
by Scott Mason, Chappaqua, New York

With the 2008 Kanterman Award-winning volume Desert Hours, Marian Olson established herself as one of the haiku world’s premier poets of place. That collection introduced readers to the unlikely, and spellbinding, natural life of New Mexico’s high desert as experienced through the soul of a kindred inhabitant. Olson now takes us across the border in her very different but equally vibrant Sketches of Mexico, inspired by decades of sojourns as a visitor to our country’s southern neighbor. The nature of Olson’s relationship with Mexico is signaled in the epigraph of this latest book: See with the heart first—

There is much indeed to see. It all begins (and—spoiler alert—ends) with color: the kaleidoscopic hues of a stylized jungle scene by Karen McClintock grace the cover. The poems themselves paint a veritable rainbow.

ocean fog— orange pink yellow
in a patch of blue dahlia skirts
an island drifts by swish in the dance

luxury hotel happy hour
gold crystal malachite Zihuatanejo cliffs glow
first floor only red with flowers

Nor does Olson scant the other senses. She shares with us the heady tastes and aromas of her culinary discoveries; the jocund din of the streets and cantinas; and physical pleasures, both simple and sybaritic.
sailing
I drag my hand
through cool water

I try a raw oyster
to please you
then ask for another

At their very best, Olson’s haiku present Mexico, in all its contrasts and complexity, as a piquant dish.

the child licks
a candy skull
Day of the Dead

beggar’s cup
layers of gold
gold the cathedral

sunset . . .
the artist’s fingers
wet with lead paint

Or perhaps Mexico is a great big serape, where the warp of its florid landscapes and the woof of its colorful and teeming humanity both combine and compete for our attention and affections. Here the relationship can be complicated. While Olson twice in her introduction characterizes Mexico as “generous,” that quality can become strained in a populace whose impoverishment works against its capacity for largesse. Beggars figure in no fewer than eight haiku. Many more poems portray locals employing an assortment of stratagems with visitors to make ends meet.

gift of a yellow rose
to bring her back
Pepe’s flower stall

table serenade
the singer looks at his tip
and waits

hand-drawn chain
blocks each car
ten pesos to pass

Then there are the tourists. (The author would doubtless—and I think justifiably—consider herself a returning guest.) With no excuse for less than gracious behavior, these folks receive Olson’s most withering gaze.
Good Friday procession
a gringo steps in
with the biggest candle

no place to escape
the tour-boat bullhorn
uneasy seals

Gucci bag knockoff
the tourist buys three
just because

A handful of poems give us a tantalizing glimpse of Mexicans uninvolved with, or seemingly oblivious to, the tourist and hospitality trades. I found these the most heartwarming and refreshing of all.

stiff-legged children
mimic street clowns
on stilts

family-held blanket
a girl steps out
in a bikini

señoritas
wrinkled men on the beach
cease their talk

Start to finish, *Sketches of Mexico* is like a piñata. Crack it open and a new world pours out in all its colorful, complex, sensual, edgy and, ultimately, intoxicating glory.

agave its sharp edges tequila

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*Scott Mason’s haiku have received the top honor in more than a dozen international competitions, including the 2012 Harold G. Henderson Memorial Award from the Haiku Society of America. He currently serves as an associate editor with *The Heron’s Nest.*

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