
REVIEWS

Elements of a Life, by Rebecca Lilly (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2014). 140 pages; 4¼"x6½". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936848-34-8. Price: \$12.00 from www.redmoonpress.com

Reviewed by John Stevenson

A triumph of ambivalence, *Elements of a Life* cannot be discussed intelligently with those who have not seen it until a physical description is provided. It is really two books (but not really) under one cover. This is apparent before one reads a single word. Half of the pages are dark grey and half are white. A graphic image and its “negative” appear on the front and back covers. One either begins reading from the lighter cover and grey pages or one turns the book over (and upside down) and reads from the dark cover and white pages. It seems fairly clear that the lighter cover is the front of the book since it has the number 1 on it and the darker cover has the number 2. Also, the author’s introductory remarks appear only under the light cover. The white pages, under the dark cover, contain a dark grey, rectangular area in which the poems are presented in white ink. The dark grey pages, under the light cover (and following the author’s Introduction), contain a white rectangle with poems in black. Do you get the picture?

Since it seems obvious that a game is afoot, I suspect that many readers will start, as I did, with the Introduction. This is the opposite (the negative?) of my usual procedure, which is to read the poems first and only when I have experienced them in my own way to look back at the Introduction. But in this case, I thought the introductory remarks might contain the “rules” for reading this book. And, to some extent, they do.

The first half of the book (dark pages, marked “book 1”) is a selection of the author’s haiku, edited by Allan Burns. He has arranged the poems in four sections and titled each with a line or phrase from one of the haiku it contains. The second half of the book (dark cover, white pages, dark rectangle, and white type, marked “book 2”) takes these same poems, in the same order, and riffs on them. The affect is something like producing sketches from a finished painting. The riffed versions are also presented in four sections. Since the sections in Burns’ arrangement suggested “water,” “earth,” “air,” and “fire” the author has labeled each section of her revisions accordingly. It might be good, at this point, to offer a poem from book 1 and its counterparts in book 2.

book 1

Blue shadows
under the footbridge—
mallards drift

book 2

Dim, dark field mallard
heads mnemonics
of worn slats measured

the bridge a foot
in the blue mirror
sun cooling jimmies

Given the nature of this book, it may not be a surprise that my reactions are deeply ambivalent.

Having made a quick comparison of the first entry in book 1 and its counterparts in book 2, I decided that I would try to read the whole book in this way. But I quickly tired of turning the book around and upside down for each poem while marking my places with two fingers. So I read book 1, which is what this whole book was originally intended to be. This is a satisfying reading. Some favorites:

Silence behind the sound
of wind over grasses—
some gap in myself

Low rent apartment—
on the ceiling
luminous star decals

Then I read the second version of the book (book 2) but I suspect I would not have read most of it had I not agreed to review the book. Nevertheless, it has an important conceptual function, even when one reads only enough of it to realize how it relates to book 1. The author says in her introduction, “My hope is that the images and observations in Books 1 and 2 together allow readers to discover less conscious or apparent parts of themselves in the process of experiencing my attempts to uncover my own.” It succeeds in this way for me, though book 2 is more of a presence than an act of communication. And to establish this presence, I need only to have read a few pages.

Elements of a Life may remind certain readers of *4.48 Psychosis*, a play by British playwright Sarah Kane that is composed of twenty-four sections having no specified setting, stage directions, or characters. The staging of this play varies wildly from one production to another. The “staging” of Rebecca Lilly’s book seems to be the heart of its meaning. She could have used the same material but arranged it differently—in three parts, for instance, in which the effect of books 1 and 2 might be followed by a third part representing some kind of synthesis. But I presume that this would not have seemed truthful to the author and the co-equal standing of the books is her statement.

It seems to me that, in *Elements of a Life*, Rebecca Lilly is showing us what it’s like to be in pain and what it’s like to be standing one step (or maybe a half step) back from pain.

Haiku: The Interior and Exterior of Being, by Don Baird (Burbank, Calif.: The Little Buddha Press, 2014). 212 pages; 6"x9". Glossy black and white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-304-67843-0. Price: \$14.95 from online booksellers

Reviewed by Robert Epstein

The intelligent reader will not want to mess with Don Baird’s new book of poems, *Haiku: The Interior and Exterior of Being*. The martial arts expert was inducted into the Masters Hall of Fame in 2009. Although Baird isn’t explicit about the interface between haiku and martial