

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2019 - RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION

Judges – Anna Maris and David Lanoue

The winners are Richard Tindall, UK and D W Brydon, UK
The runners-up are David Jacobs, UK and Tom Bierovic, USA

Anna Maris writes:

The point of haiku is to capture a moment in one or two contrasting simple images, which on reading either deepens or stays with you. Being somewhat traditional, I look for the classic features, also in experimental haiku, where I wish to see at least some the traces of the original form, such as wabi-sabi, karumi, yugen, makoto or the zen-like simplicity. I pay little attention to syllables, but rhythm is important. Haiku must be elegant and unconstructed, not clever, too elaborate, self-centred or trite. It is always difficult to select only a few poems out of several hundred, but a winning haiku is original and universal, that is to say created for the reader and not for the writer. A first class haiku allows the reader to open their mind to reflection and fill the shell of the poem with our own feelings, experiences and thoughts about this world. But most of all haiku is art and poetry. And if it is not poetry or art, then it is also not haiku.

The overall quality of the contest was good and varied, however it was easy to pick out the top 50. Of the top 10 poems, there were many strong contenders but to me, the winner and runner up were outstanding. It is important to remember that whatever rules you follow when you judge a competition, however many common criteria, the poems that stay with us are also a matter of personal taste.

I am grateful for the opportunity to judge the BHS awards in 2020 and thank you all for the many poems, which I will carry with me for years to come.

Winner - Richard Tindall, UK

*remembering Dad
I send my skimmer-stone
into Doggerland*

This suggestive haiku beautifully captures the simplicity of sending a childhood skimmer-stone into a sea area that used to be land, the physical connection of Britain to the rest of the European continent. It plays on the memories of our parents and the complexity of love between ourselves, and those who are closest to us. The exquisite rhythm of the poem, further strengthened by the alliteration of the “d”s gives it a unique movement, which makes me want to join the writer in letting go of old memories in lightness and acceptance.

Runner-up - David Jacobs, UK

making the snow globe snow the child within

The subtle humour of this poem brings instant recognition to the reader and allows us an opportunity to reflect on our own inner child. It effortlessly and skilfully incorporates the season word in a playful, concrete scene. A perfect one-line haiku, which could not have been written on three lines, its immediate back-beat rhythm also allows the reader to split the poem in other places to make new interpretations.

Honourable Mentions:

*river dusk
on his rock the dipper
still not still*

--- John Barlow, UK

all day rain carving its way through the valley

--- John Barlow, UK

*moon and mist
each becoming
a little of the other*

--- Simon Hanson, Australia

David Lanoue writes:

Haiku is about discovering connections: a unique, intimate art form in which the poet invites the reader into his or her thought-and-feeling process, so that they begin together at point A and then arrive together at a point B that neither the poet nor the reader could have predicted. As a journey from here to there, haiku involves a breakage of normal thought and language: a daring leap that reminds us of its origin as hokku, the opening verse of a renku, which itself is essentially a mini-renku: a fractal of all the leaping, dancing verses that follow. A haiku remains forever what it was in the beginning: a holy ritual of imagined travel through the universe bending toward enlightenment.

Of the 477 haiku submitted, 38 completely satisfy my requirements. This means, given my charge to narrow the field to no more than five, many excellent haiku must go unmentioned.

Winner – D W Brydon, UK

*taxi horn
a cat-shadow leaps
into its echo*

Runner-up - Tom Bierovic, USA

*melting icicle . . .
a sparrow showers
drip by drip*

Honourable Mentions:

a heron moving silently at the shrine her lips
--- Clare McCotter, UK

*spring morning rain
bus drivers from opposite directions
salute*
--- Mark Powderhill, UK

*cherry blossoms
a girl wears lipstick
for the first time*
--- Tom Bierovic, USA

Reflections

The “*taxi horn*” haiku literally embodies my ideal of haiku as a leaping form. A horn blares; a cat leaps—and everything happens so quickly that nothing is certain, boundaries blur, sound becomes echo, cat becomes shadow. The poet discovers and shows us in the moment the simultaneity of all things, along with a hint that “things” are really actions: lithe and elusive processes. Everything happens so fast, we never see the cat in the poem, just a leaping into shadow. The taxi drives on into the night (as I picture the scene) and the quick cat, who has just now used up one of his nine lives, abides somewhere we cannot see but we are happy it is so.

The “*melting icicle*” haiku is exquisite in its observation and suggestiveness of feeling. One drip at a time, the sparrow patiently showers: shaking its head (I imagine), ruffling its feathers, and then waiting for more. I imagine that it is also waiting for springtime heat and the resurgence of life that the melting of winter ice betokens. I sense such warmth, compassion, and camaraderie (Issa-like!) for the little bird.

“*a heron moving...*” draws us into a scene, a mood, and a revelation. This is life captured on the run—no edits, no second thoughts, no looking back.

“*spring morning rain...*” also evokes a slice of life, as the two bus drivers, going two different directions, salute each other—a spring scene that so simply and eloquently expresses shimmering wetness limned with hope for humanity.

“*cherry blossoms...*” too, discovers deep connections: the springtime of blossoms and the springtime of a girl’s life: freshness, beauty, bright color, and the promise of so much more.

TANKA SECTION

Judges – an'ya and Gregory Longenecker

The winners are Debbie Strange, Canada and Margaret Chula, USA

The runners-up are Debbie Strange, Canada and Chen-ou Liu, Canada

an'ya writes:

It's an honor for me to be invited to judge this contest. Although I regret not being a submitter this time, as this has been one of my favorite competitions over the years.

Having said this, I judged on four criteria, and chose tanka that had all of these qualities combined together:

Memorable content

Tanka rhythm (close to a (s, l, s, l, l) song-like melody)

A human element

A nature element

There were many decent tanka, but very few had all the above mentioned.

Winner - Debbie Strange, Canada

*between the spokes
of your spinning wheel
a dusty web . . .
I never thought our lives
would so quickly unwind*

For the overall winner, I've chosen this tanka by Debbie Strange from Canada. It has a fantastic visual juxtaposition of a spinning wheel with a web between its spokes. I can see this sitting in someone's attics for a long time gathering dust. The final word "unwind" allows readers to literally unwind from the tanka itself. All the words that have a "w" sound are a plus, 'between", "wheel", "web", "would", and "unwind". Not to count syllables but, this is a fine example of writing a crescendo into the tanka. Debbie's two shortest lines being the same count, the first long line (2) is one beat longer, the second long line (4) is two beats longer, and so forth until the final and longest line by three beats which created its fine crescendo.

Runner-up - Debbie Strange, Canada

*watching you
prepare a star fruit
just so
the small galaxies
of grace in your hands*

For runner-up, surprising but not surprisingly by the same talented author, Debbie Strange. The rhythm is there, it makes a nature reference via fruit, plus the human element. It's succinct, and yet this tanka is complete. The reference to "star fruit" and "small galaxies" is a striking comparison. The final line is memorable and adds "grace" to the whole tanka as well.

Honourable Mentions: (in order of preference)

*cradled in my palm
my baby sister's ashes
and shards of bones—
remembering how I envied
her high cheekbones*
--- Margaret Chula, USA

This tanka by Maggie Chula from the USA, although sad is a fine piece. I personally would have suggested the word "envied" could have wrapped to the last line, however, it's a matter of individual taste. I really love the bittersweet emotion this tanka brings to readers.

*a black river
of ants surges across
the pavement
they know their destination
long before I know mine*
--- Debbie Strange, Canada

Again, another well written and poignant tanka by Debbie Strange from Canada. The mention of ants as a black river surging across the pavement is a super visual, and there's a solid human element of compassion in this one too.

*migrating geese
slip-stitch the autumn sky –
sometimes
only nature can mend
what's frayed within me*
--- David Terelinck, Australia

This tanka by David Terelinck from Australia caught my attention in line two with the word "slip-stitch". Word choice can be what separates one tanka from another, making it notable.

Gregory Longenecker writes:

This year's contest contained a number of excellent tanka, ranging from the personal and philosophical to climate change and the ongoing immigrant crises. I asked myself if the poem utilized a tanka structure of subsidiary thought/image working with a larger theme or did it wander off course? Was it an expected poem? Did it have a unique viewpoint? Of the

remaining dozen or more tanka I read over and over again, they all contained these elements and touched me deeply with their insights which went beyond words.

Winner - Margaret Chula, USA

*cradled in my palm
my baby sister's ashes
and shards of bones—
remembering how I envied
her high cheekbones*

I love this very personal poem with its echoes in sound and image. The author writes of cradling ashes as they might once have cradled the sister; the mention of bone shards recalls the poet's envy of the sister's cheekbones. The sounds resonate with the assonance of "a" and "o" sounds in the first three lines, echoed in the last two lines. The loss of someone younger is always hard to accept. This isn't how we expect life to be. It's because this tanka is so personal that it becomes universal.

Runner-up - Chen-ou Liu, Canada

*the dervish
of first snowflakes...
a Syrian
child refugee talking
to the foreign sky*

This is a well-crafted tanka that begins with snow falling, identifying who sees it, where and their reaction to it. The use of "dervish" refers to the meditative movements of disciples of Sufism. The snow is moving and so is the child, a Syrian refugee in a new land. One wonders what the child makes of all this.

Honourable Mentions:

*the slow effacement
of our snow angel wings
with the wind's hushed breath
moments I failed to grasp
have slowly blown away*
--- Linda Jeannette Ward, USA

The author uses nature to symbolize how we don't always grasp the important things in life. The natural elements are soft, "slow effacement," "snow angel wings," and the "wind's hushed breath. These underscore how we overlook happenings in our life. There is a great feeling of regret in this poem.

*watching you
prepare a star fruit*

*just so
the small galaxies
of grace in your hands*
--- Debbie Strange, Canada

This is a deceptively simple tanka. The poet observes someone working with star fruit and enters into a meditation. They notice the small things being done, “just so.” There is a kind of magic or “grace.” “The small galaxies” refers to the fruit and/or the work performed by the preparer.

*migrating geese
slip-stitch the autumn sky-
sometimes
only nature can mend
what’s frayed within me*
--- David Terelinck, Australia

This tanka of healing centers around the flight of geese and the changing of the lead goose. The words, “slip-stitch” are Velcro words that force the reader to linger over them. In life, the writer is saying, one must sometimes wait for nature to heal us.

HAIBUN SECTION

Judge – Simon Chard

The winner is Marietta McGregor, Australia
The runner-up is Marietta McGregor, Australia

Simon Chard writes:

Winner – Marietta McGregor, Australia

River

Wet season. The rains are late again this year. An eight-year-old boy whimpers in half-sleep. These days in thick heat he plays with his sister in the slow-flowing brown river while his mother and village women go about daily tasks. Today seemed no different to all the rest. His mother rises from her mat. His forehead feels hot. She fans him with a pandanus fan. Wrings out a cloth and bathes his heaving chest. The boy is awake, crying, holding his head. She tells the boy’s sister to run to a house where an old woman lives who knows bush medicine.

*weeks without rain
dead leaves rustle
in a water tank*

Late summer. A heatwave grips a wealthy country's state capital. A nine-year-old boy who played all day in his local Olympic pool is whisked by ambulance to the children's hospital. He's limp, sweating and unresponsive, hooked up to drips in an isolation ward. It's too late. Close to dawn, he dies. A research team issues a press release: an amoeba infected the boy's soft meninges. Contamination from the water supply. Hysteria grips the city. The closed pool reeks of chlorine. Tap water stinks of bleach. Politicians point the finger — at each other, farmers, miners for taking too much water during a drought. Meanwhile, a metal pipeline from a sluggish river snakes overland, cooking in the sun like a rusty pot over a slow fire, until soupy water discharges into city reservoirs.

*overnight vigil
a window blurs
the gibbous moon*

Heat like a baleful dragon already stalks the village. The healer has done her best with tinctures of roots and leaves and smoke from bark but she cannot fight the sickness. As the sun comes up a high keening fills the air like wind in water pandani. No-one knows why the boy dies; there is no-one to ask. Children frolic in the slow river. Village life moves on.

*failed monsoon
a cracked water-pot
crawls with ants*

*

In judging this contest I simply looked for what I thought were good examples of the haibun craft and, as such, writing that would pique the interest and emotions of the reader. Ken Jones' phrase "literary nourishment" was very much in my mind. River is ambitious in its scope and Marietta McGregor pulls it off beautifully. "Wet season", "pandanus" and "bush medicine" are the clues that we are with Aboriginal people, most likely in northern Queensland. Then we switch to the city – perhaps to Brisbane further south, it being the state capital, where a boy of a similar age has also been taken ill with amoebic meningitis. Despite the ministrations of medicines, bush in one case, 21st century in the other, both die. The bacteria don't distinguish between the two boys, but it is the villagers in the north who inevitably are none the wiser. There are some big themes here: health inequalities, failure of government, environmental pollution, and lurking behind all these the dark shadow of global warming. It's a poignant account and a piece of writing for our times, told with a reporter's eye but not as mere reportage. No words are wasted. The haiku are excellent, the images working perfectly as 'comments' on the preceding prose. 'River' might seem an innocuous title but as we follow the thread it illustrates what life-shaping forces are now at work in areas on the frontier of climate change.

Runner-up – Marietta McGregor, Australia

In my Father's house

In a cemetery at the end of the world, Italian cane farmers lay their dead. Halifax cemetery lies close to the Herbert River in far North Queensland. Weed-strangled paths pass between row after row of mausoleums. Each tomb is like a big doll's house or miniature stately home, perfectly-proportioned but scaled-down. Arched porticoes, dadoes, and classical entablatures adorn the largest, reserved for whole families. Some crypts shed mosaic tiles where damp has chewed away grouting, leaving irregular maps of bare concrete. Weathered marble angels bow heads over open books. Wrought-iron gates rust and sag on their hinges. Some sepulchres are raised against the frequent tropical floods, stone steps climbing to glazed doors with bronze latches. The double doors of one large vault have been prised open by a liana. The vine twines around a stone plinth, capturing a Capodimonte vase overflowing with porcelain roses. A mother smiles from a hand-tinted photograph, her young face belying her death year. A breeze rattles the dry fronds of palms edging the cemetery. I let the wind with its caramel-molasses hint of smoke from scorched canefields blow through me, and away.

*cryptic runes
of moss in shade
things we keep safe*

*

To the Italian sugar cane cutters who first started to arrive in the 1890s, Queensland would indeed have felt like “the end of the world”. In time though, with many becoming plantation owners themselves, Italian nationals soon came to shape the landscape, physically and culturally, and that included the memorialising of the dead, as the writer so well describes. Here though the dead may not be totally safe. Nature is always threatening to take over, in dramatic ways such as the rampant liana and more quietly in the form of moss. And moss and secrets go together. The haiku feels like the writer’s deep breath after that myriad of fancy stonework. It’s a moment to take stock and, as she says, just feel the wind. Right from the title (it’s from John 14:2: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”) and first sentence, Marietta McGregor grabs our attention. The tightly packed prose that follows mirrors perfectly the dense arrangement of the cemetery’s mausoleums. Is the writer simply a tourist or is there a personal connection to Halifax? It’s a fine piece with scripture, geography, social history, and the culture of death all rolled into one.

Honourable Mentions:

The Gull by John Barlow, UK is a well-depicted encounter with a sick bird along the coastline and with it a pause for reflection on the precariousness of life.

Winnowing by Margaret Chula, USA is a scenario familiar to many of us, that of having to move an elderly relative into care, in this case the writer’s mother. Told with compassion and humour.

Sweet Corn by Margaret Chula, USA. The abrupt conclusion captures how memories of idyllic childhood summers came to be haunted by what was to happen to the writer’s youngest sister.

Administrator's Note:

Congratulations to the winning poets! As I am writing this note we are all living in very challenging times and I do hope the results are going to bring not only good news but also hope and serve as an inspiration to the poets around the world. All winners, runners-up and honourable mentions will receive BHS Awards certificates. Another remarkable year with some poets receiving multiple awards for their exceptional performance.

The British Haiku Society would like to thank the judges Anna Maris, David Lanoue, an'ya, Gregory Longenecker and Simon Chard for their dedication 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. 2019 was a very productive year and compared to the previous one we saw an increase in submissions: 9% more haiku, 23% tanka and 28% haibun. In total we received: 477 haiku, 158 tanka and 59 haibun from 14 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, UK, and USA. 46% of the poets were from UK, 33 % from USA, 8 % from Canada, 5% from Australia, etc.

Looking forward to your entries for the BHS Awards 2020!

Iliyana Stoyanova
BHS Awards Administrator