

An interview with Rita Wong:

Thinking About Water

When did you start writing poetry?

I started writing poetry in elementary school, and had a poem published in the *Calgary Sun's* children pages when I was in grade 5. I wasn't prolific though! I loved reading, immersing myself in others' stories and experiences. At first, I was more of a journal writer, and I kept a diary where I could express things that couldn't be said out loud. I learned how to engage in a larger conversation over a longer period of time about what makes a fully lived, meaningful time on this earth. It was a process of experimentation, play, following sounds and words to find out what gifts they might surprise me with. In writing poems, I learned that I'm always alone and never alone, both at once.

What drew you to the subject of water?

A dear friend of mine, Dorothy Christian, organized an event called Protect Our Sacred Waters a few years ago. I responded to her call by developing a humanities course on water. We started by acknowledging the over-50 buried salmon streams that existed in Vancouver — many cities have streams that have been hidden and paved over. I've always been interested in how to see the everyday world with fresh eyes, and learning about the buried streams has changed the way I see and experience the city. Now I pay attention to what's underneath our feet.

What have you learned about "the poetics of water"?

As someone who grew up in the city, I had to learn over the years how to be more at ease in forests, to appreciate nature. If I were to summarize the process, I would

say that I've been learning to recognize the watershed as a life support system, not as something completely separate from me. I belong to the watershed and have a responsibility to it. Water helps me to see the connections between the local and the global, the perpetual flow that links us across time and space. Water is constantly transforming and enlivening, a shapeshifter that has much to teach us.

Are there other poets you admire who write about ecology?

Oh yes. So many. Angela Rawlings comes to mind, as does Sonnet L'Abbé, Adam Dickinson, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Armand Garnet Ruffo, Rob Budde, Ken Belford, Wang Ping, Daphne Marlatt, Myung Mi Kim, James Thomas Stevens, Christine Leclerc, and many more. They might not write "about" it so much as engage or activate an ecological approach. That is, I find myself immersed in a way of perceiving that is attuned to surprising connections and subtlety, not so much writing about something as an outside or separate topic.

You were commissioned to write a poem for the Edward Burtynsky exhibit. How did you approach writing this poem?

I haven't written it yet! I'll let you know when I figure it out. I plan to go see the exhibition, spend time watching and listening and just being with the work, paying attention to what evolves from that experience, and being open to associations, feelings, and ideas as they arise.

Read Rita Wong's poem "fluorine" on our website: poetryinvoice.com



Rita Wong