

The background is an abstract composition of organic, flowing shapes in a rainbow color palette. At the top, there are shades of orange and yellow. Below these, a large, vibrant green shape dominates the upper middle section. Underneath the green is a bright cyan or light blue area. The bottom half of the cover is a deep purple, which contains a horizontal band of small, overlapping circles in a lighter purple or lavender hue. There are also some faint, overlapping circular patterns in the purple area, similar to the one in the cyan section.

# *fire* RAINBOW

A Haibun and Tanka Story Memoir

Robin Anna Smith



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A Haibun and Tanka Story Memoir

*by*

Robin Anna Smith



WILMINGTON, DE

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*I can be anybody, anybody that I choose.*

—DANIEL TIGER





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## Isolation

Childhood was a hollow I could never fill. An ache I could never assuage. A loneliness I could never companion. A night I could never alight . . .

dusk gathers  
with the alchemy  
of ravens . . .  
alone, in a clearing  
my heart picked clean

**a(x,x)is**

growing up / i never questioned / my identity / i acted out / as instructed  
/ my vagina / that made me / a girl / boys and men like / girls / soft pink  
parts / begging / by their existence / to be / defiled / before i was old  
enough / to go to school / learn / my 3 r's / geography / this was a subject  
/ i had / mastered / by boys / masturbated on / my mind and body / soiled  
/ contorted / molded / to expectations / to be quiet / no crying / no telling  
/ open my mouth and close my eyes / in bed at night / waiting for them  
/ to come /

latitude & longitude I detonate the map

## Father Figure

stuck  
under his thumb  
hair clippings

“You need to cut your hair.”  
“Stop looking down all the time.”  
“Why do you have such a sour puss?”  
“You need to wear something other than black.”  
“What are you trying to hide under there?”  
“Get your bangs out of your face.”  
“Don’t you have any clothes that fit?”  
“Here’s a pretty outfit I bought you.”  
“I need to see your eyes.”  
“You should show off your figure.”  
“Why are your pants so huge?”  
“Who’s going to want to marry that face?”  
“Smile, do you know how lucky you are?”

a purple dress  
revealing  
my shame

## **closing in**

one, one thousand;  
two, one thousand;  
three, one thousand;  
thunder crack!

inside me  
I choose him  
or his gun

## Puncture Wounds

a boy is a / punch / through the night sky / each strike / a hole / the size  
/ of everything / my body is / missing / deep and dusky / as the orifices  
/ jabbed open / by a stronger hand / his will / pressed / against mine /  
without apparatus / I pummel / my way in / to my self / each gash falls  
/ open / to let the light / spill out . . .

sipping from cupped hands how much is lost

## More Ways Than One (To Bleed)

glass doors flung open. *one-by-one*, the fine china removed. *two bony hands*. gold-trimmed. *soft-pink* flowered. placed gently on the table. *you finger* the edges. almost sharp. like the cut of *a girl-boy*. in a *purple strapless dress*. pick it up. rub *your hand along the backside*. fumble the *hem*. *you raise it*. and then you crash it to the ground. *it falls* so far. from what is *broken*.

tending garden—  
shards of adolescence  
in the soil



## Reap

missed moon  
he takes what he wants

It's my junior year of high school and my period is three weeks late. Two blue lines on a pregnancy test stick indicate that I'm pregnant. I tell no one.

I call and make an appointment at Planned Parenthood. Skip school. Show up thirty minutes early, alone and panicked. As I make my way toward the building, strangers crowd me and shout things that all blur together, but are clearly punctuated with hate.

righteousness & judgment  
forcing themselves on me

I make it inside. Check in at the front desk and begin filling out paperwork. When my name is called, I'm escorted to the nurse's station, where she draws my blood to run a pregnancy test. I'm hoping that the one from Walgreens was wrong.

I sit down with a counselor. She asks an array of questions, explains all of my options in detail. The results are soon ready.

positive  
the weight  
of a word

Unable to imagine gestating his harm, and heeding his threats about telling my family what he's been doing to me, I schedule a time to return for an abortion.

A little weight lifted, I imagine myself free of him—that he suddenly gives up and leaves me alone. A fantasy, but I feel better knowing that this one part of him will no longer have dominion over me.

things I can control  
pulling threads

Three days later I'm back, this time with a friend. Again, thirty minutes early. Again, full of anxiety and bombarded with hostility. I focus on unraveling the bottom of my sweater as a distraction.

The nurse walks me back, has me disrobe, and helps me get as comfortable as possible. The doctor comes in and discusses the process once more. She asks if I'm sure—if I'm ready.

Feet in stirrups. Knees apart. She examines me.

the girth  
of a grapefruit  
our eyes widen

Despite only missing one period, she informs me that I'm about five months pregnant. She says the bleeding in the previous months must have been due to stress. She explains the law and how they can't help me at this point. She leaves the room while I get dressed.

The counselor comes in and asks if I want to further discuss the other choices I have remaining. I don't.

fear of the unknown  
growing inside me

I can't focus on what's going on at this moment. All I can think about is carrying my rapist inside me for the next four months—how every moment he'll loom.

My heart and mind race with worry about what he'll do when he figures it out. That he will finally follow through and kill me, and my family.

nipping  
at my heels  
sidewalk vermin

I emerge from the exam room and find my way to the waiting area, where my friend is. He looks up and asks if I'm okay, but I can't even speak.

As we plod through the crowd, they spew vitriol.

Where exactly is this God they claim to speak for right now?

## Information Age

gender neither here nor there

“Why don’t you wear makeup?”

“Why don’t you shave?”

“Why do you wear baggy clothes?”

“Why aren’t you into me—do you like girls?”

zeroes and ones he tries to decode me

I look in the mirror and see someone else.

Who glares back from the glass can vary

from day to day;

Today, I’m a boy.

I worry that someone may notice

so I put a barrette in my short-cropped hair.

*There. Much more believable.*

I feel like I’m dressed in drag.

“Sir... I’m sorry... Ma’am?”

Others seem as confused as I am.

I don’t correct the person at the DMV

when they put “M” on my license.

the answer to the question is the wrong question

## **fragments with periods**

green polka dot hair. chem major.  
making LSD. taking LSD.  
in a tent. with flashlights. and exacto pens.  
carving the sea. into my arm.  
atop the water tower. looking down.  
I sing to the echo. of myself. of no one.  
grabbing for a star. I miss . . .

backseat of a stranger's car :: things I leave behind

## Handfed

My grandmother tells me I don't need to go to college. I should simply find a man to provide me with what I want and need. She says I'm "pretty enough."

She questions me about why I'm single. Tries to set me up with every man she deems good-looking. Maybe I'm a lesbian. Maybe I'm difficult. Why else would I not have a string of men lined up? She doesn't consider the idea of independence.

Should I resign myself to being an animal in a petting zoo and charge for admission? Let a man put his hands on me for a handful of grain? When the food runs out, move on to the next man who clicks his tongue at me? Build a life on a cycle of begging?

I look at my mother and how well my grandmother's teachings have served her. Always tied to a man for lack of support. Lack of funds. Lack of perceived self-worth. I see what their money buys. Depression—an unaddressed vacuum in her eyes. Emotionally unfulfilled. An automaton programmed to praise and apologize, always waiting to be told what to do.

Silent Generation—  
raising my voice  
until she listens

## Mural

red unicycles  
the white space between  
memories

I open my eyes to a creepy clown face staring down at me. No idea where I am. Glancing around, I come to realize this is a hospital. Don't know how I got here or why I'm in a pediatric room. Shifting in bed, I feel my body is crusted with something. Touching my hair, dark flakes come off into my hand. When I get up to use the bathroom, I can better see what's all over me. It's vomit, feces, and oil paint. Shortly after returning to bed, people start filtering in, asking questions. I don't know what to tell them.

After a lecture from my Commander, I'm given a referral to the base shrink. I shower and dress, then I'm discharged from the hospital. My training partner gives me a ride back to the barracks. Anticipating a mess, I'm surprised to see my room is spotless. Friends who broke in, and called the ambulance last night, come to check on me. They give me a play-by-play of everything that happened.

a handful of pills I overdose on negative thoughts

## Cocaine

There's a long black Lincoln that's blaring "Barracuda" outside Joey's Bar. I only know one of the guys inside—Richie. We've been seeing each other off-and-on for a few months. I know he's married but I'm somehow convinced there is going to be a payoff eventually. Friday nights are ours.

He tells me the guys in the car are his uncles and cousin. They're celebrating his cousin's release from prison. I'm so drunk, none of it matters. I pour myself into the car and we're on our way. I'm surrounded by hands.

Drink after drink, snort after snort, they keep handing me rolls of bills to place their bets. I try to figure out how to pocket some of the money, but my outfit doesn't allow anywhere to hide it.

Soon, we move the party to a hotel. When I'm done having sex with Richie, he asks me to blow his cousin in the adjoining room. I do it, thinking once they fall asleep, I can make off with the money or jewelry he's got lying on the side table.

greyhound racing life of a side piece



## Second-Hand Books

A rusty bed frame with a stain-covered mattress that dominates the room. Walls the color of filth, at least where there aren't holes. Crowded, shouting hallways reeking of trash and urine. Agitated people who get too close. A shared bathroom where no one could get clean.

drug den—

my search for affordable housing

## Cosmopolitan

I'm at a bar when a friend of a friend starts flirting with me. Brioni suit. Fresh haircut. Johnny Depp cheekbones. He buys me a couple cocktails and we talk for a while. He shakes a small pouch from his pocket and asks if I want to go to the ladies' room with him.

No one seems to care as we shove our way to the back stall. A few lines later, I expect him to put his hands on me but he doesn't. Must be a nicer guy than I'm used to. When we return to the table, we see that our group has left. One more drink, then he offers to drive me home.

We sit in his car outside my apartment. He says a beautiful woman like me deserves nice things and should be treated like a queen. Wouldn't I like that? Of course, I would.

mixed messages  
he offers me a job  
as an escort

## Handlebar

Chicago 'L' train  
stars follow me home  
from the platform

Windows down on the highway in your mom's Impala. We're making our way down I-90, toward Indiana. It's offensively hot, but we don't mind. Happy to be getting out of the city for a few days. "Don't Stop Believin'" blares from the radio and we're belting it out.

I'm riding shotgun and from the corner of my eye, I notice a motorcycle. Absorbed in song, I don't pay much attention. It creeps back up again and then falls back. Still singing, I make note of the biker's face. A few moments later, the same guy is coming up on the driver's side.

Suddenly you shout "Oh my God!" and swerve. He's flicking his tongue at us like Gene Simmons. His pants are unzipped and he's beating off, balls flapping in the wind. We scream, roll up the windows, and you try to pull away. He speeds up next to us, never slowing down the activity of his hand.

Miles pass as we try to think of other deterrents, none of which would work. We are panicking. *Should we get off at the next exit? What if he follows us? We should throw something at him. But what if he crashes and dies? Will we go to jail?*

He abruptly veers away onto an exit ramp, smiling and nodding at us with satisfaction. Dick in hand—still going . . .

## Eraser Marks

you prattle at me about my curves. ignorant of what's beneath. this  
dress. this flesh. this skull. you judge the earth by its terrain.

weekend warrior. mentally impotent. worship the idol of your groin.

spinal cord tethered to bone. vertebrae curved into a soft s shape. my  
scaffolding—a rigid-plastic-braced erection.

your eyes at the crest. thoughts in the gorge. i am not a conquest  
designed for you.

futile grasping at twisted femurs. knees held together by a carbon cage.  
i spurn your on-demand subscription.

you ascend the mountains eschewing the soil. adhere to the ocean brim  
in fear of a salty womb.

scars. on my body. in my brain. lifelong homework never complete.  
scratch out and rewrite. touch truth to paper. infuse my words with  
kevlar.

tits & ass  
the landscape  
of your bias

## Trance

After a night of dancing, I wake up in the gutter covered in dirt with my  
purse and my memory missing . . .

navigating  
my Rohypnol haze . . .  
a broken compass

## Damage

timber moon  
where winds collide  
violins

my grandmother and I are arguing again. she never gives without expectation of a return, yet explodes if I refuse her. it is frustrating but it has taught me a lot. I know to never accept gifts from men. I know to look for manipulation in every compliment. and I am always prepared to walk away, unaffected . . .

blood rain  
the sirocco  
rosins my bones

## Escape

Following the sudden death of his mother, my husband falls into a spiral of self-destruction and abusive behavior. For two years, I try to help him work through his grief but he states that he doesn't want to feel better. His guilt requires him to suffer.

spooning lies . . .  
he tells me he always uses  
clean needles

Eventually, I realize that the situation will never improve. When I let him know of my intent to file for divorce, he insists he'll kill himself the same way his mother took her life.

full magazine . . .  
another promise  
he doesn't keep

## Freeze

Having just moved, I'm hunting for a new psychotherapist. Researching the potential candidates from my insurance website, I don't find much additional information, so I choose the lady whose Facebook profile picture is a green M&M. I accept this as a sign that she doesn't take herself too seriously. My only concern is she's a trauma expert and that isn't an issue for me. I'm just hoping she's adept at other conditions as well.

the density  
of mental illness—  
gravity anomaly

To some, I imagine her office is considered cozy. For me, it's like sharing a coffin with a stranger. I have to try really hard to not panic and run out. While she looks over my paperwork, I stare at the angel nightlight on the wall opposite me, wishing I had those wings. Increasingly anxious, I begin scanning every detail of the room in an attempt to find a mental escape.

convergent boundaries . . .  
the sweat begins  
to flow

The therapist starts by asking why I've come and what I hope to achieve. All I know is that I'm supposed to be here and I don't want to die. She begins the scripted inquiry I've heard dozens of times until she suddenly stops and tilts her head.



“What was that?” she asks.

“What?” I respond, my eyes glancing at her and then quickly looking away again.

“You just paused and changed position, and facial expressions, as if reacting to something. What was it?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I just get...stuck.”

someone  
from the inside screams—  
subglacial eruption

Suddenly, her line of questioning pivots and she poses questions I haven’t been asked since I was first diagnosed, despite seeing numerous practitioners over the past twenty-five years.

Do you experience this? Do you do that?

“Yes! And yes! I’ve been telling them this for years!”

Finally, she asks about abuse and instead of denying, I start to tell the truth.

stratigraphy  
rock by rock  
I uncover my past

## Immortality

the lion paces  
the fence line—  
canned hunt

I can see my hand shaking out of the corner of my eye. You're sifting through your bag. I look you over. Dark greasy tendrils of hair. Sharp angles of a jaw and nose. Tall gangly body that you slouch one minute and puff up the next, like an overcorrection.

white flag . . .  
the deer scents  
a wolf

I can feel you hovering over me. The look in your drugged-up eyes, the smell of cigarettes, cheap booze, and ether, the drips of sweat from your face pressed into me. I feel my body giving way as you throw me onto the floor, your hands on my throat, ready to crush out my life like a roach under your boot.

field sport—  
the shooter claims  
his trophy

Guilt, as I think about the others you probably hurt after me—events which could have been prevented if I'd spoken up sooner. You should have been in jail. Even after you left me alone, I couldn't process those events, let alone talk about them with someone else.

an antelope  
escapes the cheetah—  
endurance race

It's been thirty years since you stopped stalking me. Every few years, I spend hours checking the internet for any signs of you. This is despite having read the police report about your death over twenty years ago. Part of my brain knows you can't harm me now. Other parts will always be watching for you.

## calving

carefree. I glide in the ocean. cool, soothing, cradling. wrapped in gentle rocking. allure of the sun. blooming on the horizon. I swim farther out. cold grabs at my foot. the undertow's tentacles pull me. down . . .

icebergs  
keeping myself  
buoyant

its grasp firms. I flail. chop escalating. I should call out. a plea for help. SOS. I exhale and fill my lungs. with brine . . .

drop by drop  
I become  
the ocean

## Daniel

It's always been my superpower to be able to leave my body. Just vanish and leave everything behind. When I was a toddler, I imagined myself to be the little tiger in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood of Make-Believe. That my disappearing episodes were just me going to hide away in my broken grandfather clock. Minutes . . . perhaps hours could go by while I watch the rest of the world from above.

A few years later, after discovering Elton John, I imagine I'm the one arriving tonight on a plane. Now, at nearly fifty, Spain is still my dream destination. When I need to disappear, I hover over the beaches outside Valencia. At night, I marvel at the lights of Ibiza.

Rocket Man . . .

I finally escape

my past

## Malnourished

poking out lenses  
from rose-colored glasses  
for the first time  
I see you  
for what you are

Sometimes we are wrong about the things we need. All our lives, we're spoon-fed misinformation and unrealistic expectations. Our vision of the world warps into the shape of dysfunction . . .

I stare  
out this window  
alone again tonight  
my eyes filling  
with strawberry moon

## Kippers and Toast

I wake up well-rested. It's finally the day I've planned for all year. I pull up the shades and look out to a clear bright sky. While the shower heats up, I go to my closet and pull out my gown—ivory taffeta and tulle with apricot flowers embroidered.

I bathe, then sculpt my hair and apply makeup. Dressing, I take special care to add all of the accessories: stockings, jewelry, tiara, and heels. I give myself a final look and then walk downstairs to put on some tea.

Using my grandma's handed-down china, I situate the table settings and lay out plates of food. The kettle whistles; I bring it to the table and pour. As I take a seat, my cats come to join me. The four of us enjoy breakfast. When we're finished, the cats lick their paws as I move the dishes to the kitchen.

steeped catnip  
the desire for more  
than a man

I grab a glass and pop a bottle of Dom Pérignon, a wedding gift I was instructed to keep. The cats and I relocate to the living room to cuddle. I search Netflix for movies that feature cancelled weddings. With each runaway bride or groom, I feel more at peace, content with my decision. Perhaps it's the champagne.

At eight p.m., I wake up on the couch like a drunken bride after a wild reception. Crumb-covered breasts making their way out of the gown's

stained neckline. Hose and bra in a ball on the coffee table. Shoes missing. Tiara cocked sideways. Makeup smeared.

I get up, stretch, and lead the cats upstairs. I set out their dinner, then wash my face and brush my teeth. I slip out of my dress and into bed . . .

sideways sleeping alone in a king-sized bed



## The Surge

Seasoned of Sodom. Dry-brined and sunbaked, I harden. Cleaved to a foothold meant only to provide passage.

Shunned by moonlight. My shadow shallow and obscure. Breathing stopped. Scentless. Not even carrion-eaters advance.

Won't pluck these hypertonic spheroids from their orbits. Or strum the desiccated sinew fixed to my splintered bones.

The only movement is that which eschews my carcass—a warning more than a landmark.

toeing the tide I dissolve the might-have-beens

## **droplets of revolution**

ideas require darkness and a steady drizzle to germinate. letters and syllables mingle. seeping layer by layer into the ground. entwine and thrive deep in the earth. forming stories which push their way up. they present themselves without shame. basking in sunlight. continuing to grow. shouting the brightness of their names. for as long as we tend to them.

rainseed . . .

I feed words

to the cloud

## Shapeshifter

I exist somewhere between a match and a flame, a tear and the sea, a handful of clay and a sculpted vase.

No other being determines or influences which form I take, which direction I follow, which air I choose to breathe into my lungs.

Those who fear my state of being fear the unknown, the unsubscribed, the undeclared.

And that which causes their unease is my strength.

fire rainbow following my own arc

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robin Anna Smith** is a writer and artist whose work has earned numerous accolades, including The Touchstone Award for Individual Poems (2020), Second Place in Golden Triangle Haiku Contest (2020), First Place in the UHTS Fleeting Words Tanka Contest (2019), and nomination for the Pushcart Prize (2018). Their work focuses on disability, gender, trauma, and systems from a neurodiverse perspective. Their work is published internationally in numerous journals and anthologies. Robin has two e-books and a collection of meandering haiku (a form of her creation): *Systems Askew* (Yavanika Press, 2019), *Forsythia* (Turtle Light Press, 2020—Second Place in the 2019 Turtle Light Press Haiku Chapbook Contest), and *Controlled Chaos* (*Sonic Boom*, 2019).

Robin is the Founder/EIC/Publisher of *Human/Kind Journal* and Human/Kind Press, Associate Editor at both *Sonic Boom* and Yavanika Press, and a founding member of Haiways Publishing Collective. They are more of a cats, dogs, and unicorns person than a people person.

*Fire Rainbow* by Robin Anna Smith is a genre-bending and emotionally charged collection. By employing the haibun and tanka story forms, the poet masterfully shows us the versatility of these Japanese prose poems. They unflinchingly lay their soul bare within these pages, delineating a traumatic childhood, “shards of adolescence,” and the spiral that follows in an attempt to make sense of the “self.” We are co-passengers on the poet’s dissociative journey as she uncovers her past and finally escapes its menacing “tentacles.” This raw, bold, and seething collection begs us to stop asking the “wrong question,” urging us, instead, to redefine and “detonate the map” of the human body as we know it.

— **SHLOKA SHANKAR**, Founding Editor of *Sonic Boom & Yavanika Press*

If we don’t have disturbing witness statements free of news censorship, then we do not have real freedom of information. Poems as witness statements fly in the face of the secrets that are wrongly protected over decades through privilege and fear. These poems, in the form of blending prose with haiku or tanka poetry, and other variations, come through with actual truth: not filtered pretence of truth and transparency. They should be etched onto every court building, every abusive home, and where politicians enter to do their business.

— **ALAN SUMMERS**, Co-founder, *Call of the Page*

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