RUÑAGATE

§ SONGS *of* THE FREEDOM BOUND §

Crystal Simone Smith

PRAISE FOR *RUNAGATE*

"Crystal Simone Smith's poetry sparkles with clarity—haiku allows nothing less. She offers searing attention to the wounds of the past. The imagery and formal look of each poem on the page also reveal her gifts as a visual artist. Here are poems our ancestors deserve."—TSITSI ELLA JAJI, author of *Mother Tongues: Poems*

"The voices of the self-liberating African Americans that Crystal Simone Smith reclaims in *Runagate* are resolutely alive. Smith captures the emotive and embodying possibilities of haiku and tanka to invite readers to reckon with their rejection of 'the laws of slavery' and invite us to imagine their lives beyond the confines of the posters and capture notices that once held their histories. This is the poetry of destiny, revealing Smith's grasp of the infinite possibilities of formal poetics and of the living spirits who dared to claim freedom for themselves, and for those of us who are blessed to hear their stories."—SHEILA SMITH MCKOY, author of *The Bones Beneath*

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— FOR MY MANY GREAT-GRANDPARENTS

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FOREWORD

Ce Rosenow · FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE HAIKU SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Crystal Simone Smith is a highly respected, highly talented member of the American Haiku Movement, and a leading figure among African American haiku poets. In *Runagate*, Smith brings her facility with haiku and the related form tanka to a poetic project that breaks new ground with these forms both through their subject matter and through their engagement with other poetic forms and traditions. Drawing on her extensive research at Duke University, Smith crafts a collection of poems that gives voice to enslaved and formerly enslaved persons, contrasting their humanity with the inhumanity of the enslavers. Reviewing materials from Freedom on the Move: A Database of Fugitives from American Slavery and from *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States* created the impetus and context for Smith's poems. The resulting haiku sequences, individual tanka, and tanka sequences also function as persona poems, poems of witness, and, in some cases, verse journalism. The resulting collection presents image-centered narratives that bring real people out of historical archives and into first-person, poetic depictions of their experiences, foregrounding the humanity and strength of the enslaved and the brutality of slavery.

The opening section of the book presents haiku sequences written in response to advertisements from slaveholders and jailers. In the ads, slave owners provide

descriptions of runaway slaves written from the point of view of the slaveholders and offer rewards for their return. Jailers announce the capture of runaway slaves and ask owners to retrieve them. Left-side pages contain a single ad facing right-side pages presenting one of Smith's haiku sequences written in the persona of the person described in the ad. In this way, Smith participates in what Gwendolyn Brooks termed "verse journalism," as she investigates these events through the creative exploration of what might have been the enslaved person's experiences. The sequences incorporate details from the advertisements while also developing a sense of the fugitives' trauma and commitment to freedom. Although many of the haiku can stand independently, every haiku is more fully realized when read within its sequence. Smith's approach recalls the Japanese *rensaku* tradition, where the meanings of the separate haiku on a topic are enhanced by the full sequence.

In addition to crafting linked verse in the personas of the escaped slaves, Smith also constructs a chronological order of events that adds to the sequences' narrative quality. The combination of the speakers' voices and the chronologies produces an enhanced understanding of the horrors of slavery because there is a greater sense of the fugitives' personhood in contrast to the advertisements' emphasis on humans as property. Poems also depict the dehumanizing effects that slavery had on slaveholders, who were willing to own other humans, separate family members, and torture adults and children.

Using haiku sequences as a lens through which to view African American experiences locates Smith's work in the lineage of poets such as Lenard D. Moore and Sonia Sanchez. Moore's sequences in *Desert Storm* and *A Million Shadows at Noon* consider the military service of African American men and the events of the Million Man March. Sanchez's sequences, especially in *Morning Haiku*, celebrate the achievements and contributions of African American artists, novelists, political activists, and other prominent figures while also elegizing people whose lives

were lost due to racist violence. Smith's haiku recall the formal approaches taken by these poets as well. Her more traditional haiku juxtapose two clear images and often incorporate a nature reference, which is consistent with Moore's poems. Smith also experiments with form to better accommodate her project's emphasis on witnessing through the voices and experiences of escaped or freed slaves; therefore, some poems emphasize the human experience beyond what is typically seen in haiku. While not technically *senryu* (haiku-like poems focusing on human affairs and often including humor or commentary), they resonate with many of Sanchez's haiku that are explicitly human-centered. Sanchez's sequences in *Morning Haiku* also refer to actual people and include a reference to them in the title, such as "15 Haiku (for Toni Morrison)." Smith titles her sequences with the name of the person in the advertisement, as with "Peggy," or, if there was uncertainty about the person's actual name, the variations given in the advertisement, as with "Ely or July."

Two tanka sections follow the opening group of linked haiku. Tanka are five-line poems that often present a haiku-like, three-line unit using a short-long-short pattern followed by two longer lines incorporating the speaker's feelings or thoughts. Contemporary English-language tanka, while typically presented in five lines, now follow a variety of line lengths, divisions between units, and subject matters. Smith follows a traditional approach of two units, using both a three-line unit followed by a two-line unit and a two-line unit followed by a three-line unit. Her content sets her tanka apart from other contemporary English-language tanka because once again she draws from historical documents about the experiences of enslaved or formerly enslaved people and writes from their perspective. Her source, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States*, was part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration and focused on slave narratives from individual states. Smith works specifically with information from North Carolina.

The first tanka section presents poems written in the persona of an actual enslaved person whose story was included in the source material. The poems are printed one per page, allowing for maximum impact. Tanka allow for more narrative description than would be afforded by haiku, yet they are also more focused and condensed than a haiku sequence. The surrounding space on the page keeps the readers' focus on the images and information, giving time to process what is conveyed within the context of the larger collection of poems. The speakers' voices describe the atrocities, emotional and physical, endured by slaves, both adults and children. In several poems, Smith embeds the words of other people so that her speakers are sharing both their thoughts and what they've heard from others. In this way, she creates layers of information and meaning within the compact tanka form.

The section of individual tanka creates a bridge between the beginning and ending sections of sequences. The haiku sequences focus on the time before emancipation and on slaves who escaped to freedom or who escaped and were recaptured. The middle section of the book, while witnessing life under slavery as told in *Slave Narratives*, also addresses experiences after emancipation and during the transition from enslavement to freedom. The final section emphasizes the "former" nature of enslavement endured by the speakers, who, while reflecting on the past, are now free.

The six tanka sequences, or tanka strings, that complete the book provide longer, more developed representations of the personal histories shared in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States*. As in the middle section, each tanka offers more details than would a single haiku; by linking them, Smith constructs an expansive representation of the person's memories. Some of the sequences develop chronologically, while others link together separate recollections. Each emphasizes the emancipated status of the person whose story Smith crafts into poetry. For instance, Smith dedicates the first two sequences to specific persons and refers to their free-

dom by referring to that status in the subtitle, as in "for former slave Robert Glenn," the format Sanchez uses when subtitling her haiku sequences "for" specific people. The third sequence contains the subtitle "as told by former slave Millie Henry." The final three sequences do not have subtitles but return to the title structure of the haiku sequences that began the collection. In these instances, Smith writes verses within the tanka strings that specifically reference the time when "Yankees finally came," as her speaker says in "Essex Henry." Concluding the book with linked tanka using the speakers' names brings the project full circle. The titles once again rhetorically emphasize the personhood of the people whose stories are shared in the book and are brought forward through their poetic personas crafted by Smith.

Runagate brings a heightened awareness of slavery's human cost. By combining haiku and tanka with other poetic traditions, Smith develops a robust sense of individual people and their lives, including their bravery in the face of extreme cruelty and suffering. Moment by moment and narrative by narrative, she expands the poetic range of haiku and tanka while deepening the reader's understanding of a tragic part of American history and the people who endured it.

PREFATORY NOTE

THE NARRATIVES in *Runagate* reimagine fugitive (or captive) journeys of the enslaved and therefore witness daring acts of human autonomy Tim Tyson calls "to steal one's freedom." The narratives employ the Japanese poetics of haiku, with inclusions of imagery, tension, and nature elements that embody the form. Tanka, the earliest Japanese poetic form (*waka*), is also employed. Both short forms can be composed in stanzas (or sequences) that here extend accounts of fugitivity or survivalism of enslaved figures.

Black poets' engagement in haiku dates to the beginning of the English-language haiku movement. Our approach to the form often diverges to explorations of social politics and culture, shifting beyond the traditional Zen-inspired response to nature. This approach can crescendo into a radical voice calling attention to racism. Of the hundreds of haiku poets who practice and publish in the present day, a mere handful are poets of color. We embody a long-established tradition of poets like Richard Wright, Etheridge Knight, and Lewis Grandison Alexander, whose haiku were first published in *The Messenger* in the 1920s. Lenard D. Moore (b. 1958) is distinguished by having published more haiku than any other black poet.

I was introduced to the form by Moore, and for years my preliminary practice was that of Zen-inspired, nature-induced haiku, the conformal modus of contemporary haiku writers. Undistinctive of Wright and others, a thirst to embrace black identity entered my process. The predisposition to infuse blackness into existent art forms like haiku is not learned or radical. Uncounted realities inform the historical relationship black and

white natives have with nature. Whereas black ecopoets align with an appreciation for the natural world, our entanglements contain a legacy of racism manifested over centuries through customs of tree lynchings and forced field labor. Camille Dungy states that the view of nature "is intensified by the black experience of slavery."

My exploration into slavery haiku originated with a slave narrative course I structured years ago. In preparation, I read four narratives that depicted the natural world very differently. For the enslaved, nature was captivity. I found the concept of nature depicted from this angle intriguing, a supposition resisting the singular viewpoint of nature as scenic with the prime motive of calling attention to its pleasurable aspects. The slavery angle affirms the harshness of nature as the milieu of enslavement. This angle was visually curated in the cinematic adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* when Solomon, the enslaved protagonist, lost in the drudgery of fieldwork, pauses to observe the spectacle of a majestic sunset. While seemingly too impressive to ignore, it does not induce pleasure, but frustratingly increases his predicament.

Haiku is an esoteric practice to many contemporaries and critics. Like enslavement, its presence in the larger world today remains rather muted. One of the earliest poetic forms, it is language most distilled, the art of expressing wonderful or powerful meditations with few words. By virtue of its brevity, haiku offers a straightforward way to engage in conversations about slavery. The aesthetics of haiku can increase the intensity of the moment, flooding the reader with sentiment, evoking candid responses. Conjointly intensifying, slave narratives are documented accounts that preserve, collectively, the lives of the enslaved and particular incidents in those lives. Using these testimonies, I began the process of distillation: capturing images and incidents experienced by humans abiding under forced labor, evident in the following haiku:

spring auction
a slave named
Mourning

A notable paradigm of this approach to haiku is Sonia Sanchez's *Haiku and Tanka for Harriet Tubman*. In critique of Sanchez's praise poem for Tubman, Meta Schettler states, "Tubman appears as a shape-shifting giant 'riding thunder' and capable of wrapping herself around the 'legs' and 'eyes' of slavery to inhibit it and reject it." In homage and with affinity, *Runagate* aims to illuminate the experience of the fugitive enslaved.

Such an immersion in the study of institutional slavery is not a practical act, no more so than it was to engage in the phenomenon of freedom when born into captivity. Both are leaps into unknown worlds of unfathomed psychological peril. The reality of the enslaved past requires a form of attention that transcends dimensions of isolation and cruelty to bring the captive and fugitive into view, an avant-garde approach to modern and traditional haiku concerned with one's presence in, and response to, the natural world.

Zen informs haiku, placing strong emphasis on simplicity and presence. The mediative practice often requires a nondualistic approach. Put simply, this translates into "not two": life exists here and now; there is no separation, only one universal essence, one reality. Thus, presence and attention are imperative. By contrast, dualism, philosophically speaking, is the concept of "two." The mind extends beyond the brain as a spirit or soul distinct from the body, one we can imagine surviving the death of the body; it is suggestive of eternal existence. As chattel enslavement is a past event, I was torn in the practice and confessedly still in the silent reckoning of my own ancestral slave lineage. Once, writhed with curiosity, I combed the internet, traced my familiar lineage to the oldest ancestor I could locate. She is listed as the property of a white man, a young woman named Ernestine, born in 1827. Her birth, on the whole unverified but withal not disproven, incited a *haibun* that closes the text. Formal research expanded into the fields of preserved historic plantations, where there was a keen awareness of spirits in the sullen and torrid midsummer air. In response, I generated effective haiku. Notwithstanding, the process with greater yield was that of ekphrasis—writing in response to artifacts, physical documents, and relics of slavery to gain a sense of the

bruteness, unremitting surveillance, and psychological toil endured. It was this approach that allowed the "oneness" we strive to achieve in the mediative practice of haiku.

Subsequently, listening to voices of the formerly enslaved whose recorded accounts were archived in the Library of Congress, I gave consideration to the haiku aesthetic, sensation (or senses), to process the terror of tortured beings and the exhilaration of freedom. In these voices, otherwise unheard, was a strict fixation on survivalism. This listening became the framework for my consideration of a time in which *time* was the foremost concern. As haiku practitioners, we believe the poem is a moment left open for individual interpretation or for the reader to finish. Thus, as I encountered Cornell University's Freedom on the Move database of ads generated by slaveholders seeking the capture of runaways, my instinctual thinking was to visualize the journeys of those listed by forename only. The database comprises more than thirty thousand ads that synopsize runaways through marks and scars, acts of insolence cited, or descriptions of individuals' flights.

The actualness of the ads time-marking these freedom performances incited reimaginings of their escapes through images recorded as haiku. Such a process, with the journeys or outcomes of the fugitives unknowable, provoked intense personal depictions that gave an immediacy and matter-of-factness to their plight. As mentioned, this interpretation of the natural world entails a formal separation from Zen principles. While within these poems the reader is able to conjure potential beauty and possibility, the disturbing images are meant to unsettle us and to raise political consciousness, illustrated in the following stanza of the haiku sequence "Clinton":

days I lay resting
bloodied feet
vultures circling

The tanka in *Runagate* respond to documented slave narratives prepared by the Federal Writers' Project between 1936 and 1938. The interviews, I will disclose, often fall under the scrutiny of historians regarding the journalistic accuracy of this

sampling of elderly ex-slaves' recollections of childhood incidents. Notwithstanding, the narratives provide candid accounts of emancipation and Reconstruction. Moreover, the interviews give voice to the enslaved, an oral history persistently faulty in or omitted entirely from textbooks. With this expansive source, each interview comprising one or more full pages of text, tanka offered a greater landscape. While brevity is a feature of both haiku and tanka, they differ in structure. Haiku is a three-line poem that captures our awe of nature. Tanka, a five-line poetic form, translates as "short song." The latter form can embrace all of human experience with emotions of love, pity, suffering, loneliness, or death, illustrated in the following tanka:

oh my brother's
cracked-open feet!
we could track him by blood . . .
when the Yankees came
through he got shoes

Presently, five generations removed from slavery, I abide with millions of other descendants as testament to the black intergenerational trauma pervasive in America. New formations of oppression permeate the existence of black lives as modifications of captivity: mass incarceration, housing inequities, educational inequities. Unearthing and chronicling the journey of the enslaved is critical to understanding the effects American slavery has yielded. *Runagate*, through the lenses of escape, recognizes the hopes, loves, and improbable dreams of the enslaved.

PROLOGUE

RUNAGATE: WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL?

—WHEN THE WHITE ORTHOPEDIST AT THE TRACK MEET
ASKS ME WHY WE RUN SO WELL

let us run it back // in 2026 we will have been at this occupation two hundred and fifty black years // though no one merits it // we can take the heat // recently I hosted a film fest for black college students // the track runners rose to leave halfway in // when I asked why another professor said *they have to go into them fields* // there are countless practices of running from police sirens // the sound of the beast // we run because in 2016 over one million of us were caged in prisons // in 1926 thousands of us began running north escaping southern torture and lynchings leaving all that darkness in the distance // in 1826 two million of us were in chains // we ran barefoot beside rushing creeks into thickets at night // most of us were captured so we ran again // it all started around 1776 // Britain's Somerset decision freed us before America did // colonial generals were forced to make a decision // let enslaved blacks fight alongside them in exchange for their freedom too // they refused so thousands of us ran to Nova Scotia to live free under the British rule colonial slaveholders were escaping.

a fly slamming
against a window—
lush mountain holler