

Looking Back: A Conversation with George Swede

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George Swede is one of the most well-known, prolific, and awarded haiku poets in Canada. Not only was he a trailblazer, but he was one of the founders of what is now Haiku Canada: “When Eric Amann, Betty Drevniok and I got together in 1977 with the intent of founding a haiku group, we were like persons taking turns tossing a pebble into a pond. We had no idea how many skips each stone would make nor the extent of the ripples.” (1) His comments on Amann’s haiku resonated deeply for me: “Yet like all good haiku they contain that mysterious element that sends the spirit outward in all directions.” (2)

George’s career as an academic allowed him to study the psychology of art and creativity. Alongside, he has edited haiku journals and anthologies, judged countless contests, and written several children’s books and psychology texts. Remarkably, he has published over 2,500 poems in over 7,600 places (3), and his work has been translated into over 20 languages.

In our weary world, I find that George’s words about connecting with nature provide invitation as well as consolation: “I have always nurtured a connection with the immediately perceived: in a forest, or in the centre of a large city, or in my study. It seems to give me the grounding necessary to not be overwhelmed by the suffering that surrounds us in its many guises.” (4)

I was curious to know more about him and his poetry, particularly in the days before the internet made connecting with other poets easier. And I wondered about changes in haiku since he first began writing. This interview took place by email in early 2023, and I am grateful for George’s willingness to share so personally about haiku and its place in his life.

How did you find your way to haiku?

My journey to haiku would not have occurred had I not first started writing free verse in my late twenties (my first poem was published in 1969). The groundwork for this development was laid in two stages: during my teens and during my undergrad years at the University of British Columbia (UBC, 1959-60 and 61-64).

In my teens, I wrote a number of non-haiku poems, the awful kind that deal with unfulfilled yearnings for love and sex. To my relief, none remain in existence.

Later, at UBC, during the academic years, I was too busy with my studies and part-time work at two jobs. However, one of the jobs, at the UBC Bookstore, at least kept my interest in poetry

alive. A couple of fellow workers were Jamie Reid, who in 1961 co-founded TISH (a student poetry newsletter) and John Newlove (who won a Governor General's Award for poetry). I became fascinated by their discussions about the Vancouver poetry scene — its publishing and reading opportunities. The result for me was that during summer breaks, when I worked at jobs out of the city, I would write in the evenings because there was little else to do except get drunk at a nearby tavern, if there was one.

My interest in writing continued to be nurtured in 1963-64 when I became friends with fellow fourth-year honours student, Alan Marlatt. It turned out that he was married to Daphne Marlatt who was one of the editors of TISH and who was glad to answer my questions about poets and poetry.

I graduated from UBC in 1964; got married soon after to Bonnie (nee Lewis); and then we drove to Halifax where I earned a Master's in Psychology from Dalhousie ('65) and Bonnie finished her second year general BA. Then, in a twist of fate, we ended-up studying at Indiana University with Alan and Daphne who had already been there for a year.

Bloomington was the place my poetic sensibility changed from interest to passion when I had my first LSD trip there — legal in 1965. Starting late in the evening, on a hilltop in the middle of a park, Alan guided me (via the techniques described in the manual by Timothy Leary, et al.) to ensure I went through a joyous experience. At dawn, Daphne and Bonnie brought me what I was convinced was the best sandwich I had ever tasted — a BLT. This psychedelic experience eventually led me to start writing poetry. By the way, Daphne went on to a huge publishing and teaching career, receiving an Order of Canada in 2006 for her contributions to Canadian literature.

In 1975, Dean Tudor, the editor of *The Canadian Book Review Annual*, asked if I were interested in doing a review of an advance copy of Makoto Ueda's *Modern Japanese Haiku* (University of Toronto Press, 1976). The reason he chose to talk to me first was due to special circumstances.

Dean and I both worked at the former Ryerson (now Toronto Metropolitan University) — he was a librarian and I was a member of the Psychology Department — and we sometimes met in the faculty cafeteria where he found out that I had published poems in a number of periodicals (*Canadian Forum*, *Quarry*, *Tamarack Review*, etc.) that were included in my first collection, *Unwinding* (a chapbook by Missing Link Press, 1974). Thus, for Dean this background meant that I was qualified to write the review in spite of having no experience with the haiku form. As for me, a poet's ego and everyday curiosity prompted me to say yes.

In his anthology, Makoto Ueda included twenty poets, each with twenty haiku. For me, all 400 were inspiring with how much they could say with so few words. But to write a proper review, I needed to educate myself on the haiku form. In a time with no Internet, I had to rely on

libraries and bookstores. Eventually, I found four books that helped me do a decent job: K. Yasuda's *The Japanese Haiku* (1957); H.G. Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* (1958); W. Pratt's *The Imagist Poem* (1963); *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Bashō and translated by N. Yuasa (1966).

My first attempts at writing haiku were clunkers, but gradually with practice some publishable ones emerged. The love of my life and second wife, Anita Krumins, was instrumental. Used to helping me on my longer poems, she quickly adapted to evaluating haiku. Undoubtedly, her qualifications helped — a Master's in English literature and a Canada Council Scholarship for Ph.D. studies. I recall how she crumpled the sheets of paper with the bad haiku and threw them to the floor and how I then used to retrieve them and sneak them to my study for possible revision.

However, there was a problem — I had no idea of where to submit the haiku that passed Anita's scrutiny. Today, one would simply go online and search for "haiku publications." Back in the '70s, it took me a while to discover that the Fisher Library at the University of Toronto had some haiku periodicals and books. It was there I discovered *Haiku*, the journal first edited by Bill Higginson and later by Eric Amann (1967-69). Also found was Claire Pratt's collection, *Haiku* (1965). I soon made friends with both and found out where to submit. My first haiku publications occurred in 1977 — *Bonsai*, *Cicada* and *Dragonfly*.

Was there any aspect of your childhood / youth that you believe laid the foundation — so that when you found haiku, you recognized it as your way of expression?

There were four aspects that seemed to lay a foundation.

The first was when my mother, stepfather and I came to Canada in March, 1947. We stayed with my maternal grandmother and step-grandfather at their home in Oyama, BC, which, prior to WW2, was mainly the hub for Japanese fruit farmers in the area who chose to name the village after a Japanese general famous during the late 19th century and early 20th. However, during the war, the Japanese in Oyama, as well as in the rest of Canada, were interred and, by war's end, many had lost their homes. A clear example of this was the abandoned farmhouse across the road from that of my grandparents. As a child of six and seven, I used to go to this house to peer into the windows, fascinated by the Japanese furniture, art works and the general layout.

The second aspect was the life on my grandparents' fruit farm. I did chores from 8-12 a.m. and then, after lunch and a nap, I had the afternoon off until five p.m. Because I had no playmates — the closest child my age was four kilometres away — I spent a lot of time wandering the local mountainside with its woods (and black bears) and open land (dotted with cow skulls) accompanied by Laddie, a Newfoundland / Labrador mix, whom I loved and who made me feel

safe. Now and then, we would go down to Woods Lake where, in the summer, I would swim and fish. This lifestyle made me very attentive to the moment, its movements of air, its sounds and silences, its flowers, bushes, trees, winged creatures, insects, as well as its wild and domesticated animals — all good training for a future haiku poet.

The third aspect was when my mother, stepfather and I moved to Kamloops. In 1948, my stepfather was diagnosed with a previously unnoticed case of tuberculosis and was forced to go to a TB hospital near that city. My mother got a job working in a jewelry store next to a dental office. She became close friends with the Japanese dentist and his family who lived nearby. One of the children was a boy my age who attended the same school as I did, and we spent many after-school hours playing at his house until my mother finished work. What struck me then was the similarity of the decor in his home to that of the abandoned farmhouse in Oyama, thereby reinforcing my interest in the Japanese sensibility. When my stepfather died in 1950 at the age of forty, my mother and I moved to Vancouver.

The fourth was my decision to major in Asian Studies at UBC in 1959. Looking back, I'm certain that my experiences with Japanese culture in Oyama and Kamloops led me to make this choice. After one year of Chinese and Japanese history, however, I changed my major to Psychology for I had discovered that there were limits to my interest in the Far East when I learned that the final two years of the honour's degree would require the mastery of either the Chinese or Japanese language. Nevertheless, I continued to be attuned to developments in both countries.

What is most vivid for you about the evening in 1977 when the Haiku Society in Canada was created (with Eric Amann and Betty Drevniok)? Or any other reflections on those early years of the organization?

Most vivid was the determination of the three of us to set up an organization to promote the haiku form. The ideas flowed as freely as the sake in the only Japanese restaurant in Chinatown at that time. The most important decision was to hold the first meeting of the Haiku Society of Canada during an autumn evening at Eric's house. At that gathering came the idea to hold an annual get-together with the first to be held at Betty's inn on a lake near Combermere, Ontario in the fall of 1978. At this Haiku Weekend two important anthologies were conceived: my *Canadian Haiku Anthology* (Three Trees Press, 1979) and Rod Willmot's *Erotic Haiku* (Black Moss Press, 1983). Both anthologies were featured at Toronto's Waterfront Reading Series with almost all of the contributors present each time.

What has sustained your writing of haiku for so many years? Or, how has haiku sustained you?

As you say, I have been writing haiku for many years — forty-eight from when I started and forty-six from my first publications. One of the things that has sustained me is that my haiku

have continued to be published during all this time, that is, I am still being rewarded — like a rat getting a pellet of food for pressing the correct lever. Another sustaining factor is that my writing keeps changing and I want to see what will happen next.

Of course, there are probably other reasons of which I am unaware. As Saul Bellow once said, “I am not an ornithologist — I am a bird.”

How has English-language haiku evolved from the 70’s to now (if at all)?

The biggest change is the increase in the number of one-liners being published, both in print and online. Another change is that more haiga are appearing, especially online where, given the visual tools on all modern computers, it has become easy to apply a visual background, either still or moving, to a haiku. Finally, there is more widespread interest in stretching the metaphor distance, or disjunction between the two primary images. This is not surprising because repeated pairings, such as frogs with ponds or cherry blossoms with spring or love, can cause interest fatigue.

How have your own haiku evolved over the years (if at all)?

The evolution of my haiku has been in concert with the general changes in English-language haiku.

Would you be willing to share a favourite haiku you have written, and why?

I have too many favourite haiku, published during almost five decades, to be able to pick one without immediately changing my mind for another.

Do you have any other reflections that you would like to add?

I’m pleased that HCR finally became perfect bound. It has always been at the forefront of haiku developments and needs to be easily found on a library bookshelf.

NOTES:

1. Carter, Terry Ann. *Haiku in Canada: History, Poetry, Memoir*. Victoria: Ekstasis Editions (2020). [From the Introduction by George Swede, p.12.]
2. Amann, Eric, “Cicada Voices: Selected Haiku of Eric Amann, 1966-1979,” *The Haiku Foundation Digital Library*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/2383>. [From the Introduction by George Swede.]

3. Website for George Swede: <https://www.georgeswede.com/home.html>
4. Hirschfield, Robert. "George Swede: Haiku Master & Secular Contemplative." *Beshara Magazine*, Issue 22, 2022, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://besharamagazine.org/arts-literature/george-swede-haiku-master-secular-contemplative/>