Roads to the Interior

W. Hans Miller
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The musical poems collected in Roads to the Interior honor truth and beauty while reflecting on the self and nature.

In W. Hans Miller's poetry collection Roads to the Interior, nature is the fulcrum between reflecting on the self and observing the external world.

Though most of its collected poems are free-verse entries, the book's brief acknowledgment cites the work of seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō who wrote haiku, as the influence and inspiration for its work. Despite this pronounced inspiration, though, the book's entries are quite varied in form. Their subject matter includes moments outdoors, honoring nature, engaging in self-reflection, and metaphysical concerns. Most entries preference brevity and surface simplicity; some use traditional haiku techniques as well, like setting a poem within a particular season—or experimenting with the form, as with “Tiny Sound”:

    in the growing quiet of night  
    a tiny sound  
    baby woodpecker  
    practicing.

Many make external observations memorable, with lines like “The little white ceramic Buddha on the rocky hillside, / shoulders excited by the sun's burning rays” conveying images so sudden and visual that they approach experience itself. And while many of its entries zoom into single moments, the book's longer poems center on metaphysics or self-reflection and veer toward end rhymes.

Attentiveness to details of color, contour, and context makes the book's images visible. Still, its most successful evocations pull on images outside of the speaker's busy mind and personal mythology. This conflict between within and without becomes explicit in poems like “Grandma's Legacy,” where the speaker rebels against the inclination to put a human spin on everything and tries instead to “discern snow's point of view,” and in the conclusion of “Earth's Ayahuasca”: “We were born as one. We will die as one another.”

In poems weighted more toward metaphysical concerns, visceral details, even if imagined, morph into less exciting figurative language, as with “I smashed two flints to start a firelight. / My fuel was made of memories dying without death.” And the book’s metaphysical poems ask familiar questions—about a person's place in the world; about their connections to others. Some begin with epigrams or dedications to other writers and philosophers; some are framed as parables and consider time-honored truths.

Rocking between an external and internal focus, the musical poems collected in Roads to the Interior honor truth and beauty while reflecting on the self and nature.

MICHELE SHARPE (October 31, 2023)

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