

## Reviewed

**Collin Barber.** *The Devil is a Child.* Stoke-on-Trent, England: Yet to Be Named Free Press, 2014, 125 pp., perfect softbound, 5.25 X 8.25 inches. ISBN 978-1-493748-06-8. US\$8.00 plus shipping from [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).

by Dan Schwerin, Greendale, WI

Collin Barber's first collection, *The Devil is a Child*, has the feel of a sax wailing in the dark on the corner of rainy lament and Memphis noir. These are brown bottle songs reminiscent of Charles Bukowski. Sometimes you can hear Santoka:

spring cleaning  
how much of this dust  
is me?

The images convey a world of lizard cages, jail cells, and cramped rides in the car. Some poems riff on death and hell, all of them whispering the frailty of being human.

the surgeon  
before giving the news  
washes his hands

Many of the poems are tanka. These longer songs slow down to a steel-guitar rhythm for the vagaries of domesticity and child prophets:

as he sketches  
an imperfect drawing of me  
my seven year-old son  
asks me why I need  
so many beers

Barber's collection makes me wonder if noir is a season, like war—a human season arising from natural cycles—especially

post-2008 with the impact of the banking crisis on the U.S. household. Reading this collection brought to mind the gritty blues of Jeffrey Winke, Lucas Stensland, Colin Stewart Jones, and the dewdrop world of French-Quarter New Orleans in David Lanoue's haiku novels. Remember Richard Wright populated his haiku with the seasons via green cockleburrs and lice, but also drunken girls and consumptive men.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one of the earliest antecedents of noir as a season can be found in the hard-luck wandering haiku priest, Issa. David Lanoue, in his book, *Pure Land Haiku*, describes one of the poetic themes of Issa as featuring the state of the world (*setai*).<sup>2</sup> In the Pure Land Buddhism of Issa's time, a journey through life has to reckon with the depravity (*mappō*) of the age.<sup>3</sup> It has the feel of a spirituality born in getting honest:

this world's  
blooming lotuses  
are bent<sup>4</sup>

Barber's poems do not make this claim of noir as a season except in their force and frequency—especially alongside the growing chorus of writers who render more urban settings. Barber's butterfly poem is less Issa and more North American:

butterflies . . .  
a child's name  
set in stone

Like the butterfly poem, many of Barber's haiku begin with an opening image and end with closure through image or action.

another first date . . .  
I fail again  
to be myself

talk of sex  
a lime wedge slides  
down the bottle's neck

This is the high-wire act of *The Devil is a Child*: the most successful poems can end with a closing down but still continue to resonate. This collection reminds us that what we focus our attention on as writers creates a world or a place in time we ask readers to interpret. When one tanka ends, “I wonder if it is we who have been captured in a jar,” we have Texas chain-saw honesty about the walls closing in on a dystopian world. A close reading of Barber reveals plenty of natural images: leafless maples, sunrises, and swatted flies—but also hotels, fishbowls, and dive bars—a reminder our best poems lament or praise with layer and nuance the song of being human.

rural sky  
what other worlds  
have a Beethoven?

#### Notes

1. Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (New York: Arcade, 1998), 31, 114–15.
2. David Lanoue, *Pure Land Haiku: The Art of Priest Issa* (Reno, NV: Buddhist Books International, 2004), 42.
3. Lanoue, *Pure Land Haiku*, 42.
4. Issa in Lanoue, *Pure Land Haiku*, 46.



*Dan Schwerin's most recent poetry has appeared in Frogpond, Modern Haiku, bottlerockets, The Heron's Nest, is/let and Bones. He has most recently been anthologized in Robert Epstein's The Sacred in Contemporary Haiku. His first collection, ⊕rs, is forthcoming from Red Moon Press.*