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The Leap from Lyric Poetry to Haiku . . . and Back Again:

A Conversation with Claudia Coutu Radmore

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I have always been curious about poets who began writing lyric (long-form) poetry (1) and then moved to writing haiku, often in the hope of sharpening their craft: how do the forms differ, and how do they influence each other? To explore these themes more deeply, I interviewed Claudia Coutu Radmore. She discovered haiku in the late 90s after more than a decade as a lyric poet. Her first book of lyric poetry was published in 1992, and was entitled *The Pond* (2). Since then, her work has appeared in many lyric and Japanese-form collections and anthologies. Showing her talent as both lyric poet and haiku poet, two books were published in 2024: a collection of lyric poems about wildflowers (3), and a collaboration with Grant D. Savage of 500 tan renga (4). She is a member of the Ottawa haiku group KaDo, Haiku Canada, Tanka Canada, the Writers' Union of Canada, and the League of Canadian Poets.

Claudia served as President of Haiku Canada (2018-2022), and President of KaDo, the Ottawa haiku group (2012-2017). With Marco Fraticelli, she co-edited the Haiku Canada 35th and 40th anniversary anthologies (5, 6). In 2017 her haiku collection called *the business of isness* (7) was published, followed the next year by a tanka collection, *fish spine picked clean* (8). She seldom enters contests, however her haiku “summer heat” won Second Prize in the 2008 Porad Haiku Award, and “for the

briefest moment” won a Sakura Award in the 2009 Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational. In 2021, Claudia was one of three judges for VCBF contest. She has also judged Haiku Canada’s Drevniok Award contest.

summer heat	for the briefest moment
brooding in the dark	before it lands
bantam hen	shadow of a cherry petal

Claudia’s lyric poetry has appeared in most Canadian journals, as well as internationally. *Accidentals* (9) won the 2011 bpNichol Chapbook Award, her poem “where language forms” was runner-up in the 2010 Banff Centre Bliss Carman Poetry Award Contest, and another poem “the breast for sappiness” was selected for *The Best Canadian Poetry of 2019* (10). For many years she was the co-director of Ottawa’s Tree Reading Series; was a founding member of the VERSeFest (Ottawa) poetry festival; and served on the editorial boards of *The Bywords Journal* and *ARC Poetry Magazine*.

Claudia is also a publisher. In 1992, she started her first small press, Bondi Studios. In 2012, she created catkin press devoted to Japanese-form collections. She has published over 30 titles, including a reprint of the classic text by Eric Amann, *The Wordless Poem* (11), and the influential *Moonflowers: Pioneering Women Haiku Poets in Canada* (12) by Terry Ann Carter. I disclose that I am a friend of Claudia’s, and she published my first book.

Her career as an educator was varied. Most of her teaching was in elementary and secondary schools in Quebec and Ontario. In the late 80s, as part of a CUSO initiative, she trained teachers in early childhood education at the University of the South Pacific in Vanuatu. This included writing the Preschool Teacher's Guide in Bislama, the local language (13). She described her experiences in Vanuatu through lyric poems in a collection called *Pink Hibiscus* (14). In July 2005, she and Terry Ann Carter taught English to teachers at the Dongzhou International Exchange Centre in Haimen City, China. Currently, Claudia facilitates workshops in all Japanese-form poetry. At many of these events, she also instructs participants on how to make small books for their poems.

Claudia received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Queen's University in 1984. Her artistic flair is evident in the beautiful cover design for the many books and chapbooks she has published. The Haiku Canada logo incorporates her brush work.

Our interview took place online in 2025. I am grateful for her willingness to illuminate so many aspects of her journey as a poet.

How did you find your way to haiku?

In 1997 a friend introduced me to *RAW NerVZ HAIKU*, a small poetry magazine edited by Dorothy Howard. Its contents caught my imagination enough that when my own copy came in the mail with an invitation to attend a haiku gathering in Aylmer, Quebec, I filled in the form. The *RAW NerVZ* poems were brief, but the syllable counts were all over the place. I thought perhaps in a group I'd find out more about 'rules,' and if so, perhaps

they'd help me write more verbally economic lyric poems. An hour or so two should do it, I figured. Besides, the venue, an old monastery, appealed.

I stayed for the whole weekend, booking a small former monk's cell, though I didn't even have a toothbrush with me. How could I leave this swarm of ideas that kept branching into new directions. There was something going on called 'link-and-shift.' Tadashi Kondo, a renku master from Japan, explained how that worked, and two other ongoing variations of the technique showed how to put the concept into practice.

It appeared that yes, there were not exactly 'rules,' but guidelines that could lead to writing good haiku. Here were poets reading very short poems, twice, with time given to each one. Thoughtful comments filled time and space, and I met poets like Margaret Saunders who shared her poem about a funeral director "sizing me up." I was on overload, hooked, fascinated by poets who immersed themselves for three days in working on, sharing, enjoying three-line poems. I was sunk. Most importantly, it didn't take long for me to know I needed to stay in touch with such creative minds, these poets who really cared about and worked at making good haiku. So, I joined Haiku Canada, and became one of them.

As you began your literary career with writing lyric poetry, what was the most challenging aspect of learning to write haiku? In other words, what did you need to learn, and perhaps unlearn?

Haiku was much harder to write well than I'd expected, but there was so much more beauty, tenderness, openness to it than I could

have imagined. It was a different way of looking at the world: emphasising a delicacy and precision of word choice, and the wealth that a breath's worth of poem could hold and disperse.

It took a while to understand that a haiku does not tell everything, lean on narrative, or explain my own feelings. It was new to me to consider trusting the reader, to focus on what was observed, and to stop there, knocking out redundancy. I saw that paying attention to smaller things was better than larger themes. Using the concrete was a way to reach for what is beyond it. I could trust unpredictability, and look for the turning point. Simple language was best, space in a haiku mattered, as did the judicious choice of an article.

What did you find most helpful when you first began exploring haiku?

I've just been going through old journals and came upon my first published 'haiku' in Dorothy Howard's *RAW NerVZ: wooden bridge over the creek / THUMP / of muddy sneaker*. I remember my excitement. She had a much looser approach to haiku, and acceptances, than the formalists, which made the journal a lot of fun to read. Early on she used many of my inkbrush sketches too, some of them pretty comical.

Alongside the *Haiku Canada Review*, which came out several times a year, it gave me a front seat as to what was possible in a haiku poem. Both publications included renga and haibun. The first time my haiku appeared in a members' anthology was a real high: *Spring spider silk / from the window frame / to the plaster Buddha*. On top of all that, a Haiku Canada Sheet 2001-2002, shows four of my verses in *the naked goddess renku*! It was beautifully overwhelming!

When I read journals like *Frogpond*, poems seemed to depend on the editor of the moment. I found I was more of a rule-breaker. That left me wondering what kind of haiku I wanted to write. Should I fall in with what others were writing that was currently admired? Should I apply the same questions to my lyric poetry?

What distinguishes a haiku from a very short lyric poem?

The STOP, as in when your breath stops. The moment it leaves you with. Purposeful lack of narrative. Attention to small, seemingly insignificant moments. Leaving interpretation and meaning up to a reader/audience. The absence, in the best haiku, of emphasis on ego. The importance of a turn that can be read in different ways: one impression in conjunction with the first line, another when linked only to the last line.

A haiku is often more a seed than a finished story. It's only the beginning of what can be a different poem for every reader. A short lyric poem tells everything, tells how it ends, how the poet feels, what you are supposed to feel, full stop. A haiku invites you to stay with it longer, breathe again, consider what it means to/for you. That is, in a way, also your own poem.

Has your writing of haiku influenced your lyric poetry?

Renku prompted me to be brave with juxtaposition, to work with unpredictability. Most ideas are connected within six degrees of relationship, so I began to use unusual juxtapositions, to swing out of the narrative, see what happened when I threw a swerve into a poem. I risked using only my own verses from a series of renku with Grant Savage for a collection: unexpectedly, *Accidentals* won the 2011 bpNichol Chapbook Award.

I still wrote lyric poems with narrative themes, but in them I try to be more aware of the virtues of brevity, and paying attention to anything—whether word, object, person, or something in nature. The importance of attention, of stillness, if possible, is the most important thing I took from haiku. Haiku poets indulge in form and shape: one-liners, two-liners, stepped lines, concrete poems, and shaped poems. This led to my series of lyric juxtapositions in a ‘boxed’ shape, most recently published by Turret House Press as *someone is lying* (15).

You also practice other poetic forms related to haiku: tanka, haiga (art + haiku), and haibun (story + haiku). What sensitivity is needed for each form? Is this the same or different than for haiku? How do you know which form an inspiration calls for?

In the 70s, long before I wrote poetry or knew there was such a ‘thing’ as Haiku Canada, I picked up Murasaki Shibiku’s *The Tale of Genji* in translation. I was entranced by the story but mystified by the poems and their importance to the tale. Their two-part structure intrigued me. I didn’t know that the poems were something called tanka as I had no education at all in poetry. But fifty years later, I’m still studying the tale and its poems.

In the year 2000, I fell deeply in love and wrote tanka to express my emotions. It was so freeing. I still have a fading home-printed copy or two of *Tracing Your Ribs* (16), but when Mike Montreuil translated the tanka into French, they were published as *Your Hands Discover Me / Tes mains me decouvrent* (17). Tanka allows a poet to set up context and elaborate on their reactions and feelings.

Tan-renga is the most accommodating of these forms. It is a conversation stressing link-and-shift and has virtually no rules or guidelines at all. It is up to the participants to choose to have one interaction which would be a single tan-renga, or to continue ‘talking’ for months on end creating a tan-renga series. Grant D. Savage and I spent a year linking our tan-renga with a thousand verses. Our book, *the heron still there* (18), wanders through the literary, cultural, scientific, and natural worlds of both our minds. It is a rather wild journey. Verses range from the intensely personal to the desperately still – with fun tangents.

You were President of Haiku Canada for 4 years, and also President of the Ottawa haiku group (KaDo) for many years. What are some of the highlights for you?

I was proud to be more connected to our poets and delighted to know what was happening across the country, to be at the hub of all the swirling ideas. I learned so much about how and why the organisation works: volunteers.

I saw what volunteers can achieve, how much of themselves they are willing to invest into keeping Japanese-form poetry alive and well in Canada. I also learned what I don’t do well, though I am a great delegator and love letting others do what they are skilled at. The former teacher in me knew how to help organize meetings and conferences, and how to choose a variety of presentations to create a program. However, I’m not great at leading an AGM. It means following complicated rules: I know they are important, but I am not patient. And I am terrible at understanding finances.

Highlights were seeing new poets become part of Haiku Canada and welcoming them; hearing poets suggest how we could improve meetings and publications; encouraging interaction and conversation; and seeing what members were doing.

You are a member of the League of Canadian Poets and the Writers' Union of Canada. What are your thoughts on how haiku is viewed on the Canadian literary scene?

In general, haiku is not understood or explored in depth by contemporary poets or poetry audience. Haiku has been relegated to a spot somewhat below the limerick. Amusing. A lot of brouhaha about nothing. Count the syllables and have a good giggle about it. Not ours culturally. It's difficult for most trade publishers to take seriously a few words with a lot of space around them on the page. For instance, the last KaDo haiku presentation at VERSeFest Ottawa got the highest (by far) virtual audience for one of its presentations. Despite being ignored for the past few years, KaDo Ottawa was asked to host a reading at verseFest in March 2026, so we are now being accepted as an ongoing part of the poetry scene in Ottawa.

Ekstasis Editions with Richard Olafson at the helm is one of the few national poetry trade publishers that understands haiku, and publishes well-known haiku authors. Angela Leuck's Yarrow Press in Quebec publishes a fair number of Japanese-form collections, but is not well known outside the haiku world. In 2013 Pedlar Press published a renku collection (19). However, most Canadian collections of Japanese-form poetry are published by small lesser-known Canadian presses that can seldom afford to run websites or arrange widespread publicity.

I've always wondered how haiku poets could get their word to a trade publisher. A route that I know to be true for several lyric poets, is to first complete a Master's degree based on a full edited collection. A university connection seems to open doors.

Having taught at elementary, secondary school, and university levels, what would you most like educators to know about teaching haiku?

I've just finished reading Kimiko Horne's interview in the last HCR, and I heartily agree with her that haiku is not taught enough in our schools. It's partially that Canadian teachers have to follow a curriculum, and teachers are not encouraged to study poetry or haiku themselves. Until teachers at all levels, including university, are persuaded to learn about the beauty and power of Japanese forms, I can't see its profile as literature taken seriously by mainstream publishers.

If those in charge of education began to realise again the value of poetry in general, there'd be a chance for haiku to be in the curriculum. I would like teachers' colleges and English departments to be guided and enlightened by books such as *Lighting the Global Lantern: A Teacher's Guide to Writing Haiku and Related Literary Forms* (20), and train teachers accordingly. Written by Terry Ann Carter, and providing many lessons and examples, it's a good read that would excite any educator.

I was nagging Marco Fraticelli of Montreal to make a video for students and teachers to counter all the terrible 'How to teach' haiku videos online. He offered a useful compromise. His book

Dear Elsa (21) is a story / haiku guide written for young people (ages 9-12). The book has won awards, is widely available, and is on the shelves of many school and public libraries. Poetry teachers at all levels (yes, all!), should read *Dear Elsa*. It's a surefire way to light the fire of haiku in classrooms anywhere. I still wish someone would do the video, because every video online still promotes merely counting syllables.

Recently, I gave a series of workshops in Almonte, Ontario, in which I introduced haiku, renku, tan-renga, and haibun. One lyric poet attended all the sessions, saying that she thought every poet should study these forms. If only teachers realised how much easier it would be to teach poetry if they started with Japanese forms.

What keeps you coming back to haiku after almost 30 years?

Partly because I am a hermit, and am attracted to focusing on small wonders. I understand that beyond the small, is always the smaller, and so on — which inevitably leads to a larger awareness. This kind of inquiry is always a surprise. 'Slant' as Emily Dickenson would put it.

I'm probably still here because of our Canadian haiku community, and the way Canadians take haiku seriously but aren't invested in ego. We discuss and share haiku generously, and are more than happy to see other poets write better than ourselves.

Particularly I stay with haiku because of how a haiku can stop me, stop even my breathing. I come back to it because something happens and I'm encouraged to hesitate, take out a tiny notebook, and try to capture why.

How have you seen haiku evolve, if at all, over the years you have been writing?

By the time I came to haiku, so much had been published on how haiku is different for non-Japanese writers: rhythm is not as important; capitals and punctuation are seldom used so as not to interfere with the flow of thought; and the breath, that one breath, seems to focus on concrete sensation and not abstraction. Poems can be more spare, or make solid use of a pivot line. The meaning of a poem is left open to involve the reader.

I think haiku evolution happens in spurts. For me, there are times when an established journal's offerings seem boring; and then a few months later in the same journal, its content is vibrant again. Whenever haiku gets tired of itself, I hope that it keeps trying to be interesting.

Recently I heard an eminent haiku poet say that haiku is dying. I don't agree. The idea may come from what the poet is seeing published today, but I think it's still vigorous and will stay that way as long as poets are trying to write the best 'one breath poems' that can be made.

Do you have a favourite haiku of your own, and why is it meaningful for you?

Here are two early poems which I'm choosing not because they are favourites, but because on that morning at the Botanical Gardens with Angela Leuck, the expressions 'dragged by the nose' and 'centering myself' came immediately from the lilacs as a flood of sensations. The poems appeared in Angela's blog *A Poet in the Garden*, and in my collection *the business of isness*.

from lilac to lilac
being dragged
by the nose

on the yellow center
of a lilac flower
centering myself

Are there any other reflections you would like to share about your dance between lyric poetry and haiku?

That's a good way to put it, the dance. What kind of a dance does this idea, this concept, this phrase, this word need. Do I waltz with it? Jitterbug? Hip hop?

Haiku tends to pay attention to the particular, the apparently unimportant. So it's made me attend to the moment and the object—the smaller, the better. But trying to catch the essence of a haiku moment can push me to reach for something more, and at times that means it should become a lyric poem. I may have learned to write like that without haiku, but it would have taken a lot longer. I think Japanese forms have also encouraged me to experiment and play more in lyric poems.

In a strange way, Japanese forms poke at the mind and heart in ways traditional poetry doesn't. It encourages acceptance, offers a kind of peace. Hardly anyone is interested in lichen haiku, and that's okay. I'm not unhappy being a small frog in any genre. I will never be famous, but I will keep trying to write good haiku.

NOTES:

- 1) Long-form poetry includes 3 main genres: narrative, dramatic, and lyric. However, for simplicity, I am using the terms “lyric” and “long-form” interchangeably in this interview.
- 2) *The Pond*. Creative Writers and Illustrators, 1992.
- 3) *Sweet Vinegars: Wildflower Poems*. Coaticook, QC: Shoreline Press, 2024.
- 4) *the heron still there: 500 tan renga*. Grant D. Savage and Claudia Coutu Radmore. Ottawa: Éditions des petits nuages, 2024.
- 5) *The Touch of a Moth: The 35th Annual Haiku Canada Members' Anthology*. Claudia Coutu Radmore and Marco Fraticelli (Editors). Sudbury, ON: Scrivener Press, 2012.
- 6) *Wordless: Haiku Canada: 40 years of haiku*. Marco Fraticelli and Claudia Coutu Radmore (Editors). Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Editions, 2017.
- 7) *the business of isness*. Éditions des petits nuages, 2017.
- 8) *fish spine picked clean*. Éditions des petits nuages, 2018.
- 9) *Accidentals*. Ottawa: Apt. 9 Press, 2011.
- 10) “the breast of sappiness” in *The Best Canadian Poetry of 2019*. Rob Taylor (Guest Editor); Anita Lahey (Series Editor); Amanda Jernigan (Advisory Editor). Windsor: Biblioasis Press, 2019.
- 11) Amann, Eric. *The Wordless Poem*. [Reprint]. With foreword by Michael Dylan Welch. Carleton Place, ON: catkin press, 2020.
- 12) Carter, Terry Ann. *Moonflowers: Pioneering Women Haiku Poets in Canada*. Carleton Place, ON: catkin press, 2020.
- 13) *Kindabuk: Preschool Teacher's Guide*. Vanuatu: University of the South Pacific Press, 1988.
- 14) *Pink Hibiscus: poems of the South Pacific*. Ottawa: Éditions des petits nuages, 2022.

- 15) *someone is lying*. Montreal: Turret House Press, 2025.
- 16) *Tracing your ribs* [chapbook]. Self-published, 2004.
- 17) *Your Hands Discover Me / Tes mains me decouvrent*. Traduction de Mike Montreuil. Montreal: Éditions du tanka francophone, 2010.
- 18) See note 4.
- 19) Yoko's Dogs [a writing collaborative: Jane Munro, Susan Gillis, Mary di Michele, and Jan Conn]. *Whisk*. St. John's, NL: Pedlar Press, 2013.
- 20) Carter, Terry Ann. *Lighting the Global Lantern: A Teacher's Guide to Writing Haiku and Related Literary Forms*. Township of South Frontenac, ON: Wintergreen Studios Press, 2011.
- 21) Fracticelli, Marco. *Dear Elsa*. Toronto: Red Deer Press, 2023.

