

**Marian Olson.** *Sketches of Mexico*. Northfield, MA: Lily Pool Press, 2012, 110 pp., perfect softbound, 5.5 x 8.5. ISBN 978-0-934714-40-2. US\$20 (includes shipping & handling); order directly from author: Marian Olson, 2400 Botolph Road, Santa Fe, NM 87505.

by Scott Mason, Chappaqua, New York

With the 2008 Kanterman Award-winning volume *Desert Hours*, Marian Olson established herself as one of the haiku world's premier poets of place. That collection introduced readers to the unlikely, and spellbinding, natural life of New Mexico's high desert as experienced through the soul of a kindred inhabitant. Olson now takes us across the border in her very different but equally vibrant *Sketches of Mexico*, inspired by decades of sojourns as a visitor to our country's southern neighbor. The nature of Olson's relationship with Mexico is signaled in the epigraph of this latest book: *See with the heart first—*

There is much indeed to see. It all begins (and—spoiler alert—ends) with color: the kaleidoscopic hues of a stylized jungle scene by Karen McClintock grace the cover. The poems themselves paint a veritable rainbow.

ocean fog—  
in a patch of blue  
an island drifts by

orange pink yellow  
dahlia skirts  
swish in the dance

luxury hotel  
gold crystal malachite  
first floor only

happy hour  
Zihuatanejo cliffs glow  
red with flowers

Nor does Olson scant the other senses. She shares with us the heady tastes and aromas of her culinary discoveries; the jocund din of the streets and cantinas; and physical pleasures, both simple and sybaritic.

sailing  
I drag my hand  
through cool water

I try a raw oyster  
to please you  
then ask for another

At their very best, Olson's haiku present Mexico, in all its contrasts and complexity, as a piquant dish.

the child licks  
a candy skull  
Day of the Dead

beggar's cup  
layers of gold  
gild the cathedral

sunset . . .  
the artist's fingers  
wet with lead paint

Or perhaps Mexico is a great big serape, where the warp of its florid landscapes and the woof of its colorful and teeming humanity both combine and compete for our attention and affections. Here the relationship can be complicated. While Olson twice in her introduction characterizes Mexico as "generous," that quality can become strained in a populace whose impoverishment works against its capacity for largesse. Beggars figure in no fewer than eight haiku. Many more poems portray locals employing an assortment of stratagems with visitors to make ends meet.

gift of a yellow rose  
to bring her back  
Pepe's flower stall

table serenade  
the singer looks at his tip  
and waits

hand-drawn chain  
blocks each car  
ten pesos to pass

Then there are the tourists. (The author would doubtless—and I think justifiably—consider herself a returning guest.) With no excuse for less than gracious behavior, these folks receive Olson's most withering gaze.

Good Friday procession  
a gringo steps in  
with the biggest candle

no place to escape  
the tour-boat bullhorn  
uneasy seals

Gucci bag knockoff  
the tourist buys three  
just because

A handful of poems give us a tantalizing glimpse of Mexicans uninvolved with, or seemingly oblivious to, the tourist and hospitality trades. I found these the most heartwarming and refreshing of all.

stiff-legged children  
mimic street clowns  
on stilts

family-held blanket  
a girl steps out  
in a bikini

*señoritas*  
wrinkled men on the beach  
cease their talk

Start to finish, *Sketches of Mexico* is like a piñata. Crack it open and a new world pours out in all its colorful, complex, sensual, edgy and, ultimately, intoxicating glory.

agave its sharp edges tequila



*Scott Mason's haiku have received the top honor in more than a dozen international competitions, including the 2012 Harold G. Henderson Memorial Award from the Haiku Society of America. He currently serves as an associate editor with The Heron's Nest.*