

Reviewed

Roberta Beary. *Deflection*. Lexington, KY: Accents Publishing, 2015, 29 pp., perfect softbound, 5 x 7 inches. ISBN 1-936628-33-9. US\$8 plus shipping from www.accents-publishing.com.

by Penny Harter, Mays Landing, NJ

Deflection, Roberta Beary's new book, may be a relatively slim volume, but its contents have an impact that equals, or goes beyond, the work in many longer collections. Stylistically, Beary's poems vary in format from evocative haiku sequences to haibun that consistently stretch the genre, both in content and form. Many of the haibun are free verse with haiku interspersed between or after stanzas. In other instances, the prose portions adhere to the traditional paragraph format or a more contemporary single-sentence format.

Beary's poems are always starkly honest, startling the reader with her skillful rendering of very personal, and often harsh, moments of her experience. In just her first four poems, we find a free-verse haibun about the waning of a woman's attraction to a lover ("57 Varieties"); a sequence consisting of three-line haiku interspersed with one-line haiku about adultery ("Afterglow"); a haibun about her mother's downhill slide into dementia ("Around Here"); and a combination haiku/tanka sequence about her son's coming out as a gay man ("Before the Outing").

To open a collection with such powerful poems is daring, and in Beary's masterful hands, it works. The reader is already compelled to read on. Beary's skill in using specific details to suggest widening circles of meaning is certainly evident in "Afterglow." Here's the entire piece:

Afterglow

rose petal saké—
my crazy is not
his crazy

jasmine scent of the other woman is me

daymoon
grass stains
of original sin

broken vow the gin bottle's vacant blue

the way he says
consensual
mauve sunset

The first two lines of the striking third haiku in this sequence, “daymoon/grass stains,” lead readers to wonder whether the narrator, “the other woman,” and her lover lay down on the grass—and then Beary leaps to “stains/of original sin,” a powerful juxtaposition!

Several poems later, in two deeply moving haiku sequences, “Caretaker—I” and “Caretaker—II,” Beary shares the weighty responsibility of caring for one’s parent. Here are some sample verses from “Caretaker—I”:

in the wheels
of mother’s chair
wet leaves

autumn moon
her brain a tangle
of white string

And these from “Caretaker—II,” which moves beyond caregiving to the aftermath of her mother’s death:

resurrection sky
mother somewhere between
here and there

bone dry
mother's hand
in mine

forsythia
the funeral
unfolds

on the church steps
a mourning dove
with mother's eyes

Having lost my mother, far away in Texas shortly after Bill and I had moved back to New Jersey from Santa Fe, these detailed and haunting verses make me both grieve with Beary and wish I could have been at my mother's side when she died. Again and again, not just in these verses but throughout the volume, Beary impresses with her juxtapositions. I, for one, find "a mourning dove/with mother's eyes" to be an extraordinary coupling of images, which also evokes the echo of a mourning dove's cry, a repetitive, sorrowful sound. In "Nighthawks," Beary describes the moment of her mother's death, culminating in a closing haiku I find equally memorable and adept:

autumn coolness enters a hand long held in mine

I could go on and on, quoting from nearly every piece in this collection, for threaded throughout these poems are works that return again and again to the shock of her mother's decline and loss. Immediately following "Caretaker—II" is the title poem of the volume, the haiku sequence "Deflection." Here, Beary focuses on the ways she tries to deflect the intense pain of loss at her mother's death. Two haiku from this sequence:

mother gone
my urgent need
for a new coat

The new coat—something to wrap around her, hug her as a mother might, button up to the chin, warm her out of the shocking cold of loss.

radiant heat
one free upgrade
to orphan

Even the warmth of radiant heat cannot compensate for the chill of finding herself an orphan.

In the remaining poems of this strong collection, Beary moves out into more wide-ranging subjects. In the haibun “Free-Floating,” she describes waking at 2 a.m. thinking she hears “the baby,” runs to check the child’s room, then wakes to the realization that there is no longer a baby in that room—it has become her study. Here’s the opening to that haibun, and its closing haiku:

my heartbeat wakes me. it’s 2 a.m. is the baby okay? i run to
check. the baby’s room is empty.

dead of night
thoughts the lamplight
illuminates

For any of us who have been parents, the memory of listening in the night for the slightest cry from the bassinet or crib still lives in our memory, especially when we have lost a parent and are once again babies ourselves.

And harking back to her own childhood, in “Irish Twins,” Beary evokes the childhood horror of witnessing the abuse of her sister. Then later, in “The Offer,” although she does not name the character, she sees the man who “used to scare [her]

to death” having become a needy old man, demanding her attention, blaming her for banging his cane so hard “a crack forms on the ceiling.”

And in the poems that mix free verse with haiku, like “On the F Train,” “Philantha,” and “Snow Bird,” Beary revisits other poignant, former relationships. In “Snow Bird” she re-creates the memory of her attraction, when she was only 15, to an older boy (man?), which ends with the lines:

My toes feel the silky weave.
Of the net he cast.
I know what was caught.
And released.

Although the poems that refer to Beary’s memories of childhood abuse, relationship, divorce, and marriage never overtly mention sex, there is an implied sensuality in them that is even more powerful than if she had spelled more out for us.

Deflection closes with the enigmatic, narrative haibun “What Remains.” The images strike the heart. Throughout the haibun, and particularly in the ending, we are dealing with the loss of a child. Here is the middle prose section, followed by a haiku and the closing prose:

I always thought we would have time to repair the old grievances. I never thought I would be the recipient of your story told over and over. Words that never change: “Imagine losing your only son. Imagine.” What remains after the words are gone?

a blue cat roams
the empty hours . . .
cold winter moon

You leave us with one last story. It is 4 o’clock in the morning. A police car sets its revolving light on a mother’s house. The shadow of two men appears. The front door opens. One man is a policeman. This is where the story ends. The other man is a priest. This is where the story begins.

It is impossible to read a collection like this one without relating to it personally. I, too, have been both parent and caretaker, have lost a mother and father, gone through a divorce and remarriage, then lost my second husband, the love of my life. Like Beary does in this collection, I had to write my way through all of these hard rites of passage, the varied seasons of my grief. As writers, it is the way we struggle to make sense of it all, to define what we are feeling, and to release those feelings into words, hoping for healing as we do so.

In her extraordinarily skillful haibun and haiku sequences, Beary offers us pivotal moments of her life, gives us the universal in the particular, and helps us to understand that we are not alone as we navigate our own often challenging paths. These poems are a blessing, and this collection a necessary one. Thank you, Roberta, for daring to share these facets of your journey!



Penny Harter's recent books include The Resonance Around Us (2013); One Bowl (2012); and Recycling Starlight (2010). A featured reader at the 2010 Dodge Poetry Festival, she has won three fellowships from the NJSCA; the Mary Carolyn Davies Award from the PSA; and two fellowships from VCCA (January 2011; March 2015).

