
REVIEWS

Singing Waters, by Johnette Downing (Windsor, Conn.: Buddha Baby Press, 2022). 92 pages; 5½"×8". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-7366037-5-8. Price: \$25.00 from the author at PO Box 13367, New Orleans, LA 70185.

Reviewed by Peggy Bilbro

Johnette Downing's *Singing Waters* is a charming collection encompassing all aspects of her creative life as an accomplished musician and writer with a rich production of music, poetry, and children's books. Her many years of writing haiku have been culled down to one hundred haiku, a selection that reveals her love of New Orleans, the music that defines her life, and her delight in observing the innocence of childhood. These themes all combine with the music of flowing water.

Downing tells us in her introduction that she has always lived near water but that few of her poems in *Singing Waters* are about water. However, there are enough water poems to confirm her love of it in all its transformations. She has divided the poems into six sections, each titled with some aspect of water, moving from falling rain to the bayou and ultimately to the ocean. More than a few of the haiku are full of images of moving water, sometimes in a quirky nod to modern life, as in the first poem of the book—"dishwater sky / we walk through / the rinse cycle"—or this delightful six-word poem that combines the movement of the tides with childhood pleasure—"tide pool / children / come and go."

Music in all its forms is an underlying theme throughout the collection. The chime in a zen garden, church bells, the roar of a crowd all add to the musicality of Downing's writing. One of only two haibun in the book is dedicated to the ever-present sound of music in the streets of New Orleans, which she connects to the celebration of death in two of the haiku following the haibun. Downing's writing in poems such as these is

so full of life and energy that the reader is pulled into the activity, almost dancing along with the parade:

coffin	cemetery workers
in the curves	digging
of the tuba	the music

Also woven throughout *Singing Waters* is a view of a child's world, not through the eyes of the child, but rather as the writer observing the innocent joy of children. She is very adept at showing that innocence, while leading the reader to remember the simple pleasures of childhood, as she does in "buttercups / a child's / yellow nose," or evoking the challenges of childhood in "double-dog dare / sourball / candy." The reader is also allowed to stand back and simply observe the beautiful, dancing freedom of children as in the following poem:

pink tutus
fluttering in the wind
spring butterflies

Downing's writing is clean and straightforward. She makes artful use of kigo and kireji to link nature and human experience. The simplicity of her writing makes her poems even more effective. In the sequence titled "Mother" the simple acts of closing her mother's eyes, closing her mouth, and folding her hands opens the reader to the full circle of life, love, and death. This is not a poem of sorrow but of love and acceptance. Even the haibun "Hurricane Katrina," recounting the horrible toll of that storm, exhibits the shared burden and finally the same acceptance of life we saw in "Mother," as we see in these two haiku:

tears of a stranger	dry riverbed
leave their mark	she moves on
on me	with her life

Downing moves easily from traditional haiku and senryu to contemporary themes and format firmly anchored in modern English haiku. She

plays with form, from concrete poems such as “March winds / his / c o m
b o v e r,” with its upswept final line of letters, to the representation of an
ever-so-familiar sound in this senryu:

nails _____
_____ chalkboard _____
_____ chills

Johnette Downing’s collection of haiku is an excellent representation of her creative spirit and lifelong themes. Each poem is complete in itself with nothing added or missing. She presents a warm relationship with life, even in its most difficult moments. Her ability to communicate a full story in a few, simple words makes this book a rich and worthy addition to any library.

Walking Uneven Ground: Selected Haiku of Bill Pauly, eds. Randy and Shirley Brooks (Taylorville, Ill.: Brooks Books, 2021). 169 pages; 6¼”×9¼”. Glossy four-color hardcover. ISBN 978-1-929820-22-4. Price: \$30.00 from www.brooksbookshaiku.com

Reviewed by Lee Gurga

Walking Uneven Ground is the latest clothbound book of selected haiku in Brooks Books’ “Masters of American Haiku” series. The book contains three prose introductory sections, an ample selection of Bill Pauly’s haiku, and a selection of tan renga. The editors’ introduction relates the Brooks’ personal and poetic relationship with Bill since the late 1970s. If you get the idea from the introduction that Bill was a special man and a special poet, you would be right.

Pauly promoted his reputation mostly through contest entries rather than networking. This may be one of the reasons he is so minimally represented in the major anthologies that have surveyed the haiku landscape over the past five decades. Sadly, Pauly’s work doesn’t appear in any of