

Mark Harris. *burl*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012, unpag. (64 pp.), perfect softbound, 4.5 x 6.5. ISBN 978-1-936948-04-1, US \$12 <www.redmoonpress.com>.

George Dorsty. *The Space Between*. Sound Beach, NY: 2012, 48 pp., perfect softbound, 5.5 x 8.5. ISBN 978-0935252-75-0, US \$10, George Dorsty, 1314 Showalter Road, Yorktown, VA 23692.

by J. Zimmerman, Santa Cruz, California

Recently I took pleasure in reading and comparing *burl* by Mark Harris and *The Space Between* by George Dorsty. Though these are the first full-length books for each writer, most haiku practitioners will have noticed work by these poets frequently in *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, and elsewhere. Dorsty, in addition, was selected over a decade ago as a *New Resonance* 3¹ poet; his two-page micro-book (or “pinch book”) *Making Way* was published² and well received;³ and his work has appeared in at least eight Red Moon Press anthologies of English-language haiku.

Both *burl* and *The Space Between* are subtitled *haiku*. Rather than fuss over delimiting haiku, senryu, ku, and so on (such boundary disputes being handled with more finesse in the world of “Jurisfiction”⁴ than in our own), I accept the authors’ claims that their poems are haiku, close enough. I am more concerned with what each poem means and what is the significance of the assembled books.

To a non-haiku poet the books might seem very similar: slender with tiny poems on about 50 pages with one poem per page in *burl* and between one and three poems per page in the larger-paged *The Space Between*. But to a haiku poet the books are quite different.

In appearance Mark Harris’ *burl* (2012) is a beautiful and inviting book, from the warm pale orange and yellow cover (art by Harris), through the clear printing on ivory paper, to the varied layouts and placements of the poems presented singly on unnumbered pages.

Many poems look and sound close to traditional English-language haiku, written in three lines, often with a longer second line, a juxtaposition, and a seasonal reference:

the way back
a burl born wood wasp falls
into sunlight

and the wrenching:

autism
the tree we took for evergreen
loses its leaves

Apart from three vertical poems, one diagonal poem, and a haibun (presented untitled with its prose and poem on opposite pages), almost two-thirds of the 52 poems are written in three lines. But almost a third are a single horizontal line, and these contain some of the most remarkable, haunting, and memorable poetry of the book. For example:

a burl's knotted core the cure the cure
and

bur burr burl she echoes why do you bite yourself

Of his poems, it is especially his one-liners that have mystery and music. In this first one-liner above, the consonance of “c” and “r” in “core” and “cure” links these words while permitting the reader to feel that the core may be the cure for something and that concurrently a cure is sought for the hard and knotted core of whatever or whomever is the “burl.” The poem is like a trapeze artist, inviting you to jump and take its hands and swing lightly out into air: a thrilling ride.

The second one-liner uses the consonance of “b” and “r” to link the first three words. These words are used in various versions of English for what in the USA is called “burl” and signifies primarily a knotted lump in growing wood that results (according to its entry in Wikipedia) when a tree experiences “some form of stress.” But a “bur” is also a thing that clings; and a “burr” can be a rough edge or a lump of rock

within softer material or even a halo around moon or star. These meanings refract and shimmer through the poem. The consonance of the three opening words with the two closing words “bite yourself” encourages many ideas about the relationship of the “she” and the “you” in the poem, as well as of the “you” to him/her/itself in this brief rich poem.

Harris delights the reader with the sounds of words. And once one has entered each poem, one finds that it is full of echoes of poems that went before and poems to come, as in this vertical poem:

heart
wood
her echo
lalia

with its enriching line breaks in the midst of heartwood and echolalia.

The structure of *burl* is cumulative rather than linear, the book being filled with different trees and their coming-and-leaving leaves, with wounds and with grief and with what comes next. The sense of the book accretes much as a burl accrues around an injury on a tree, or as time accrues around the heart of a bereaved parent:

under the understory
our daughter harbors
a worm in her mouth

and

rain, rain . . .
we let her unborn twin
return to loam

The Wikipedia entrance for “burl” adds that a burl can be “filled with small knots from dormant buds.” Perhaps this is how a parent feels, filled with the loss of the unrealizable moments with the now-gone child, and yet facing the light as in Harris’ final poem:

all spirals
these larch cones
we turn to face the sun

Turning to Dorsty's *The Space Between*, I find many poems here are similarly about the hidden, the unseen, the missing, and the lost. Dorsty writes his three-line poem in a minimalist style, with only two or three words in most lines. His style is relatively mainstream, direct, and familiar to most haiku poets. Of the many pleasing poems in *The Space Between*, a favorite is

the mountain
behind the monastery . . .
just sitting

A sense of grace and spaciousness fills the poem, as well as a pleasing ambiguity as to whether it is the mountain that is “just sitting” in meditation or if it is the practitioners inside the monastery or the poet himself—or some combination of these. And indeed whether the mountain is, as Paul Miller³ suggests, a “what” or a “who.”

The above poem and almost half the poems in *The Space Between* are adept season-less haiku—poems of space, time, and spirit. One of Dorsty's best poems for me is

dead hamster—
my son invents
a religion

This converts the “my child deals with a dead pet” cliché into a tremendous and concise poem about coping, consoling, and creating in the face of loss. Indirectly it overlays the huge sociological issue of how religions arise. Another favorite is

a year later . . .
even her leaving
has left

Again the sentiment moves into and on from a sorrow. The sounds enrich this poem, especially the “ee” assonance in the second line (with the palimpsest-like resonance of the word “grieving”), the “t” consonance that links the first and last lines, and the liquid “l” linking all three lines.

Just occasionally the minimalism of Dorsty's style leaves too much to interpretation. An example is

sidewalk crack—
forgiving
my mother

The reference to the childhood “step-on-a-crack” game is followed by a nice reversal of my expectation that the mother would be the one doing the forgiving. But “forgiving” and “mother” are such freighted words. No other poem in the collection informs this one. So I wobble between thinking this is a joke (a senryu, as I would have intended it) and thinking this is dire. An additional phrase or a season word could have saved me from such radical confusion.

Dorsty is an avid user of juxtaposition flagged by an em-dash. This punctuation appears so often (in 4 out of 5 of these poems) that I question whether it is always needed. For example I find that an unpunctuated version:

summer cumulus
a neighbor's
harmless threats

reflects better the rising and passing by of a cumulus cloud and a neighbor's threat than does Dorsty's version:

summer cumulus—
a neighbor's
harmless threats

Traditional in sensibility as Dorsty's haiku feel, fewer than half of his poems use the short-long-short pattern of syllables. Nonetheless his line breaks usually serve his poems well. A rare exception is

ice storm—
the great buck's
antlers devoured by mice

The word “devoured” is intriguing and deserves a more prominent placement. If we change the second line break by moving the predictable “antlers” up a line, we give the more interesting “devoured” better emphasis:

ice storm—
the great buck's antlers
devoured by mice

Dorsty's book does not have sectional divisions or a developmental sweep of topic or seasons. On the basis of limited research I hypothesize that his sequence reflects the order in which poems were published. If this were the case, I would encourage the poet to say so as it could give a reader the opportunity to perceive and appreciate developments in the poet's style.

In conclusion, what is the value of these books? Both are recommended for reading and study. *The Space Between* is a solid and valuable contribution, assembling excellent poems from a decade of work by a poet skilled in a mainstream English-language style. And with *burl* we see a different animal: poetry that a few traditionalists might be unwilling to call haiku, assembled into a resonant and integrated whole, a book that has the potential of becoming a breakout book, beloved not only among haiku readers but more generally among readers of poetry.

Notes

1. Jim Kacian and Dee Evetts, eds. *A New Resonance 3: Emerging Voices in English-language Haiku*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2003.
2. George Dorsty. *Making Way*. Greenfield, MA: Tribe Press, 2004.
3. Paul Miller. Book review of George Dorsty's *Making Way*. *Modern Haiku* 36.1 (2005). Archived on-line at <http://www.modernhaiku.org/bookreviews/Dorsty2004.html>.
4. Jasper Fforde. *One of Our Thursdays is Missing*. New York: Viking, 2012.



J. Zimmerman is a poet, editor, reviewer, and physicist born in Windermere, England. She has worked in the USA, UK, Germany, and Greece, where her favorite jobs remain archaeological surveyor and falconry apprentice. Her 2011 tanka chapbook is nectar untouched. She won the Mary Lonnberg Smith Poetry Prize and co-edits Ariadne's Poetry Web at <http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne>.