

Joel Ochoa
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Anna Maris: An Interview Informed Reading Response Essay

For this essay, I chose to write about the contemporary haiku artist, Anna Maris, specifically focusing on her published collection *Lifedeathetc*. In an email correspondence with Anna she stated that this was her third published work after having two published in Swedish. The first collection focused on the calendar year and the second focused on transport. After explaining her work, she discussed how she got into creating haiku: "Being Swedish, I got into the form pretty much on my own and have not had a 'master' other than reading classic haiku, writing haiku and then submitting haiku to journals, where I got some feedback (mainly that they selected the poems for publication or not)." Despite never having a "master" to look up to, Maris became an accomplished haiku writer who is a prominent member of the global haiku community.

In my original email I asked Anna about her creation of *Lifedeathetc* and her process in creating haiku. In creating her collections, she says, "I think a secret to a good haiku collection is that you actually have a theme and that the poems complement each other and create some sort of narrative" (Maris email). This is how *Lifedeathetc* came to be; she saw a common theme in her haiku and put them together to try and create some sort of narrative. Specifically answering about the creation of *Lifedeathetc*, she responded by telling me that her working title was originally "Transitions" because she had four sections in the collection rather than three. The life and death sections were always involved in her creation process. In her response, she answered "When I started putting *Lifedeathetc* together, I simply noticed that many of the poems were about death, and where there is death, there is also life, so those two sections came naturally" (Maris email). The other two sections were entitled Planet, which focused on eco-poetry, and People, which was mainly senryu. The last two sections were molded into one after her publisher wanted to take out a number of her eco-poems.

In response to her process, she states that it is ongoing. It is not daily, but it is ongoing. Her inspiration often comes from nature, travels, and through qigong (similar to tai-chi). She says she is primarily a journalist which has allowed her to produce haiku without having to wait for inspiration. About creating haiku, she states "As you get into haiku practice, it becomes a way of viewing the world". All of her responses and ideas can be seen in her collection of haiku in *Lifedeathetc*. I will show how she utilizes them through a number of haiku chosen from this collection.

Her collection is divided into three parts as seen in the title. The first couple of haiku come from the "Life" section of her collection. The first one I will be analyzing reads:

first spring sun
along the railroad tracks
fresh graffiti

Maris, LDETC, 11

Upon reading this haiku, the imagery that the words of this haiku create are vivid from just the first line. She does not use fancy words and language to enwrap the reader in her haiku; rather, she uses images that make it easily generalizable for a wide range of people. The words she chooses to utilize evoke specific pictures that make this haiku stand out to me. With this simplicity of the words and images of this haiku, it allows for many potential deeper meanings that the reader can choose to see. Simplicity and strong images are core ideas in her writing of haiku, and I think it is particularly strong and seen in this one.

I chose this haiku because it had many parts to it that shows what I think her definition of things associated with "life" in its lines. In the first line, the word "first spring sun" brings about the idea of newness. People usually associate new with life because life always has new things in it. In her last line, she also uses the word "fresh," which is a synonym for "new." This again reiterates the idea of life existing of the "new." She

uses the technique of creating a simple haiku with strong imagery that has a deeper meaning. She uses “lighter” words to showcase life as colorful and meaningful. I think her use of the word “graffiti” is a brilliant technical choice because it allows for the reader to decide for themselves what the mentioned graffiti might say or who may have put it there. This haiku seems like one that came to her on one of her regular days which is what makes the haiku so effective; it does not seem like she forced the haiku to come into existence.

I found this haiku particularly interesting because of how common of an image it discusses. It is such an easily generalized image which is what intrigued me about it when first reading it. I immediately saw her theme of “life” and ways in which she sees that theme, specifically with the idea of “new.” As with all haiku, this may have been what Anna intended for the reader to see or it is completely something I noticed that she may have not intended. That I think is the beauty of her haiku; her haiku allow for multiple deeper meanings to be seen and for the reader to craft them. She does not tell the reader what to think, she simply discusses an image and allows for the reader to identify what they think it means. This is a common idea for many haiku writers and for the traditional haiku itself, as discussed in *One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers* by Gail Sher who stated, “Show readers what you experience so they can have the same experience on their own, bringing to it their own history and inner life-don’t tell them” (Sher 182). This technique is seen clearly throughout her collection and makes her haiku much more compelling because of her utilization of it.

The second haiku I chose to include also comes from the “Life” section of her collection. It reads:

winter fishing
the hole in the ice
shrinks

Maris, LDETC, 25

After first reading this haiku, it stuck out to me in comparison to others in this section of her book. Unlike other ones in this section, I could feel how it was focused on the process of living rather than ideas associated with it. This poem has such interesting imagery that it evokes; the ice shrinking can be vividly pictured in the reader’s mind. Like the first one I chose, this one utilizes simplicity and strong images to elicit a response from the reader, which it does a brilliant job at achieving.

In this haiku, she focuses on a moment of living rather than finding a detail in a regular day. She utilizes the idea of time in this haiku without ever saying the word; ice spreads after time which is an interesting technique to use that adds to the depth of the haiku. She uses the word “winter” to focus in on a specific season. Life is often referred to as having “seasons,” so I think her use of applying a specific season into this haiku is a brilliant idea that has a direct correlation with the theme of “life.” She utilizes the technique of ending with a striking word that the reader may not have seen coming at first. The last word of “shrinks” ties the whole poem together which shows her technique of writing in a way that allows the reader to decide what the deeper meaning to the poem is.

This haiku was interesting to me because of the idea she uses as the basis for the haiku. Ice fishing is a popular thing, but only in certain places due to differing weather climates. While not every reader may have personally experienced ice fishing, they do not have to have a super deep understanding of this idea in order to understand the deeper meaning of the haiku, which I thought illuminated the brilliance of this haiku. Maris tells this moment like it is and it is so easy for someone to picture this moment, even someone that has no clue what ice fishing entails. It really captures the idea that life is full of different experiences for everyone and that there are so many wonderful parts to life. Life is full of little and simple joys that make life what it is; beautiful.

The next couple of haiku are a transition into her “death” section of this collection. These haiku encapsulate many different ideas of what death may look like and are written in many different ways. The first one from this section I chose reads:

the same hole in our hearts
white chrysanthemum

Maris, LDETC, 31

This haiku hits deep. It is not hard to find the deeper meaning to this haiku. In America, white chrysanthemums are usually seen as a cheerful flower. However, reading it from this perspective would be the wrong lens to use. Maris is Swedish and in many European countries, “incurve chrysanthemums symbolize death and are used only for funerals or on graves” (Chrysanthemum). So, in this poem, they symbolize death that has just occurred. I thought her use of two lines instead of three was a super interesting choice that I think adds to the overall effect of this poem. She is able to convey an incredibly deep meaning in just two lines which I thought is what made this poem very strong.

She utilizes a lot of techniques in this haiku that I think make it effective. Her word choices are very specific which is clearly seen in the layout of the haiku. She really uses the first line to conjure up the idea of death in this poem, but it really comes to fruition with her last line. It is such a brilliant use of a popular symbol in her country that allows for a deeper meaning to shine through a lot easier. Maris definitely knew that this symbol of a white chrysanthemum could convey a lot simply because it exists as a popular symbol which is a brilliant technique.

This poem was interesting because it talked about literal death. In the first line, the “hole” it refers to may be the hole in the ground where the white chrysanthemum is laid but also doubles as a figurative hole in the heart of the person in the haiku. This double meaning really adds to the effectiveness of the overall poem because it allows for the surface level of the haiku to be seen easily, but also uncovers a much deeper meaning with the same words. This is a genius execution of this technique which makes the haiku a lot more interesting to read. With each read, another meaning may be uncovered. It is so interesting because it makes this moment seem real which leads the way for the reader to experience emotion when reading this poem. It cuts to the heart in a beautifully tragic way which makes this haiku stand out among others in this section of her collection.

The second haiku from this section I chose to discuss reads:

failing
to find the words
suicide note

Maris, LDETC, 33

This haiku is incredibly deep from the first read. Maris takes the topic of suicide and puts it into a brilliantly written haiku about the tragedy of losing someone to suicide. When someone commits suicide, there are simply no words that anyone can really say to make it seem better. I chose this haiku because it is so simple and written so elegantly but has a much deeper meaning that I think anyone can understand and relate to. Suicide is not an easy topic to talk about because it is so tragic, but Maris does a fantastic job and not telling the reader what to think about this issue. She simply states a moment that translates into a much deeper meaning behind this topic.

She utilizes another double meaning in this haiku that can uncover different meanings for the reader. This haiku does not state the relationship to the person who committed suicide which is a brilliant idea. It allows the reader to come up with the meaning behind the words “failing to find the words.” Failing to find the

words after a suicide takes place looks different for a friend than it does to a family member for example. No matter the relation to the victim, failing to find words is a common thread between all people who knew them. Maris uses that idea and embeds it seamlessly into this haiku. She takes a serious topic but does not tell the reader how they should feel. The technique of this idea is clearly seen in this haiku which allows for deeper meanings to be illuminated in an easier manner.

I chose to include this haiku because while it literally talks about death, it also addresses so much more. Suicide is a growing issue that never gets easier each time it happens. There is so much that goes into this topic, but Maris is able to find a common thread that all people feel after one occurs. People fail to find the right words because there are no right words when it comes to this issue. It is such a difficult thing that no one should have to endure. Finding a note allows for a little closure to potentially take place, but it still does not allow for complete understanding or acceptance. This is a brilliantly written haiku that is so real and makes the reader feel something, regardless of if they've personally experienced this moment or not.

For my third selection from this section of her collection, I chose a haiku that does not speak about literal death. It reads:

packing up to leave
everything we have
dead weight

Maris, LDETC, 43

I thought this haiku was super interesting because it is one of the few in this section that do not speak about literal death. The word "dead" is still used so it goes along with the theme of death, but it goes about the idea of death in a very different way from the others. This haiku discusses a very specific moment and allows the reader to vividly picture it. It utilizes many interesting choices and techniques that add to the overall effectiveness of the haiku.

Maris again uses a double meaning to tie back to her theme. "Death" can mean many things just like "life" can, and she very much shows that idea in this haiku. Dead weight is a common saying that people use which allows for a reader to apply their own deeper meaning to that phrase. Dead weight could refer to many things; Maris knows and utilizes this idea and flawlessly executes this technique in order to add to the effectiveness of her haiku. A common thread in Maris's haiku in this section of her collection is the use of phrases having more than one meaning and this technique can again be seen in this haiku. Her use of the double meaning is super interesting in this one which makes this haiku stand out a little in this section.

In the third section of her collection, she writes haiku that are about anything else other than life or death specifically. She often uses similar techniques that she utilizes throughout the other two sections, but they are a little subtler. The first haiku I chose from this final section from her collection reads:

fog
my own headlights
blinding me

Maris, LDETC, 50

I chose to include this haiku because it shows the theme of "etc" very well. It is a specific moment in time that seems to have no specific theme attached to it other than being a well written haiku. Maris uses words that elicit a vivid image in the mind of the reader which allows for the reader to be engulfed by the words. It is an easily generalized situation that many people have probably experienced. This haiku clearly illustrates her idea of haiku being a way of viewing the world; it is such a simple and specific moment in time that she crafted a haiku out of.

Unlike many of the haiku in the first two sections of her collection, this haiku does not appear to have a clear double meaning associated with a phrase. She seems to rarely use first person pronouns besides “we” in her poems which makes it a clear technical choice to use it in this one. It makes the haiku seem more personal and real to the reader because the reader can more easily put themselves in the haiku due to the use of the word “me” in the last line and “my” in the second line. She uses the technique of making the first line more generalized by setting up a scene where the haiku may take place. This is a common technique that haiku artists often use which allows for vivid imagery and a deeper meaning to be more easily accessible to the reader. This haiku was super interesting to me because of how simple it is at first glance. It is such a common moment yet never really perceived as anything that could translate into a haiku. This haiku is simple yet effective which to me makes it much more interesting.

The last haiku I picked reads:

war-epic
we pause for a firing squad
of micro-popcorn

Maris, LDETC, 66

I thought this haiku was another great example of Maris’s technical style that makes each haiku unique. She utilizes the technique of using a phrase for double meaning that adds to the overall effectiveness of the poem. I chose to include this haiku because I thought it showed a little comedic side to her writing. A brilliant writer can capture many different kinds of emotion in words and she has shown that she can do that through her haiku. She is so good at creating specific moments that allows for the reader to vividly picture it. Many of the previously mentioned techniques are seen again in this haiku which illuminates her writing style. This haiku is different from the ones mentioned before as it does not have to do with life or death but still focuses on a little moment of life. The use of the word “we” allows for the reader to decide who the “we” is in the haiku. Depending on who they choose for it to be allows for completely different meanings to be possible. This haiku is interesting in that the zinger comes in the last line. It ties the whole poem together and creates the specific image rather than the first line really setting up the scene. This is a little change in technique but still follows her common theme of using double-meaning phrases.

Each haiku I chose illuminate a little more about how Maris writes and how a writer may connect themes throughout a collection. Her haiku fit together very well and allow for the reader to be taken on a journey as they read her collection. With the chosen haiku, her brilliancy for writing haiku shines. There is no denying Maris knows how to write a good haiku and there seems to be no doubt that she will continue to do so.

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