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**Review: *The Taste of the Earth* by Hedy Habra**

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Hedy Habra's third collection of poetry, *The Taste of the Earth* was the winner of the 2020 Silver Nautilus Book Award in Poetry, also a Grand Prix 2020 Short-list Honoree in all genres for the Eric Hoffer Award, and Finalist for the 2019 Best Book Award in Poetry.

The first lines of "Topography," the initial poem in the book, describe the poet contemplating her own reflection in a mirror:

Sometimes I think my face is a map,  
each line a faint record of hidden scars,  
of what I've seen or felt...

and the poem ends with this sentence:

...I often see  
that other face beneath the one looking  
at me in the mirror, swelling with recollections,  
unraveling all of my senses.

Indeed, the topography found in the book itself is a combination of internal and external mapping, as Habra sifts through her memories of places lived in and left, some long ago, some torn by war and upheaval.

Hedy Habra identifies herself as "of Lebanese origin...born and raised in Heliopolis, Egypt and has lived in both countries." ([hedyhabra.com](http://hedyhabra.com)) Her first language was French, and she is now fluent in five languages plus having studied both Greek and Latin. In Beirut she graduated with a B.S. in Pharmacy, but left Lebanon at the start of the civil war, spent time in Athens Greece, six years in Brussels, Belgium, and then settled in Kalamazoo, Michigan where she earned an M.A. and M.F.A in English and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Spanish Literature from Western Michigan University, where she now teaches. This might seem like the biography of a linguist in love with words, but that is only a part of Habra's story. She also has a passion for, and broad knowledge of painting. The cover of *The Taste of the Earth* is Habra's own painting "The Sons of Horus," and she is currently studying Mandarin Chinese and Chinese Ink Brush Painting.

*The Taste of the Earth* is organized in five sections. The first is a kind of introduction to themes and concerns of the collection, and also a tasting menu of various poetic forms Habra uses in the later sections: stanzaed columns, tercets, couplets, haibun, and interesting placements of lines on a page—the painterly linguist’s eye confronting white space.

Section II takes the reader to the oldest inhabited city in the world, Jbeil, Byblos, where Habra in her introduction to “Meditations Over Phoenician Letters,” points out their nature as “visual messages that sailed from shore to shore undergoing an alchemical transformation, still echoing the same sounds in other tongues.” Each drawing of a letter is followed by a brief lyrical response.

Section IV returns to meditations, this time “Meditations Over the Eye of Horus,” the “*Wadjet*, the most powerful of protective amulets” in ancient Egypt. Each poem in the section is a haibun, a Japanese form that combines a short prose paragraph with a classic haiku, and the form is often used to record a journey. Habra is a published author of prose, both fiction and essay—as well as a poet—and the haibun form makes excellent use of her talents. Each haibun responds to a part of the shattered eye of Egyptian god Horus and one of the senses: smell, sight, thought, hearing, taste, touch. From the 4th part of *Sam* (hearing):

...Emanations of jasmine and honeysuckle mixed with fragments of dialogues. Moonlight filtered through shutters would turn the ceiling into a live screen on which we’d stage our own script.

broken words shiver.  
a double flame undulates  
in chiaroscuro.

Within this consideration of an ancient symbol, using another country’s ancient form, Habra creates poems that recall moments of joy and sorrow, family memories, personal experience, and world history. Each sense—and part of Horus’ eye—ends with a list poem:

the sight of Poinciana’s lush flames, their yellow  
stamen in flight  
the sight of the Nile glittering in the felucca’s wake  
under the moonlight  
the sight of the woman’s blue bra uncovered  
as she was beaten in Tahrir Square  
the sight of ...

For all of the rich sensory engagement, affecting detail, and simple beauty of Section IV, the heart of this collection might reside in Section III, within the poem “Weaving and Unweaving” which sits among others that reflect on the poet’s memories of civil war and displacement from Lebanon. The poem starts by echoing the unraveling in “Topography”:

I used to marvel at my mother’s readiness  
to unravel a sweater  
or unstitch

her needlepoint  
at the slightest error...

then asks “But why look at unweaving as erasure...” and after exploring aspects of weaving and unweaving, Habra ends the poem with:

...The image

vanishes, not the roads that led to it,  
like a text whose lines haunt you...

A constant wavering between  
remembering and forgetting,  
telling and retelling.

*The Taste of the Earth* is far more than “taste” in the work of a woman whose restless intellect and ability to express sensory details creates so many poems that soar and yet are grounded in her experience. In an interview on *The Next Big Thing* blog hop, posted at her website, [hedyhabra.com](http://hedyhabra.com), Habra speaks of her first books *Tea in Heliopolis* (poetry), and *Flying Carpets* (short stories) as “an attempt to recover people, places, affects pertaining to an almost mythical past that is at the same time lost yet alive...”—a past that remains alive in this fine collection of poems. Whether or not you have ever tasted *zaatar*, Turkish coffee, Belgian waffles, or good Midwestern tuna noodle casserole, your own senses and memories will come alive as you read this book—an experience not to be missed.