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## REVIEWS

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*Runagate: Songs of the Freedom Bound*, by Crystal Simone Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2025). 76 pages; 6" × 9". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-4780-3181-9. Price: \$24.95 from online booksellers.

*Reviewed by Paul Miller*

Smith continues to delve deeply into the histories of enslaved persons, following up her 2022 book *Ebbing Shore*. A quick internet search defines *Runagate* as “a person who has run away; a deserter.” But that casual definition implies an act of cowardice, which is hard to square with the bravery exhibited by runaway slaves—as such, the title has an uncomfortably ironic tone to it that makes it more powerful.

The book is broken into three main parts: “Freedom on the Move” contains haiku sequences written in response to slaveholder ads seeking the capture of runaway slaves (the focus of this review); and two “Slave Narratives” sections, one containing individual tanka and another of tanka sequences, both from the perspective of enslaved persons. The book ends with a single haibun.

The book is well-served by Ce Rosenow’s fine Forward in which she explains the project. However, in a subsequent Prefatory Note, in which Smith seeks to place Black haiku into its historical context as part of the larger English-language haiku movement, going back to the early work of poets such as Richard Wright, Etheridge Knight, and others, we think she discounts the large number of social haiku by non-Black voices in favor of Zen-infused, nature-oriented work to make her point. That said, Smith’s project breaks new ground.

Putting aside such quibbles for a moment, the haiku sequences are a damning read. In the first, “Henry and Maria,” Smith writes in response to the following slave holder ad (excerpted for space here):

A FREE MAN who calls himself, Henry Fields, has stolen from the subscriber living near Salem, Franklin county, a Negro woman name MARIA. The negro man is a low, heavy set fellow, tolerably black, about 5 feet 6 inches high. He has a certificate from Col. Micah Taul, that he is a free man. The girl is of yellow complexion, spare built, about 5 feet high; as I now recollect she has a scar from a burn on one of her cheeks ... I will give \$25 for the apprehension of the girl, and \$25 for the boy if confined to any jail ... The boy has with him a Fiddle. He stole a Grey Mare ...

The ad is one of thirty thousand archived at Cornell University's Freedom on the Move database. Using it as the basis for her imaginary narrative of the pair, Smith creates a six-haiku sequence (all sequences are between five and seven verses), the first three "links" shown here.

indigo midnight  
I made her the offer  
of freedom or heaven

she took one hand  
in my other  
a gripped fiddle

humid night  
our solitude  
a paradise

The first poem strongly links the bruise-colored night to the couple's flight. In the second, there an erotic link between the wooden curves of the instrument and of Henry's presumed, long-lost wife; we can imagine one standing in for the lost other, both prized.

The second sequence, "Jemmy," begins with the haiku:

fiery dusk  
he left my flesh  
in pieces

It is a Dante-esque vision, and we can easily understand why Jemmy fled. The dissemblance of him into pieces speaks to the way slaves were characterized as bodies, not as men and women.

In another, “Clinton,” the cotton bloom of late summer mirrors a lifetime of oppression, and we can read into the bloom the protagonist’s growing dream of freedom.

cotton near  
in full bloom  
I ran madly

However, because the sequences aim to be journalistic, invoking perhaps what Gwendolyn Brooks termed “verse journalism,” some of the poems are more narrative statement than haiku, such as the poem that begins the sequence “John Bull” or another later in that same sequence:

like many slaves  
I did not know  
how to run away  
  
I cried for the giver  
of all good to deliver  
me from bondage

These poems are uncut, and while they serve to move the narrative forward, they don’t work as fully-realized haiku. Rosenow acknowledges this in her Forward, commenting, “Although many of the haiku can stand independently, every haiku is more fully realized when read within its sequence.”

This is similarly true in “Harriet, Bella, Elsey, and Milly,” where the three opening stanzas are really one connected, free-verse line, rather than three independent haiku.

we witnessed  
a spent slave  
large with child

give offense  
in the field  
to the overseer

made to lie down  
over a hole  
dug to receive her

This is a lovely line of poetry, and our quibble might seem small, but Smith makes a point of calling her three-line poems haiku. While we appreciate the breach into the larger poetic conversation, calling them haiku is misleading.

As poetry, however, none of this detracts from the strong emotional pull and anger at man's inhumanity to his fellow man that is revealed throughout the collection. At its best, haiku, through strong and carefully chosen images and without explanation, can put the reader tangibly into a scene. This is especially powerful when the scene is one of fear and flight, with terrible consequences should the runner be captured. In a way, this immediacy is perhaps more powerful than a non-fiction book or documentary on the institution of slavery. As such, *Runagate* is a fine addition to both the corpus of Black literature and English-language haiku tradition.

*Timbre: Selected Haiku of Hilary Tann*, eds. Gary Hotham and John Stevenson (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2025). 128 pages; 4¼" × 6½". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-958408-59-9. Price: \$20.0 from [www.redmoonpress.com](http://www.redmoonpress.com)

*Reviewed by Ferris Gilli*

Coming two years after Hilary Tann's death, *Timbre: Selected Haiku of Hilary Tann* is a fine and highly welcome collection of the poet's work in haiku and senryu. John Stevenson's wonderful Introduction in *Timbre* reveals personal insight into the poet's mind and heart, and it is the perfect prelude to this haiku trove.