
REVIEWS

Where Rain Would Stay: The Haiku Poetry of Peggy Willis Lyles, eds. John Barlow and Ferris Gilli (United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2022). 240 pages; 5½" × 8½". Matte four-color wrappers; hardcover. ISBN 978-1-903543-45-0. Price: \$50.00 from www.snapshotpress.co.uk

Reviewed by Brad Bennett

Strong haiku collections and anthologies are published each year, but every once in a while a book appears that delights and astounds above and beyond. As John Stevenson, Managing Editor of *The Heron's Nest*, writes in his back cover blurb: "*Where Rain Would Stay* is a haiku book for the ages, setting a standard we may all strive to emulate, however short we fall." Over the course of my haiku writing career, Peggy Willis Lyles has been the writer I have most striven to emulate. *To Hear the Rain* (Brooks Books, 2002) was her last collection of haiku. That book has been one of my most-treasured and most reread haiku collections—I have learned many lessons from virtuosa Lyles. So, I was elated to discover that editors John Barlow and Ferris Gilli had produced another collected volume of Lyles' work.

Where Rain Would Stay includes 236 previously uncollected haiku of the over 1,800 haiku that Lyles published between 1976 and her death in 2010. Peggy Willis Lyles was an important figure in the haiku world for decades. She published widely, placed in many haiku contests, and also judged a fair number of them. She was an Associate Editor for *The Heron's Nest* from 2002 to 2010 and a member of the Red Moon Press Anthology editing team from 2006 to 2010. She was so beloved that, in 2013, *The Heron's Nest* instituted an annual haiku award contest named

after her. “If the alchemy of haiku is that they can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, breathing new life into moments that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, it takes an exceptional poet to realize this transformation repeatedly across the years and decades. Peggy Lyles was such a poet.” These are superbly crafted haiku by an exceptional poet, expertly selected and sequenced.

The book starts with an introduction by John Barlow that contains biographical information and an analysis of the progression of Lyles’ haiku voice and style from her early days through the rest of her career. Barlow explains that *Where Rain Would Stay* is not a traditional “Collected” or “Selected” book of poems. “Rather, this volume collates the most enduring of her published but uncollected haiku, and presents them in a manner that is sympathetic to the qualities of the individual poems and the collective whole.” *Where Rain Would Stay* includes haiku published after *To Hear the Rain* and some that appeared in magazines and journals, but were not previously collected.

The haiku in *Where Rain Would Stay* are organized into sections by season, starting with spring: “Blue Butterflies,” “Sun-Splotched Stone,” “Morning Moon,” and “Winter Stars.” That this collection is organized by season is especially apt for Lyles’ haiku, given that seasonality was an essential ingredient of her oeuvre. Barlow asserts that Lyles “...helped establish seasonality as a workable and credible aspect of English-language haiku.” Here are two of her haiku that exemplify this heartfelt and authentic embrace of the essence of seasonal transitions.

winter rain:
leaf smoke lingers
in our pockets

dawn seeps
between the mountains —
plum blossoms

The book’s four appendices (written by Barlow) offer further insight into the editors’ overall selection process, how they treated variants (haiku that were revised between multiple publications), seasonality in Lyles’ haiku, and an explanation of the editors’ process of sequencing the poems. Their guiding question for selection was “whether Peggy would have wished an individual haiku to be recorded for posterity.” In

“Appendix 3: Seasonality,” Barlow describes techniques used to realign the seasonality of haiku featuring kigo that are outside the seasons to which they are traditionally attributed. In “Appendix 4: The Ordering,” we are treated to a peek behind the curtain to see the wizard’s legerdemain. Barlow’s editorial expertise has been readily apparent in all of the books Snapshot Press has published over the years. Here, he explains the “link and shift” ordering strategy that he applied to *Where Rain Would Stay*. Elements that influenced the ordering included seasonality, subject matter, mood, form, and phrasing. And finally, for the true haiku enthusiast, the editors have included the book’s haiku in chronological order (by year of composition).

One of the major lessons I have learned from Lyles is the efficacy and vitality of euphony in haiku. In the “Author’s Preface” of *To Hear the Rain*, Lyles writes, “Sound enhances meaning. Every nuance contributes to the total effect.” Let’s take a closer look at how she composes her music.

snakeskin	earth tremor
a place in the rock	sticky beads of nectar
where rain would stay	in the lily’s star

In the first example, the words with long **a** sounds in each line, the consonance of the **k** sounds in “snakeskin” and “rock,” the alliteration of **w** sounds, and the consonance of “-skin,” “in,” and “rain” all contribute to the poem’s cohesion. The second haiku contains a couple of hard **c** sounds, the **st** sounds of “sticky” and “star,” the consonance of words ending in **or** and **ar** at the end of each line, and the ending **y**’s in sticky and lily. In both of these haiku, the totality of all these effects creates effective intra-poem unity. In addition to her frequent use of specific euphonic devices (e.g. rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia), Lyles was also adept at enhancing the contrast between a haiku’s phrase and fragment by using different devices in each. Here’s an example:

low tide at dawn ...
 a woman stoops to gather
 scattered moonshells

The phrase utilizes several euphonic devices that help it cohere: multiple **s** sounds, the assonance of the **oo** sounds in “stoops” and “moonshells,” and the near rhyme of “gather” and “scattered.” The fragment contains none of these devices. In fact, it even includes words with three vowel sounds that are not found in the phrase: long **o**, long **i**, and the short **o** or **aw** in “dawn.” That contrast further enhances the coherence and musicality of the phrase. In the following poem, the phrase and fragment each have their own sound patterns, creating their own cohesion, and thus helping to enhance the juxtaposition of the two. Note the alliterative hard **g** sounds and the repetition of **p** sounds in the phrase, and the alliterative **w** sounds and repetition of **m** sounds in the fragment.

smudge pots
 in the grapefruit grove —
 a woman warms her hands

Another lesson I learned from Lyles is the vibrancy and power of the well-chosen verb. Haiku has been called the poem of the noun, but the right verb can enervate and complete a well-crafted haiku. Often these verbs are the “hot words” in Lyles’ haiku, the words that may be the most striking, unusual, fresh, or meaningful in the poem. In the first haiku below, the word “plucking” adds an aural quality to the act of fishing. In the second, the word “tilt” alludes to the position of the earth and sunlight that creates our seasons. Lyles’ use of the word “grip” in the third one creates determination, desperation, or fear. In the last one, the verb “seeds” could imply sowing thistle seeds in the air or an attempt to create rain.

kingfisher
 plucking silver
 from the dark lagoon

thin blinds —
 a woman’s fingers
 tilt the light

heat lightning
 the heron’s toes
 grip dead wood

one breath
 he seeds the air
 with thistledown

Lyles was also adept at using the strategy of repetition in her haiku. Repetition can create euphony, but it also helps to generate rhythm, emphasis, or emotional intensity. Lyles used repetition to achieve all of these effects.

mist drawn from the mountain breath by breath

rain settles
 some of the pollen
 some of the plans

In the first haiku, the repetition helps to intensify the experience of breathing in mountain mist. The second is an example of what Richard Gilbert calls “symmetrical rhythmic substitution,” “word substitutions occurring in symmetrically repeated rhythmic patterns.” Lyles uses this technique to create rhythm and to help explicate the differences between rain’s effects on pollen and humans’ best laid schemes.

It is unclear how deliberate Lyles was in using Japanese aesthetic principles to inform her writing process, but her haiku are certainly infused with them. While reading *Where Rain Would Stay*, two concepts specifically came to mind. In his introduction, Barlow suggests that Lyles’ poems are filled with *makoto* (sincerity, authenticity, or truthfulness). In an interview with Lidonna Beer, Lyles states: “At best, haiku merge images from the exterior world with the landscape of the poet’s heart so effectively that a receptive and fully participatory reader can become part of the poem.” In addition, many of Lyles’ haiku are also characterized by *karumi* (lightness). Here are examples of each:

May morning
 I share an acre
 with a wren

daffodils —
 a laughing girl
 with rain in her shoe

Lyles was a gifted craftswoman, so her poems invite closer study of their construction. For instance, *Where Rain Would Stay* includes many haiku containing end-of-line punctuation—more so than we see in a typical contemporary English-language haiku collection. For instance, over half

of the haiku in this volume include end-of-line punctuation. Perhaps Lyles was partial to refining her cuts in order to recreate what kireji do for Japanese haiku. Lyles' most frequently-used punctuation mark was the em-dash (70), followed by the ellipsis (40), the colon (16), the semi-colon (3), and even a comma (1). In the first of the following poems, the em-dash seems to emphasize contrast. In the second, the ellipsis alludes to the contemplation of the passing of time. Lyles' use of colons, a rare occurrence in contemporary English-language haiku, often seem to imply some sort of metaphor, as in the third poem below. At times, her punctuation takes on a more concrete role, as in the fourth haiku, in which the semi-colon looks like a hook.

swallowtails —
a mission fig
cut in half

eleven o'clock ...
on the sundial an inchworm
humps toward afternoon

the thin soles
of old sandals:
summer's end

circles in the pond;
a blue-haired woman
baits her grandson's hook

Where Rain Would Stay is a wondrous and nourishing reading experience. Each poem is a joy to inhabit. The reader experiences the poem's sincerity, the exquisite focus of its haiku moment, the lushness of Lyles' word choices, and the expertise of her artistry. If, like me, upon reading, you were left craving more of Lyles' work, have no fear. The editors plan to publish a "companion volume" of unpublished haiku chosen from her handwritten records. Lyles once described her writing process in this way: "... natural juxtapositions stir physical and emotional responses in me and are poems ripe for the taking." (Lidonna Beer) I, for one, am already looking forward to reading more of her sun-ripened poems.