
REVIEWS

Stone's Throw: Promises of Mere Words, by Gary Hotham (Montrose, Colo: Pinyon Publishing, 2016). 105 pages; 5¼" x 8". Glossy blue card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936671-33-5. Price: \$16.00 from www.pinyon-publishing.com

Reviewed by Peter Newton

As the author notes in his introductory remarks to *Stone's Throw: Promises of Mere Words*, "Without words the world is the child's dark closet of unknowns." In his latest full-length collection, Gary Hotham proceeds to throw open those closet doors onto a landscape of language. His poems are the "lights we see the world with." Hotham is an expert of the overlooked. He captures each experience precisely using just the right words to allow the reader immediate and repeated rewards.

Haiku as dense and layered as Hotham's benefit from the one-poem-per-page format. You'll want to examine Hotham's work from several angles to appreciate their fine craftsmanship. In reading his poems we are reminded that there is always something at which to marvel. Our challenge as human beings is to take notice and the bigger challenge for some of us is to set these experiences to words. *Stone's Throw* is evidence that few contemporary American haiku poets are achieving this challenge as consistently as Gary Hotham.

Hotham's language in *Stone's Throw* is simple, welcoming. The images he conjures are familiar. It is his accomplished placement of images and precise word choice that give his haiku staying power. In his brief preface the author offers some explanation of his subtitle, 'Promises of Mere Words.' He says, "A deeper or greater understanding of the world comes

by testing and refining it with more words or better words.” Better words are not bigger words. In fact, there are no big words in Hotham’s haiku. What’s big is their impact. For example:

before it turns dark —
children start a game
they’ve just played

No sense of past or future when you are a child. All we have is now. Kids know this without knowing it. That’s what Hotham does for his readers. He allows them to know things again. And it’s refreshing to relive this experience. Ah, the power of a single poem.

The range of subject matter in *Stone’s Throw* is to be admired. There are the expected poems of death and loss. But the way in which Hotham handles this familiar subject is a mark of his accomplishment.

Dad’s funeral —
the same knot
in my tie

In “Dad’s funeral” the poet triggers a multitude of meanings with his knotted tie. Did the father teach him to tie a tie when he was young? Did the poet tie the tie that the father wears in his casket? And there is the more subtle knot or lump in one’s throat which speaks to the grief that exists beyond words. The emotional impact of one image is left open to interpretation. Possibilities are the best gift a haiku poet can give the reader. And Hotham is generous.

Nearly all of Hotham’s poems in *Stone’s Throw* are written in three lines. There are a very few exceptions as when he employs the use of the dash on its own line:

more windows than home	lights we see the world with
—	—
the child’s drawing	fireflies

Is he bucking tradition, pushing language to its limit or simply punching up the volume on the words he does provide. A dash of drama, so to speak. On one level Hotham's use of the dash on its own line is a clear division, a pause in the reader's mind. On a deeper level he is asking the reader to fill-in the blank. And of course the reader's participation is central to an effective haiku. While the poet maintains his ties to haiku traditions, Hotham is a progressive in his use of the dash. He seems to be indicating that sometimes, the best word is no word at all. It's this level of restraint that makes Hotham such a valuable teacher to the newly minted haiku poet as well as his contemporaries.

The title poem is typical of the everyday enigmas Hotham presents for his readers:

stone's throw
the rest of north
behind us

Here is the voice of an explorer. A man deep into his discoveries of the known world (Hotham's been writing haiku for more than 40 years). One could reach a destination with very little effort if it's a "stone's throw" away. Hotham is a man in the middle however. Between the possibilities of what lay ahead and "the rest of north / behind us." Here is where we catch a glimpse of the poet's willingness to go off-road. He is not concerned with what has already been accomplished. North is of little interest now. It's what goes beyond north that is Hotham's guiding principle. The undiscovered. Perhaps, the undiscoverable.

Sure, there are poems that some readers may find a bit too enigmatic. Too concise. Perhaps, just not enough words there. Whenever I encountered one—and they are few and far between—I was rewarded after multiple readings. That's the thing with a poet like Hotham. He is a man of age and experience. Most of his poems strike just the right chord on the first pass.

So much of *Stone's Throw* is celebration of life and language. A poet's tribute to a life well-lived. And it's not over yet. Here's another example of Hotham's easy yet earned wisdom:

New Year's day
 the party hat not made
 to stay on

That string-thin elastic band is all that holds the life of the party together. Which is to say—life itself. It's a temporary arrangement. Perhaps the poet is saying it's time to set childish things aside. The party's over. But I suspect Gary Hotham might argue otherwise. In *Stone's Throw* he sustains a consistent atmosphere of celebration. A party that does not end. A tribute to the one-breath poem which is made up of words but not merely words—better words.

Imago, by Peter Yovu (Princeton, N.J.: Ornithopter Press, 2016). 32 pages, 4½" x 7½". Gray card cover with block-printed wrappings; saddle-stitched. ISBN 978-1-942723-02-8. Price \$11.00 from www.ornithopterpress.com/books.

Reviewed by Cherie Hunter Day

The author describes the scope of *Imago* as: "about sixty individual pieces arranged in nine sequences. One-line poems take the place of titles, acting as 'resonators' from which a number of other poems sound out, and back in. [...] I have brought my love of the image, of sound, of haiku, aphorism, riddle, fragments and brief texts to bear in these poems many of which are personal in nature but reflect [...] universal themes."

The term *imago* has several meanings that are explored in this book. *Imago* is Latin for 'image,' something that is one step removed from an actual object. For Yovu the image in poetry supplies the necessary turn-around space for the imagination. The following one-liners are examples of the 'resonators' he refers to, which act as section heads.

A Blade as Belief as Long as Tomorrow

For Beauty I Wept Butterfly Pins