

Winona Baker

(1924 –)

In her introduction to *Moss-Hung Trees: Haiku of the West Coast* (Reflection Press, Gabriola, 1992), Winona Baker writes: “Haiku is meant to be enjoyed and appreciated. It has been written during festivals, parties, nature tours, walks, and other delightful diversions... a voice to the spirit of union when nature and human nature become one. That moment, which sharpens our awareness of the natural world around us and our inseparable relationship to it, is without boundaries.” To close her introduction, she remembers Basho:

*in the midst of the plain
sings the skylark
free of all things*

Winona Baker’s freedom to pursue her haikai spirit has earned her praise from Takeshi Sakuri, Radio Japan NHK, “It’s been said that a haiku lives by the silence around it. Winona Baker’s haiku is fine proof of this.” Here are a few examples from *Moss-Hung Trees* in the chapter titled “Winter:”

*snowflakes fill
the eye of the eagle
fallen totem pole*

*who can
withstand the rain
only these green conifers*

and from “Autumn:”

*my daughter cartwheels
between me and
the setting sun*

*dry October
this river should be full
of spawning salmon*

and this haiku which won the Japanese Foreign Minister’s Grand Prize (International Section) in the World Haiku Contest held in Yamagata, Japan (1989) to honour the 300th anniversary of Bashō’s most famous work, *Oku-no Hosomichi* – the journal he kept in the spring of 1689, when he embarked on his journey from Edo (Tokyo) to Ise (Yamagata). She celebrated this poem by using the first line as the title for her collection. Winona traveled to Yamagata to receive her award.

*moss-hung trees
a deer moves into
the hunter’s silence*

Born on March 18, 1924, in Southey, Saskatchewan, the sixth of eight children, Winona McLeod experienced a child’s prairie

life. An older sister, baby Iris, died from the Spanish Flu. She has written about these days (and nights) in *The Slough – A Prairie Childhood* (Leaf Press, 2006), and later in *Flesh in the Inkwell: Poems from a Writer's Life* again with Leaf Press, in 2010. These collections contain longer “lyric” poems and give details to her beginnings.

*...I imagine mother/ lying in the missionary position/ when
he'd finished/ she'd get up to douche/ while his Celtic sperm/
swarmed toward her Loyalist egg*
from “Began My Ending”

*...making my way up the evolutionary ladder/ I tested the five
senses/ wiggled things as they sprouted*
from “Embedded in Her Landscape”

*...I entered the world of light – gasped/ Air rushed into my
lungs/ Jesus, Sappho – what sinners or saints/ had some
of their particles in that first holy breath/ that made me a
mammal*
from “The Naming”

*...How to fit five children in a two-room cabin/ Help with
seeding – prepare for a prairie winter*
from “Moving to a Quarter Section”

She also wrote of her grandmother’s visit (resting her head on the table to sob), buffalo robes in a winter sleigh, aching feet in the cold, underpants made from unbleached cotton flour sacks, prairie horses, chinooks, patched patchwork quilts.

Winona's father, William McLeod, was instrumental in organizing the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. He attempted to make a living by farming, but these were hard years of drought and crop failure. By the time Winona was six, the family had moved across the prairies in a Model T. Ford, to make a new life in Langley, British Columbia. Winona remembered her father and some of that journey in an interview with Abdullah Sulaiman (retrieved December 2, 2016).

He had been captain of a Canadian ship then joined the Navy in WW1. He was stationed in Halifax. On patrol in the Atlantic for German subs he was badly concussed in one encounter, came out physically healthy but damaged by his experiences. I think both of my parents were unhappy with their marriage but had 8 children. There was a worldwide Depression and drought and dust storms on the prairie. He thought moving to BC was coming to a Promised Land warm as California. We moved out in a 1926 Ford car. Quite a load, – six children and two adults, camping, no Trans-Canada then so we dropped down into the USA part of the way and then back up into Canada when the road resumed. Then out to BC where the world-wide depression hung on. Some parts of Canada were badly hit. Another baby was born into poverty. Young people might wonder why we were so poor, but there wasn't the social system that there is now.

Winona's mother had been a school teacher on the prairies, and was a Presbyterian Sunday School teacher who liked to recite poetry and play the organ. She brought her family a love of music

and words. Winona attended the University of British Columbia for a time, and became a teacher in Vancouver; she met a handsome airman at a dance, Arthur Baker, and married him in 1947. They moved to Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island, and raised four children: Donald, Douglas, Helen, and Stevenson.

Between family responsibilities and part-time teaching, Winona encountered Basho and Issa in an introductory book on haiku and tanka. She connected with the spirit of haiku, which taught her to appreciate nature and the joys of a simple life. In Nanaimo she met other poets: Mildred Tremblay, Alison Watt, Leanne McIntosh, and Ursula Vaira (poet and publisher of Leaf Press in Lantzville). They became friends and formed the Nanaimo Writers Group. She became a member of Haiku Canada, the League of Canadian Poets, the Federation of BC Writers, several North American, European and Japanese haiku organizations, the Haiku International Association, the Tanka Association of America, and Poets for Peace groups. Her work was found on transit posters, in art work, calendars, holographic anthologies, cd's, peace packets, and online.

In the early 80's, Winona established a publishing company – red cedar press – with her husband, Art. She self-published a book of poetry *Not So Scarlet a Woman*, and later a haiku chapbook *Clouds Empty Themselves*. She also worked part-time in a book store on Bastion Street, where she had a chance to hear writers like Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Denise Chong, John Ralston Saul, and others. Eventually, Winona was a regular reader at poetry events there.

The Canadian Poetry Association published Winona's haiku in their anthology *An Invisible Accordion* in 1995. Here is a sampling:

*election rally
purple loosestrife spreads
along the river*

*in the stubble
a ball of blue wool
unwinds in the wind*

*the old dog
chained in the backyard
barks coldly*

And in 1997, she published these haiku in the Poetry Society's anthology *Strong Winds*:

*it's happened
my mother doesn't know me—
first autumn rain*

*high rise shadow
falls on the cardboard box—
vagrant winter home*

In 1994, the Romanian Haiku Society awarded her a Commemorative Medal and in 1997, an award for her paper presented at a Symposium on Basho, in Bucharest; the Croatian Haiku Association also presented her with an award in 1997.

Winona Baker's work appears in more than eighty anthologies in North America, New Zealand, Japan, and Europe, including *The Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (Kodanshu International, 1996: 621 poets from 52 countries writing in 25 languages). This collection has been translated into Japanese, French, Greek, Croatian, Romanian, and Yugoslavian. She has haiku in *The Book of Hope*, an international anthology published to raise funds for children in Afghanistan. Her work is archived in the Haiku Museum, Tokyo; the Basho Museum, Yamagata; the American Haiku Archives in California, and the Haiku Collection in the Fraser-Hickson Library, Montreal.

At the Haiku Canada conference held at the University of British Columbia in 2009, Winona was honored in a special presentation given by West Coast haiku poets Alice Frampton and Vicki McCullough – who spoke of her inclusion in Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English* (Norton, 1999), and her inspiration to others in Pacifi-kana (the British Columbia and Territories haiku group). Another West Coast haiku and tanka poet, Carole MacRury, remembers Winona as a “soft-spoken, gentle lady” who regularly attended the summer haiku gatherings at Drumbeg House on Gabrioloa Island, the home of Naomi Beth Wakan and her sculptor husband, Eli Wakan.

After ten years of these summer celebrations, Michael Dylan Welch edited a selection of poetry and prose titled *Tidepools: Haiku on Gabriola (celebrating ten years of weekends on Gabriola Island, British Columbia)*, Pacific-Rim Publishers, 2011). Here is an excerpt (haibun) from Winona's contribution:

...Part of the first day's program is walking out to Drumbeg Park on a road that ends at the sea. We're asked to write at least two haiku on our stroll. They will be critiqued later in the day. When I arrive at Drumbeg Bay, I wade in.

*beneath water
these stones seem
to be breathing*

...It's time to walk back to the Wakan's home. I'll see if I can find another haiku on the way there.

*such faint fragrance
in this unknown wildflower
I should not have picked*

I await our wonderful potluck while sitting on their back deck.

*soft wind
carries the scent of lilacs
through the screen door*

For her last book, *Nature Here is Half Japanese* (Trafford Publishing, 2010) Michael Dylan Welch wrote an introduction, pointing out her “steady voice in English-language haiku for many years. This new book shows once again why her voice is worth a close listen.” The primary theme of the collection was aging:

*orthopedic clinic—
the skeleton watches
leaves fall*

*mare’s tail clouds
the engineer’s ashes
scattered between the rails*

*Christmas card list
so many names
crossed out*

Michael also points out her juxtaposition of senryu; here are some fine examples:

*office party
all the happy faces
on the balloons*

*more casualties
in Afghanistan—
I deadhead roses*

Again in her interview with Abdullah Sulaiman, Winona recounted: “I finally have, after my four wonderful children have grown and gone, what Virginia Woolf said every woman should have – A Room of Her Own. There I write mostly in my messy office. Sometimes I move to the kitchen table. I am a morning person and like to write then... I can edit and read and exercise in the afternoon, but mornings are mine. Balzac said you only need a bare room. Pen and paper, but I like my computer.”

Winona Baker published her first poem when she was eleven years old. During a writing career that has spanned a lifetime, her poems have been published all over the world and translated into twenty-five languages. Winona approaches her 93rd birthday this year, and still lives in the book-filled home in Nanaimo where she raised her four children. She is proud to say that she is the mother of four, the grandmother of seven (sadly, one boy passed away while young due to leukemia), and the great grandmother of six. Her poetry has taken her to places she would have otherwise missed: the Japanese Pavilion at EXPO '86, Toronto, Romania, Japan, the Japanese Consulate in Vancouver, and the Vicki Gabereau Show on CBC. We raise a glass in celebration of her hard work and international honours. Kanpai!

Awards

Shikishi, calligraphy by Akiro Mizuno of haiku by master haijin Toto Kaneko for her haiku in English, 1986.

Expo 86 Japan Pavilion Book Prize from Japan Airlines, 1986.

Japanese Foreign Minister's Scroll haiku contest, Grand Prize World Haiku Festival World Haiku Contest, 1989.

Trophy World Haiku Festival Oku no Hosomichi 300th Anniversary Committee haiku in English, 1989.

Basho Trophy haiku in English, 1989.

Featured on TAKESHI SAKURAI's program Haiku Corner on NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai /Japan Broadcasting Corporation), 1990.

International Literacy Year celebrations, *Clouds Empty Themselves: Island Haiku*.

Fundatia Nipponica Societatea Romana De Haiku Award of Excellence for a paper presented at the Symposium on Matsuo Basho Bucharest, 1997.

Fundatia Nipponica Societatea Romana De Haiku Commemorative Medal for her book Moss Hung Trees, 1997.

Croatian Haiku Association Award, 1997.

Nihon Kajin Club World Haiku Festival Winner of the International Tanka Contest, English Division, 2000.

Publications

Not So Scarlet a Woman: Light and Humourous Poems. red cedar press, 1987.

Clouds Empty Themselves: Island Haiku. red cedar press, 1991.

Moss-Hung Trees: Haiku of the West Coast. Reflections Publishing, 1992.

Beyond the Lighthouse. Oolichan Books, 1992.

Even a Stone Breathes. Oolichan Press, 2000.

The Slough: A Prairie Childhood. Leaf Press, 2006.

Flesh in the Inkwell: Poems from a Writer's Life. Leaf Press, 2010.

Nature Here Is Half Japanese. Trafford Press, 2010.

Selected Anthologies

Haiku Moment: An Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku.
Bruce Ross (Editor). Tuttle, 1993.

Haiku World. An International Poetry Almanac. William J. Higginson,
Editor. Kodansha International, 1996.

The Haiku Anthology. Cor van den Heuvel (Editor). W.H. Norton & Co.,
1999.

Haiku: Poetry Ancient & Modern. Jackie Hardy (Editor). Tuttle,
2002.

In Fine Form: A Contemporary Look at Form Poetry. Kate Braid & Sandy
Shreve, Editors. Raincoast Books, 2005. [*In Fine Form* (revised edition).
Caitlin Books, 2016.]