

Cricket Dusk, by Carolyn Hall (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2020). 104 pages; 4¼" × 6½". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-59-3. Price: \$15.00 from www.tinyurl.com/cricketdusk

This One Life, by Renée Owen (Durham, N.C.: Backbone Press, 2020). 34 pages; 5" × 7". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9994659-7-4. Price: \$10.00 from www.backbonepress.org

The Years that Went Missing, by Susan Antolin (Durham, N.C.: Backbone Press, 2020). 36 pages; 5" × 7". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9994659-5-0. Price: \$10.00 from www.backbonepress.org

Reviewed by Dan Schwerin

Three new haiku collections evidence three California stars glowing in their craft. Taken together, they offer a singular north star for poets who wish to grow in their art and, too, to incorporate social consciousness in their craft. Individually, each collection also answers the question: where is this voice going and what are the signature elements that make it shine?

Cricket Dusk, Carolyn Hall's fifth full length collection of haiku and senryu, is a meditation on living in a season of just enough:

patched cracks
in asphalt
these autumn poems

The author mines insights made known in images such as a wolf moon, cricket dusk, and a deep listening as 'the birdsong I don't know grows closer.' The presence of such range serves to vivify her work and offers the perspective of sufficiency. The use of chickadees, kittens, gophers, antlers, beetles, nesting owls, mynahs, jays, hummingbirds, butterflies, and grosbeaks suggests the movements human and existential waiting below the image.

Perhaps my favorite poem was discussed in a recent meeting of Haiku Waukesha. Great haiku reveal delights sturdy enough to bear up under lengthy discussion. They evoke the bones of personal narrative and allow meditation on the unlived lives we leave behind. This poem offers space to consider for a moment the possibilities of a life that was not chosen—and why:

nesting owls —
who would I be
if I had stayed

One member of the workshop noted a rewarding echo of ‘who’ that launches the second line. I was drawn to the move of a mature poet who does not render the second line, ‘who I would be,’ but rather offers the reader a more satisfying contemplation of ‘who would I be,’ followed by the generous space of a line break.

This work also presents humanity embodied and the vistas of aging without apology. When the human body is suggested in *Cricket Dusk*, it takes the scene boldly, as in ‘the glitter of beaded rain on naked limbs.’ We see ‘magnolia buds’ and ‘grafted apples’ standing in for the seasons and experiences in a woman’s life. These autumn poems evince a tart apple voice full of irony and wistful humor.

While a small poem cannot suffer lines that read like bumper stickers, poems that avoid their hour and context tell something shorter than the truth about our lives. This is not the voice of a poet’s development arrested in blossoms and butterflies. There is a refreshing honesty in these effective haiku that suggest social consciousness. I was grateful for the truth-telling in a poem about ‘Martin Luther King Day,’ and several on wildfires that grabbed me and made me consider:

wildfire we who left those who stayed

Another poet who writes from a relationship with Northern California reveals what Wendell Berry calls ‘local adaptation’ in his book, *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*. Renée Owen’s *This One Life*

rewards the reader with poems of startling interdependence. Her work is not only set in an identifiable place, but it advocates for the life of places and begs us to see this place with urgency:

nightfall
 the glow of hotspots
 inside burned homes

Owen centers her collection with a section called ‘nothing but smoke,’ suggesting the losses of wildfires and the thinness of human action. Owen populates these poems with Diablo winds, burn zones, charred paper fragments, and sifting ash. In the hands of a mature poetic voice and with a lightness of craft, *This One Life* advances a bold stewardship of nature. Take for example:

this one life
 I move the sparrow
 to higher ground

There is a spiritual resonance in Owen’s third collection, threaded as it is with seven river poems and images such as a birth valley and a mountain retreat. The gentle insistence of wind and mountain poems narrate a Northern California sturdiness with echoes of Li Po. Several of these poems stayed with me. This poem befriended me for weeks:

a star-studded sky
 for my shroud
 indigo night

A more interpersonally relational presence creates coherence in Susan Antolin’s second full length collection, *The Years That Went Missing*. For Antolin relationship is the locus of her art. These poems gift us with shifting glimmers of presence:

triage waiting room
 a quick game
 of hangman

The quotidian moments are given an insightful eulogy, and in this collection, family is a season:

curriculum vitae
 the years
 that went missing

Geese, owl, sparrow, and finches are images that bear witness to the frailty of life. This is another mature poet with a refreshingly honest voice describing the terrain of life with cancer or the pain of living with issues related to brain health. Often Antolin's poetry features a foreground and background construction that renders a dark remove for reflection:

psych ward
 out in the night air
 my turn to fall apart

Poets who know they are always perpetual novices can take comfort and a lesson from these last three poems. Notice the discipline of Antolin's constructions and what these contribute to the poetry. I have enjoyed reading this poet for years, but it wasn't until I had a collection in my hands that I appreciated how her construction lends itself to the Japanese aesthetic of 'ma.' Brad Bennett, in these pages reviewing Alice Frampton's *from here* (volume 50.3, autumn, 2019), cites Yukiko Kasaki describing *ma* as 'an emptiness full of possibilities, like a promise yet to be fulfilled.' *Ma* is room left in the poem that wants something—either the next word dawning disjunction or juxtaposition in the verse—or the reader's cognitive rabbit trail taking the image further and deeper. Note the room in Antolin's poems as the first line ends. In other haiku, she leaves similar space after the second line. This gap allows for unfolding resonance, reverberation, and reflection.

Antolin writes with a consistent sense of balance in her poems. Writers will take note how well-crafted poems deliver power as in:

tendrils of crabgrass
in every direction
that one lie

Some might have been satisfied with ‘crabgrass’ in the first line, perhaps with some lazy modification slapped against it like grey paint. However, this poet’s fine perceptions give us ‘tendrils of crabgrass,’ offering the second line more reward in its work as a pivot.

Together, these collections offer readers poems that indict poetry that settles for easy ‘slapdash blah blah blah—spring rain’ constructions. A look at the biographical information in these books reminds us, too, that each of these poets has served as an editor, a pilgrim who has turned in her journey and invested in other pilgrims—to the good of the poetry community and the poets, themselves. It should come as no surprise to see such strong craft, interdependence, and social consciousness in their work.