

Lilacs After Winter



Haibun by
Francis Masat



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THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING

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About the Book

Journeys to the edge of life and death may not be pleasing, but the truth, insight, and outcomes at the heart of this collection show that the journey is worth the costs. Rich with experience, the poet uses natural images to show the interventions of fate. All of us have probably noticed little things in Nature like birds and raindrops, snowflakes and field mice, or stars and blossoms. But when they encompass a human story of love, loss, and redemption, they become more than one might imagine.

About the Author

Originally from the Midwest by way of New Jersey, the author is a 24/7 wildlife rescue volunteer in Key West, Florida, where he and his wife have lived for 15 years. He also volunteers feeding shut-ins and, when he finds time, writes poetry such as that in his first poetry book, *A Taste of Key West*, Pudding House Press. His work appears in over 75 anthologies and journals.

First Publication Credits

- "Arcs" *Stylus Poetry Journal*, No. 23, October 2006.
- "Distance" *Contemporary Haibun Online*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2007.
- "Hapless Currents" *Contemporary Haibun Anthology*, Vol. 8, 2007.
- "Lilacs" *Contemporary Haibun Online*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006.
- "Not Long Now" *Hermitage*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2006.
- "Only Eight" *Presence*, No. 27, September 2005.
- "Reception" *Contemporary Haibun Anthology*, Vol. 7, 2006.
- "Returning in Silence" *Stylus Poetry Journal*, No. 23, October 2006.
- "Rising Wisps" *Simply Haiku*, Vol. 2, No. 4, July/August 2004.
- "Saturday Party" *Modern Haiku*, 36.1, Winter 2005.

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And this is what my mother told me.

Arca

Returning from a doctor's office, I glance up a blue-sky day. I notice a blackbird that lands on a high-voltage insulator. There is a P.O.M. and the bird instantly begins a brief "free at last" arc. More floating than falling, it tumbles down to soft sun-drenched grass. I am compelled to stop.

Lilacs After Winter

mine

the only public

I think fleetingly about people who die suddenly, not knowing that their lives are over. The blackbird's arc, though, remains to me. It causes me to share of the blackness growing in me now, to think of my own "free at last" tumbling. In some way, my knowing gives me grace. I will not be surprised by my last arc. I pray that I too will land on soft sun-drenched grass.

travel office—

looking at brochures

with a childhood friend

And this is what my mother told me.

Arcs

Returning from a doctor's office, I glance up: a blue-sky day. I notice a blackbird that lands on a high-voltage insulator. There is a POP! and the bird instantly begins a brief "free at last" arc. More floating than falling, it tumbles down to soft sun-drenched grass. I am compelled to stop.

a bird in my hand
mine
the only pulse

I think fleetingly about people who die suddenly, not knowing that their lives are over. The blackbird's arc, though, returns to me. It causes me to think of the blackness growing in me now, to think of my own "free at last" tumbling. In some way, my knowing gives me grace: I will not be surprised by my last arc. I pray that I too will land on soft sun-drenched grass.

travel office—
looking at brochures
with a childhood friend

Some nights, time seems endless.

Not Long Now

A midnight drive up The Keys*; must get to Miami very early. Headlights starburst the blackness, turn my bug-splattered windows to white. A rising moon silvers the salt-flats. Breezes riffle the coves. Silhouetted, ospreys coddle their young atop a pine; the nest held in a hand of white limbs. Stopping to pee, I yearn to trek into the dark night.

fishing championship
flickering on the old TV—
Mom asleep again

Semi trucks tunnel by in the starry night. Their wakes riff the dark mangroves and black water. White-striped miles Morse code by, spin my thoughts back in time. I revive memories, but the future interjects. Everything runs together.

Mom leaves unsmiling—
raindrops streak
her clean windows

A lavender, pink, and iron gray dawn. The sun breaks through a cloud, bounces off the surface of Biscayne Bay. Sunrays light the bottom of a bridge in spots and flares of dazzling gold and white. Nearly to the mainland—not long now.

a short night—
Mom's eating less
each long day

*The 150-mile 43-bridge archipelago off the southwestern tip of Florida begins with Key Biscayne beside Miami and ends in the Dry Tortugas a few miles west of Key West.

Circumstance, like time, morphs our expectations.

Pl Saturday Party

The rest-home parlor is crowded: when you listen, you hear the same stories from different families. A row of matriarchs—hand-to-hand in their walkers—passes through. People gather around a new arrival and her one old suitcase.

tall cedars—
old folks
bend in the wind

Men and women creep down the halls, moving through late afternoon sunrays like white dust motes. In the Alzheimer's unit, Mother and I share a glass of ice water. We sing Happy Birthday again and again, then again, and again.

Mother's doll tumbles
from her wheel chair—
"What's cake?"

And some days seem longer than time itself.

Droplets

thunder—
the sound echoes
the sound

In full sunlight, without warning, a shower, straight down. In a moment, it slants away in white racing swirls. On a hapless breeze, droplets begin to sift through our window.

“Tell me what you see,” she pleads. And I start.

“The palm trunks are soaked turning them from shades of gray to tan and light caramel brown. The shag bark of the mahoganies changed from mottled gray to black beneath their vibrant green canopy. The waxy crotons shine with light. Each variegation of orange, yellow, red, and green, sparkles brighter. On the peeling gumbo-limbo trees, shades of cinnabar and red spread out in widening . . .”

And I stop. She has fallen asleep again. I simply sit and stare through prisms of droplets.

sudden storm
on our deck
the same stray dog

And there comes a time to seek other shores.

Please—Let Her Swim

fresh breeze—
the weathervane turning
with the gulls

Each night her sheets fill with morphine winds. She leaves again this port, her tiller set for morning. Once more, pushed windward, all aft to bow secure, her halyards strain, her gunnels wash and buck in a flow of tides that she can no longer fathom.

On her nightly sea, she's spun again by rip tides, skirting Charybdis' whirlpools and Scylla's appetite. There is no one at her helm these nights; surely her tiller must break free, leaving her in irons, rolling and tacking in winds we pray we never feel.

harbor sunset—
walking the long way
home

We try to plug our ears against her siren screams, but they seep though our skin and soak our souls. We who watch ask again—Will Zeus send his bolt to slash only her sails, leaving her adrift once more to wash-up upon another morning's shore of pain?

Her battered masts have held for much too long. Let this be the night that they shatter and fall, firing her tattered sails for Hades' welcome sight. Set this vessel free from these useless odysseys. Please—let her swim with the Nereids evermore.

white beach shell—
becoming
sand

Then, the waters grew colder.

Hapless Currents

Snowflakes swirl across the windows. They sift through hapless currents onto the grass-clumped homes of field mice hunkered down—their names unknown to us.

Inside the empty dining room, glitter snowflakes twist on the ends of gold ribbons hung from holiday wreaths. They sway in hapless currents of hot rest-home air. Four snowflakes hang over each table. Each flake has a name in gold. The names once caused smiles and tears for mothers—their names unknown to us.

Unlike the countless snowflakes swirling down to the field mice homes, the number of snowflakes inside is constant. Each year, though, as if by hapless currents, new names do appear.

Christmas lights
twinkle on and off
beyond a hearse

And it snowed and snowed and snowed.

Reception

winter goodbye—
ice crystals inside
a paw print

I sigh in relief—finally home. Almost immediately, the stinging pain of the cold yields to the warmth and aromas of the kitchen. The windows are frosted over from the steam of baked potatoes with dry crusty skins, macaroni with a rich cheesy crust, rice pudding with raisins and nutmeg crusted into the top, sour home-canned cherries under a sugar-cinnamon crust.

the coffin
slowly sinks
through the frozen snow

The doorbell rings. Our reception begins.

The next day . . .

Rising Wisps

My near-frozen breath rises above me. I scratch a small circle in the frost on my bedroom window, look out at the snow that has flocked our neighbor's trees. Even inside there is the ozone smell of cold fresh snow.

our first storm together
listening for creaks
in the old roof

Sunlight gleams through cracks in the weathered clapboard siding. Thoughts of chores and skiing. I slide out from the warmth of covers, pull on stiff, icy clothes, open the door to a glistening white yard.

the smell of sweet hay—
steam rising
from the barn floor

Amidst the rising sounds of wind, we set out cakes, a teapot with steam rising from the spout. The mug's warmth flows into my hands.

sixty-fifth birthday—
snow-white wisps of hair
dangle above my tea

After a while, the story swapping begins.

Only Eight

As an eight-year-old boy, I wanted a flowering plant for my Mother for Mother's Day. Crossing the rail-yard near home, I scooped up a dainty white flowering plant and planted it in a clay pot I had found. Mom liked it, smiled, and put it on her kitchen window shelf, next to her cactus.

empty flowerpot
rain clings
to the spider web

The cactus lived for almost 30 years. My plant died in about three days: I used hardpan and the plant had few roots. In time I learned that each spring the railroad yard sprouted weeds bearing tiny white flowers that always went to seed and died in about a week.

late blooms
white and sparkling—
early frost

Years later, I gave my Mother a potted chrysanthemum each Mother's Day. In the summer, I would transplant it near her porch so she could enjoy it in the fall. When she moved to a senior center, I found that I had planted only eight mums.

grassy patch—
a child stands
where the railroad was

We share one of Mother's favorite poems.

A Classroom in the Snow

Snow mixed with poignant love and disbelief. Memories long since dead are now aroused by choking clouds of plaster dust rolling away like childhood dreams and fears. Smile and sigh and die a little; they're tearing down my school.

a child
twisting string
into a bracelet

Creaking stairs and giant ceilings—bells and swings no more. Smiles and rain and running—melancholy love and nostalgic pain for long past sunlit rooms aglow with flowered, bustling bulletin boards.

the world
spinning
under a hand

The first sunlit goldfish bowl; tall women who stoop to help. I can but imagine the steel ball crashing through windowpanes, splintering the floor where I shuffled my feet beneath a desk smelling of yellow paper and soft crayons.

an eraser
clearing space
for what is next

Then I had to walk and walk and walk . . .

Distance

A swimming and fishing lake lies upstream of the 1910 railway bridge east of town.

skimming rocks

— — —

the clouds reform

Down stream, beyond the railway bridge, I can sometimes see, depending on season, the bridge for the highway that parallels the railroad.

spring morning—

bike tracks fade

between puddles

If I focus on the bridge beyond the bridge, I see life flowing back and forth, in and out of town, fleeting past as if I am not here. I turn away, ignoring them in their trip across their bridge.

autumn afternoon

cicadas replaced

by the clack of cattle cars

Even with my back turned, the breeze carries the occasional humming, singing sound of a semi or cycle ripping over the road.

in the shadows

an old carp moves

under the bank

With the indigo-black night, Libra returns.

Returning in Silence

I rest against a tree on the western side of a hill overlooking Little Rock Creek. As the afternoon light plays out on the vale, violet hues emerge, deepening into blues and grays. The path is barely visible now, but the time has come to head home again.

forest road
shadows press together
shoulder to shoulder

Through a dark dell, I find a path down to Silver Lake. Small sand beaches surround the lake, as though they are ropes that keep the lake from spilling out. I walk onto a pebble shore and stop. There is no one anywhere, but no matter: home is only a few quiet hours away.

skimming rocks
—
only the stars return

Time and history passes and I return in May.

Lilacs

In my Mother's day, lilac switches and lessons went together. As a child, I learn to choose, when ordered to select my personal switch. My thoughts jumped between "Is this the day to scream-dance to thin and stingy cuts?" and "Or is this the day to howl-jump from thicker darker welts?"

I made my choices then, and the pain, as time since, passed. At least my Mother let me choose.

May morning—
cutting lilac blossoms
for Mother's grave





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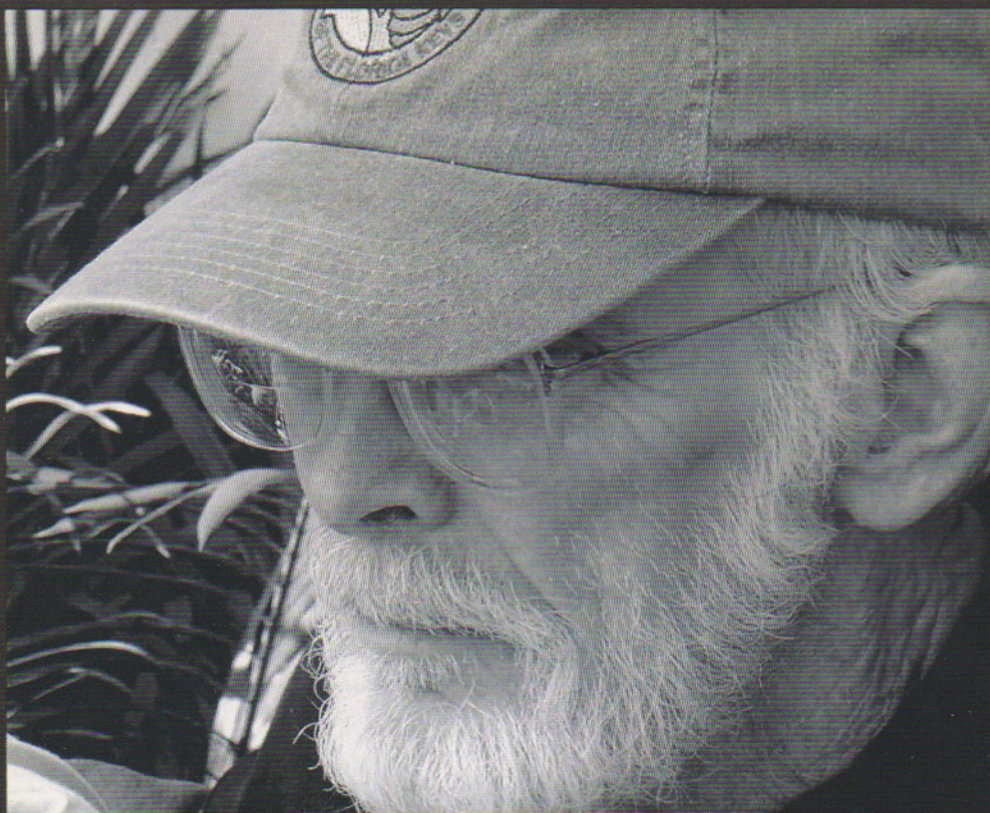
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