

Poet Profiles

Anne McKay

By Ty Hadman

This month's poet profile is on Anne McKay, one of the many highly gifted Canadian haiku poets. It is my belief that her name ranks right up there amongst the best of them. Her latest book in progress, *On A White Page*, is in its final draft and should be coming out very soon. It contains about 350 pages of selected haiku, renga, sequences, etc. from all 19 of her previously published collections. If you like Anne's work and would like to purchase a copy, please tell her that Ty @ AHA sent you (Studio B, 1506 Victoria Drive, Vancouver, BC, V5L-2Y9, Canada).

Anne currently has 17 renga partners who she corresponds with. Her personal letters are written, in the same musical tone as her poetry, with the words dancing on the page, usually typed using a blue (or occasionally red) ink ribbon, with each line indented where she feels is aesthetically pleasing on the page. Her typewriter, an extension of her fingers, and like a dear friend, is a Hermes 3000 that she has been using since about 1975. She signs her name (ever since 1988) simply @.

Anne often writes of childhood memories, of those she loves or has loved, and of the region she lives in, in southern British Columbia, of the gypsies of Surrey and the Salish weavers of the Soowahlie Indian Reservation. A recurrent theme throughout Anne's work is growth. The word "green" appears in many of her haiku. Her haiku are definitely neither like bonsai, nor a grove of majestic pines, but are more like a verdant meadow and the sensual feeling of fresh fragrant grass sticking up between the toes.

In Werner Reichhold's book review of *Acorn Book of Contemporary Haiku* in the February issue of [LYNX](#), he quotes Kevin Bailey in Chapter 4 as follows: "There will always be the haiku purists. The haiku is a traditional poetic form native to Japan, and there it should and will be preserved. But when haiku and other Japanese verse forms have been mauled, digested, and regurgitated by their own poets, and cast out of polite and innocent national isolation to be preyed upon by Imagism, Symbolism, Minimalism, and a hundred and one other cultural influences, the beast we're left with has had to adapt to survive. It is notable that many non-Japanese haiku magazines try to protect the haiku like some endangered animal, by giving it only a little literary space in which to roam free of the predatory attentions of mainstream poetry. This is done quite appropriately in its native land, fused as it is with Zen philosophy and culture, but it is an insult to the nature of literary evolution not to allow the form to mutate and hybridize within whatever cultural habitat it has become established."

Even though Anne's work has been widely published in haiku and poetry publications over the years, it seems apparent (at least to me anyway) that there has been some reluctance and discomfort, in the part of the haiku community that Kevin Bailey refers to in the quote above,

the puritans, in accepting poetics in haiku poetry. The topics of whether or not haiku should even be considered poetry and the use of poetics are still being debated today amongst well established haiku poets. Japanese haiku has mainly been practiced as a male art and due to the masculinity of the genre, some women's contributions in the West have made some people squirm uncomfortably as a result of these new influences. Anne has bravely stormed the treacherous waters of adversity and has bucked the long existing minimalist trend and influences in negation to the beliefs that haiku is a "purer" form of writing due in part to its avoidance of the use of poetics and that in haiku, "the shorter the better".

Rhyme, normally internal, and the 5-7-5 rhythmic structure have been used successfully in haiku by numerous haiku poets, but Anne McKay is the first to introduce lyricism in haiku as an elevated style. This is no minor accomplishment. Nicholas Virgilio showed us some very fine things that could be done using rhyme, assonance, and alliteration; but Anne has gone even further, breaking away from the necktie structure Virgilio mainly adhered to (this is not meant as criticism of his work nor am I implying or suggesting any superiority), and has allowed her words run free on the page like a child in a meadow without a care in the world, singing and dancing with joy and mirth. Anne has given us a new way of experiencing haiku, and for many, it is quite refreshing. Reading Anne's work, we feel we have been freed from the straitjacket of some haiku rules and restrictions and lists of dos and don'ts which is not to say that I am in favor of an anything goes attitude, but Anne has showed us, at least in her case, that once you have the haiku spirit, you can write from the heart; the heart and spirit then become the only really important guidelines in writing haiku.

There has probably been too much discussion on trying to define haiku, debates on structure and content, and disagreements over the differences between haiku, senryu, and short poetry. I propose that those seemingly endless discussions be dropped for the time being and that we move on and shift our focus towards discussions on techniques, approaches, styles, new applications, the spirit of haiku today, haiku motivated by that which we love and is dear to us; haiku as it relates to one's own language, culture, history, and environment; haiku as it relates to other evolving contemporary arts such as music, painting, sculpture, and dance; haiku as how we express ourselves as members of the human race on this planet in this point of time that we are now living, haiku as praise and protest, haiku as community involvement, haiku as a healing process, haiku as self-discovery, haiku as autobiography, haiku as an expression of personality and character, haiku as expression coming from the core of our being, and haiku as exploration and discovery of the world we live in day to day – moment to moment. Thousands of things are waiting to be discovered and rediscovered that have not yet been revealed by haiku poets. Haiku, like any other art, is of immense value to the individual and to the world.

So why do we love the work of Basho, Issa, Santoka, Ishikawa, and Shiki, or Marlene Mountain, Alexis Rotella, Ruth Yarrow, Janice Bostok, and Anne McKay, or any other haiku poet for that matter; regardless of nationality, gender, and era? Because they belonged to a particular school or are a member of a particular haiku group? Because of their religious convictions and training? Because they were masters or because they have been widely published, acclaimed, and awarded the top prizes in haiku competitions? Because they wrote

in 5-7-5 or don't write in 5-7-5? Because they usually included or often don't include season words? Because of their deep appreciation of nature or because of their deep interest in human nature? Or because of their concerns regarding the environment, endangered species, degradation, survival of the human race, and our plight? Because of their educational background or wisdom? Or because of who they were/are? Or because of their tremendous artistic talent in self-expression using just a few words? Or because they were/are extraordinary human beings, great personalities with character, who dug deeply into soul, psyche, or the realms of childhood innocence? Or because their work bubbles with energy and enthusiasm, is permeated with humor, and captures life just as it is, naked and raw? Or because they were/are filled with aspiration and inspiration and were/are a source of inspiration to others? Or because of their deeply felt regard for all forms of life, all types of human beings? Or because they expressed joys, longings, disappointments, and pains of the heart and tapped the deep reservoirs of intuition and emotional existence? Or because they gave/have given so much of themselves and shared/have shared some very special and valuable perceptions and in-depth experiences with us that really ring true now and forever, again and again, triumphantly, in just a few words?

I ask these questions, perhaps rather clumsily and longwindedly, but many of you I am sure will ask similar and better questions. The point I'm trying to make is that when we view the best of a haiku poet's work, we may be critical of certain pieces for a variety of both valid and purely subjective reasons, but the total effect of the work should leave no doubt as to whether we, as readers, have read some outstanding haiku poetry.

Is haiku, poetry? Can poetics be used when writing haiku? What absurd questions. Read Anne McKay and there will be no doubts.

Here are several examples of Anne McKay's work (I'll refrain this time from making my usual brief comments):

```
|      at first light
|      casting their green nets
|                      the skeena fishermen
```

* * * *

```
|      halfhiding
|                      the darting play of children
|                      shy as trout
```

* * * *

```
|      shy as the linnet
|                      a lilting girl
|                      marries the meadow
```

* * * *

| warm scent
| sweetheavy
| bread and bagels
| garlic and dill
| from open deli doors

* * * *

| mangoes and melons
| spilling rich and ripe
| from tilted street stalls

* * *

| no longer singing . . .
| the arrow
| in a green wood

* * *

| a cappella
| the children's voices
| in that green garden

* * *

| april . . . and again
| the seven days of poppies
| rushing red

* * *

| on midsummer moons
| the faint skirl
| of the ghostpipers

* * * *

| scrimshaw in glass cases
| . . . tales in ivory
| of whaler's green journeys

* * * *

| almost a mantra
| the rhythm
| of the night harness racers

* * *

| . . . and the woman
| leaning
| from a latenight window
| closing the shutter
| closing the moon

* * * *

| even at midnight
| from over the river
| the peacock's bright blue scream

* * * *

| following father's deep snowsteps
| in single file
| to sabbath service

* * *

| touching
| the old warrior's bodycuts
| "the song of the knife"

* * *

| brews of sloeberry
| madder root and lichen
| . . . and copper mordant

* * *

| gallgreen and almost simmering
| the pond's thick froth
| of summer slurry

* * * *

| sundrying
| on split rail fences
| skeins of ochre earthred cascara

* * *

| skin shivers now
| at the gold edge of autumn
| . . . the cold edge of autumn

* * *

| come november
| a scent of wine and wet wool
| in the night subway

* * * *

| returning soon
| the dune swallows . . . the pale smiles
| of summer strangers

* * * *

| the bee woman
| across the rain gully
| . . . we exchange poems and honey

* * * *

| rhythms of a red shawled girl
| gathering oysters
| on the neap tide

* * *

| into may now
| and the rhubarb has grown to seed
| . . . rootrobbed it won't do well next year

* * * *

| a wayward beachball
| drifting shoreward lost and shining

| . . . like a fallen sun

* * *

| small prints
| nightmade in snow
| leave me listening . . .

* * *

| after twenty seven suns she dreamed rain

* * *

| high and sweet from the hill the young man's flute

* * *

| deep into the rainy valley
| the ghostcamp
| home again of marten and raven

* * * *

| breaking camp now
| the gypsies of surrey
| painted caravans pointing south

* * * *

| only the white wolf
| stirring now
| under black cherries moon

* * *

| snows come quicker now
| thicker now
| to thief the moon

* * * *

| at the mission clinic
| a woman's winter fingers
| winding gauze

* * * *

| ... and the songs of summer and silk
| laid away now
| in the house of winter

* * * *

	that chapel bell	
		times twelve
	. . . and all's well	

