

This Week's Montage

—*Women's Experience*

Comparative Haiku

selected by

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Mother's Day (the second Sunday of May) was conceived of by Anna Jarvis as a holy memorial day for women. It was declared a national holiday by Woodrow Wilson as recently as 1914, but rampant commercialization quickly caused Jarvis to become an outspoken critic of the holiday she came to wish she had never founded. Still, Mother's Day provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate the work of some of the haiku tradition's finest female practitioners—especially their haiku and senryu that address women's experience. Chiyo-ni is perhaps the most renowned of all women Japanese haiku poets. She studied with disciples of Bashô and began writing haiku at age twelve. Late in life she became a Buddhist nun (the *ni* in her name means “nun”), and the final haiku in her selection below addresses being a nun and shaving her head; the untranslatable term *kotatsu* means “a table covered with a quilt, with a charcoal brazier under it,” used for warming hands and feet. Her haiku are juxtaposed here with those of two of her most notable English-language descendants, Anita Virgil and Ruth Yarrow, both of whom have written many superb haiku and senryu addressing women's experience.

Chiyo-ni (1703-1775)

Anita Virgil (b. 1931)

Ruth Yarrow (b. 1939)

a butterfly
in front and back
of the woman's path

woman's desire
deeply rooted—
the wild violets

change of kimono:
showing only her back
to the blossom's fragrance

moonflowers!
when a woman's skin
is revealed

rouged lips
forgotten—
clear springwater

traces of a dream—
a butterfly
through the flower field

putting up my hair
no more—
my hands in the *kotatsu*

from *Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku Master*, Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi (Tuttle Publishing: Tokyo, 1998).

over & over
my silver needle catches
the morning sun

knifing deep
into earth seeking
the whole mushroom

holding you
in me still...
sparrow songs

spring breeze...
her breasts sway
over the porcelain tub

she turns the child
to brush her hair
with the wind

following me
deeper into my quilt
the wren's song

feet up
toes spread wide
I catch
8 tiny summer breezes

1-2 from *A 2nd Flake* (1974)
3-6 from *ONE POTATO TWO POTATO ETC* (Peaks Press, 1991)
7 from *A Long Year* (Peaks Press, 2002)

warm rain before dawn:
my milk flows into her
unseen

low winter moon:
her cheek curves the shadow
of the crib bar

my thumbprint
on this thousand-year-old pot
fits hers

mastectomy—
the surgeon's word massive
in my mouth

wallpaper roses
opening
my hips to you

the child's eyes
from the broken cup
to mine

after the garden party the garden

1-2 from “no one sees the stems” (High/Coo Press, 1981)
3 from “Down Marble Canyon” (A Wind Chimes Minibook, 1984)
4 from “Whiff of Cedar” (2007)
5-7 from *A Journal for Reflections* (The Crossing Press, 1988)

Previous Montages

April 26: Antipodes
May 3: Buddha-nature

Next Week's Montage: Bashô's Journey

Cid Corman
Robert Hass
Sam Hamill