Ways of Looking: Haibun at the Cusp of the Covid Period
by Judson Evans

As a long-time writer, reader, teacher, and now editor of haibun, I look for the ways new work both reaches back to roots in Japanese tradition and pushes forward, evolving and absorbing aspects of poetic experiment. I have always been an advocate of a more lyric approach to the "haiku prose" of haibun, and fully agree with Keith Polette in a recent essay in *CHO* (17.2) that haiku prose can draw upon "a rich palate of western poetics to find new ways to embody and express elusive yet essential sensibility of wabi sabi…." Polette references Tony Hoagland's notion of poetry as dramatization of "the mind in motion" and opens haibun prose to the wide influence of "deep image" poetics. Polette's emphasis on the "mind in motion" has also been used to describe the contemporary prose poem, as David Lehman in *Great American Prose Poems*, quotes French poet Charles Baudelaire: "a poetic prose, musical without meter or rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the jolts of consciousness…" (16).

It is interesting to note that, in the last fifteen years, haibun has broken through into the world of free verse contemporary poetry. An important advocate, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, has championed the form as an escape from the lineation and traditional assumptions of western lyric into a kind of experimental travel poem that opens up ways "to re-imagine fairy tales, or examine persona." (*poets.org*, Academy of American Poetry, Feb. 19, 2014). She offers examples of haibun by contemporary lyric poets like Jeannine Hall Gailey, Lee Ann Roripaugh, and Kimiko Hahn, whose work, in my estimation, is much closer to what haiku poets deem haibun than, say, what an earlier generation—John Ashbery or James Merrill—wrote as "haibun." That difference is partly a pulling away from fingerprints of unmistakable style that make the haiku just a broken off tidbit of the same discourse as the prose. A continent of Ashbery followed by a little island of

Ashbery. (No disrespect for Ashbery, a poet I worship and mourn, rather playful bemusement that his voice and stylistic gestures are so strong they elide the difference between prose and haiku.) These more recent attempts at haibun by free verse poets, on the other hand, have a stronger impulse to make "haiku"—even when they don't obey rules or traditions most haiku poets respect—distinctly different in their perceptual angle, their level of objectivity. The "haiku prose" these poets are writing is close to a certain species of contemporary prose poems. Interestingly, both Ashbery and Merrill's "haibun" were anthologized in David Lehman's *Great American Prose Poems* (2003).

For me, the contemporary prose poem asserts a useful model for haiku prose in haibun. For the prose poem, the sentence, rather than the line, is the basic unit, and the integrity and variety of sentences and tensile strength of their imagistic and auditory bonds is primary. As David Lehman has noted, the contemporary prose poem has a chameleon-like or parasitic quality; it can take the form of multiple types of discourse: "impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose…" (*Great American Prose Poems*, 14). Similarly, in the contemporary haibun of Red Moon Press's *Contemporary Haibun Volume 16*, haiku prose functions as a prayer (Bob Lucky), parable (J Hahn Doleman), thumb nail portrait (Chris Bays), nature study (Dyana Basist), philosophical-literary koan (Jim Kacian), humorous slice of life anecdote (Terri L. French), and travelogue (Matthew Caretti). Further, in the books of two ambitious haibun writers who I will examine further here—Jennifer Hambrick's *joyride* and Jianqing Zheng's *A Way of Looking*, haibun prose functions as a recipe in the former "Béchamel" and as a mixologist's cocktail "Joining the Parade" in the later. Red Moon Press's *Contemporary Haibun Volume 16*, offers a useful vantage point to make some wider observations about the state-of-the-art in haibun, as an introduction to a look at the unique qualities of the two recent books noted above: Jianqing Zheng's *A Way of Looking* (Silverfish Review Press, Eugene, OR: 2021) and

Jennifer Hambrick's *joyride: a haibun road trip* (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). Information for how to purchase these three haibun works is appended at the end of this essay.

I. Contemporary Haibun Volume 16

A casual reading of the whole of *Contemporary Haibun Vol. 16* offers a snapshot of some of the major trends in haibun in this fraught moment and a chance to consider some of the sub-genres and varieties of haibun commonly being published. First, it seems significant that such a large number of the pieces here—I count 18 of the 82 haibun—are elegiac in subject and tone. The two books we will turn to also follow this trend. These "elegiac" haibun celebrate, mourn, and memorialize the dead, showing how effective haiku prose and haiku can be in combining elements of eulogy and character study. Margaret Chula's "Clothes to Go Out In" provides a fine example of haibun as a straightforward elegy. Here haiku prose keeps its concrete diction and precision with articles of clothing, shoes, and jewelry functioning as objective correlatives to the personality of a deceased mother: "I wish I had been there to dress her in a cashmere sweater and wool pants, to wrap a matching scarf around her neck, and clip on her favorite pearl earrings." The move to the closing haiku is mediated by a sinuous final prose sentence: "I would have slipped on a pair of soft slippers so she could go lightly into the next world," and the haiku shifts into a contrasting mode of discourse—an observation of nature that has the parable-like sense of a traditional death verse:

how easily
the snake sheds its skin
then disappears

Chula offers an interesting variation on haibun elegy in another piece "Winter Chill" where she inhabits and reimagines a narrative built around Yosa Buson's famous haiku on his dead wife's "boxwood comb," combing out implications of grief and

eroticism: "her tresses tangled—not from lovemaking—but delirium" (35–36). Other variations on elegy include Gary LeBel's "At Eibingen," a piece explicitly in memory of the much loved and missed haibun writer/editor Angelee Deodhar. Here, in place of haiku, we find rhymed quatrains dividing a fragment of historical fiction implicitly comparing Deodhar to the polymath medieval Abbess Hildegard of Bingen. Richard Grahn, on the other hand, follows a prose paragraph about a lost friend with two interwoven tanka. Bob Lucky approaches to the haibun-elegy by a kind of indirection. The deceased subject is never named or described, but rather functions like a sun or nebula whose magnetic field reaches out with lines of force and charged particles. All the exuberant appetites of the guests at the funeral reception, their contradictory desires and energies, offer evidence for the sparks of personality, friendship, and connection that remain:

> Abandoned beer bottles seating on patio tables. Inside the house people argue over what music to play. Everyone seems to know what he liked, but no one agreed, which means no song ever gets played to the end. Outside, a game of horseshoes thuds and clangs into the dark.
>
> thunder clap
> a Mason jar full
> of lightning bugs (86)

Another sub-genre of haibun, the travel journal, harkens back to Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi*. I count ten of these in this anthology, including Jim Kacian's "Hinagu" which updates the traditional pilgrimage, here to a literary sacred site—Taneda Santōka's final home—with literary biography. This piece evokes the essence of the Japanese travel writing tradition, where according to Meredith McKinney:

> Places were in a sense sites of literary worship in a manner similar to holy places on a pilgrimage route, places where

> the traveler would pause in awe, perhaps recite a poem or poems associated with the site, and compose a poem in turn, often incorporating some allusive reference to that earlier poetry, almost as a pilgrim will offer up a prayer (xx).

Here, against the tradition, irony flavors the dissolute atmosphere that surrounds Santōka's world of alcoholic inspiration: "'Sake is my koan,' he wrote…" Kacian imitates the 'snap-out-of-it' slap of Zen master's so-called 'encouragement stick' in the abruptness and enigmatic non-rationality of his final monoku:

"beating a dead horse with no stick satori" (72)

Matthew Caretti proves to be a master of the travel journal technique cited by McKinney—"the prose tends to…set the scenes for poems like a series of glowing points on an otherwise dark map…" (xvii) in his Malaysia travelogue sequence: "A bucket here. Saucer there. Relight the damp wick of the candle."

night thunder
the way the spider
avoids the puddle

Caretti's travel haibun also double as love poems:

the neatness of clouds
scooping rice and dahl
her hennaed hands

A subset of haibun here—I would judge about five—primarily serve as poems of erotic experience. In fact, the opening haibun of the volume, Priti Aisola's "In Another Lifetime," offers "half-playful, half serious" banter about pebbles under the bedclothes to lead up to discrete, but charged suggestions of married love in a final haiku:

night fragrance
the nagalingam uncoils
my doubt

Here, the name for the cannonball tree contains the word "lingam," in Hinduism, a symbol of divine generative energy, as well as a phallic object worshiped as a symbol of Shiva.

As readers of haibun, we are all probably most familiar with haibun whose prose offers short, concise narratives, captures a moment, or enacts an epiphany. As Bruce Ross has said in *Journeys to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun*, "if haiku is an insight into a moment of experience, a haibun is the story of how one came to have the experience." That narrative moment may be contracted to what William Wordsworth called a "spot of time," or Virginia Woolf called a "moment of perception," or it may be expanded to the scale of a short, short story or a type of prose poem favored by writers like Robert Haas, Carolyn Forché, or Mary Ruefle (referenced at length by Michael Dylan Welch in "Ringing the Bell: Learning from Mary Reufle," October, 2020) an example of haiku prose as literary criticism. In these contemporary writers of the prose poem, narrative circles back on itself, or crystallizes around dramatic concrete images. The vast majority of haibun in *Volume 16*—I count 31 haibun—provide some form of narrative structure, from staggeringly sharp psychological realism of Roberta Beary's "Two Fathers" to the playful, imaginative flights of magical realism or surrealism in pieces like Praniti Gulyani's "Fistful": "When father came back from the far, far land where he had gone, he came with a pocket full of shadows. And just as I put my hands into his pockets to see what he had got me, the shadows dropped down, forming small puddles around my feet" (59).

Beary's haibun strikes a perfect balance between the contrasting discourse and diction of prose narrative and haiku, each haiku taking on the sense of objects broken out of the narrative world and claiming their own space. Contrasting imagery of light reveals a world through two different lenses, two different forms of

illumination—from a nostalgic glow that somehow etherealizes and sanitizes the past:

> hometown visit
> sunlight haloes
> a dusty pew

—to a visceral moment of reawakened trauma:

> votive candle—
> veined hands spark
> a prayer for the dead

Light threads its way through the piece like a fuse, exposing the priest's indifference to the narrator's plight "Under the weak light of confined space, he blesses me. Then makes a dismissive gesture with both hands. His paper falls against the lit screen. Yesterday's horse races…" and then ignites again in the description of her sister, a second victim of their own father's abuse, "Outside I see my sister, smoking. She disengages from a group of boys. Hands one her cigarette…" (25).

The two haiku, surrounding the narrative block, ground and universalize the complex amalgam of shame, anger, despair, and rebellion, so powerfully condensed in the taut narrative. But more than this, they are through-composed with the rest of the piece to reinforce its internal structure—the doubleness that creates tension throughout. On the other hand, several other narrative pieces remind me of the absurdist prose poetry of writers like Charles Simic, Russell Edson, or James Tate. In Jonathan Humphrey's "White Light White Light": "The moon's half-brother is wanted in three states for robbing flour mills…" (65). In Matthew Moffett's "Feral Dads": "Before heading to bed, Virginia Meyers walks down to the barn to make sure it's locked up and finds it infested with dads…" (90). In Alexis Rotella's "The Visitor": "A man wearing a ragged Confederacy uniform walks through my clinic door…" (116).

Other haibun move in a direction of political/social critique often through satire—at least four pieces do this explicitly, including Lew Watts's haibun "Houston, We Have a Problem," where the narrator bluntly confronts the sanctimonious religious bullying of the surrounding culture: "'Now, I know you all think I'm an atheist, but I'm not. I do believe in God,' I said, to gasps of relief. 'I just don't like him.'"

> voice breaking the church choir master's grip" (122).

Here, critique is part of a broader humor and deft handling of pace and dialogue.

Finally, there are a few experiments with form that draw from mainstream free verse poetic technique, such as the eschewing of punctuation and asymmetric scattered spacing of text on the page, as well as from more traditional forms techniques like rhyme in Jennifer Hambrick's "Pandemic Power Walk": "kick buckets of dirt   sweaty mask   sweaty shirt   breathing fast" (61)

or the use of anaphora in Bob Lucky's "Pray":

> For the hell of it
> for the weight of yourself on your knees
> for the whispering sigh of your voice escaping
> for the sourness of hypocrisy pickling your tongue… (84).

Part of me worries about haibun wandering too far from the haiku; part of me wants to see how far haibun might evolve in the liminal space between genres to make us see in new ways.

II. Jennifer Hambricks's joyride: a haibun road trip

Of the two recent individual collections of haibun examined here, Jennifer Hambrick's *joyride* responds most directly to the impact

of Covid-19, not only through the specific references we find in haibun like "Green," "Pandemic Power Walk," and "Together," but also in the way her deeply visceral, tactile imagery—a kind of sensory saturation—expresses what psychologists have come to call the "skin hunger" we develop when we are forced to isolate and distance:

> endless day
> rainbow on the skin
> of a bubble

While, I admit, the opening haibun struck me as stylistic and tonal overkill—too much of a good thing—I became increasingly impressed by the energy in sound, image, and imagination as I read on. Part of my growing respect came from Hambrick's self-conscious embrace of the demotic language and Americana ("Taste"), and the way she risks falling into the cute and sentimental, only to swerve into smart, rich, and surprising moments and images:

> mellow evening
> a mantis prays
> in the river grass

This gorgeous haiku is pivoted perfectly in the middle of a prose description of a barroom scene where a patron shows off his elaborate tattoo of an exotic female figure ("She jumps each time he makes a fist"). The haiku makes the reader see the tattoo shade from the sexual notch in the belt into a kind of romantic-religious stigmata, as if the tattooed patron were a backstreet Petrarch (think Bob Dylan, "Tangled Up in Blue").

When the haibun in the opening section exploit their full technicolor extravagance to capture childhood perception, the writing finds its sweet spot:

School's out
days count off
in endless blue

corkscrew lollipop
the crazy colors
of laughter

Taking these haiku out of context helps make an important point about Hambrick's work: her haiku are crafted so well they are self-sufficient, and yet the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. The intelligence of the work as a whole holds an element of shadow and shift from innocence to subtle intimations of experience:

fireflies
flashes of freedom
between folded hand

Of course, the collection's title clues us in to all the ways locomotion serves the themes and emotions of the haibun and transports us through the narrator's felt experience from puberty—"spilling down drenched plastic, bounce like a bumper car..." (17)—through womanhood—"the windows are down and we've got highway wind going and I take off my flimsy flip-flops and stick my feet with the purple toenail polish out the window and close my eyes..." (45). The successive haibun have a further strength in the renku-like way they often link one to the next—so, the side-by-side cleaned plates of father and daughter in the poignant "Béchamel" segue into the "chipped china plate" in "Spirals." Another strength is the way Hambrick's choices of punctuation (or lack thereof) serve her sensory-emotional ends. Like rests, half rests, and quarter rests in music, the choice to capitalize or let sentences begin without caps, punctuate or not, seem intentional and calibrated to determine levels of objectivity and control. For example, in "That Summer" with its pull-out-the-stops sense of infatuation and blooming sensuality, the whole prose passage is uncapitalized, yet broken

up staccato style by commas and periods. Everything is equally charged; experience flows in freshets and spirals; but there is also a sense of confused boundaries and resistances: "everything untied, wide-eyed, jute-chinned, hemmed-in, take-n-bake, glass bead, knock-kneed..." The final haiku satisfies as its sudden silence and objectivity turns down the volume:

> walking around
> in a new place
> first kiss

Here, in particular, the contrast between the fireworks of sound and image in the prose and the clarity and simplicity of the haiku sticks an almost athletic landing.

While the collection luxuriates in lightness and comic relief—it's epigraph, after all, comes from Seinfeld—I also appreciated a subtle undertow of something a bit more haunting and complex: W.C. Williams's "the pure products of America go crazy..." in the near perfection of "Under Wraps" with its comic, wry detachment and hint of melancholy. The purposeful gaps of white space in the text let the wind blow through the fragile makings of a home, a relationship, a life:

> and two of the guys tear off part of her roof, working slower than a visit with the in-laws   and in November they build studs for the new bedroom and wrap the frame with DryWrap   then it's The holidays and no work gets done
>
> sawdust
> light leaks out
> under a closed door

Likewise, within the exuberance and joy of the book as a whole, several haibun, "Together," "Green," and most powerfully

"Harmonica" memorializing the author's father, play the role of elegy:

His voice rang through the instrument:

> autumn sunset
> dad's harmonica
> quiet in the wooden box (79).

Hambrick shows her range and versatility further in the elegiac tone that follows through her haibun on the pandemic "Green":

> cold spring
> the bird house
> empty

and—amusingly—in the elegy for the ornery Saturn roadster that proves the bane of her narrator's existence and the reigning objective correlative for bad relationships throughout the second half of the book:

> O Saturn, how much greater your worth than these two hundred trade—in dollars! Even as your pallbearers tow you away, how radiant you shine…" (89).

As we might expect from the title, a large number of these haibun, veer toward the sub-genre of travelogue, here Americanized to "road trip." The focus is local (the range, mostly fraught trips to the grocery store or to the beach). These center on the narrator's relationship with an anthropomorphized car—*Mary Ellen*. Here, I became a bit impatient with the repetition of the car as a romantic rival and demonic protagonist theme; but, as in the work of Jianqing Zheng, it is fascinating to find haibun travel writing refracted through the American lens of the Beat Poets, specifically Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (something, of course, that Bruce Ross spoke of in his *Journeys to the Interior*). Hambrick Americanizes the

pillow words of Japanese tradition and makes us hear the jangly music of "Roanoke... Cadillac... Elks Club... ketchup-drenched crinkle fries..." (in the haibun "Spirals").

III. *Jianqing Zheng's A Way of Looking*

Jianqing Zheng's new book of haibun uniquely combines travel writing with an emotional dialogue between cultures: Chinese culture, Japanese culture, and the blues culture of the Mississippi Delta. Formally, the haibun import unique elements of traditional Chinese poetry with its balanced phrases and symmetrical structures and pits them against the asymmetries of Japanese aesthetics. Notice the patterned paring of phrases in these sections from the prose:

"Sometimes the slow tooting of a barge sounds like a soft southern drawl; sometimes the drifting willow catkins add a sense of motion to the still landscape..." ("The River Park in Helena, Arkansas," 12) and "Each day we zigzag on the mountain roads taking pictures, and each night we see stars and then sleep" ("Diversion," 13).

In the opening haibun "Old Man River," Zheng introduces this multi-purpose personification to represent the epicenter of the African-American blues tradition. "He"—"Old Man River" (also evoking the song from the 1926 musical *Show Boat*)—emerges at once as a random old man on a park bench observing the river, as a ghostly appearance of a Buddhist monk poet out of a Chinese landscape painting, and—of course—as personification of the river, itself:

> The mind flows with your stiff gait until you dim into the graying dusk.
>
> moonrise
> above the river
> a hovering gull

The river's gentle transformation from "stiff gait" to "mind flow" carries through the haiku with its janus syntax—the middle line hovering between modifying the first and the third lines of the haiku—a subtle tiered cosmology.

So much of the energy of this work comes from fusing the tradition of Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi* with a road trip through Blues Country:

> Old Man River—
> forgetting the self and
> the floating world

The incessant flow of the river is like a "silent piece of blues..." ("The River Park in Helena Arkansas," 12).

Like Hambrick, Zheng updates and Americanizes the tradition of pillow words and resonant place names:

> Moorehead, where W.C. Handy's 'Yellow Dog Blues' immortalized the crossing of the Southern and the Yazoo Delta railroads... ("Weekend Drive, 1998").

A Way of Looking is enriched by the multiple perspectives of three cultural lenses, but it also subtly reaches the alienation and suffering at the heart of blues when it explores the feeling of cultural marginalization. On one hand, Zheng's embeddedness in American culture is intensified by the shared suffering of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina Flood:

> In a university cafeteria, a few diners talk about the New Orleans looters who take away things from a chain store. One gray-haired man at the table raises his voice: 'They are not looters; they take things because they need shoes to wear and food to survive. When they can't get help from somewhere, they have to find ways to help themselves.' Diners from the other tables lift their eyes, then look down at their fried catfish.

lunch for evacuees
a boy sops up the gravy
with a cornbread

But, the other side of these deep ties to his American identity, throughout the text linked to his love of the blues, is the melancholy of cultural dislocation when he returns to his family's place of origin in China in what I consider the most masterful and rich prose passage in the book:

> He feels like being carried back by an ox-cart hearse to his father's loud laughter over liquor and mother's broad smile at his big bite into the pancake she made, to his street fighting and tofu peddling, to his dating and wedding, to his days to son a father and father a son, to his young wife whom he never saw again after he sailed to America to build railroads, to the Pearl River where he once swam naked and caught shrimps with a small net and pieces of dried pigskin. He walks down to the river shouting I'm home; he wants to hear an echo, but his shouting is like a stone thrown in water to produce only ripples...He looks hard at the river, his dream river: a horn blows, and then a barge looms in. It chugs along and looms out into the white sun rising over the river's bend, and its horn fades away like a dirge.

a rooster's crow
    headstone
of a Chinese railroad worker

Here, the loose river-like flow of the syntax is strikingly juxtaposed to the hard edges of the haiku, whose isolation of the word "headstone" in a single inset line makes it feel both tonally and formally as if roughly engraved in stone. So many rich associations layer between these Chinese experiences and those of the Mississippi River Delta, with its own rivers, barges, and, of course, rituals of jazz funerals:

> At Mama Nell's funeral held in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the pastor gave an account of her life experience as a butcher in a slaughterhouse in New Orleans, a singer for two years with the Louis Armstrong Band…
>
> funeral procession
> the pall sways too
> with the jazz band (70).

This is one of several haibun that serve, like so many we have seen here, as an elegy. For Zheng, elegy broadens beyond individual loss of a loved other to those cultural losses experienced by exploited minorities in American culture, as well as to dissidents whose lives and hopes are crushed in China. In "Eulogy" for Zheng's professor and "rebirth father" (because, as Zheng writes, " he brought me to this beautiful country…"), personal loss is linked with the loss of cultural disconnection:

> summer visit—
> in the town where
> I was born
> I'm asked
> where I am from (71).

In this elegiac zone of feeling, Zheng pairs a lapidary close observation of nature with an aesthetic of impermanence:

> The light brown mushrooms emerge from a pile of dark woodchips ground up from the stump of an oak tree felled a year ago. They are like blooming peonies, but four days later they begin to decay, exuding dew-like latex from their gills. In two more days they droop and collapse, shriveling like fallen pecan leaves in shades of dusk.
>
> deep autumn—
> look at a skeletal leaf
> against sunset

This sampling of haibun from *Contemporary Haibun Volume 16*, as well as from these two remarkable, adventurous poets, suggests that haibun has entered a charged, fertile moment that invites all of us who love the form to both explore new directions and reconnect with sources in Japanese tradition.

Works Cited & Purchase Details:

- ***Contemporary Haibun #16*** *edited by Rich Youmans and the CH staff (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). 158 pages, 5.25" x 8.25". Four-color card covers, perfect softbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-72-2. $20 from www.redmoonpress.com.*

- ***joyride: a haibun road trip*** *by Jennifer Hambrick (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). 72 pages, 4.25" x 6.5". Four-color card covers, perfect softbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-74-6. $15 from www.redmoonpress.com.*

- ***A Way of Looking*** *by Jianqing Zheng (Silverfish Review Press, Eugene, OR: 2021). 80 pages. Four-color card covers, perfect softbound. ISBN 978-1878851727. $18 from online booksellers.*

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