

Not Asking what if by Adele Kenny (2016, Muse-Pie Press, Passaic NJ). 80 pages, 4¼×6½", perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-918452-51-8. \$16.50 from adelekenny.com

Reviewed by Wally Swist

Not Asking what if is a refreshing book of haiku. I should probably clarify that I have read many of these haiku before, and that I can emphasize that I reveled in reading them again. I became acquainted with many of these haiku by having read them either in journals or in previous volumes of Adele Kenny's. However, it is actually nurturing to see these all collected here along with new haiku within a single volume, and a distinguished volume it is.

My overall aesthetic appraisal of the collection, other than its ostensible accomplishment, is that it resonates with what I can term the era the haiku originated from—the 70s, 80s, and 90s—as a golden age of North American haiku. These decades were reflected by what is sometimes referred to as the first wave of haiku poets, and possibly some second wave writers, including the late Nick Virgilio, master of acute perceptions within the haiku moment; Virginia Brady Young, who was expert in representing the layers of images within nature in the haiku form, ever so ingeniously; and Raymond Roseliep, who taught everyone how to look deeper into the ordinariness of our lives and to discover either the *mysterium tremendum* in them or a kind of ribald humor, often with oneself as the subject or object, or both.

We also can't forget the true majesty of Elizabeth Searle Lamb, indeed, as she was dubbed, "the first lady of haiku," and her precision of image and tone, which I wouldn't doubt originated from her being an accomplished harpist and who had played in at least one symphony orchestra.

All that richness comes back to me in reading the haiku in *Not Asking what if*. Nor can we forget the inimitable John Wills, who in my mind is, perhaps, the premier American haiku poet, when we read his "a box of nails / on the shelf in the shed / the cold." Elements of such classic American haiku resonate within those

of Adele Kenny's. Hers may not have been written thirty or forty years ago, or more, but the tones of her haiku echo in a similar demonstrative and memorable way. In her new book we read:

snow in the air —
the graveyard gate opens
on rusty hinges

that is reminiscent of Wills. Another haiku of Adele's that this time recalls the immaculate depths of Father Roseliep, who was also a Catholic priest, reads:

gathering shadows
statues
with broken arms

There is a mysticism that reverberates in this haiku whose spectrum ranges from the alchemical to a treatise by either Meister Eckhart or Thomas Merton on the benefits of poverty in the life of the spirit.

Two more of my favorites in Adele Kenny's book are:

abbey bells
muffled by dusk
as the hills lose shape

which is one of the most lyrically achieved haiku I have ever read, especially with the onomatopoeia of abbey bells; and

nightfall
the corners of my room
disappear first

which is such a writer's or poet's haiku in that anyone who has labored long in one's study or over one's desk has had to experience those "corners of my room" become only an evanescent memory as one's day has in working on a revision

or a new piece of writing, just to see the perfection you were seeking dissipate into oblivion.

It is also significant for me to see that Adele Kenny, as well as some other haiku poets, have worked successfully in various genres, since she has published books of what haiku poets call “longer poems,” as well as prose books regarding creative writing as well as collectibles. Although there is one more haiku, out of a very many in this book that are quotable, which I can’t help but mention, as one of my own personal favorites, and that is one that is also reminiscent of Raymond Roseliep, also referred to as “the John Donne of western haiku,” who had published several volumes of traditional verse with W.W. Norton & Company in the early sixties only to forego writing “longer poems” and composing only haiku for the last decade, or so, of his life. This haiku reminds me of the one that the American poet Denise Levertov, who published many books with New Directions, quoted in a blurb on the back of Roseliep’s book, *Listen to Light*, published in a handsome edition by Alembic Press in the late 1970s, which reads: “campfire extinguished / a woman washing dishes / in a pan of stars.”

Adele Kenny’s haiku, with its own echo providing equal clarity, is reminiscent of Roseliep’s poem as it is concomitantly a fine companion piece:

mountain spring—
my hands
fill with stars

Kenny’s haiku isn’t quite as romantic but it is evocative of the “mountain spring.” We can, as readers, feel the coldness of the water she is cupping, before she drinks; taste the fresh water; see a galaxy cupped in her hands. If anything, Kenny’s haiku is at least as pure as Roseliep’s, if not offering a more elemental clarity—one that is at least as memorable.

Not Asking what if is a book of haiku that can be read for enjoyment and delight. It can also be read as a primer in its own right as to how to craft language into an aesthetic in which haiku

can be subtly and providently shaped, effortlessly holding itself into an imagistic perpetuity.

first crickets—
the pulse
in my wrist

BRIEFLY REVIEWED

Reviewed by Randy Brooks:

Past Due by Jeff Stillman (2015, Red Moon Press, Winchester VA). 64 pages, 4¼×6½", perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936848-49-2. \$12 from redmoonpress.com

Last spring one of my students, Erica Forbes, told me I had to read Jeff Stillman's new book, *Past Due*. She said it's the only haiku book she's read in which she could count on every haiku having a genuine sense of being alive, with the author paying attention to things that matter. With such high praise I was eager to check out this collection, and I am glad to report that Erica is right. This is an outstanding collection of authentic haiku—simple, direct perceptions of daily life and relationships. With only one haiku per page, the reader can pause to let each haiku slowly open up into a gift of insight or emotional significance. One of my many dog-eared favorites: *boardwalk stretching the length of her complaint*, and another: *biting cold / the gritted teeth / of jumper cables*

Finding a Way by Robert Witmer (2016, Cyberwit, Allahabad, India). 70 pages, 5½×8½", perfectbound. ISBN 978-93-85945-13-7. \$15 from cyberwit.net

In the introduction Robert Witmer states that haiku "intensify and exalt experience, whether actual or imaginative." *Finding a*