RESULTS OF THE BRITISH HAIKU AWARDS 2015

HAIKU SECTION

The adjudicators were David Bingham and Kate B Hall The winners each receive £125. The runners-up each receive £50

The winners are Matt Morden (Wales) and Scott Mason (USA) The runners-up are John Barlow (England) and Scott Mason

David Bingham writes:

When I accepted the task of choosing the winners of this competition I knew there would be an element of 'I don't know what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when I find it' in the way I made my selection. That said, there are certain defining characteristics I expect of good haiku. They should be about real things, written in simple everyday language, use concrete imagery, convey emotion without using abstract nouns and verbs, be in the present tense to capture the 'haiku moment' and written from the point of view of a neutral and dispassionate observer.

I read through the 378 entries several times, using these criteria, and 20 stood out from the rest. Then, for the final stage of selection, I considered how original the haiku were in both their choice of subject matter and their mode of expression. The winner and runner-up were not hard to choose. However, they are very different from each other. The runner-up is a nature haiku, while the winner is very much concerned with an event in the human world.

The Runner-up:

out of a tangle of winter honeysuckle the song of a wren

John Barlow

This haiku grabs you from the first word, 'out'.

We are startled by its abruptness, as the writer was when he experienced the sudden burst of song from the wren. A pattern of well-chosen sounds carries us through the haiku in a poetic way: 'tangle' chiming with 'honeysuckle' and 'song'; 'winter' chiming with 'wren'. There is a freshness and vitality contained in this haiku's apparent simplicity which gives us a real sense of 'being there'.

The Winner:

prostate exam – the consultant's finger touches a nerve

Matt Morden

This is a witty, well-constructed and thought-provoking haiku which is a worthy winner of the competition.

The first line, in two words, places the reader in a situation in which few men would wish to find themselves. The reason for this fearfulness is delivered in the second line. But we are totally unprepared for the shock of the third line, 'touches a nerve'. The reader is made to share the unexpected and sharp surge of pain the patient experiences, but is also taken to a deeper level of anguish concerned with what may be the overall outcome of this medical procedure.

Although there were many good entries for the competition, John Barlow and Matt Morden have written haiku which have that indefinable, magical quality which lifts them above the rest.

Kate B Hall writes:

At first the prospect of reading and judging 378 haiku was a little daunting, however once started, it became clear that while the standard of most of the entries was reasonably high, only a relatively small number stood out as possible winners. I read them all first then on the second reading began to separate the yes's and the no's and was left with 154.

Some things just didn't work for me. One was really scruffy entries, a couple of which I had trouble reading. I understand that not everyone has access to a computer but careful handwriting is needed here. Another was the jokes – I love humorous or witty haiku but they still need to be in the spirit of haiku not stand-up comedy.

More understandable were the attempts to force everything into 5-7-5, either by adding unnecessary words, or taking words out so that the haiku read like a telegram, both leaving the haiku awkwardly phrased.

However there were many really good haiku that were full of feeling, captured a moment, made me smile or feel sad, and flowed beautifully. At about the 30 mark I began to ask myself if I would change anything, add or remove a word, what exactly was the writer communicating to me. When I got down to 10, the final 3 were quite easy to choose as they stood out quite clearly. So I agonised and would have liked to choose them all, but it had to be two, so I chose the two that felt the most meaningful and then the one I connected with the most – the difference was small but enough for me to be sure.

So my runner up is:

enough said her teaspoon stirs the rest

A beautifully concise moment which I'm sure most people will recognise, and yet we are left to decide the actual mood of the stirrer, which is intriguing. The haiku is well balanced and turns in an unexpected way leaving us understanding and wondering at the same time.

And my winner is without any doubt:

lonely walk the sudden urge to throw a stick

A haiku about aloneness and how we deal with loss. The haiku is carefully pared down to its essentials. There is the lovely turn from the loneliness of walker to the desire to throw a stick, which is elevated to a symbol of loss, memory and interestingly, joy: the release of the stick - suggesting a happier time. Nothing else is needed to enable us to share this moment with the writer of this very fine haiku.

It was not until I sent the winning titles to David Steele that I discovered both haiku were by the same person – Scott Mason – congratulations (twice) and thank you for your wonderful haiku.

TANKA SECTION

The adjudicators were Catherine Redfern and Alison Williams The winners each receive £125. The runners-up each receive £50

The winners are Jean James (Wales) and John Barlow (England) The runners-up are Susan Burch (USA) and Jean James

Catherine Redfern writes:

Tanka, although a very ancient form going back 1200 years, is always undergoing subtle changes. Beverley George has written; "The world of tanka in English is developing rapidly and we who write and/or edit it must keep an open mind to its potential." Looking at the many fine entries to this competition it does seem that certain "rules" are no longer observed. Tanka is still a quintain, still a short song – a lyric verse, emotionally sincere, which uses simple language allowing ambiguity although not obscurity. What has gone is the 57577 pattern of lines (only one entry in this format), and even the looser pattern of short, long, short, long, long is not very evident.

What remains are convincing tanka which cover a variety of subject matter and mood. There is the tanka that speaks immediately to the reader and others that grow richer with the participation of the reader's thoughts. Both of these were present in the entries, and after many careful readings, usually aloud, I narrowed down the possible winners. The winner stood out, but there were four or five fine tanka jostling for the position of runner-up. All had emotional impact and musical rhythm. Sanford Goldstein perhaps sums up what I was seeking in the winning entries: "the best tanka harmonises the writer's emotional life with the elements of the outer world used to portray it."

The winning tanka is by Jean James

after the funeral an atlas on the table open at Africa you were always hoping to see new worlds

This poignant tanka flows beautifully, and indeed, looks "right" on the page. The first three lines lead from the object observed, the open atlas, to the more philosophical final two lines which recognise the wanderlust character of the person being remembered. It is a satisfying tanka to read aloud, the repeated "a"s – after, atlas, Africa, always – helping to bind the lines together.

The runner-up is by Susan Burch

piling on more blankets the weight of life without you.

This tanka too is on the subject of loss, every word (direct speech in this case) indispensable. The emotion is the stronger for the detached brevity of the lines. The word "weight" acts as the pivot It is a strong word which, even though a single syllable, somehow cannot be rushed. The physical weight of the blankets suggesting the emotional weight of sorrow is so powerful.

Congratulations to the winners, and to all who took part. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to read your work so closely. By all your entries you have made this competition a viable and valuable event. Thank you.

Alison Williams writes:

It was a pleasure, in judging this competition, to get to read a lot of tanka for a change. I'm used to finding a few at a time amongst the larger number of haiku published.

While there are similarities between the two forms I find that tanka have a different flavour. They often have a more strongly expressed emotional state, even if that is presented largely through imagery rather than being directly stated. They can also involve a sense of two voices, as in a call and response, or of changes of viewpoint or mood, or an intentional ambiguity, or some kind of turn or shift within the poem, as there is between renga verses. I don't think any of these things are definitive of tanka, they are just examples of some ways in which the longer form opens up more options. In reading the entries I was looking for poems that took advantage in some way of the possibilities of the tanka form and, for me, there were two that stood out.

My choice of winner is John Barlow's

days since it fell to earth I lift the blackbird's lightness into spring air

This has a poignancy and delicacy about it both in subject matter and in the spare details that we have of the event. The bird itself has more than one kind of lightness, the lightness of flight and also it's minimal weight in the hand as it is lifted up. Both find a correspondence with the light spring air. The 'I' who does the lifting is all but invisible with all the focus on the bird which has for some reason fallen out of it's world of flight down to earth. Why it fell and why it is being lifted again is not explained. I imagine that during those days since its fall it has been nursed back to health, recovered and is then ready to take flight again. If it had not been 'days' since it fell I might have imagined a fledgling being returned to the safety of the nest.

And the runner-up is Jean James's

the chill of an owl's hoot in the dark I move closer to your back

This is an excellent example of a pivotal third line that turns our attention from one thing to another, inviting us to find the connection. In this case we turn from what can sometimes be experienced as the coldness of the natural world to the warmth offered by human companionship. Although as I read it over several times I found an interesting ambiguity in the way it is written. Does the back belong to someone sleeping, as I first thought, or are they awake and turning away from the approach? Sometimes humanity can also be cold.

Administrator's Note:

The British Haiku Society would like to thank the four judges for the time and careful consideration they have put into the task of selecting the best of the entries in each category. Their thoughtful comments are informative and instructive.

Thanks are also due to all those who took part in each of the categories of the British Haiku Awards. As usual, haiku was the most popular category attracting 378 entries from 13 countries.
61% of the poets were from England, 9% from Australia and 6% from Ireland. Scotland, Wales and the US fielded 5% each - a much reduced number from the US this year. Other countries represented were

There were almost 100 Tanka entries, which came from seven different countries,

Canada, Finland, Hungary, India, Netherlands, NZ and Sweden

David Steele