

Fred Wah

THIS DENDRITE MAP:
FATHER / MOTHER HAIBUN

Father / Mother Haibun #1

Finally changed the calendar today to August. Sitting here this morning trying to figure out things (phone rings and she asks "Is this David? I must have the wrong number. I don't know why I keep doing this.") the *ecrit* I'm open for, ungular, now alone in the mornings looking through Jung and Hillman for hints, I mean the simple and solid clarity of my father's father's dying, his dying, and then me living and then dying too is outrageous, bald as geographical Saskatchewan and my Grandfather which made my life "racial" not that he actually came to be there but simply him here/there and her, my Grandmother, her Salvation Army Englishness really solid in the middle of his flux but both of them cutting "geo" out of their world thus Maple Creek Moose Jaw North Battleford Medicine Hat somewhere in England and Canton China places in their lives much more than in their world, you, my father, almost too, thus me, such particles caught in the twig-jam holding the water back impedimenta and this dendrite map I'm finally on now for no reason but time, and then I'll go to the city and look for an S-shaped chair to hold me and this up.

Two weeks late I turn the calendar, crave for ripe tomatoes

Father / Mother Haibun #2

Anger the same thing as you behind my face, eyes, maybe. A larger than usual black bear, eating, high up in the thin wild cherry trees in the gulley this morning, sun just coming up. I peer around the corner of the garage at the bear just like you would, eyes squinted brow lined in suspicion like yours used to, as if you were trying to figure out something serious. I feel your face in me like that sometimes, looking out of me, and now I wonder if my anger is the same as yours flying out of me from him and his, etc. the anger molten back through Chthonic fear. The bear flushed off, finally, by the dog. You hover in the cool August morning air, behind my eyes. The fire, the candle, the pumpkin, the "virtu," inside.

Crash of broken branch, hungry, pits in the shit

I try talking to you in this near-September air after I water the dry spots out of the lawn, morning sunny and clear the air coming to this for months ahead, almost, your death-month, turning the flowers, even those huckleberries I picked yesterday had thoughts of the frost ahead high in the mountains, such simple weather but something more primitive here pictures of the kids each year on the first day of school in front of the flowers in their new clothes, ahead, you too and my mind working over the connections, you're laughing, sceptical, like when I told you they used hot water to make the ice at the arena because it steams and you just about believed it because I did, my heart shoots into the memory of that actual mouths-and-eyes-talking dialogue, weather is memory every time I wonder if you ever really listened to the songs on the Wurlitzer in the cafe, particularly on a quiet winter Sunday afternoon, the words anytime your mind roaming ahead and behind like mine the little shots at living each day all the things air carries for thinking like that.

Music, I try to think of the words to Autumn Leaves, Love
Letters in the Sand

Your pen wrote Chinese and your name in a smooth swoop with flourish and style, I can hardly read my own tight scrawl, could you write anything else, I know you could read, nose in the air and lick your finger to turn the large newspaper page pensively in the last seat of those half-circle arborite counters in the Diamond Grill, your glass case bulging your shirt pocket with that expensive pen, always a favourite thing to handle the way you treated it like jewelry, actually it was a matched pen and pencil set, Shaeffer maybe (something to do with Calgary here), heavy, silver, black, gold nib, the precision I wanted also in things, that time I conned you into paying for a fountain pen I had my eye on in Benwell's stationery store four dollars and twenty cents Mom was mad but you understood such desires in your cheeks relaxed when you worked signing checks and doing the books in the back room of the cafe late at night or how the pen worked perfectly with your quick body as you'd flourish off a check during a busy noon-hour rush the sun and noise of the town and the cafe flashing.

High muck-a-muck's gold-toothed clicks ink mark red green
on lottery blotting paper, 8-spot (click, click)

Father / Mother Haibun #5

You can't drive through a rainbow I said hills to myself in the mountains glory of a late summer early fall thunder storm the Brilliant Bluffs brilliant indeed the shine rain and sunshine waves of science breaking lickety split school systems memory for the next word after colour from the other side no one could see it otherwise nature's path is home to the bluebird triangular son/event/father w/ time-space China rainbow over your youth vertical like on the prairies that rainbow stood straight up into the sky on the horizon you'd think in the winter sun ice crystals could form unbelievable

Radio on, up north an American hunter shoots a rare
white moose, geese in the sky, nibbling ribbons

I wish you were alive here in my life so we could share the ease of our lives growing older together, now time would catch up with the gap of our ages, 45-72, ethnicity would be gone, just skin and the winding down, the fence Jenefer & I built along the back, hockey games, the sunny fall day, this sentimentalism, songs too, like crazy white American juke box "Mule Train" in your imagination I thought just as those events are in mine, no, but you and the Great Lakes boats desire, absolutely your own, undying care for the single, your own world fact, all this buffer, as down the road in the village from us this so-called community, the ones we care for really spread over the whole earth if possible, padding of the family too, this softness around ourselves so that we want it, so common we could talk about it now, but so alone, so alone.

I'll stain the fence red, a dim border in the snow, might
last thirty years

Father / Mother Haibun #7

I was back in Buffalo when you died and when I came out for your funeral at the end of September there was snow on Elephant Mountain as far down as Pulpit Rock from Ernie's house the lake quiet my mother alone suddenly, months unused, unusual, I knew you best in the winter when there was curling and hockey or in the summer when we fished, dark mornings on the way to work or wet leaves in the gutter, driving at this time of year from Cranbrook to Nelson for the Lion's dance, car heater toasty warm upholstery, outside the air wet and cool mist hackles in the mountains your life simply closing down in the quiet month on the Hume Hotel ballroom floor wobble of the planet's sun seasons shortened golden flower's corny harvest elixir completed.

Road's nearly empty, only a few pickups with firewood

The pulse. So. When I take it now the microsystem wild card is almost cellular in its transport of the image imprint forward or I think back pictures. Some Saturday afternoons I'd have to take off work at the Diamond to play soccer down at the Civic, or you'd feed me a steak before a midget hockey bus trip to Trail, after the game Frenchie's french fries outside the Cominco, my earth my world which grosses more sensation, you knew more than I did, now my daughter has grown up into her stomach too, large encryptic sublease a full grown symptom of I'm just curious about this body. You read it all, playing games is really not such a big deal but I always thought I had to pad it a bit to get off work, the world and out the door down the street, you knew it and me, outside the sun and the chemicals it's either numbers or that large front swinging wooden door.

Felled tree in the fall, I look at the stump for sap, zero

"Why do you think of your father so much?"

"He's dead. Every once in a while I think I see him, or someone I see reminds me of him, or I'm writing this book and he's in it."

"That's not the truth. There's more to it than that."

"What we'll try for is a paradigm in this."

"You can think of a fishing cause. For him environment is connected with the earth."

"Dante phoned last night. From Salmo. And the day before, Mike Zoll showed up and told me 'The subtle quality of things transcends all formal boundaries.' I don't know, I'm not sure, maybe."

"Do women think a circle is a labyrinth?"

"Kore, no one wears purple like you. I half expect you to come with a hat."

"I feel I'm lucky I'm part Chinese when I see a river."

"So. What about your father?"

"Look, it's an old problem. When Smaro says 'Alley Alley Home Free' I know exactly what's going on. Her eyes twinkle. Here, it's snowing today. Sounds are deadened, like waking up in a room with the windows closed. Why do you ask?"

"'Autumn in New York,' 'Moonlight in Vermont,' they're all haiku. And that's just one of the tricks Lionel knows. You know that poem about his dad and the echo of the axe on the other side of the valley? That was in the fall, there was frost. Or Victor's poem, 'Kenkyusha: Day Nine,' his daughter's birth, my father's death, zooming in on the phoneme of time, accurate, and asks me 'what time.'"

"You'd better ask Peter about Jack Clarke's Hegel's 'discipline of service and obedience' and 'the lake Fred Wah said it all ends up in' in case McNaughton and the hidden 'd' can help."

"Maybe tomorrow. I've been carrying it around all week. It's the epitaph to my Aunt Hannah's grave in Swift Current. It's like a song. Whenever I think of it I can hear my Granny Wah singing, front row, in the Salvation Army hall, and I can see her grey-blue eyes softened with a bit of surprise."

Hannah Elizabeth
fell asleep in Jesus Arms
1918-1936

Working with my back to the window for more natural light, dog chasing cows in the field, the words stubble today, embedded there in the bracken at the edge of the field, Chinese philosophy and numbers, the cloud-filled night, "and they swam and they swam, right over the dam," etc., all this, and sugar too, holding the hook, time, the bag, the book, the shape, you also carried on your back yin and embraced yang with your arms and shoulders, the mind as a polished mirror, there, back into my hand.

I can't stop looking at the field of brown grass and weed
and feeling the grey sky

Father / Mother Haibun #11

Mother somewhere you flying over me with love and close careless caress from Sweden your soft smooth creme skin only thoughts from your mother without comparison the lightness of your life/blood womanness which is mine despite language across foetalness what gods of northern europe bring out of this sentence we say and live in outside of the wife of the storm god's frictive battle with the "story" our names

Rain washes first snow, old words here on the notepad,
"Where did Odysseus go?"

Mom you'll know this as a wordgame, strategy to get truth's attention, your name, Corrine, for example, core, cortex, heart, blood, islands of the liver, a tension to incite the present, your friend Woody written into the texture, coloured uphill under their apple tree beautiful also, we were about fifteen when Wayne Waters said to me "Your mother's a good looking woman" and I blushed, tissue of skin, shades of other people's hair, touch.

The landscape is red, "pudeur," an air of sanctity and respect, etc.

Father / Mother Haibun #13

The issue is to divide into two, duplicate, derive language which is a filter for the blood, and then to replenish thought in a precise flow to converge again on life, how much a copy of you I am also a material for my own initials (F.J.) Karen Marie Erickson when your mother died all the undoubling condensed memory added up to a single snowy winter month like January.

I get up and look, no sky today, just the fog. How one can one be?

When my hands, arms, and head grew larger there was at one point a very comforting sensation which I thought might relate to my birth and you're constantly rubbing your wrist joints this spherical map of "influence" as in Dad's anger, maybe, or your clearing your throat. I wait for simply old age and a mental space serrated description narrative the same refrain female song a flair for the fictive or theory that there is invocation in the inheritance of the blue-print.

In winter ravens look more majestic, weaving over the highway, tree to tree, tree to tree

Father / Mother Haibun #15

All this imaging is only the subliminal daily cache because of your first real house and the "Just Mary" show *time* with you in the radio air of the room carpet *Journeys Through Bookland* "Tom and the Waterbabies" with story every morning and on Sunday afternoons got "serial" eyes with "Jake and the Kid" or John Draine's story hour quiet spring evenings Sgt. Drake on the Vancouver waterfront breathing radio world innuendo a mother with secrets when the snow blows in circles over the farms final connections to the ancient world.

Someday I'll grow them, prairie hollyhocks again, on a stucco wall

I know the language just turns you into metaphor, rock of ages like
Granny Wah, the truth. Traces of the other mothers, cliff-dwellers in the
golden city, your windows nothingnesses to the world's something,
bisons on the walls at Lascaux. So there. How to defend you and I from
a language edited by Christians I stand facing west with my father and
speak words which are new names for the sea.

Old month's countenance, deer swim the rock-wall river,
mean anything to you?

Father / Mother Haibun #17

Oh Mother, the brightness of the birch tree's bark in this November
mid-afternoon sunset, fringes, the datum which is permanent, the
external events of all that stuff actual energy is created from, you on a
different planar syntax Jenefer discovers in turning the yin/yang key, a
cyclic thing going on there, ontologic principle, all the daughters want
it, one pot, this morning I watered your Christmas cactus bursting
brilliant pink and purple on schedule for your birthday again, and you
should see Helen's, what'd those philosophers say, he beats the drum, he
stops, he sobs, he sings, they had mothers.

You flew over me, outside there was a moist loss, now I
remember

I'd say that's a "proud" or swollen wound on my finger, body's pride
reminding itself of itself, something genitive about the blue sloped roof
of the '51 Pontiac, lives broken into car eras both of you (thus us) the
heat on the edge of healing skin red something eucharistical and my
own two daughters even this spring, fall leeches ground and then
outside the flowers see how hard it is for me to make sense of a hunch,
looking around myself looking for the simple "of" connection might
be, and why my friend Albert set out his amaryllis this spring.

No more snow to shovel this winter, back to the ground,
flowers

Father / Mother Haibun #19

I'm here alone for the weekend, get fires going and burn all that junk,
mind keeps that there to clean up. I get some rice on and the cabin's
warm. Now I sit here sip a beer and dwell on my aloneness, the solitary
singleness and being older now. That is a prediction I gave myself when
I watched some of the old men around town, isolation. Night falling.
Cold over the lake, fingers of clouds in the western sky above Woodbury
Creek. I told Peter that's the process I'm interested in as long as I can
keep getting the language out. Now I'm as old as you were. The fire
outside in the dark comes from your eyes. The words of our name settle
down with everything else on this shore.

Smoke sits on the lace, frost tonight, eyes thinking

Father / Mother Haibun #20

I still don't know how to use the chopsticks as right or as natural,
bamboo fingers hands arms mind stomach, food steaming off the dishes,
rain or wet snow, windows, night lights, small meals you'd grab between
rushes (unlike me), that's what you did, isn't it, went back to the cafe
later, on the nights we didn't have rice at home, me too, when I first
went to university in Vancouver I: couldn't stand it, I'd need rice, catch
the Hastings bus to Chinatown, what is it, this food business, this
hovering over ourselves?

**A little ginger, a little garlic, black beans, lo bok, Auntie
Ethel, the kitchen**

Father / Mother Haibun #21

Speedy dancing and the leaves of Germany meet me at the elevator,
words mean everything, I try to phone you on mother's day, everyone
does, more Swedish than Chinese, you didn't want me to be a boy scout
all my life, did you (the leaves cling to this writing), sometimes to be
battle-ready Norbert Ruebsaat, genetics and geographies, he can tell you
too, exactly like mother alphabet the new lyric feet, McKinnon's South
America eyesight I tell myself my self-perception, palace/place/police,
spring leafless trees on Ontario's horizon, did Pindar catch us dead in
our tracks?

**Japanese plum blossoms, my finger joints swollen, your
kind of love sweetest, get that, sweetest**

Fred Wah

Length in poetry seems useful as a means by which to explore the possibilities of a content, both formally and implicitly, as well to distort or twist the familiar and automatic apprehension of perception. That is, the long poem offers, paradoxically, the opportunity for dwelling in minute and particular moments, ruptures of the continuous that disturb transparent continuity. The goal of the writing is to make itself visible.

“This Dendrite Map,” for example, attempts to engage, in each “run,” the reaction and resonance of the “haiku” that settles out at the bottom. These “haibun” were interesting to write because, while writing the prose, I was conscious of how, paradigmatically, thought and language can become suffixed in a kind of avalanche of word-sneeze that settles out further down the slope.

As my own writing life has turned out, “This Dendrite Map” is just one vector of an extensive biotext that, as far as I can see now, began with using the word “cousins” in a pictogramic transcreation of a rock painting. This biographical address became a writing project that has branched and tangled itself through a number of texts. *Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh* was the first self-conscious treatment of name and identity. *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, from which “Dendrite Map” is taken, spread out into family and, particularly, father. *Diamond Grill*, a biofiction, turns more to prose to extend the problem of writing through identity into racialization. Even *Faking It*, a collection of critical writing, pulls some of the biotextual dendrite into a kind of poetics of the body. Long poem, deep life.

Fred Wah was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan in 1939, but he grew up in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. He studied music and English literature at the University of British Columbia in the early 1960s where he was one of the founding editors of the poetry newsletter *TISH*. After graduate work in literature and linguistics at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and the State University of New York at Buffalo, he returned to the Kootenays in the late 1960s where he taught at Selkirk College and was the founding coordinator of the writing program at David Thompson University Centre. He now teaches at the University of Calgary. He has been editorially involved with a number of literary magazines over the years, such as *Open Letter* and *West Coast Line*. He has published poetry, prose poems, fiction, and criticism. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* won the Governor General’s Award for Poetry in 1986 and *So Far* won the

Stephanson Award for poetry in 1992. *Diamond Grill* won the Howard O'Hagan Award for Short Fiction in 1996.

By Fred Wah

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