

REVIEWED BY RENÉE OWEN

Shifting Light by Hannah Mahoney (Backbone Press, Durham, NC: 2022). 32 pages, 7" x 5". Glossy covers, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-7363467-6-1. \$10 from <https://backbonepress.org/category/haiku-collections>

Hannah Mahoney is clearly a poet who knows her craft. She makes the outdoors her church, creating prayer from a keen engagement with all she observes. Mahoney's fresh choice of images, rich in details, build to an aural and visual rhythm which resounds with each reading.

Her work invites us to look not only at what's around us, but also to the topography deep within ourselves, to examine the pathos of joy and pain we find there. This invitation, if we choose to take it, is to get out of our own way and glimpse the transcendent mystery at play in our lives:

rippling shallows
what matters
and what doesn't

Mahoney's haiku weave a kind of spell, transporting us with a tactile sense of motion, accomplished in part by her use of language. Almost half of the poems make skillful use of the letter "f," its interwoven sounds an echo lifting us into flight, immersing us in her world:

autumn surf	dry creek bed
a flutter of terns almost lands	a breeze eddies
then lifts away	a leaf

Mahoney draws pictures with a photographer's nuanced perception of light. As the book's title implies, she places us squarely in the lens of her scene and season, be it shimmering with spring or dropping into the shorter days of fall and winter:

slanting light
picking bits of silk
from the husked corn

Each time I read this haiku, I find myself unconsciously replacing the word "silk" with "light." It brings a ripple of delight, as I remember waning summer days and warm nights in my grandmother's Blue Ridge garden. The astuteness of Mahoney's observations seem to encourage this visceral response. Even when not directly referenced, the light, or its absence, sparkles or dims before our eyes, as in these two:

the river's rush	black Angus huddle
a chimney swift	in the low pasture
skim-bathes in flight	November dusk

Many of the poems evoke a felt sense of intimacy—between the poet and a loved one, or with her natural surroundings—creating a resonance and empathy that pulls us further into Mahoney’s vision. They engage all of the senses to powerfully recall our own layered memories of beloved people and places and of time passing:

rinsing blueberries
what will my daughter
remember?

what it means
to have a body
midnight snow

In these haiku, Mahoney takes risks to expose her fragile midnight musings. She trusts us with the questions that haunt her sunny days and darker nights, inviting us to look at what it means to be human, living in our own vulnerable and scarred skin in this shifting world.

dark earth
the furled spikes
of skunk cabbage

late-winter pond
a pulse of shimmer
in a melt spot

Mahoney’s poetry offers comfort and a knowingness that we’ve journeyed with a skilled guide into this interior landscape. From the magical alchemy of the indigo moth-like cyanotype on the cover to the book’s concluding haiku, this collection is worth reading and re-reading. Highly recommended.