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Harriot West. *Into the Light.* Mountains and Rivers Press, 2014, 45 pp., perfect softbound, 5.5 x 8.5 inches. ISBN 0-978-0-9896021-2-9. US\$15 plus shipping from mountainsandriverspress.org.

by Melissa Allen, Madison, WI

Harriot West's new collection of haibun and haiku, *Into the Light*, although physically thin, is emotionally and artistically robust. Among its many virtues is the superb sequencing of its poetry, which is evident from the very first piece in the collection, a haibun aptly called "Stories I Might Tell." Beginning by cynically describing the publicity efforts of an unnamed celebrity ("She's on TV again, promoting her memoir"), the narrator goes on to ironically compare the sensational, tragic subject matter of the celebrity's life story with the potential material for her own memoir: "the drafty house where I grew up, the way I always said yes please, no thank you or maybe how I felt the first day of school in my thick woolen socks and sturdy brown oxfords."

With this first haibun, West does several things. She establishes the subject matter for the collection—the mundane substance of daily life and the inner emotional life of the narrator and other characters. She establishes its dominant tone, one of detached, ironic, mature observation. She displays her signature prose style—a controlled, assured, taut brevity that contains precisely the type and amount of information needed to convey her point and not a syllable more. And she names the central artistic dilemma the book will contend with, the dilemma that faces so many of us who draw on autobiographical material in our writing: If nothing very exciting seems to happen to us, if we have ordinary lives, how do we write about them in an extraordinary way? How do we make meaning of, and compel our readers' interest in, the minutiae of our daily existence?

The haiku that completes this haibun, I feel, offers one possible rejoinder to these questions:

secret garden
one slat missing
from the picket fence

This image of a narrowly controlled view into someone's private life—her “secret garden”—is an appropriate metaphor for West's writing in this collection. Anyone who's ever peered through such a gap in a fence knows that the limited scope of your view makes what you can see all the more interesting. Similarly, West compels our interest by maintaining a laserlike focus in each haibun on a small number of telling, concrete details that vividly evoke both the narrator's sensory experience and her emotional experience. Each piece in this collection can be thought of as yet another slat missing in the fence, another view into the narrator's life.

The early haibun in the book, gathered under the title “Sepia Shadows,” describe a child's life in a well-to-do but emotionally chilly family, with parents who are alienated from both each other and their children. Later this section moves on to describe the narrator's adult relationship with her aging parents and their eventual deaths, but the early haibun, rich with the tiny details that children so often notice and remember more effectively than adults do, are more powerful. All West's haibun are brief, usually no more than one short paragraph, but by carefully choosing these details, she is capable of effectively summing up an entire character, episode, world in no more than one sentence and a haiku, as in “Praxis”:

She wouldn't let me call her momma or mom; mummy was okay but she preferred mother and when I graduated from boarding school she suggested I call her Jean.

not one crease
on the linen tablecloth
bone china

In “Dissimulation,” likewise, West packs a vast amount of information about the narrator’s family into just a few images by describing “how mother sat on the couch all afternoon holding an unopened copy of the *The New Yorker* on her lap, how ice cubes rattled round the pitcher as father stirred the second martini, how voices sharpened late at night behind closed doors . . .” And in “His Story My Story,” West combines the memories of the narrator and her brother, shifting back and forth between their experiences to evoke the confusion, fear, and also hope of two small children whose mother is temporarily institutionalized for, presumably, mental health reasons: “He remembers mother’s story about a place where she could only cut with plastic scissors. I remember a bottle of small red pills. . . . I remember the toy train lurching into a tunnel, my brother and I certain it would emerge once more into the light.”

After the powerful material of this first section, the brief middle section of haiku, “Foreshadowing,” acts as something of a palate cleanser, clearing the mind for the quite different material of the haibun to follow. The haiku begin to take the reader into more adult territory, evoking the complexities of mature relationships with fresh images and syntax:

the pear in his hand rearranging my thoughts

The third section of the book, “The Pinwheel’s Colors,” contains more haibun, but this time the subject matter is the adult love affairs of the narrator. The tone is lighter and more playful and the perspective, of course, less naïve. West’s wry commentary on the vagaries of love and relationships is once again supported and made compelling by her keen powers of observation, encompassing all the senses. In “Foraging,” for example, the narrator’s daydreams about a grocery store clerk she imagines is about to kiss her are interrupted by her thoughts about what to have for dinner: “But there, on the shelf above his head, a tin of split pea soup. Perfect for supper if I buy some sole from the curly-haired fishmonger. The one whose fingers smell of lingcod. On second thought, I’ll grab

some endive from the greengrocer down the street. His fingers smell like mint fields on a summer morning.” And in “Wrangling,” West once again demonstrates her consummate skill at summing up an entire personality in a single sentence-plus-haiku:

His voice sounds like one bourbon-minus-the-rocks too many, the skin on his triceps most likely is beginning to sag, but I like the low-down way he wears his Lee’s and there’s something about a man with calluses and that ‘Amarillo by morning’ look in his eyes.

until I asked
just another scar
he’d forgotten

I’ve spent most of this review on West’s haibun prose, perhaps because it often seems to me that haiku poets are liable to have more trouble writing effective prose than effective haiku, but I must note that West is better at writing skillful, apt haiku that are effectively and meaningfully linked with the prose than just about any other haibun writer I’ve ever read. Her haiku almost always seem like an essential part of the work, not tacked on as an afterthought, and almost always open the piece up wider, give us a deeper understanding of the subject or a new perspective. They are clearly distinct from the prose and could easily stand alone, but they resonate with it, like the echo of a bell that continues long after the bell has been rung and continues to make you think about the bell’s sound.

Just as the first haibun serves as an effective introduction to the book’s style and themes, the final haibun, “New Year’s Resolution,” serves as a joyful summing-up of the sensory feast West has provided us with and, perhaps, a promise for the future. Throughout the book food is a frequent subject; in this haibun it makes a final appearance, in the form of a detailed description of a rich holiday feast—so detailed that it made this reader salivate. The final words of the prose appear to offer a challenge to both writer and reader: “Full. So full. Sated. But resolved. When asked, say yes. Say yes to it all.”

And with the final haiku, we can imagine a writer who has just finished one book sitting down to begin another:

fresh snow
the dazzle
of a blank page



Melissa Allen's haiku and haibun have been widely published and anthologized, including in Haiku: The First Hundred Years (Norton). She is currently a co-editor of Haibun Today and of the haiku journal Bones, as well as a board member of the American Haiku Archives. She writes the haikai blog Red Dragonfly.

