

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2023 – RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION *The David Cobb Haiku Award*

Judges – Klaus-Dieter Wirth and Caroline Skanne

The winners are Heather Lurie, New Zealand and John Barlow, UK
The runners-up are Jay Friedenbergl, USA and Frank Hooven, USA

Klaus-Dieter Wirth writes:

Judging haiku is a delicate job. Firstly, it is true, the known basic criteria to be applied are a decisive help in separating the wheat from the chaff: these are the fundamental asymmetry based on the three-part form and the two-part content with its incorporated caesura, a proper openness for further interpretations, the renunciation of any personal comment, and, as a matter of course, the essential surprise effect.

This initial step is in general quickly done with, in my experience, an average yield of only about 5 per cent with the consequence that this remaining humus makes any further cutting down all the more difficult inevitably causing some discomfort for the juror.

Hence evaluation standards within this last framework obviously depend on the very individual experiences made with the haiku and overall conceptions of poetry as such.

Winner – *Heather Lurie, New Zealand*

standing against
a city of stars
the stag

In this sense, the winner haiku displayed the following decisive aspects: a rhythmically convincing focus on the target object, the associated strong use of alliteration (*st*) for support, the bold image connecting the human and celestial spheres (*a city of stars*), the enormous contrast between the universe and a single living individual besides virtually immovable against any change of location.

Runner-up – *Jay Friedenbergl, USA*

sunset
waves glitter
into pointillist light

The runner-up text reveals similar qualities though in a smaller range, that is: presenting the span from a greater but earthly natural phenomenon (*sunset*) to a much smaller one (*waves*), beguiling with a sparkling play of sounds (s, t, l, i) which exactly illustrates the content of the statement (*glitter*) while delicately transitioning to the human-artistic realm of pointillism, a perfect comparison!

Honourable Mentions:

Of the Honourable Mentions examples, the first is again initially appealing due to its connection between a celestial body (*moon*) and an object from the human-creative sphere (*piano*) sharing a similar colour (*ivory*). Moreover, there are the optical comparisons between the slenderness of fingers and moonbeams apart from the fact that both are stroking those keys but gently. Finally, a delicate synaesthesia comes into play with the acoustically extremely subtle keystrokes.

tapering fingers
you stroke ivory keys
with moonlight
— Olive Malcolm, UK

The second example even tops this rhetorical device with its triple use employing scent, vision, and absent (!) sounds.

scented candle
the way she speaks
without words
— Ravi Kiran, India

The third is convincing due to its consistent shift from the concrete to the abstract when starting from rather inconspicuous natural objects (*leaves*) to a special mental state (*dark mind*). At the same time the whole process is impressively carried forward again with the help of alliteration yet in addition supported by the function of an anaphora (*three times an initial d at the beginning of the verse*) which leads to a special conciseness of the whole message.

dripping leaves
dank air
dark mind
— Sarah Edwards, Wales

Caroline Skanne writes:

Winner – John Barlow, UK

a sedge warbler's mimicry wind-torn clouds

The slightly chaotic quality to this poem skilfully mimics the sedge warbler's song. This jumbled musicality that sets the tone of the poem, feels at once spontaneous yet practised, lending it an effortlessness that can be so hard to achieve. Technically, it's a well-crafted haiku, incorporating an effective pivot in its one-line presentation, as well as the repeated 'w' sound tying 'warbler's' with 'wind-torn'. The word choice 'mimicry' further sparks the imagination, inviting the reader to think of likely/unlikely sounds. 'sedge' adds context to the poem, and 'warbler', music. Hence, we don't need to be familiar with the specific bird to get the gist of its mimicry. It's one of those deceptively simple poems with rewarding depth/s that work/s on different levels. Multisensory and playful, specific yet accessible, the poem smoothly fuses its various elements. Indeed, the poem seems to continuously & beautifully scatter & reassemble in the mind—into song, wind, cloud.

Runner-up – *Frank Hooven, USA*

clearing skies
wind ruffles the water
in a little red wagon

While not explicitly stated, here in 'a little red wagon', is the whole sky. Above all, this poem welcomes us to really take notice. There's a gentle nod to *The Red Wheelbarrow* by Williams Carlos Williams in the delicate images that make up this poem. As we further explore the space between these images, we are rewarded with uncovering the subtle details, shifts, and relationships. It's the understatement of this haiku that makes it so effective. But also, in the way each word seems to be just right, and at just the right place. If read out loud, or even quietly in the mind, you'll hear the barely-there music that flows through this quiet whisper of a poem. Its echo lingering long after being read.

Honourable Mentions:

dusting of snow
the soft rhetoric
of a fairy tale
— *Sharon Martina, USA*

I've lost myself in this poem more than a few times now. Its light-as-snow touch and emotional depth, giving it something of a spell-like quality. There's a lot to delve into in this deftly delivered poem, perhaps even childhood itself.

winter sun
more shadow
than tree
— *Marjolein Rotsteeg, The Netherlands*

A concentrated poem, offering so much in just six simple words. And it's just this simplicity that expands the poem, infusing it with feeling. I could write about where this poem takes me, but I think I'd rather leave the reader to make their own discoveries.

dipper song
the smoothness of stones
at rest in the beck
— *John Barlow, UK*

Sometimes, if we're lucky enough, a dipper might stop for a while and sing. And maybe as we hear this song, we will pause long enough to also notice 'the smoothness of stones/at rest in the beck.' Haiku is about connection/s, and this poem seems to honour just that.

It was a pleasure reading and rereading the entries to the 2023 BHS Awards, thanks for the privilege.

TANKA SECTION

The Linda Jeannette Ward Tanka Award

Judges – David Terelinck and Bryan Rickert

The winners are Pamela A. Babusci, USA and Susan Burch, USA
The runners-up are Debbie Strange, Canada and Susan Burch, USA

David Terelinck writes:

It's not easy to select a dozen shortlisted poems from 203 submissions, then winnow this to winner, runner-up, three honourable mentions. I objectively considered tanka subject, structure, poetic devices, word choices, imagery, inferred emotions, original metaphors. In arriving at the final 5 tanka, it is inevitable that some good short-listed tanka, that may have placed under a different judge, had to be passed over.

Winner – *Pamela A. Babusci, USA*

sitting alone
beneath
opium stars
a woman
in deep pain

Defying classical structure, this 10-word tanka works because of the brevity and sharp imagery. We need not know the source of this pain; it is enough to know the woman shoulders it alone, finds relief beneath the stars. Immersion in nature increases dopamine and serotonin in our brains to become a powerful antidepressant. Star bathing can reduce emotional stress and heartache, improve general wellbeing. There is indeed an opiate in nature (independent of the poppy) that can soothe troubled souls and bring peace from pain. Those who have sat alone under the quietude of star-filled skies will appreciate the restorative power of such moments. The use of the phrase "opium stars" binds this tanka together in an unforgettable manner.

Runner-up – *Debbie Strange, Canada*

sunbeams sift
between the bones
of our barn
mucking out stalls
has never felt so holy

Opening with a gentle *shasei*, this tanka assumes a deeper meaning in the closing metaphor. Cleaning straw and manure from animal stalls takes on new meaning in the glow of light between the boards; honest labour becomes devotion. A ‘Hand of God’ moment we liken to when fall-streaks appear through clouds. The tanka has subtle alliteration with a solid structure. It has a satisfying elliptical ending as the sense of a holy task links back to the sunbeams often seen in classical religious paintings. The author is unobtrusive, and there is sufficient dreaming room for the reader to insert themselves into the scene.

Honourable Mentions:

red-faced warbler...
he tells everyone
they’re stealing
his clothes
at the nursing home
— *Susan Burch, USA*

A poignant tanka of someone who may have dementia. His constant song likely a background hum to those hearing it daily. Yet there are warblers and other birds that practice nest material kleptoparasitism. This reader ponders the balance of truth to this warbler’s claim.

cold silence
in the classroom
the boy too bland
for bullies to notice
leaves an empty chair
— *Tracy Davidson, UK*

A sad tanka of loss and grief. What has happened to this boy overlooked by everyone? Has he died by suicide? A lack of attention, love and friends can be as damaging to self-esteem and life as relentless bullying.

all weekend
she saw it coming
and now the winds
have torn the dark
the silence of the stars
— *Clare McCotter, Northern Ireland*

So much dreaming room in this tanka that leaves many questions. Something powerful and devastating, that the narrator knew was coming, has happened; it has caused a rift in the dark and given voice to stars. Powerful and enigmatic.

Bryan Rickert writes:

I would like to thank Ms. Stoyanova and the BHS for honoring me with the opportunity to judge the tanka section of this contest. All of the poems were read multiple times over the course of several weeks and were eventually eliminated to my top five picks. This was difficult because so many wonderful tanka resonated with me through the reading period but I found myself returning to these same five time and time again.

Winner – *Susan Burch, USA*

learning
how strong I am
on my own
the soufflé
starting to rise

In a wonderfully concise way, this poet talks about finding their strength and yet compares it to a culinary dish that is delicate and temperamental. The tanka accurately demonstrates that sometimes when we find our strength, it is a precarious situation and is fraught with difficulty and challenge. There is always the fear of falling flat, but when we make it, we become a treasured and valuable thing. Soufflé, being the past particle of the word soufflé, means to blow, breath, or inflate. The reader cannot help but imagine the poet starting a new life on their own, inhaling deeply and rising to the occasion.

Runner-up – *Susan Burch, USA*

red-faced warbler...
he tells everyone
they're stealing
his clothes
at the nursing home

Without actually stating that the gentleman in the nursing home is angry, this tanka graphically demonstrates an emotional situation by juxtaposing a person to a red-faced bird. The reader is instantly taken to the visual of an older angry man, complaining to the world about problems that are big to him, but might seem small to others. This poem strikes deeply at the fears that many people have, the fear of working your whole life for your home, for your children and your spouse only to end up an angry person who has been reduced to worrying about the things that we take for granted right now. The things we probably have plenty of - socks, pants, and shirts. Will there be anyone there for us later who will listen and care or will we sing like a red-faced bird in the hopes that someone, anyone, will respond?

Honourable Mentions:

lay my body
by the cherry tree
it's high time
we fed
the vultures too
— *Susan Burch, USA*

This tanka has a beautiful lyrical quality that speaks so well about the transience of our time here and the poet's willingness to see all living creatures with equity.

a thin slice of carrot
in the vegetable soup—
her voice lingers
over the word
misogyny
— *Julie Bloss Kelsey, USA*

Even though there is nothing funny about misogyny, this poet brilliantly uses humor to convey larger ideas and insight into social roles and patriarchy.

*sunbeams sift
between the bones
of our barn
mucking out stalls
has never felt so holy*
— *Debbie Strange, Canada*

Through this beautiful tanka, the poet demonstrates that wonderful moments of enlightenment and grace are not limited to structured times of church and prayer. If we stay connected to the moment, we can find a poetic truth that transcends time and place.

Poets wrote on themes that are deeply pertinent to our world today. I appreciated the humor and playfulness of many of the entries, as a way to handle difficulty. Some poets even invented new words, and illustrated the meanings subtly by the shapes of their tanka. Illustrated here – a great sense of loss. A love and care for nature and ecology. Timeless family love. Lament for the difficulties in personal relationships. We yearn for freedom. Time flows through us, and nature and the seasons of human life are mirrored. We open ourselves to transformation and realizations. We question.

Grateful for tanka, a deeply emotional and beautifully shaped vessel for all of this – capable of elasticity in contour and weight, our lyrical heritage, our little songs. And grateful to these poets who wrote and sent these poems. It was an honor and pleasure to read your tanka and to learn from all of them.

HAIBUN SECTION
The Ken and Noragh Jones Haibun Award

Judge – Kala Ramesh

The winner is Alice Wanderer, Australia
The runner-up is Shalini Pattabiraman, Scotland

Kala Ramesh writes:

At the outset, I would like to thank the British Haiku Society for entrusting me with judging their haibun contest. I had 67 entries and judging haibun isn't easy. I read the poems several times, and each time I read them all together at one go, for I felt the flow — and consequently my judgement — might falter if I read them piecemeal.

What is haibun, if not an extension of a haiku that gives us more leeway to carry a story forward? The 'link and shift' that we employ is a precious gift from the Japanese that can be used extensively in all art forms. With conviction, I say that 'resonance' has a major role to play in haibun. Nobuyuki Yuasa says, "In good haibun, the prose deepens the understanding of the poetry, and the poetry gives greater energy to the prose. The relationship is like that between the moon and the earth: each makes the other more beautiful." (*Blithe Spirit*, Sept 2000).

When I came into haibun in 2005, editors were constantly talking about haikai prose in haibun. Why does no one think haikai prose is important or relevant in haibun today? When language becomes flamboyant and flowery, then it makes more noise than poetry. And haikai prose is all about poetry.

Using the criteria of compelling narrative, link and shift, and resonance, all coming together in the haikai prose mode, I have selected the winners.

Winner – *Alice Wanderer, Australia*

Fate Lines

On page 253 of Andrew Gordon's *A Modern History of Japan* there's a monochrome photograph, taken in 1961. Two hands, one cupped in the other, emerge from black shadows with the disembodied purity of a Brancusi head. But instead of polished marble, they are cracked clay.

No, not cracked clay. They are not cracked clay. But they do not look real. With palms twice as wide and fingers only half the length of mine, they are calloused and fissured. The hands of a twenty-one-year-old, "farm daughter".

Work hands, these palms would not be able to work without pain. She could not wash her face, caress herself or another or comfort the dying without pain.

To pray at a Shinto shrine – for a son, say, or a good harvest – you must clap your raised hands together twice. Even so, the crop may miserably fail.

potato famine –
orphan girls jostle to sight
the Southern Cross

Making skilful use of emotionally resonant images, '*Fate Lines*' stood out for me for the use of haikai prose. The well-constructed resonance pulsating between the title, prose and haiku, gives an added texture to each reading.

The resonance begins with the title — 'fate lines,' which are in our hands – the hands resembling cracked clay – the hands of a young 'farm daughter', whose skin is so 'calloused and fissured' that she can't even clap her hands twice at the Shinto shrine, for a son or a good harvest. And then the resonance is capped with an excellent first line in the haiku – 'potato famine.' What agony and yet lines 2 and 3 tell us that the charm in life is still alive.

Runner-up – Shalini Pattabiraman, Scotland

Out of control

Condensation settles on glass, metal, wood, rubber, even plastic, feeding it with life.

You are awake. Pre-dawn, your eyes swivel into distinction, from sleep-washed to purposeful.

It is in the air, the spores as old as time itself. Racing over walls, growing, taking root over the body of home—windows, corners around the foundation, the edges behind furniture, sometimes the ceiling, like a revolt of the unseen, the invisible in hidden spaces, unattended, unacknowledged, but growing.

You scrub. Scrub the mould out of surfaces. It clings. You scrub again. It comes back to haunt you in dreams. You persist. Relentless in erasing it out. The skin breaks. Flushing. Red first, then squirting warm blood.

A pause between two notes of music, the house is clean, as far as you can see—of any dissension. But the spores are breathing. Inside the lungs, inside the bones, under the nails and the skin, they have already laid siege and you have become them.

threadbare winter
a crow knocks
at the window

This haibun disturbed me. Again, such masterful storytelling with effective repetitions enhanced the resonance. The mention of a crow in the haiku gave this haibun a Himalayan-sized impact. In Hindu tradition, crows are believed to serve as messengers between the

physical and the spiritual worlds. So much is left unsaid in the white spaces between the title, prose and haiku, that with each reading the story gets deeper.

Honourable mentions:

New Build

by Clare McCotter, Northern Ireland

she is holding the key to a house he would no doubt consider a characterless assault on design – no ludic interludes, no unexpected turns – no patina of words or fingerprints – no family heirlooms, no walls with stories to tell – seated on the stairs she eats Chinese take away with a plastic fork – later beneath a chest of stars she will sleep on bare floorboards exhaling the dark blue faces of pansies and eucalypt leaves

open window
the wind sweeping clean
old piano keys

Very well written. Seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Déjà Ku

by John Barlow, UK

There's nothing new under the sun. It's all been done before. We're borrowing lines, recycling loanwords, appropriating clichés. Still, some things are worth discovering for ourselves; some things are worth following.

summer morning
again the grasshopper
lands on its shadow

Down-to-earth prose. I was clean bowled by the haiku.

Return

by Clare McCotter, Northern Ireland

three in the morning and there is no light in this un-mooned sky – you have just hung up and I can see nothing only your heart burning in a spinney of gnarled thorns – cancer, a cakewalk, you said, compared to the depression, is back, back after all this time – you tell me all shall be well, and it shall, all shall be well for your heart is of the west and it has come back from the place into which the light sets

no torch
through ink-black elms
the stars

The depth of emotions is understated and capped with a strong haiku.

Administrator's Note:

Due to unforeseen circumstances I had to fulfil the BHS Awards admin role for yet another year. However, this is now my final eighth year and I am happy to announce that Nick Taylor will take over for the 2024 BHS Awards.

I would like to express my gratitude to this years' judges Klaus-Dieter Wirth, Caroline Skanne, David Terelinck, Bryan Rickert, and Kala Ramesh for their time and energy in producing such well-crafted reports! It was a pleasure working with you all.

Congratulations to the winning poets! All winners, runners-up and honourable mentions have received BHS Awards certificates for their achievements. The BHS is grateful to all poets who have supported the contest over the years. In 2023 there was an 11% increase in the haiku submissions and 4% increase in the tanka category. We received 483 haiku, 203 tanka and 67 haibun from 19 countries: Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, The Netherlands, UK, Ukraine, USA, and Wales. 46% of the poets were from UK, 45% from USA, 9% from Australia, 6% from Scotland, 5% from Canada, 4% from Germany and Wales, etc.

We are looking forward to your entries for the BHS Awards 2024!
Good luck, Nick!

Iliyana Stoyanova
BHS Awards Administrator