page seem like clothes hanging on a line in the country. Or with three haiku on each page, the view from a three-story building.

“Haiku is visionary, a timely meditation, an ironic manner of creation, and a sense of motion, and, at the same time, a consciousness of seasonal impermanence.”

Vizenor's images are startling—the pressure of ice that pushes a hole in the bucket of frozen water. Large ice chunks floating on a river reflecting the full moon in the river itself broken with ice and in turn breaking the moon hurtful yet playful almost as a ball bouncing. The union of water across the stones and birds copying the sound in a tease or costume of mimicry. River stones under thin ice like an ancient bridge of little people.

The haiku is fleeting as milkweed fuzz in the wind and transitory as understanding a passage of eternity. Vizenor's work opens the human soul—“honeysuckle climbs / a withered fruit tree / reach of memory.” You see how the universe can be held in the smallest seed—the withered past that once bore fruit, but no longer does, still has life of another kind growing upon it. To me, there is a longing for something past, or someone. It even could be the story of the loss of the native way of life, but with acculturation, another life has come.

Vizenor's word, survivance, also is there in the opening of the introduction. It is the survivance of the native mindset after all that survives. Vizenor explains that he sees the virtual world in haiku. Almost as if they were film. Or images on a scrim. “The fugitive turns and transitions of the season.”

Vizenor, an expansive writer of all genres, finds the largeness of his craft even in the haiku. [It] “was my first sense of totemic survivance in poetry, the visual and imagistic associations of nature, and of perception and experience. The metaphors in my initial haiku scenes were teases of nature and memory. The traces of my imagistic names cut to the seasons, not to mere imitation, or the cosmopolitan representation and ruminations of an image in a mirror of nature.”

I think what is important in *FAVOR OF CROWS* are the towers of the haiku, the essay on the form itself, and the overall sense of not what it is, but what it causes—a living energy, a *causer* in its own right. A generator of a comprehensive city that is built within the book. All of which haiku is for Vizenor.

I also need to say something about the haunting cover, *Crow's Mortality Tale*, Rick Bartow. It is the head of a creature that looks something like a bear or maybe a bald man. It has one human eye and one animal eye. The chartreuse ghost in the background. The blue hand in the foreground that often is seen imprinted on Ghost Dance shirts in museums. It is an accretion of

thought, memory, artifact, innuendo that provides a conceptual shadowing of the haiku Vizenor writes.

He also ties together Japanese and Chippewa cultures. The White Earth Reservation in Minnesota and the pine islands of Matsushima. Basho to Vizenor who sees haiku as a native dreamsong. "...the dispositions of *manidoo* and *shi* are perceptive moments of presence in nature..."

The solid world is pulled apart like a milkweed pod, and the fuzz spreads its down on the wind. The coilings and connectives. The taking apart of a part of the world to see beyond the world. The interpretations and exigencies. The governmental agency for dispersing rations. Or Vizenor's haiku as totems like the small stone bears I have in my china closet. One with a book in its mouth. The other with a parchment tied on its back.

"The anishinaabe dream songs and tricky stories of creation that bear the totemic nature, elusive ironies, and tragic wisdom of natives were traduced and depreciated by the hauteur of discovery, the cruelties of monotheism, and the pernicious literature of dominance."

Vizenor also mentions the history of his family as well as the removal of his Anishinaabeg tribe to the White Earth Reservation. The wounded in spirit.

Vizenor's new collection still finds him in his waders in the steady stream of the evocative.

*Diane Glancy, Macalester College*