

*Waiting for an Oracle: Algorithmic Haiku* by Petro C. K. (Nun Prophet Press: 2024) 125 pages, 5.5"x8.5". Four-color card covers, perfectbound. ISBN 979-8864030-23-3. \$4.98 from Amazon.com.

In contemporary studies of writing processes, scholars have studied various approaches to invention—how a writer discovers and develops ideas to write about. These studies often distinguish between algorithmic and heuristic approaches to problem solving. Algorithmic approaches provide strict rules or steps to follow to reach a predictable solution to the problem. Heuristic approaches provide broad guidelines or “rules of thumb” that might be helpful and do not determine but rather assist the writer to create one of several possible answers to the problem. In general, expert writers do not follow mathematical algorithmic formulas. They develop heuristic strategies such as “appeal to the reader’s cultural context” or “start with shared opinions and connect those to new perspectives.”

When I first saw that Petro was calling the poems in this collection “algorithmic haiku,” I was initially afraid that we were going to see another attempt to program a computer to write haiku. Many of us have seen the poor results of this computer programming exercise. The coders attempt to create algorithms to generate “haiku” based on the usual “rules”, such as a 5-7-5 syllable count in three lines, with some vocabulary connected to nature images or seasons. More recent versions of this algorithmic approach to writing haiku direct the program to draw images or phrases from a large database of language from the fictional works of a particular author. The predictable results are ineffective 5-7-5 poems of random images and phrases. A few might seem like they have a human perspective or emotional insight of a haiku poet, but most are just gibberish.

In *Waiting for an Oracle*, Petro is actually employing the auto-suggestions of words and phrases common in current text messaging, word processing, and social media software. He is not building an algorithm to create haiku but drawing on the predictive

text functions of software as a heuristic to find surprising new combinations or connections in the language for his poems. He is using this technology to write haiku that do not come from his immediate contact with the world nor from his memories of previous experiences. He is using these auto-suggestions as a means of collaborating with a text-generating sooth-sayer: “In the true fashion of oracles, whether reading tea leaves, casting ruins, scrying into crystal balls, or laying out tarot cards.” For Petro, his job as a poet is to collaborate with these oracles of predictive text suggestions to find haiku that intuitively or unconsciously fulfill “an ever-present desire for connections as we make our own way through an unpredictable future.” Here are a few from his collection:

ghost mice  
in my pocket all day  
wisteria

old black and white films  
nobody is still alive  
yet again this year

back to back blackberries  
the last time we were out  
of breath

humidly romantic  
getting served wallpaper  
for the wedding

To be clear, these haiku were not written by artificial intelligence software. They were written by Petro in collaboration with auto-suggestion predictive text software. He’s employing the software to introduce unpredictable connections and surprising language beyond his own immediate experiences and memories. He might be collaborating with the Borg mind of predictive text software, but he has not become a Borg haiku writer. ◻■