

Poet Profiles

JANICE BOSTOK

by Ty Hadman

The Poet Profiles have so far focused on American haiku poets. Other than Japan, there are more poets that specialize in haiku poetry (and related forms such as tanka, renga, haibun, etc.) in North America than in any other country or region of the world. In many countries however, haiku is not so highly specialized and has become accepted by some poets as a good option in expressing and recording keen perceptions of, emotional responses to, or deep insight or awareness into ordinary daily activities and events or even extraordinary personal experiences, but is not their preferred choice of poetic or literary expression.

Australia is about ready to launch its first haiku anthology. Many of those included in the anthology are mainstream poets and writers who have not only received recognition and awards nationally, but have also received important awards internationally and have had their work translated into other languages as well. These writers have fondly accepted haiku as a form of expression to be included along with the other genres they usually write in. They are writers that have accepted haiku as a type of poetry they wish to develop simultaneously as one literary form of self-expression alongside others.

In North America too, there have been mainstream poets that have occasionally found haiku to be an effective mode of poetic expression such as Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Diana de Prima, W.S. Merwin, and John Ashberry, but for the most part, haiku is still not accepted amongst the majority of the upper and middle echelon of poets and academics. [Richard Wright](#), (last month's Poet Profile) wrote over 4,000 haiku, but it took 38 years before a publisher could print the 800 which Wright considered his best work and this happened only after several aid grants had been awarded by Kent State University to one of the book's editors and some copyright restrictions had finally been lifted (or expired) at Yale!

The situation outside of America, however, is generally reversed. Most of the haiku being written in other countries are by mainstream poets who have chosen to include haiku (and related forms) in, rather than exclude them from their poetic repertoire. This has indeed been the case in Spain and much of Latin America and I suspect in many other countries around the world and perhaps to a slightly lesser extent in some European nations. There are however a few who have become distinguished as haiku poets rather than poets that write haiku. This month's profile features one such poet, [Janice Bostok](#), Australia's first haiku poet. She single-handedly pioneered the writing of haiku in her country beginning in 1972.

Janice Bostok became introduced to haiku in 1970 when she read some English translations of Japanese haiku in one of the books published by Peter Pauper Press. She was already a published writer at the time, but haiku had such a powerful effect and strong attraction that

she immediately began writing her own haiku. Some of her early haiku were soon accepted in haiku publications in North America.

Janice and her husband lived in Murwillumbah in the northern part of New South Wales where they had bought a 70 acre banana plantation in 1967. I think that it should be mentioned here, for those of you who don't know, that the Japanese word for banana plant is *basho*, thus it is an amazing coincidence that Australia's first haiku poet was cultivating thousands of *basho* plants during the early years of her haiku development when she herself was attempting to sow the seeds of haiku throughout Australia. Her first collection of haiku published in 1972 was thus fittingly titled, *Banana Leaves*.

There was no haiku market in Australia, so Janice decided to try and create one with the introduction of *Tweed*, Australia's first haiku publication, in 1972. She proved to be a few years ahead of her time. Janice had three collections of haiku and a book of poems that included haiku published from 1972-1978, including *Walking Into the Sun*, which won a Haiku Society of America Book Award in 1974, but she was like a lone sparrow, one of the very few Australians writing haiku back then and could not garner sufficient support from Australian poets to justify the magazine's continuance. Most of her contributors and subscribers were from North America, so she reluctantly had to call it quits in 1979.

After the disappointment of having to discontinue the publication of *Tweed*, Janice enrolled in the University of Queensland in 1980. The next year she and her husband were divorced but they were re-married in 1986, the same year she received her BA in English Literature. Janice did not seek publication during this stressful period, but began submitting her work once again in 1988 and has been very active in haiku (and related poetry) ever since.

Janice's haiku have been translated into about half a dozen languages including Japanese. Hiroaki Sato's, "The Agonies of Translation" published in a *Frogpond* supplement in 1999, included 30 of Janice's one-liners and is only one example of Japanese interest in her work. Another important example was when Japanese artist Takejiro Nojima became inspired by her haiku that had been published in English in Japan. He did some of them in calligraphy and they were presented personally to Janice a short time later in Brisbane. Seven of the *haiga* from this collection were donated to the Tweed River Regional Art Gallery in Murwillumbah where hundreds of school children in the district have visited every year since 1996. Whenever the exhibition goes on display, Janice is always invited to speak to the school groups as they pass through.

Janice herself is an artist, sometimes illustrating her own work with sumi-e drawings, an art that she has practiced since a child when she was fond of drawing tigers and bamboo. She sometimes teaches this art to children in schools. Janice has developed a special type of modern haiga based on sumi-e techniques done with the aid of a computer. Her drawings allow plenty of white space like the unspoken but suggestive parts and pauses in her haiku. Several of her haiga sketches have appeared on the pages of *Tweed* in the 70s and in more

recent years in the *Heron Quarterly of Haiku* and the *Paper Wasp*, an Australian haiku journal.

She was the haiku editor of *Hobo Magazine*, one of Australia's leading poetry magazines from 1994-2000, is currently the co-editor of both the haiku journal *Paper Wasp* which began in 1994 and the *First Australian Haiku Anthology* that is due out early in 2001. She had her first collection of haiku since 1978, *Still Waters*, published in 1997 followed by *A Splash of Sunlight* published the following year. These two titles sound like the first two lines of a haiku! I wonder what the title to her next collection of haiku will be? Do I see some herons coming?

Janice was the source of inspiration of a major haiku project that got approved through the efforts of Janice's New Zealander poet-friend Catherine Mair who was able to convince the mural town of Katikati council members. The construction of haiku pathways, a millennium project in a town park located in northern New Zealand, was inaugurated on June 4, 2000. Haiku written mostly by New Zealander and Australian poets have been carved onto boulders placed along the pathways. Here's one of the two of Janice's haiku that can be found in the park:

stationary bus
talking we visit places
within each other

So true. We are all travelers. No two experiences of a place are the same and each place has its own sweet or even terrifying memories that are special to us which we wish to share with others and wish others to share with us. Haiku is no different.

Haiku stones, a Japanese idea, may be one of the few things in our present throwaway plastic civilization that will still be around thousands of years from now for archeologists to unearth, comment on, and place on exhibit for people to view and visit like the Egyptian and Aztec pyramids, Stonehenge, etc. Hopefully most of the animals and plants that are included in some of these haiku won't have become extinct, describing in words carved into stones that which once was, like the bones of dinosaurs and fossils found in today's museums.

Let's now have a look at some of Janice Bostok's haiku. A couple from the Outback:

plains extending
over & over
this forgotten land

* * *

buffalo tracks
deeper
near the water hole

Janice often employs the use of Shiki's technique known as sketching, the sketching of life just as it is. The last haiku above and the next two below are very fine examples of this style:

colorless sunset
the evening closes colder
on the mountain

* * *

morning light
a young woman alone
at the bus stop

The two haiku above complement one another in their expression of loneliness and aloneness.

In the next haiku sound is introduced. This clattering is not a noisome sound; it's musical, the sound of vitality, a nourishing reassurance that all is well, as should be.

early spring mist —
in the valley the clatter
of milking pails

Quite a few of her haiku are written in one line:

midnight storm intermittently the white horizon

muzzle of the drinking cow glides across still water

The humor in the above haiku is the kind I look for and really appreciate in haiku.

The following haiku was selected as one of the winners in Itoen Tea Company's haiku competition and was printed on cans of iced tea on sale throughout Japan. The annual grand prize award is about \$4,000! (This year's contest ends Feb. 28th. For information on the Itoen Tea Haiku Contest [email](#) them with your request.)

winter solstice
promised warmth
from a new friendship

I noticed a certain fondness for wood planks as a reoccurring theme in a few of Janice's haiku. When I asked her about it she said, "My sister and I slept on a verandah (called a sleepout). The average small Australian house usually has two inside bedrooms and the verandah was given some type of temporary netting or a ply wall with windows, so the children could sleep there."

"The traffic would drive past our house, over a solid cement bridge and then had to cross a wood-plank bridge, leading out of town. For years there was a loose plank, and a car's tires would hit it exactly 8 seconds after it passed our house. It might sound crazy but I would lie there and count, 'one-chimpanzee, two-chimpanzee', until the car hit the loose plank. It was some sort of sign that I too would one day leave town, get away from the country town life, and do something with myself."

"The wood-plank bridge which led out of town when I was a child, also led me back, and is now the one on a smaller, less traveled road, where one could possibly find oneself, if one was looking. The sound of a car crossing a wooden bridge always arouses feelings of loneliness, the desire to escape, and perhaps return to my childhood."

A haiku:

evening mist
swirls up through gaps
in the wood-plank bridge

And a tanka:

lingering on
jetty's ancient woodplanks
sun-warmed memories
timber smooth
where my father fished

Janice's favorite coastal bird is the heron. Here are a couple of fine examples:

watchful the night heron lowers its neck into shadow

white faced heron slumps in heat of the wetlands

Another favorite bird of Janice's is the crow. When she was a child she had a pet crow that had fallen or been pushed out of its nest. She saved the poor creature's life and taught the baby crow how to talk! Because of the peculiar way that crows call, the bird would stutter, asking, "Who-who-who are you?" and saying "Hello-o-o-o-ow!" She let the crow out during the day and put him back in his cage at night. The crow eventually refused to go back into the cage and went off and joined the other crows in the neighborhood. He often flew over the house calling, "Helloooooow! How-how-how are you?"

I didn't fully appreciate the following haiku until I heard the story above related to me.

my youth has gone
a solitary crow circles
adding his lament

Here's another fine haiku:

morning crispness
lingering into noon
this autumn day

This haiku very nicely describes the first "real" autumn day for Janice, not the "official" one marked on the calendar and proclaimed by the scientists and astronomers as the autumn equinox. This haiku, like many other of Janice's, nicely displays a light or soft touch, known in Japanese as *karumi*.

Here's another nice subtlety that Janice has managed to capture:

full moon
reflects off the mirror's
hard surface

Which is slightly different than the moon reflecting off a soft surface such as a puddle, lake, snow, or even moist grass.

Some final examples of Janice's haiku:

window closed
the sea's sound
rolls back

* * *

from deep within
the rooster crows —
eye glinting

* * *

in and out of fog
the yellow line of highway
runs with the train

* * *

in this blue
the scalloped flight
of one sparrow

For me, this last one describes Janice herself, a lone figure in a vast background, flying freely in her own marvelous creative pattern with nothing to distract us, as we look on in wonder

