

**At the Top of the Ferris Wheel: Selected Haiku of Cor van den Heuvel** by Cor van den Heuvel (2017, Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA). 304 pages, 5×8", perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9826951-5-9. \$30 from The Haiku Foundation.

*Reviewed by Randy Brooks*

**A**t the Top of the Ferris Wheel features haiku by Cor van den Heuvel, one of the leading editors and writers of haiku in English, providing access to select published work from his books spanning nearly fifty years of writing. From his earliest haiku, he has demonstrated an artistic command of conversational language with surprising leaps of perception, as in this haiku from his first chapbook, *Sun in Skull* (1961): *in the toy pail / at low tide floats / the still ferris wheel* (21). Childhood play, often from a boy's perspective, is the most common theme throughout van den Heuvel's collections. For example, *through the small holes / in the mailbox / sunlight on a blue stamp* (38). He also likes to write from a sense of adventure about cowboys and Indians from the wild west, as in *distant thunder / Crazy Horse ties up / his pony's tail* and *snow / tombstones tombstones / snow* (61). Several haiku from The Komiku Kollection reflect his joy of comic book adventures, but the resulting haiku often provide a surreal leap from the imaginary world to the immediate, as in this one: *from the Tarzan / comic strip a rhinoceros / looks out at my mittens* (62). We see this same attraction to adventure and play in *winter evening / a pinball machine lights up / in the roadside diner* (101).

In 2002, Cor van den Heuvel was honored with the Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Award at the International Haiku Convention in Japan. In his acceptance speech, "My Haiku Path," he shared that in his earliest haiku he was trying to be poetic, employing western poetic practices such as "colorfully descriptive" adjectives and "interesting sound effects."<sup>1</sup> He also shared that "surrealistic-like juxtapositions, another carryover

from western poetics” are evident in some of his early haiku. Regarding his later haiku, he stated that “Though the use of mellifluous language and surrealistic juxtapositions may have a legitimate place in haiku, I think my path in haiku has been moving in a direction away from them.” He characterized later collections as portraying simple images of everyday life in his urban environment of New York City. For example, here is the title haiku from one of his collections: *high above the city / dawn flares / from a window-washer’s pail* (29). Other haiku portray the city life of music, as in *the blues singer / tells how bad it is / then the sax tells you too* (140). While exploring the cityscape, van den Heuvel experiments with minimal haiku and arrangement of words on the page: *snow / on the saddle-bags / sun in skull* (25). Of course his most famous minimal haiku is just one word, *tundra* (31) in which the white space of the page serves as the juxtaposed second image.

Starting in the late 1970s Cor van den Heuvel wrote and published haiku in short sequences. Some of his chapbooks were carefully arranged to read like sequences as well. For example, *The Wooden Indian* starts with *shading his eyes / the wooden Indian looks out / at the spring rain* (105). In the middle of this collection we find *a torn-up girlie magazine / at the end of the woods road / it begins to rain* (109), and the sequence ends with *drifting over the waterfall / a cloud / lit by sunset* (114).

In his 2002 award speech, it is clear that he considers haiku from the chapbook, *dark*, to be some of his best writing up to that time. Most of the haiku in *dark* are short one-line nature observations such as *a stick goes over the falls at sunset* (127). Was this a stick released by the writer to watch it go over the falls? All we know is that it goes over into the darkness of the coming night. I personally don’t care for most of the haiku from this collection because they seem to rarely transcend description. However, in a review of this collection, Rod Wilmot claims that Cor van den Heuvel goes beyond his usual spiritual quests to a psychological acceptance of loss as an essential part of the human experience.<sup>2</sup> My favorite from *dark* is *from behind me / the shadow of the ticket-taker / comes down the aisle*” (128). In this haiku the dark

shadow comes up “from behind me” but there is a suggestion that the train is going somewhere beyond just taking tickets.

After a short period of writing sparse, bare-reality, cityscape haiku, Cor returned to favorite passions from his childhood—baseball haiku published in *Play Ball* and haibun memoirs titled *A Boy's Seasons*. Here is a playful haiku from his memoirs: *hide-out in the woods / my bow and arrows / wait for me* (182). And two favorite baseball haiku: *lingering snow / the game of catch continues / into evening* (206), and *dispute at second base / the catcher lets some dirt / run through his fingers* (211). These are haiku with a passion for life and adventure. The circus is back in town in *standing on one foot / the bareback rider rides her horse / into my dreams* (187). I enjoy these haiku of adventure and play—American haiku written with a fresh voice of possibility, a boy's perspective that embraces views and adventures beyond the ordinary nature of things. Van den Heuvel's best haiku reach beyond the drudgery of everyday observations and let us remember that childlike sense of wonder: *alone / at the top of the ferris wheel / the moon* (279).

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1. Van den Heuvel, Cor, “My Haiku Path,” The Haiku Foundation Digital Library, accessed January 20, 2018, <http://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/1519>.
2. Willmot, Rod. “Cor van den Heuvel: The Jazzman Cometh.” *Modern Haiku*, 20:2. Madison, WI: Modern Haiku Press, 1989, 27–39.