

REVIEWED BY JIMMY PAPPAS

edge of suburbia haibun, haiku & monoku by Christopher Bays (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). 91 pages, 6" x 9". Glossy covers, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-947271-82-1. \$20 from <https://redmoonpress.com/>.

The book begins with an epigraph from Hermann Hesse about being a “seeker” but not “among stars or in books.” Instead, “I have begun to listen to the teachings of my blood pulsing through me.” What a perfect epigraph for the central theme of this collection. In this collection’s 33 haibun, Christopher Bays takes the reader through his upbringing in urban and suburban places, sharing about living with his father and mother.

In the first haibun, we meet the author’s daughter sleeping on a couch as the poet wonders, “Which unsullied forest will open in her dreams today?” Then, in the first haiku, we watch as the author’s “face / trickles down the window.” Such great images and personal stories immediately take the reader into the book to seek what else can be found.

We find ourselves in Germany. At a “penguin exhibit,” there are “men holding purses by the ladies’ room.” What a wonderful image—I have waited in such a situation many times before.

Then we learn about the local small butcher shops: “All of them were kind butchers, only buying animals from small farms. Killing them quickly.” But they could not sustain their shops and eventually would lose out to factory farming, slaughterhouses, and larger grocery stores.

foraged greens . . .	stilled winds
a scent from childhood	the broken door
with each bite	clunks shut

Next, we are at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. We learn that the author used to live overseas on a similar base, where

he grew up as a “military brat.” How often those “brats” have to wait for their parents, sometimes for long periods of time and sometimes not knowing if they will ever return. In the sequence of opening pieces, the emphasis shifts from waiting to slaughter and back, increasing the narrative tension.

In another haibun, the speaker visits his father in the hospital before he dies. The father had journeyed out of Kentucky and Vietnam as if the two places were equally problematic. On the way to the hospital, the speaker imagines his father yelling at him to “slow the fuck down”—and one thinks of how many fathers over the years have said that to their sons. The father had asked for him, but is unable to say anything final to his son, just a sigh and then he “is gone.” At the grave, the son will “say the unsaid words.” But what are those words? My guess is “I love you.”

The father was the type of man who stacked empty beer cans, a simple fact that tells so much about the man himself. We look back at his life since we learn of his death about halfway through the book, as if the author finally began to think back on their relationship. He grew up on Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany with model airplanes hanging from the walls and ceiling while real airplanes were on television from Vietnam, where his father was.

The father returns from 'Nam with a Viet Cong crossbow. It was used to fire bamboo arrows “dipped in shit” to cause infections. The boy learned how to fire the bow shooting at a garden wall “again and again” while “a firestorm” was in his brain.

whirling maple seeds . . .	incessant rain
papa returns	within my mind
from Vietnam	a firestorm

In Iowa, the author makes a best friend named Pete who has a “prize pig that played fetch with corncobs.” The author thinks, “What more could a boy want beyond this farm?” But Pete wishes “he could leave this place” and wonders if his friend realizes how

“lucky” he was “to have lived in Germany.” Both boys are jealous of the other. The key to Pete’s sadness is his father. At the dinner table, Pete’s “father’s words were the only words spoken during that meal.”

Here, we delve into Bays’s mother’s heritage: the life of her own mother and father, Oma and Opa. Poor families always know the importance of food in life. They are willing to share and still “fight over the last bite.” As so often happens, families drift apart through divorce or travel. Oma dies and the family feasts disappear.

Before Opa went to war, he had planted a black cherry tree for Oma. He would not return, but she would tend that tree for forty years until she could no longer bend over to pick up cherries or climb a ladder to reach them. At that point, she did the unexpected: cut the tree down.

As a boy, the author and his cousins play with a gas mask hanging on a wall until his uncle shouts from above about “respect for the dead.” That is followed by a wonderful haiku:

arrowheads
within a plowed field
the heft of secrets

The author gets a call from his mother about an incident with a few “handsome” teen boys. They seemed so nice with their suits and ties that she takes a flier from them. It was all about Nazis, so she calls them “horrible, horrible boys.” Then they snicker, click their heels, and give her a Nazi salute. Other people have to keep her moving so she will not attack the boys.

Christopher Bays has followed the advice of one of his haibun: “the best writing often comes from personal tragedies.” Now he lives in “suburbia,” but he has the stories of “papa with PTSD; mama a child of war.” We have been taken into the world of his past—his heritage—in order to learn more about what it means to be human. We are better people for having done so. ◻■