

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2018 - RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION

Judges – Claire Everett and Scott Mason

The winners are John Barlow, UK and Alan Summers, UK

The runners-up are Martha Magenta, UK and Julie Warther, USA

Claire Everett writes:

My favourite haiku are small hymns to Nature. The poet/observer's presence is only implied, thus inviting the reader to share in a numinous experience that somehow binds us all in a sense of oneness. This is what the late Martin Lucas described as 'poetic spell' and to me, the best haiku are akin to incantation: they connect us to past, present and future and vibrate the very atoms of our being in the same way that the bees hum the blossoms and the wind sings the grass. My selections are primarily of this ilk in so much as they do not have an overtly present human voice and so have a life of their own. They are the haiku that speak most intimately with myself as a poet and fellow living being. Of the 437 entries, they were sadly few and far between, but a shortlist of about fifteen leapt from the page on first reading and all that remained was for them to compete for my attention and favour like the hidden voices of a summer hedgerow. And yes, coincidentally, the majority of them were birds . . .

Winner – John Barlow, UK

*a whitethroat
launches into songflight . . .
hawthorn in bud*

My winner and runner-up switched positions a number of times as both are imbued with the qualities that, for me, make a haiku not merely excellent, but memorable and magical. In the end, it was the whitethroat that held me captivated with its aria to the rising sap of May and all that that implies. I was reminded of my forebears who would have made crowns of hawthorn for their Queen, lit the Bel fires and with hands fasted, pledged or renewed their love for a year and a day. At this time of political and environmental uncertainty there is something undeniably healing about that tiny (and predominantly monogamous) bird, revelling in his courtship and *launching* himself into the blue on the wings of a juddering, dancing song. The bird's under-feathers are white with a blush in parts, reminiscent of the blossoms that wait to explode from their buds. In reading the haiku aloud, the joie de vivre is tangible and pricked my eyes with its truth and beauty. Surely *this* "is what it is all about" . . .

Runner-up – Martha Magenta, UK

*earthshine . . .
the stir of life
in a siskin's egg*

My runner up is another work of magic. *Earthshine*: the very word is an exquisite invitation to share in the moment. It conjures a sense of otherworldliness in that image of the soft glow on the

shadowy face of the moon that is rendered by the reflection of sunlight from the Earth. When you think of the magic that makes this phenomenon possible-- a satellite, a planet, a star and the genius of the human eye – it is not too much of a leap to consider the miracle of life itself and the potential that is awakening within that pallid, sometimes speckled, shell. It is fitting that according to folklore, the siskin has in her nest a magic stone that keeps it invisible. With all the power science has at its disposal, the greatest mystery of all remains largely unsolved.

And for my commended poems, in no particular order . . .

*myself
in another's hands . . .
spring snow*
--- James Connolly, UK

A haiku that involves the human in a way that I would venture to say most readers will be able to relate to, yet here, the possibilities of interpretation provide the element of magic. Who has not been surprised and delighted by snow in spring, just when we thought winter had loosened its grip? Is this the thrill of new love, or love reawakened, or is it an alien, unwanted, perhaps clinical touch that makes us a condition, a patient, a problem to solve, not to mention all the uncertainty and possibly fear that comes with that? There is a great sense of surrender, but the emotion behind that is wholly dependent on what the reader cares to make of the poem.

*the day's warmth
still in his stone . . .
steeple swifts*
--- John Barlow, UK

Originally one of my prize-winners, there is so much I could write about this haiku. It is a powerful animist dedication to a life that has departed this realm, at least in the form in which it was known and loved. For me, there is no bird more *alive* than the swift, whose return I anxiously await each year, and whose departure, a few short months later, I undoubtedly mourn. What might we intuit in these nine words about what the poet feels about life after death, reincarnation, heaven and earth, is more than this short appraisal allows. It is a *fine* poem and the only reason it wasn't a winning poem is its sibilance when read aloud.

And finally, as a poet, walker and cyclist who has made the glorious North Yorkshire her home, I could not fail to be wooed by this delicate haiku that places me in the Dales with their spellbinding sense of infinity, defined by the ghostly calls of curlews and the apparitions of peaks whose names I am still learning . . .

*calls of curlews
each further hill
a paler blue*
--- John Barlow, UK

Thank you to all the poets who reminded me of a spark that can all too easily be missed, and to the BHS for the honour of judging this award.

Scott Mason writes:

A good haiku can contain and convey a telling moment in just a kernel. A great haiku can implant that kernel in the reader's or listener's consciousness, making its moment live on.

This year's competition produced many haiku that I would consider "good" by the standard suggested above. A dozen or so approached greatness in my estimation. I am honored to share my five favorites here.

As diverse as these poems are, they have one thing in common: they each tantalize. They do not aspire to teach or resolve; instead they leave room to intrigue and involve. In this way they gain our attention, sustain our interest and make the moment last.

Winner – Alan Summers, UK

eye of the song a blackbird touching the void

A Rubik's ku of perception and intuition held together with synesthesia, the winning one-liner beguiles and haunts me. What and where is the "eye" of a blackbird's song? How does that blackbird "touch" the void? What void are we talking about here anyway – some nexus of negative color (blackness), sound (silence) and capability? ... the focus of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" turned inward? These questions and others draw me into a state of dreamlike reverie, impelled by a creature in equal parts totem and flesh. (The last "literary" bird to transport me like this was a thrush, in Burnt Norton.)

There are many different ways of looking at this magical blackbird haiku (easily thirteen, if not four and twenty), each with its own rewards.

Runner-Up – Julie Warther, USA

*biking downhill
an Amish girl with bonnet straps
clenched in her teeth*

This stop-action image stopped me in my tracks. I imagine I'm not alone in having anticipated a last line something like "flapping in the breeze." But the surprising actual third line is perfect, and perfectly logical: the girl's bonnet would certainly be left in her tracks if it weren't, somehow, reined in. Beyond such logic, however, lies a curious piece of intrigue. The Amish (pronounced AH-mish) are members of a religious order populating a small number of North American rural counties; they are best known to outsiders for their plain traditional garb and their adherence to a pre-modern way of life – for instance, they eschew electricity as well as automobiles (favoring horse-drawn buggies) and even, in some communities, bicycles. So what must this Amish girl be feeling as she hurtles downhill, clenching those bonnet straps in her teeth – resolve? ... exhilaration? ... terror? ... freedom?

The answer is blowin' in the wind ...

Honorable Mentions:

*in and out
of moonlight*

almost a fox
--- Earl Keener, USA

In this moving target haiku, "almost" scores a bulls-eye.

each window its own night train
--- Alan Summers, UK

This linear portmanteau has more than a one-track mind.

among the rubble
a woman is carrying
her face in her hands
--- Frank Dietrich, Germany

Sometimes one can only bear (or countenance) so much.

TANKA SECTION

Judges – Debbie Strange and Linda Jeannette Ward

The winners are David Terelinck, Australia and an'ya, USA
The runners-up are Jean James, UK and Susan Burch, USA

Debbie Strange writes:

I extend my gratitude to Iliyana and the BHS for inviting me to judge this competition and to the entrants for participating. Congratulations to the winners!

Whilst reading these entries, I was struck by the prominent themes of love and loss, and the myriad ways in which we try to define these emotions. I particularly enjoy work that leads me on a journey beyond personal experience, stirring my imagination, and resonating long after the first reading. As a singer/songwriter, I sought the qualities of distinct lyricism and rhythm during recitation. Each offering was considered carefully before I began the process of eliminating those that fell short of my subjective criteria. The top ten poems exhibited some, if not all, of the following attributes:

- a demonstrated understanding of the genre
- succinct construction
- consistent tenses
- mindful use of punctuation, articles, prepositions, and pronouns
- unique imagery, themes, and metaphors
- creative content and word choices

Winner – David Terelinck, Australia

it's not so much
the 'big one' when it comes
but aftershocks . . .
our favorite song,
letters addressed to you

The winning tanka is well crafted in the characteristic s/l/s/l/l style, displaying a thorough knowledge of form, with adept use of punctuation, and an economy of words. At first reading, the 'big one' evokes images of an earthquake, with the aftershocks deftly suggested by an ellipsis. As this phrase is also often used to describe a sudden heart attack, the poet has employed duality of interpretation and juxtaposition to great effect. Repetition of s-sounds throughout the poem serves as a metaphorical reminder of the recurring emotional upheaval following a devastating loss. The writer leaves breathing room for readers by allowing us to speculate on the nature of this event. I commend the poet's original and poignant perspective on a universal theme!

Runner-up – Jean James, UK

*July heat
along the tarred road
black bubbles
we puncture summer
with our fingers*

The runner-up tanka has the ring of authentic experience. The sketch-of-life technique invites us into the rich tactile and sensory images of the writer's world. Readers feel the rising temperature, see the heat waves shimmering above the road, and smell the acrid, nose-tingling scent of tar. This poem conjures a joyful and carefree picture in my mind's eye of children playing on a languid summer day. The final two lines are wonderfully imaginative and inventive!

Honourable Mentions:

*smoke rises
from the chimney
not everything
I remember
is past*
--- Gregory Longenecker, USA

- unconventional, both in form and in the representation of the memories we make on a daily basis

*spring raindrops
spreading into circles
on our lake
a pair of ember-geese
glide through eternity*
--- an'ya, USA

- a lovely depiction of serenity and the passage of time, with an excellent pivot line

*at boot camp
we were taught the art
of marching
I tap that cadence now
with a three-prong cane*
--- an'ya, USA

- ties the present to the past in a powerful and heart-rending manner

Linda Jeannette Ward writes:

Such an enjoyable challenge to read so many tanka with the honor of selecting the winners. I read the complete list four times, ending with a short list of 10 poems. These I re-read several more times. My preferences in tanka include "show, don't tell," (or show as you tell), juxtaposition of human emotion with nature and openness to reader interpretation. Most of all, winning entries ideally reflect what Sanford Goldstein has suggested: "the best tanka harmonizes the writer's emotional life with the elements of the outer world used to portray it."

Winner – an'ya, USA

*without . . .
each evening seems even
longer
than it takes the river
to smooth a thousand stones*

an'ya's winning tanka immediately arouses our curiosity with its one-word mystery for Line One: "without..." The first thought for the reader may be to add the word "you" to this line, but upon reflection, there are many other possibilities: the loss of one's self through illness or the loss of meaningful work, a family home, or beloved pet. So, a story all in one word, and a juxtaposition with the next four lines that not only describes how endless the grief of loss can be, but manages to tell us that it can wear one down to almost nothing. An outstanding tanka that harmonizes human emotion with not only a meaningful description of nature, but also includes the traditional Japanese tanka use of the word "thousand" for emphasis.

Runner-up – Susan Burch, USA

*a northern cardinal
in a tree without leaves
this winter
they talk of putting me
in a home*

Susan's well-constructed tanka offers a juxtaposition between the scarlet brightness a cardinal presents against bare trees in winter with the dreaded prospect of being placed in a home barren of warmth. The pivot in Line Three connects these images with a simple statement that tells us the move may be imminent and those the poet loves are making plans that will take her away from the brightness of birds outside of her window, as well as the familiar warmth a long-term home provides. Direct and concise language, and the balanced rhythm between lines three and five infuse this moving tanka with the chill of dread more than would be possible in a more lengthy poetic form.

Honourable Mention – an'ya, USA

*gibbous moon
the cosmos reposing
in its round
your body spoons a chair
that holds me to the bone*

HAIBUN SECTION
“Ken and Noragh Jones Haibun Award”

Judge – David Bingham

Both winner and runner-up is Simon Chard, UK

David Bingham writes:

Winner – Simon Chard, UK

Beast from the East

Even as I approach the campus exit I’m still swithering. But my boots and waterproofs are in the car specially. Turn right it is then. The merse. Never mind the eye-watering chill. I text when I’m all togged up. What’s this “radio silence” apology all about? Fifty minutes does it as usual – never the same route twice around the salty pools, the last of a grey sunset as I leave. Still no reply by the time I turn the key in the door. The cooker clock is flashing: there must have been a power cut. And then on the table I see the envelope. It feels as if the ink has only just dried. The words hit me in the chest; after the first paragraph it’s just a blur.

*the winter hills’
morning moonset—
a year come round*

*

My main focus in judging this competition has been on deciding how successfully the three basic elements of a haibun, title, prose and haiku, have been combined to provide the reader with a meaningful experience. The prose should be interesting and involving from the first sentence and be sharp, original and somewhat enigmatic. The title and the accompanying haiku should interact with the prose to provide a unified piece of writing.

In *Beast from the East* Simon Chard has successfully condensed a plot worthy of a Thomas Hardy novel into a short, dramatic and thought-provoking haibun. The prose contains a moment of indecision, a puzzling communication, an omen, a partial revelation and a tragic ending. The title, ‘Beast from the East’, a phrase coined by the UK media to describe severe wintry weather, is used cleverly as a device to evoke the physical conditions in which the main character takes their walk around the merse and also lingers in the mind to heighten that sense of chill which is experienced when the letter, which has been left for them, is read. The accompanying haiku then offers a partial resolution. Over the hills the moon has set, as we suspect has the main character’s relationship; but the final line ‘a year come round’ suggests not only that this relationship has been long, but more optimistically, that a new year lies ahead, maybe one filled with fresh opportunity. Simon Chard doesn’t spoon feed his readers; he leaves us to fill in the gaps by using our own imagination. This is an ingeniously constructed haibun in which title, prose and haiku work together to create an enigmatic and absorbing piece of work.

Runner-up – Simon Chard, UK

Crow Crag

You have to be a fan of Withnail & I (1987) to feel the need to make the trip to Uncle Monty's house in the country. Clearly there has been some fine restoration work of late at Sleddale Hall, to give it its proper name, but it's still very recognisable as the film's most famous location. It's only when you're here though that you realise that the view to Wet Sleddale reservoir and Shap isn't the one that Marwood, putting on his glasses, surveys as he steps out that first morning. His isn't the post-1969 view. Director Bruce Robinson instead substitutes a shot of the Haweswater reservoir a few miles away over the hill. Once you know that of course the scene will always feel a tad clunky but it's more what one would expect to see from a North Country idyll.

*blowing bog cotton
even on a Sunday
the lime works' chimneys*

*

Crow Crag by Simon Chard also fulfils my expectations of how a haibun should be written. The title suggests Crow Crag is the name of a real location; but in fact it is the name given to Sleddale Hall by the makers of the film 'Withnail and I' and within the film what is meant to be a view from the hall is in fact a substitute view from another part of the Lake District. He says of Marwood, 'His isn't the post 1969 view', which, in fact, would have been the view of a lime works which is later described in the haiku. Why does the film not include this view? It is because cinema-goers expect the idyll of the rural North Country. Not so the writer of haibun. In the haiku Simon Chard has been inspired to use 'bog cotton', a symbol of the high fells, as an image for the smoke coming from the chimneys of an industrial building. This is both a vivid description of the scene and also a sideways allusion to the mistaken perceptions we hold about 'this green and pleasant land'. This is a haibun of contemporary relevance in an age of increasing self-deception. When we use social media we are encouraged to edit out those aspects of our lives which fail to fit the ideal and in general we are constantly being diverted from the social and environmental problems which stare us in the face. Writers of haiku should tell it how it is and not how we would like it to be!

Honourable Mentions:

Monsoon by Dee Evetts, USA describes, in a closely-observed and sensitive way, how the young people of a village respond to a sudden downpour of rain.

At the Japanese Garden by Lynne Rees, UK is a lively and colour-filled haibun in which two old ladies are compared to exotic birds which, if startled, might take flight

Destined to be Broke by Alexis Rotella, USA is an engaging narrative in which a woman's hopes of wealth are raised and then confounded.

Administrator's Note:

Congratulations to the winning poets! All winners, runners-up and honourable mentions will receive BHS Awards certificates. A very interesting year with some poets receiving multiple awards for their outstanding performance.

The British Haiku Society would like to thank all five judges for their time and efforts into selecting the best of the entries in each category and into producing these discerning reports.

The BHS is grateful to all participants for their continuous support over the years.

2018 was another very productive year and we received: 437 haiku, 128 tanka and 46 haibun from 13 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, India, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Portugal, Sri Lanka, Sweden, UK, and USA. 51% of the poets were from UK, 27 % from USA, 9% from Australia, 4 % from Canada, 2 % from Netherlands, etc.

Looking forward to your entries for the BHS Awards 2019!

Iliyana Stoyanova
BHS Awards Administrator