

fanciful black and white drawings in *Sunrise* (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2010, 2019). This cover has bold red and orange forms that to me resemble vertebrae. I recall a poem from *Imago*: “the darkening/desert sky//vertebrae breaking through.” The image is organic, visceral, and holds a lot of emotional friction, which pairs well with the collection’s content.

This is a forward-thinking, expertly crafted, and remarkable collection. I highly recommend it. ◻■

### REVIEWED BY JUDSON EVANS

*A Man on Horseback: Haibun* by Joe McKeon (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2024). 100 pages, 6” x 9”. Perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-958408-52-0. \$20 from [redmoonpress.com](http://redmoonpress.com)

The combination of the title in lowercase—“a man on horseback” and cover art of a solo merry-go-round horse isolated from its cohorts—strikes the right tone for a collection that breaks chunks of nostalgia loose from the carnival of Americana to examine each fragment in the round. McKeon’s haibun offer a fine-tuned appreciation of textures of a specific place and time, the southside of Chicago in the 50’s-70’s:

“Chicago has always been a city of two world views  
northside verses southside. cubs versus sox. magnificent  
mile versus skid row.

rustbelt  
the mortgage broker draws  
a red line”

(“Dissociative Identity Disorder”)

The haibun also range across the American scene historically as politics and technology shift from the Space Age to the

present: “all hallows eve/ a kid in a Trump mask/ with a large bag” (“Collection Basket”), “direct from the cloud/ a heavenly voice croons/ *The Twelfth of Never*” (“331/3”). McKeon’s wise, wry voice holds the reader with its self-deprecating humor and relatable equanimity.

While the range of the collection is wide—from the agonies of the U.S. border (“Red Slippers”) , to the atomizing of dancing children to shadows in the atomic blast in Japan (“Fat Man”), to the Himalayas, Yosemite, Masai Masa Natural Reserve, paleolithic caves, as well as to Key West, and the streets of my own city, Boston, for a celebration of a hero of The Boston Marathon—the book is most powerful as it cuts a subtle, sardonic exposé through the American complexity of class, race and the cruelties and disappointments of capitalism.

If McKeon sidetracks the despair of Willy Loman, it is because his poetic vision finds precise, fresh moments even in the slog of nine-to-five boredom:

“Tuesday or Wednesday? Indianapolis or Baton Rouge? ...  
My third scotch on the rocks. But I’m all right...I’m all right...”

continental breakfast  
my day planner open  
to a new page”

(“I’m No Wille Loman”)

McKeon makes us feel a whole “continent” made flat for Waffle Houses, but without the “content” that hovers unreachable within that loaded word “continent”.

His vision’s antidote to despair is sly humor, as he skewers the gerbil wheel of middle class striving in the book’s title poem:

“Nothing will dampen my confidence except, perhaps,  
this slight twitch under my eye.

twilight  
the ups and downs  
of a carousel horse”

That same saving tone traces the demystifications of American romance in a haibun with my favorite title (in a book with so many wonderful titles) “Climbing Down the High Dive Ladder”:

“Fogged up windows, she looks at me with bedroom eyes  
and softly murmurs, ‘We have to wait’.

still in port  
the cruise ship captain  
goes over the rules”

While only explicit in four haibun across the collection—“Two Journals, One Man”, “Cloud Hunting,” “The Birthday Present” and “The Lottery Winner”—, the Vietnam War remains an emotional undercurrent that adds poignancy to even the lighter moments:

“...It’s the friendship that matters most. It’s about camaraderie. They talk of their brides, careers, children, hobbies. Magically they become virile young men disguised in geriatric bodies.

golden arches  
each man’s war  
on his hat”

(“Miracles”)

Up until I reached this haiku, I had been speculating on why the author wrote some haibun with traditional capitalization and punctuation in the prose, but shifted to all lower case, yet with conventional punctuation, in others. As a teacher of poetry at a

Music School with students anxious to experiment, I've usually advised: either use traditional punctuation or use none; either use traditional capitalization or drop it consistently.

But in the hands of such a strong writer, I stayed vigilant and came to see how this switch has several functions. It helps create variety in movement from more conventional first-person narration to more decentered objective observations where the thing-ly quality of haiku leaks into the prose. Haiku defamiliarize the familiar. To the haiku mind the "Golden Arches" of McDonald's commercial hype and omnipresence become "golden arches"—cheap, insubstantial décor.

To return to the substance of McKeon's Vietnam haibun, I want to praise a powerful passage in "The Birthday Present":

"He complied with their request to squat and get back up. They declared him 1A—fit for active duty.

lottery winners  
shipments of body bags  
arrive by helicopter"

As a teenager I just barely missed the draft. I had older friends and relatives radically changed by Vietnam and have been deeply moved by both the Vietnam Memorial, and most recently, a visit to the "War Remnants Museum" (previously "American War Crimes Museum") in Ho Chi Minh City, an experience I have yet to be able to express in poetry. Here, what is left unsaid, in true haiku fashion, is as important as what is:

"The road to Heaven's Gate snakes its way higher and higher... [ ] a stairway leads to the coffee shop known for seedless persimmons and tremendous views of the Fairy Breasted Mountains...It's much different than the last time I was here.

zen garden  
a monk holds up  
empty hands”

(“Cloud Hunting”)

So much is subtly suggested in the “snaking” toward “Heaven’s Gate”, the sense of sweetness in the persimmons only slightly undercut by “seedless”, the delicate femininity of a setting where we can imagine violent battles between men. The last sentence of the prose is so understated that all our attention plunges to the empty hands of the zen monk in the haiku.

As a reader, and more specifically, as an editor, myself, I always approach a book twice. First, I look at the Table of Contents, scan the titles to pick out those that pull me in, and read those selected poems to get a first take on the book. Then, I read methodically, cover to cover. Here, I had many titles tugging at me, and I enjoyed the poems that had a direct personal resonance. I have spent time in Key West, went on the “Ghost Tour” and learned about “Robert the Doll”. Likewise, “Sacred Darkness” spoke to my fascination with cave art. Remembering the excesses of the consciousness raising movements of the 70’s, I was a sucker for “Primal Scream” which had a surprise in store. And I had to read “Climbing Down the High Dive Ladder” and I wasn’t disappointed. This is a collection wide enough to work this way for any reader.

Reading cover to cover, though, I had one slight criticism among so many well-crafted and moving haibun. I would have appreciated organization in thematic sections, whether titled or not. This poet is adept at titles and I’m sure subtitles could work here with subtlety. Nonetheless, despite the wide range of themes—which also include family, alcohol, travel and elegy—the portrait of complexities of American experience stands out through this masterful writer’s lens: growing up with the ambiguities of masculinity, class, and capitalism; negotiating

a range of jobs and relationships, and commenting on how others, including immigrants, manage this negotiation. This is an impressive, engaging collection on many levels, and I recommend it highly. □■

#### REVIEWED BY NICHOLAS KLACSANZKY

*Haiku 2024: 100 Notable Ku From 2023*, edited by Scott Metz and Lee Gurga (Modern Haiku Press, Champaign, IL: 2024). 132 pages, 4.2" x 5.5". Softback. ISBN: 978-0-9600855-7-6. \$10 from [modernhaiku.org/mhbooks/Haiku2024.html](http://modernhaiku.org/mhbooks/Haiku2024.html).

Though the anthologies in this series from Modern Haiku Press can fit in your pocket, they pack a serious punch. With editors Scott Metz and Lee Gurga at the helm, the haiku selected are innovative and unique. Choosing 100 haiku to represent one year is difficult. However, I think the editors chose poems that push boundaries and show where English-language haiku can go.

Even though each haiku was selected as a representation of the year, I enjoyed some poems more than others. Here are some haiku that I thought exceeded my expectations that I would like to commentate on:

strawberry moon  
trading heads  
with Medusa

*Mike Andreleczyk*

With a creative pivot line and a resonant *kigo* mixed with a myth, surrealism takes ancestral history into account.

false spring —  
the stars & stripes  
pole dancing

*Francine Banwarth*