

REVIEWED BY MYKEL BOARD

Splashes by Cor van den Heuvel (House of Haiku Books, North Carolina: 2023). 5.06" x 7.81". 118 pages. Paperback. ISBN: 978-0962604058. \$16 from amazon.com

Splashes brings together Cor's haibun, and some haiga—a few in color with his own minimalist illustrations—from 1972 to some undated time in the recent past. It's the haibun, though, that make this book. It's Cor's eye for the chip in the fancy plate.

Humans rarely appear in these haibun. When they do, they are usually name-dropped beat writers or jazz musicians. We don't *see* them: *Lionel Hampton at Carnegie Hall*, *Zoot Sims at Avery Fischer Hall* are mentioned, but not described. The names are a background for something. When Cor writes about the Whitehorse Tavern (that famous Village bar where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death), he writes:

at the Whitehorse
raising a glass to Dylan Thomas
and the autumn moon

A fellow-poet is not enough for a toast. It needs that moon to make it Cor. Even when the person is a poet... or *the* poet... that is, Cor himself, the victory belongs to non-human nature, or to things... not to people:

after the rain
a few drops fall from the tree
into the poet's notebook

In one of Cor's haibun, he explains his writing philosophy:

(In painting,) One has to move back and let the paint create its magic. In the same way, a few "blobs" of words, if expertly chosen and placed, can also work a similar magic if the mind's ear steps back and lets the words work their wonder.

It's the non-human sensual that fascinates Cor. His ears are as quick to notice sound as his eyes are to see color:

From his notebook/diary, October 7, 1987: *katydid singing, but voice not as loud as in the past... I can only hear it now from my apartment if I open the window –did not open it last night, so couldn't hear him if he was singing as faintly then as he is now.*

In New York City... a katydid singing! Sirens, people yelling from a sports bar, and honking horns... Yes! Yes! Yes!... NO! It's the almost silent katydid, maybe missed the night before, that matters.

My favorite piece, *Stepping Up To The Bar*, is filled with a topic near and dear to my liver. I've certainly spent more time in bars than in church (synagogue). But it's neither the booze nor the barflies that catch Cor's attention. It is the bar itself. Not the neon or the history, but the foot railings and the bar stools. With a verbal close-up, the poet passes judgment on the furniture:

if the seat is not padded, at least let it be concave to fit that curve most of us sit with.

It's not only the seat that catches the poet's eye, but the things surrounding it.

A generous overhang on the patrons' side is an important element for any bar. Without it, when you sit on the barstool, you will find your knees bumping the front of the bar.

It's something drinkers all know... have seen... felt... heard the thump of... but the rest of us have never had the non-human focus to put it into words.

Many Cor-lovers know that one of his passions, besides bars, is baseball. He co-edited an anthology of baseball haiku, and often writes about the game. In the haiku section of haiga, Cor shows

his passion for baseball using no batters, hitters, catchers, or shortstops. There are no people at all:

*late February
stuck to the tree, a snowball
in the strike zone*

In the haibun, *The Last Streetlight*, Cor talks about his discovery of haiku through famous San Francisco poets like Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan. But even here, the focus is not these poets, but the streetlights outside... on the street... on slender poles or thick hooks. What do the poets look like? How do their voices sound? What's important is that *the streetlights took on a soulful, distant wail of a saxophone look, and made your shadow on the sidewalk, as you headed home from the just-closed bar, seem like the last lost inhabitant of the world.*

The final section of the book is called *Haibun for Basho's Frog*. The haibun are not for that famous poet, but for that frog that every junior high school student knows jumped into an old pond. Here's a haiku from that section:

*a breeze off the lake
the stepped-on dandelion
pushes itself back up*

The triumph of a tiny piece of nature or some *thing* amazes the reader. It is so simple that it seems very few people can see it.

A glittering light caught my eye. It was a drop of water in the curl of a leaf...

That drop is worth a dozen sightings of some guy with a mustache, wearing a tuxedo, who wouldn't even notice that he stepped on the leaf. ◻■