
REVIEWS

I Reckon, by Francis Wesley Alexander (Huron, Ohio: Botton Dog Press, 2019). 108 pages; 5½" × 8½". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947504-18-9. Price: \$16.00 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by John Zheng

Francis Wesley Alexander's *I Reckon* is a collection of thirty-five haibun, eighty-two haiku/senryu, and fourteen photographs about the poet's coming-of-age in Sandusky, Ohio. It illuminates memorable moments inseparable from his life and inspirational for his creative expression.

Alexander titles his book *I Reckon* to honor Mrs. Effie McNair, a caregiver of his who wore cornrows ("A river of black flowed down her back") and whose catchphrase was always "I reckon." Alexander also titles the first haibun "I Reckon." The poem is a series of questions about the moon and stars he gazes at, not romantic but imaginative and realistic. The speaker wonders whether the worlds out there harbor life; whether they are like humans in this world; whether they have their singers like Beyoncé and Jessie J; whether they have nations, wars, religions, or competitions in sport; and whether they ride unicorns. However, the key question is whether the outer world beings look like him—"a two-legged being living on a street in a community he is proud of, in a city that provides him lifetime memories of a marvelous state, within a wonderful country, on a vast continent." Yet the concluding haiku brings the stargazer back to a cruel reality:

brutally cold night
the stars far too distant
for homeless warmth

The irony is that if this cold world (the human world) can't give warmth to the homeless, how can the stars in the outer space (the natural world) provide it? Alexander mentions being homeless again in another haibun: "I took the amusement park job to keep from being homeless. The corporation let its workers stay in one of the dorms for less than fifteen dollars a week, which suited me fine." This outside world is the reality or environment he has to face, but his inner world helps see him through.

Alexander mines a lifetime of memories, often to interesting effect. In "A School Day" each prose paragraph seems to consist of a few haiku, and the colon placed after the first phrase of each sentence seems to serve as a cutting word to trigger the brain for associative thinking or internal comparison. For example, "Perfume scent: after the bell rings, the announcements come" and "That click clack sound: running back to our seats before the teacher enters" in paragraph one; "Flash card game: before I see the numbers, my foe answers" and "Sudden sunshine: grinning that my school project was accepted" in paragraph two; and "Warm breeze: that elated feeling of releasing a shout" and "School bell rings: the sound of teachers shouting and the scurry of feet" in paragraph three.

Alexander's brief, preface-like note explains that his haiku are meant to help readers relate to their own haiku moments. When I read this haiku of his—"Summer afternoon / the dragonfly skims / along the railroad tracks"—a moment in my childhood becomes refreshed. One evening after a summer shower, I walked along a drainage ditch with tall weeds to catch yellow dragonflies and then let them go. What's more, Alexander delights the reader with tangible images and fresh imagination. Consider "badminton / with each chirp from the front / a backyard response." Its charm appears in the call and response exchanged between the shuttlecock and the bird. On the one hand, the bird reacts to the flight of the feathered shuttlecock and to its bouncing sound from the two racquets. On the other, the feathered shuttlecock seems to become a bird as well to respond to the chirp of the real bird. This haiku shows that the interaction between human nature and nature, as well as the transference between visual and auditory images, challenges a reader to think creatively and visually so that he or she can gain in aesthetic taste.

Significantly, Alexander's haiku carry traces of his African-American culture, especially black music:

Hot summer nights
the Motown sound
dancing in the streets.

Alexander's haiku also reveal the influence of African-American haiku tradition. For example, one of his jazz ku echoes a haiku by Richard Wright. Alexander's:

saxophonist
weaving jazz sounds
into blue and red streams

and Wright's from *Haiku: This Other World*:

From a tenement,
The blue jazz of a trumpet
Weaving autumn mists.

Both poets create an effective haiku moment through the visual and auditory transference; both use the verb "weaving" to help the reader visualize the music and the color "blue" to suggest a mood; both challenge the reader to access aesthetic experience through the working of the senses.

To conclude, Alexander is a poet with a strong inner world and sensibility. Though a few haibun seem to be a little too narrative or verbose, he is able to make palpable and poignant his lifetime memories of relatives, friends, games, nature, music, and places. Alexander's book, *I reckon*, is a joy to read.