

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2020 - RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION

“David Cobb Haiku Award”

Judges – Sandra Simpson and Charles Trumbull

The winners are Joanna Ashwell, UK and Earl R. Keener, USA

The runners-up are Tony Williams, UK and Roland Packer, Canada

Sandra Simpson writes:

To be successful, haiku need to contain a telling detail, a ‘noticing’ that not only allows the reader to experience the moment alongside the poet, but also offer something fresh and lively, a new way of seeing, even – or especially – the quite ordinary. Haiku should elevate what it touches. This may be through use of language, as well as the subject matter itself. Every word counts in a haiku, and only the right word in the right place will do.

Simply writing about two things that have happened at the same time does not make a haiku, and this is where experience and some understanding of the form becomes necessary to craft a good poem. Haiku may seem simple but they can take a lifetime to write well!

I was pleased there were so many good haiku in among the record 587 entries. Reading and thinking about haiku is always a pleasurable chore.

I hope that the several entrants who chose to title their haiku; make statements; use ‘look at me words’; and/or write in an overly poetical manner will learn from their disappointment. There is much good information on the haiku form in English available on the internet and from groups like the BHS, and there are many places to join conversations and learn about writing haiku. The haiku community is endlessly welcoming so your journey along this intriguing path is only a step away.

Winner – Joanna Ashwell, UK

bluebells
carrying the drift
of rain into dusk

Almost an Impressionist painting, this poem exudes a quiet spring evening. Producing an accomplished ‘one idea’ haiku is more difficult than it looks so the poet is to be applauded. The colour of the flowers, so vivid on a sunny day, has softened, ‘carrying’ (as a paintbrush carries colour) the misty grey of the fine rain into the blue-grey of dusk. Gardeners speak of a ‘drift’ of flowers, meaning a mass planting, and bluebells are known for their scent so the poet could easily have tied ‘drift’ to the flowers, but has chosen to set ‘bluebells’, a rich image, alone on its line. By doing this, the flowers have been made real and the rain ethereal. The words that anchor the end of L2 and L3 both start hard and end soft, adding to the overall sense of the softening light.

Runner-up – Tony Williams, UK

winter sun
the moss not holding
my handprint

Haiku should have depth – layers of meaning that draw us back – and here can mine a commentary on climate change, albeit done, as it must be, with a light hand. Why does moss not hold the shape of a hand (or foot)? Because it is dry. Yet winter is the season we rely upon to refill our reservoirs and tanks. As moss is something of a natural reservoir and the sun is shining, we can draw only an ominous conclusion – a winter drought, which bodes well for no one and nothing. Hovering in the background is another idea, also tied up with environmentalism and the mantra ‘leave only footprints’. In this case the natural world is refusing to mark the presence or passing of a human, rejecting us just as we have rejected and belittled it for so long. A haiku that offers much to ponder.

Honourable Mentions:

washes of twilight
in my paint box wells –
a fox's triple bark
--- Richard Tindall, UK

teen dance
a wildfire seven percent
contained
--- Bill Cooper, USA

first hailstones
a farrier hammers
the darkness
--- Ron C. Moss, Australia

A poem full of colour and sound, *washes of twilight* also makes excellent use of language with its repeating sounds, mostly soft, occasionally hard.

teen dance made me smile with its clever inversion of jargon to demonstrate something we've all been through.

first hailstones is a vivid elemental image of sound and not light, heat and cold that could be set at any time since humans mastered fire and metal.

Charles Trumbull writes:

Winner – Earl R. Keener, USA

wind in the tamaracks
the sound of a screen door
sixty years past

My reaction to this haiku was very Proustian. It took me back to childhood summers spent in the Northwoods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where tamaracks grow and chilly winds blow. This haiku is very finely composed. The poet is not afraid to be slightly hypersyllabic when line 1 might have

been rendered overly poetically as “tamarack wind.” After “the sound of,” the reader presented with not the sound of wind but of a banging screen door.

Runner-up – Roland Packer, Canada

thumbnails
of their faces
potter’s field

A place where the unnamed and unclaimed are buried is dismal enough in itself, but to think that someone has sought to memorialize these poor souls by affixing small photos to the crosses is sadder still. That they should be remembered by their “thumbnails” alone is perversely ironic.

Honourable Mentions:

winter melancholy
the rhythmic slosh
of a washing machine
--- Michele Root-Bernstein, USA

Such an evocative haiku, so appropriate for a winter of social quarantine! Doing laundry is not the most welcome household chore, but we might as well resign ourselves to getting it done now, when we have plenty of time and there is little else we can do. The rhythm of the washing machine suggests the slow passage of time and emphasizes the melancholy.

slow night
at the kebab shop
they watch us eat
--- Owen Bullock, Australia

This senryu evoked for me a scene in a mom-and-pop noodle shop in Kyoto where we had stopped for a late supper. With no other customers and nothing else to do on this slow evening, the staff gathered in the corner and muttered about the curious behaviour of the tourists at Table 2.

family plot
the fog
thickens
--- Benedict Grant, Canada

I selected this verse because I enjoyed playing with the various possible readings and interpretations. If I read the first line as a section of a cemetery and “fog” as an autumn season word, it is a straightforward and very interesting haiku. But if “family plot” has to do with intrigue within a family, then maybe it is a senryu with “fog” perhaps used metaphorically to suggest a some skulduggery. The plot, as they say, thickens.

First let me thank the BHS members, officers, and contest organizers for inviting me to help judge this prestigious contest. Confronted with 587 entries, I needed to narrow the field substantially, so first I culled a surprisingly large number—more than 70%—of faulty entries.

Many problems were simple beginners' mistakes or sheer carelessness: misspellings, bad grammar, or non-English syntax or style were easy to eliminate. Several entries were presented in italics, quotation marks, or boldface, apparently only to call special attention to the poem. An alarming number of submissions bore titles, which I view as the sign of a beginning poet or a student. Some people even rhymed their haiku! I found too many submissions that were judgmental, didactic, or posed as philosophical statements. Some haiku tried to relate a story, involved transparent conceits, or otherwise beggared belief.

My remaining "long list" of 172 was reduced to a shortlist of 33 haiku. Happily, there were many interesting, well-constructed haiku in the mix, from these, with some dithering and difficulty, I selected my top five candidates. At the end there were some pretty tough choices to be made!

TANKA SECTION

Judges – Susan Lee Kerr and Michael McClintock

The winners are Susan Burch, USA and Susan Burch, USA
The runners-up are an'ya, USA and Pamela A. Babusci, USA

Susan Lee Kerr writes:

Winner – Susan Burch, USA

feeling the bark
of a black oak tree
how rough it is
foraging in the forest
without you

What a gift, to read 164 tanka. My long shortlist came to 66 excellent tanka – all should be published. Congratulations and thank you to everyone who entered. My first and main filter was the ache, the ouch, sometimes the shock, of my felt response. My winner, in the first lines, has immediacy (*bark*), specific place (*forest*), texture (*rough*), even a specific tree (*black oak*). It is real, active, you are there with the poet. Then comes specific action in a word loaded with meaning, *foraging*. And the final revelation, *without you*. It is a small nature poem that suddenly becomes enormous.

Runner-up – an'ya, USA

one more time
on our favorite beach
together
you in your urn and me
in a lone state of mind

My runner up shocked me and made me grieve, its first haiku lines full of the warmth of a long relationship. And then the loss and loneliness on this familiar beach. It haunted me and stays with me.

Only after choosing my shorter shortlist (27) did I analyse beyond the feeling impact – why, what made these good? I'm of the school that tanka are five lines balancing shorter and longer, but the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic count is a bygone. Meaningful economy is what matters – the poetic phrase. Each line, whether it is a single word or a full 7 syllables, must have importance, weight. Furthermore, I saw that the best tanka have a pivot, a key line somewhere that both anchors and opens the poem to further meaning. In the winner: *'how rough it is'*. In the runner up, *'together'*. Among honourable mentions, the tanka *'on the lip'* pivots in its penultimate line *'begging to be freed'*.

I then considered words and sounds. Although my first call to a poem was its hit to my gut or heart, I found how words/sounds vastly contribute. Meaning is essential of course, but look at my winner. The hard 'k's' – *bark, black, oak* -- among the open 'o's': *oak, rough, foraging, forest, without*. These sounds bind the poem, reinforce it. Similarly in my runner up, the 'o' and 'u' sounds of *one, more, on, our, favorite, your, urn, lone*.

Honourable Mentions:

on the lip
of this homeless woman
a chapped flake of skin
begging to be freed
as last darkness closes in
--- Linda Jeannette Ward, USA

the sweet pull
of caramel
at some point later
there is nothing to be
desired
--- Christine L. Villa, USA

clay pigeons –
after the divorce
relearning
to shoot the shit
with my dad
--- Susan Burch, USA

Surprise and originality also drew me. Tanka is a wonderful form for fresh, dramatic content and expression. From my three honourable mentions *'on the lip'* features a homeless woman, *'the sweet pull/of caramel'* is meltingly full of love and lust, *'clay pigeons'* in a mere five lines covers divorce, dad, relationship and shooting. In the same vein narrative, to me, is key to good tanka. My winners and each on my longlist convey story and relationship. With compassion, ruefulness and honesty subjects included aging, Alzheimer's, disabilities, hospitalisation, painterly and literary ekphrasis, Covid lockdown and, of course, loss and yearning.

Michael McClintock writes:

Our roster of 164 entries for this competition reflects the preoccupations and issues, both personal and societal, of this period in history. We might call it "The Covid Era" for convenience but its anxieties and moods are in fact far broader than may be accounted for by the pandemic alone.

I have selected five poems that were most meaningful to me, that conveyed to me some essential truth or piece of what I most needed to hear, think about, and feel. They are not flawless or perfect tanka but clearly the product of human hearts and minds, each of which steps out of the wilderness to show me what they have found of value.

Winner – Susan Burch, USA

clay pigeons –
after the divorce
relearning
to shoot the shit
with my dad

Ultimately, the poem is about love between father and child, maintaining respect, re-establishing understanding and seeking out some form of healing after a relationship important to both has been fractured and broken by divorce. The idiomatic line "to shoot the shit" falls exactly where it needs to be, with frankness and humor that belies and then underscores the fundamental seriousness of the moment and purpose of the meeting. The phrase erases any sense of pretension and suggests that plain speaking and simple, uncomplicated language will be parts of the tool kit both use.

As with clay pigeons and target practice, there will be hits and misses in their conversation but, equally clear, the real and metaphorical clay pigeons are going to be dealt with as the two search out and test their shared, new reality, moving forward.

Runner-up – Pamela A. Babusci, USA

sometimes
i am trapped inside
a Hopper painting
within subtle brushstrokes
of loneliness

This ekphrastic tanka conveys the essential power and magic of a painting by the famous American realist Edward Hopper (1882-1967). A long gaze at any of his oil or watercolor masterpieces is usually enough to find yourself "trapped inside" the place and persons depicted on the canvas. We experience not only empathy for others but, beneath that special kind of communion, an understanding of our self---a loneliness out of which goodness becomes possible, a connection to others.

Honourable Mentions:

will I always be
swimming upstream
the salmon
who wants to be
a trout
--- Susan Burch, USA

The direct and simple piece of folk wisdom here expressed is memorable, clear, and recognizable. The brief tanka form accommodates in simplicity what becomes, as we reflect on this, a rather large

and important thought. The poet varies the conventional two long concluding lines of the tanka in order to make possible an emphatic clarity and point, without padding or unneeded extra furniture.

sea pebbles
glistening in the sun
we, too
lose more of ourselves
with every passing wave
--- Debbie Strange, Canada

The pattern of surges and calms exhibited worldwide by the Covid-19 pandemic is here witnessed in this modest but productive observation from nature. How like the pebbles we are, in this together, losing millions over time, with each passing wave. The lament is clear but restrained, anchored in the natural world.

robin song
on an autumn morning . . .
all we have
to explain our words
are other words
--- John Barlow, UK

As written here, the poem draws us into thinking through what seems to be its central affirmation, discovering in ourselves, perhaps within our instincts, something we once knew but have somehow mislaid or forgotten---the human capacity to communicate non-verbally.

HAIBUN SECTION

“Ken and Noragh Jones Haibun Award”

Judge – Tim Gardiner

The winner is Shalini Pattabiraman, UK
The runner-up is John Barlow, UK

Tim Gardiner writes:

There were 71 entries in the haibun section, covering a wide range of topics and styles. Unsurprisingly, several haibun were written about the Covid-19 pandemic. Although most submissions had something to recommend them such as a strong title, lucid prose or spare haiku, many pieces did not merge haibun techniques into a cohesive, well-structured whole. I’m a writer who composes haibun in response to emotional cues, trying to capture that rawness of feeling in minimalist prose and haiku. As Bruce Lee famously said in the film *Enter the Dragon* ‘Don’t think, feel!’

The winning haibun which stood out from the rest for its emotional depth was *Out of Axis* by Shalini Pattabiraman. In this piece, prose, haiku and title combine together to form a superbly structured story of a longed for child. This immediately stirred my emotions from the sadness of the opening line to the innocence of the second and third lines (‘Her heart doesn’t know what it is to listen, yet’). This segues so beautifully into the central haiku, where the economy of expression reinforces the

melancholy of the writer. After the haiku, the prose switches to the heaviness of the author's despair before the abrupt BANG! eviscerates the dream's tragic illusion. I was left feeling the emptiness of waking reality and words from the original series of Star Trek 'She has an illusion and you have reality.' A very powerful haibun and an excellent example of less is more.

Winner – Shalini Pattabiraman, UK

Out of Axis

In my dream, the daughter I longed for, is playing the violin.

Her strain holds the violence of a beginner wrestling with strings and bow. Her heart doesn't know what it means to listen, yet.

*spring...
a feather falls
into stillness*

A hook sinks. The line becomes heavy with weight.

*Somewhere, a door falls off the hinges.
BANG! The sound carries itself into the pond. Ripples spread.*

*

My runner up is *Bluebells* by John Barlow. A short piece, it steers a philosophical path from the opening questions to the telling line (The lime-washed walls of the meeting house hold their stories) and poignant image of bluebells in a vase slowly closing. This segues into the mystery of the monoku which has a Robert Frost (The Road Not Taken) feel to it concerning the choices we make in life. Jack-by-the-hedge is an alternative vernacular name for garlic mustard, a plant of hedgerows and shady verges. #70 uses the old name as Jack means common in folklore, there for all to see. It's a clever link back to the philosophical origins of the haibun for we all make choices on our journey. A superbly crafted haibun which left me wondering about the paths I've chosen.

Runner-up – John Barlow, UK

Bluebells

How to measure a road's width? How to measure its worth? Maybe it's in the folk who've travelled it. The lime-washed walls of the meeting house hold their stories. Like bluebells, closing, in a narrow vase.

where lane meets lane jack-by-the-hedge

Honourable Mentions:

Beatlemania by Mark Gilbert, UK is commended due to its subtle nostalgia for a 60's childhood, exemplified by the poem:

inking a haiku
'Paperback Writer' drifts in
from another place

The second commended haibun was *Falling Into Place* by Simon Wilson, UK which dealt with the painful experience of watching a parent fade away from dementia:

the mirror cracks
a fractured smile
released

My third commended haibun was *Finally* by Colin Dunn, UK with its mystery and experimental approach to prose and poem. I can't pretend I fully understood this one, but the emotions are roused by themes of love, loss and death:

wave and sea
not two

Administrator's Note:

The British Haiku Society would like to thank the judges Sandra Simpson, Charles Trumbull, Susan Lee Kerr, Michael McClintock and Tim Gardiner for the hard work and careful consideration they have put into selecting the best of the entries in each category and into producing these insightful reports. As well as choosing a winner and a runner-up, each judge gave three honourable mentions and all winning poets will receive BHS Awards certificates. Last year David Cobb, who launched the BHS in 1990 and has contributed to the society for three decades, sadly died so in his honour we named the award in the haiku section "David Cobb Haiku Award".

Our warmest congratulations to the winning poets! Another remarkable year with some poets receiving multiple awards for their exceptional performance. For over a year now we have been living under very challenging circumstances so we are very grateful to all participants for supporting the contest. 2020 turned out to be record breaking with increase in the submissions in all categories - 587 haiku, 164 tanka and 71 haibun from 21 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, UK, and USA. 58% of the poets were from UK, 18% from USA, 5% from Australia, 4% from Canada, 2% from India, etc.

Looking forward to your entries for the BHS Awards 2021!

Iliyana Stoyanova
BHS Awards Administrator