

*Without Syntax*, by Lee Gurga (Champaign, Il.: Modern Haiku Press, 2020). 32 pages; 4¼" × 5½". Glossy four-color card covers; saddle-stapled. ISBN 978-0-9600855-3-8. Price: \$4.00 from [www.modern-haiku.org](http://www.modern-haiku.org)

*Reviewed by George Swede*

In the interests of transparency, I want readers to know that I first met Lee Gurga in 1984 when we both attended a memorial to Raymond Roseliep in Dubuque, Iowa. Since then, we've met or corresponded numerous times (especially when he was editor of *Modern Haiku* from 2002–2006). Thus, this review will not be free of personal bias, especially since I've always admired his haiku.

This small chapbook consists of sixteen "ku"—eight one-liners with from six to nine words and eight vertical pieces that range from four to nine one-word lines. Gurga's use of the term "ku" instead of "haiku" makes clear his intention for this collection is to go down a path less trodden. All of the ku are small jewels of adventurous writing, i.e., they successfully stretch the boundaries of traditional English-language haiku. For instance, this one-liner with an added bonus of humour:

your hands cold on my peccadillo

The extreme brevity (under ten syllables) plus appropriate word placement—"cold" after "hands" instead of before— and word choice—"peccadillo" instead of "indiscretion" or "misdeed"— make it a gem. If Gurga had written "cold hands," the more common practice, some of the ku's shine would have been lost. Even more dulling would have been the use of a word other than "peccadillo" whose richness of associative power exceeds that of any synonym.

The vertical pieces further confirm Gurga's skill with disjunction, of which the title poem is a good example:

without  
syntax

the  
bare  
skin

of  
dawn

The first two lines, “without / syntax,” encourage the relaxation of the rules that govern word choice and placement. Then, in the remaining five lines, two images appear that are not commonly associated with each other, “bare skin” and “dawn,” and which make the reader pause and wonder. Heightening the process is the ku’s structure of one word per line—each word creates more associative ripples than would be the case if it were in a line with several others.

Another way to discuss the ku in this collection is with the words of Robert Spiess that are used in the guidelines for “The Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku Awards Competition for 2021,” run annually by *Modern Haiku*:

In the better haiku there is a surprisingly large amount of subjectivity beneath the objectivity of the haiku’s entities. This subjectivity is not stated as such, but is wordlessly perceived.

Spiess, who also attended the Roseliep memorial, would have approved of all sixteen pieces in this fine chapbook.