

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: ANN HUDSON

Joanne Diaz: Ann, we have known each other for ten years now. During that time, we've been part of a writing group that has met every other Sunday, sometimes in person, sometimes on Skype. One of the many advantages of being in a writing group with you is that I get to see your individual poems evolve over time. You are one of the most astute readers and critics I have ever known, and your poems always offer powerful emotional and intellectual journeys. We are so grateful that you have shared this new group of poems with the readers of *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

I'd like to ask about your powers of observation in your poems. "Observation" might sound passive, but for you, it's clearly very active. If I go back to your first book, *The Armillary Sphere*, I notice how many of those poems are about looking, watching, quite often through a window, or noticing the behaviors of people from a distance. This watching and observing is there in the newer work as well. In "Hive," for example, you demonstrate a quality of attention that is extraordinary. I can easily visualize the elm and ash trees, the "paper cone" full of yellow jackets, the speaker looking up and squinting to assess the danger.

Where do your poems begin? How do you think about the power of observation, and the position of the speaker in your poems?

Ann Hudson: My father was a scientist, and from him I think I got a deep appreciation for the importance of close observation. There's a difference between observing something for entertainment—for example, I love to people watch, I love to sit on my porch and see who's walking by—and that seems to be a kind of daydreamy gaze. But that's different from the kind of attention that I'm calling observation. Observation takes a patience and a resistance to reflect too soon. So that observation, that resistance against the impulse to make a judgment or to insert yourself, takes a kind of diligence that has taken me a long time—it's something that I struggle with and am working toward. I believe that kind of observation yields insights that are beyond the merely personal. It seems less interesting if it yields insights just about me.

JD: Yes—once again, to go back to “Hive,” I can see that this isn’t just a poem in which the speaker has a realization about herself. The speaker is also gaining insight into what observation means, what it’s capable of. The speaker, through watching and examining, is trying to measure a theoretical danger—the thousands of yellow jackets in the hive—against the reality of the aunt’s illness—“Her paper-thin skin bleeds from bedsores / and doesn’t heal.” By juxtaposing what the speaker observes in the yard and what the speaker knows about her aunt’s mortality, the speaker is then able to understand what the correct metaphor is for the aunt. So, the observation makes something new. That to me is the insight of the poem.

AH: I’m fascinated with the idea of metaphor in that it is a kind of pattern making. To me the most exciting metaphors illuminate the source and the impulse behind that metaphor. And that pattern making, or pattern recognition, is a deep source of what it is that I’m looking for. It doesn’t have to be pattern recognition between the self and the world. It can be pattern recognition from the world to the world. I don’t need to be part of that fulcrum, if that’s the right word.

JD: From the very beginning of our writing sessions together, I have marveled at your ability to juxtapose seemingly unlike things in your poetry in order to create a sense of surprise. In “Hive,” we go from the “shiny, papery cone the size of a balloon” to the aunt’s “paper-thin skin” that “bleeds from bedsores / and doesn’t heal.” All of a sudden it’s not just similarity, but juxtaposition that makes meaning. You also do this in “Red Suitcase,” where you introduce the young boy calling out “*SOME-bo-dy,*” and then shift your attention to the three boys who pull a red suitcase from its hiding place “to find whatever was inside.” In “Index,” too, you focus so intently on the woman who is indexing her husband’s book, then shift to the speaker’s house, which is “full of things I couldn’t yet begin to classify.”

We have talked at length over the years about the connective tissue between two seemingly unlike things. Some of that is happenstance, some of that is deliberate artifice, some of that is a mix of the two. How do you think about juxtaposition?

AH: Some of it is pure accident, although I think that a lot of what happens in my poems happens best after a long and deep revision

process. I'm a very, very slow writer, which is not necessarily to say careful or precise, at least in my initial impulses, and I feel that I have to fight the impulse to over-revise, to tie things up too neatly. I appreciate wildness in poems and have to make sure that I don't solve all the problems that poems present. I think questions are more interesting than answers. A lot of those juxtapositions are revealed as a result of revising things that drag the weight of the poem down. They tend to often be present in early drafts, but I don't see the relationships until I've pruned things back.

JD: I like how you just said that the questions are often more interesting to you than the answers, and how the juxtapositions don't necessarily explain everything away. One of the reasons I think I like "Index" so much is because you set up the correspondence between the woman and the speaker of the poem, but you don't try to explain away the mystery of that correspondence. It's as if you trust my ability to figure out that everything that was going on with this woman was in some way what was going on for the speaker—some way of trying to navigate or understand what is incomprehensible.

I love the mystery that you create in "Red Suitcase," too. I marvel at how you initially present the poem as one about the innocence of a little boy singing, bird-like, for somebody to come to his room and soothe him, and then you shift to the strangeness of those three boys "all six hands fumbling / at the lock" of a suitcase found in the hedge. When the speaker of the poem tries to tell them to leave the suitcase alone, she wonders, "How could I convince them not to open it? / How could I convince them that discovery / is not ownership?" When I arrive at that second question, I realize that this poem is, in part, a story about coercion, and force, and how easily boys, even at this young age, will take what is not theirs. And then I realize that it's a red suitcase, locked, and jammed open, and when one of the boys is "so thrilled / by desire" that he can't even hear the speaker, I'm stunned by what I've witnessed in the world of the poem. We started with the innocence of a little boy wanting a little cuddle before bed—the epitome of innocence—and then we end up within this other kind of metaphor for sexual violence—but once again, you resist the urge to spell out or explain the thing I'm hungry for, which makes me go back and read the poem again. There's a sleight of hand there, where

it puts me back into the poem, which makes me want to figure out how to find the insight.

AH: I think my desire is always to classify, categorize, and label, and I appreciate precise names for things. I love digging into vocabulary and nomenclature. But I think that sense of classification and organization can be deceptive, enormously deceptive. Because you feel like you've gained some control, or mastery, or understanding, over something that is bewildering or troubling or mystifying in some way. And yet, so often once we are trying to name something, and we discover another set of mysteries and complications that come with that. Often, I'm brought up short at the moment I try to label or name or categorize something at that moment of struggling for that insight; I realize how much vaster the problem really is.

JD: Your desire to classify is foregrounded so beautifully in "Index." How wonderful that you manage to tell the reader that index cards were invented by Carl Linnaeus. I hadn't known that, and I love that I learned that through this poem! But that fact about Linnaeus and categorization are just the beginning of what actually becomes a sexual description of how this woman approaches her indexing. When she emerges from that little room after hours of working,

she'd come out
sweaty and disheveled, several pens and maybe
a highlighter or two jammed into her hair and behind her ears,
and smiling with the sheer effort and release.

By the time I finish this sentence, I'm thinking, what is she doing with those index cards?

As I talk through these lines, I'm realizing that this is the turn of the poem. I mean, at first, I thought the final line was the turn, but in this middle section of the poem, there's clearly a moment in which the speaker is seeing this as a young person and is learning about something besides the scientific method, yes?

AH: I think being able to achieve deep work, or flow—that kind of intense productivity is thrilling in a way that sex is thrilling. You're transported, you're out of time, it's both bodily and out of body at the same time, and her work is really...she's doing this cerebral work

of indexing, and yet it's a profoundly physicalized work. I'd never thought about how to build an index before. And now of course it's a search function on the computer, but to have it literalized...I mean, I wanted to honor the physicality of that work, to build that index by hand which is both highly intellectual as well as physical.

JD: It is, and I love the word "index" anyway. It's not just a pointer finger, it's the indices, the indicator, it guides your focus, it points you in a particular direction, just as the poem does. It's a very powerful thing.

AH: She was indexing her husband's book, so while she was familiar with the subject, it wasn't her field of specialization. So you can imagine building an index for a topic that you are unfamiliar with.

JD: I'm so glad that you give that nod to the tenacity and thoroughness of that labor, and then for you to have the thoroughness of your own observations about her and that flow. It's really quite nice.

We've talked a few times now about science, about observation, but maybe we could talk more specifically about research. Readers of *Spoon River Poetry Review* will recognize your name, because this is not the first time that your work has appeared in the pages of the magazine. In Issue 41.1, we featured three of your radium poems, which examine the physical cost to the workers at a radium watch factory in Illinois in the early decades of the twentieth century. I love these poems, your use of research, your engagement with history, your use of dramatic monologue. Of course, this is a recurrent engagement of yours: in the *Armillary Sphere*, you include poems about Galileo as well as the Grand Duchess Anastasia. How and when is research generative for you?

AH: I think it comes out of a profound sense of ignorance of place. I am always interested in new geographies as well as ones that are familiar to me. I like to learn the names of native plants and species, and I like to know the history of the how the street was named for somebody or those kinds of things. I'm interested in where I am and what has happened here before me. I am, in fact, a pretty poor researcher and an even worse historian, and my ability to retain facts is very shaky. So I have to look things up all the time, and I ask the same kinds of questions over and over. Which is to say I end up needing a lot of

research for support, because I don't keep those narratives in my head for very long. I lose a lot of the details and have to look them up again. That kind of organic disorder in my brain leads me toward research as an ordering function, as a way of understanding what's happened here. And so sometimes my curiosities lead me down botanical paths, and sometimes they lead me down historical paths and sometimes, like the radium poems, I was not anticipating researching the radium girls at all, but I saw a statue on a street corner and I began to investigate them, and I discovered this story behind them. So a lot of it is happenstance and a genuine curiosity about where I happen to be at any given time.

JD: And how does poetic form and structure help you to understand where you are and what you're feeling? The most obvious formal structures in this collection of new poems is "Parkinson's Ghazal." I love that poem, as you know. To me, and I hope you'll correct me if I'm wrong—one of the things that makes it so beautiful and poignant is that you've chosen a form that allows you to repeat a phrase—"out of the blue"—that's about speed or happenstance or just quickness of response—when Parkinson's is a disease that is progressive and slow in its degradation of the body and mind. The ghazal, then, is a remarkable choice for this very difficult emotional material. How do you find the right shape or structure for your poems?

AH: My father had Parkinson's—or Parkinsonisms—for many years, and the way in which Parkinsonisms affected his body as well as his mind—while there was a definite progression and in some ways predictable progression—a lot of what happened to him did seem surprising. After a point, his way of experiencing time was a lot more flexible than usual. That is, his sense of the present might be a memory of when he was a young boy with an overlay of something that had happened hours ago, with a memory triggered by an image on a t-shirt. And all of those things were in his consciousness at the same time. It seemed as if his sense of past, present, and future did not operate in the same way that they had before he was affected by Parkinsonisms. It seemed important to pick a form where the stanzas spoke to each other but could all exist in a continuous present, and weave in and out of each other.

JD: Right—because the ghazal shouldn't follow a narrative. So that's a beautiful example of how a form can give some sense to what seems nonsensical in the lived experience.

I'm seeing a few overlapping and related obsessions in this group of poems. One is about the body and illness ("Parkinson's Ghazal," "Janus," "Afterlife," "The Pond, June"); another is about the intersections between people and nature ("Hive," "Red Suitcase," "Ward Manufacturing") and another is driving. In "Rust," "Afterlife," and even in "Index," where there's a reference to a St. Thomas Aquinas statue built entirely of car bumpers! And of course, the speaker saying no to a ride home.

AH: I'm going to correct you a little here, Joanne, because none of those reference driving—they reference me being given a ride in a car. I'm not of driving age in any of those.

That's an interesting pattern that I hadn't seen, but I do think that a memorable part of my family time as a child, even if it only took two weeks every summer, was these car trips that we took, perhaps in part because we had no air conditioning in the car, and so it made a deep impression on my mind and body. I think there's something interesting about being in that closed space. You are a captive audience for each other even if you're not speaking. And "Rust" is as much about the body of the car as it is about the lives of the people inside that car. Perhaps "Afterlife" does something similar with the remembered lives of the people in that particular history as well as the imagined journey of life after death. I don't know if we take a car to the afterlife, but...*[laughter]*

JD: There's one image in "Rust" that's just remarkable: the moment when your sister "peered through a stamp-sized hole at the street whirring/past." There's a hole in the floorboard, and you're like, well, there's the road, just speeding by! The danger is about a foot away from where you're sitting, but you resist the urge to be overly dramatic or to sentimentalize relationships, and you spend your time instead on powers of observation, so that your reader can figure out just how precarious that could have been. As I spend more time with that poem, I realize that that's just the point: that's how it just is in life, how that danger is there all the time.

AH: And it was also a very interesting part of that car. Who else had a car with a rust hole in the floorboards? Certainly, people do, and people did, but it was really engaging to see the ground, frankly. My father could be a very playful, whimsical man, but also very practical, so if that car ran, there was no reason to do anything other than to drive it, no matter a little rust hole in the floorboards.

JD: This and other poems of yours make me think about the power of daydreaming, in cars and elsewhere. In “Afterlife,” too—I just think about those stretches of hours where you’re just looking out the window, staring at each other, trying to see how many times you can poke your sister in the arm, whatever—and what a gift it is to have that down time, especially as a child.

AH: I am also a teacher. I have a little note up behind a cabinet door in my classroom where I see it regularly—and I can’t remember who said it, maybe Aaron Cooper—but it says, “Boredom is the precursor to creativity.” We do need down time in the sense of rest, but we sort of fetishize wellness. Taking care of yourself with yoga or exercise or time reading a book are all very well and good, but there’s also down time in the sense of abandoning all entertainment and all senses of productivity. If you leave mental car radio on, and you just drive through and see what stations show up, and then just listen to the static for a while, you realize that at some point you’re going to drive through an area that has a radio station on that frequency. That is really good and useful work—not only for writers, but for us all as humans—to see what we can create with the self and the imaginative life.

JD: And also an awareness—being aware and observant and mindful. Many times in your poems, your speaker is just being mindful and stumbles upon something. You draw upon animal and plant life to create metaphor and juxtaposition, but you also remember to accept the thing for what it is and not just what it might mean. “March” illustrates this quite nicely. You remind your reader of an essential truth when you say: “Remember, we are a mark of the world, not of something beyond it.” We could talk all day about the symbolism of birds, but sometimes they’re just birds. Having said that, though, your attention to the natural world leads to other surprises and insights: the sparrows in “Red Suitcase,” the squirrel in “Ward Manufacturing,”

the yellow jackets in “Hive”—so, I guess, yeah, we should be bored more often.

Are you working on a new poetry manuscript right now? What shape is it taking?

AH: I have a book in manuscript called *The Vanishing Room*, and some of these poems are from that. But the more I write beyond that manuscript, the more I wonder if I’m writing the next manuscript beyond that. But it’s also possible that I’m writing some sort of hybrid, that I might break apart *The Vanishing Room* and create something else. I’m not sure if I’m doing that or not. And again, maybe this is my urge to classify like things with like things, because of course the arcs of our lives do not break down in the way our manuscripts do. And I don’t want to overly tidy or have a collection that begins and ends too neatly. That said, I hope whatever manuscript that this turns into will resonate as the sum of its parts as well as individual poems, that the tension between and among poems will speak as much as the poems themselves do.

JD: Thank you so much for sharing your insights with us.