

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2025 – RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION *The David Cobb Haiku Award*

Judges – Jim Kacian and Lakshmi Iyer

The winners are Benedict Grant (Canada) and Scott Mason (USA)
The runners-up are Gregory Longenecker (USA) and Meera Rehm (England)

Jim Kacian writes:

Winner – *Benedict Grant (Canada)*

cool mountain creek
coming back
as a deer

This invites us in as a quite normative poem, employing the sort of bucolic imagery — creek, deer — that we associate with traditional haiku.

If we take the poem as grammatically presented — “a creek is coming back as a deer” — the poem can be parsed to some degree. The poet emphasizes “cool”, and so, refreshing — perhaps seeing a deer in the woods is similarly refreshing, so the sense is “the cool[ness of the] mountain creek is coming back” [to me] “as” [I spot] “a deer”, a kind of high-level communing with nature. That’s some pretty fancy footwork on the part of the reader, but it’s not impossible.

But of course, that’s not the only, or even the primary, way we might read this poem. The second time through we almost certainly would identify the unmentioned persona of the poem to be the subject — we would allow the enjambment at the end of line 1 to become the sufficient pause to interpret line 2 as [I am] “coming back”. And this gives us an altogether different reading — the poet is now the deer, and the cool mountain creek has moved beyond traditional *kigo*. With this, our range of reference expands as well, specifically to Ovid. We recognize this poem as a retelling of the story of Actaeon, a hunter who, chancing upon the goddess Diana while she was bathing, was consequently turned into a stag. This is no simple communion with the elements: shortly he will be rendered by his own hunting dogs, who no longer recognized him.

But we can go further yet — the words permit an additional, symbolic layer. We can also “come back” to another life via reincarnation — as the poet does here, in that rustic setting, in the not-so-objectionable form of a deer.

Much of the savor of the poem comes from the ambiguity inherent in that middle line. So while this poem presents as normative, it arrives as something quite complex.

Runner-up – *Gregory Longenecker (USA)*

an answer
to a forgotten question
komorebi

This poem was a strong contender for top prize as well. Ultimately, I decided the reliance upon a foreign word limited its accessibility to much of its audience.

But what a word! *Komorebi* is a Japanese word describing the dappling of light when the sun glimmers through the leaves of trees. There is no exact English word for it (undoubtedly why the poet chose it). It’s both universal and quite unique.

The first two lines describe a specific mental process: unbeckoned, the elusive answer to a question that might once have been important has floated into [the poet’s] consciousness. *Komorebi* serves as a natural analogue by which such information is retrieved. There is no bright light of ideation, no linear progression to recover the

answer. Instead, it has filtered its way into consciousness, without effort: the one process suggests the other. There is a quality of *ars poetica* to this, but I think in this case it is effective and apt.

Honourable Mentions

There is much to recommend each of these additional poems (arranged first word alpha).

... a hole in his pocket glacial erratics
— *Julie Schwerin (USA)*

dementia talk
a magpie breaks
the bird bath ice
— *Matt Morden (Wales)*

night jasmine
I tell Sirius
my real name
— *Joshua St. Claire (USA)*

Lakshmi Iyer writes:

I am honoured and delighted to be called to be the adjudicator for the British Haiku Society Awards, judging 914 poems. Haiku is a conscious study of reviving one's senses, articulating the aesthetics and encapsulating brevity - the call within me of a positive attitude showcasing maturity, humility and gratitude and the character defining the structure, techniques and syllables.

Congratulations! The following poem bags the first prize:

Winner – *Scott Mason (USA)*

editing God

a leafcutter ant

'*editing God*', I am awe struck with the formula to choose God as the subject that's beyond one's reach and thoughts. My conversations with God relate with this poem. The silence in the space before and after 'editing God', leaves a dreaming room with a higher level of consciousness! To juxta well with a leafcutter ant is a checkmate with God. I have visualized the leafcutter ant priming the leaves with a blend of perfection and solidarity. And I wonder if only this ant can edit God's creation if not the Creator; it is a par excellent poem. A transient feeling! Thank you, poet!

Runner-up – *Meera Rehm (England)*

first swift
the deaf girl
describes it

For a second, I plugged my ears and saw the world around me. The verb, 'describes' is the takeaway word. The action evolves around the *first swift* that the deaf girl notices as the speed switches action with the sound described by her tutor through sign language. The swift is the fastest; doesn't stand, perch or walk. Its high-pitched sound breaks the stillness. I could imagine the deaf girl experiencing the vibes of speed, as the swift screeches and darts nonstop. The brevity and the choice of words balances the emotions and the subtlety of the narrator. There is a sense of love and care for nature and the surreal feeling of oneness with all purity and blissfulness. Thank you, poet!

Honourable Mentions:

The next three honourable mentions are not in any order of preference:

leaving
the shrine gate
I begin again
—*Owen Bullock (Australia)*

The poem is open to the readers to accept what the poet meant by saying, 'I begin again leaving the shrine gate'; with displeasures or happiness.

sun-warmed path
a child lifts a worm
leaf by leaf
—*C.X. Turner (UK)*

I loved the clear distilled mind of the child, the understanding in its growing up; to lift the worm leaf by leaf as it falls tumbling down on the sun-warmed path.

construction site
why does nothing
never happen
—*David Jacobs (England)*

I liked the ambiguity. 'Why does nothing never happen'. The nonstop constructions of high-rise have forcefully scraped the natural beauty.

My best wishes to all the poets who participated and appreciate the enormous growing community of haiku in the world.

TANKA SECTION

The Linda Jeannette Ward Tanka Award

Judges – Alan Peat and Michael Dylan Welch

The winners are C.X. Turner (UK) and Susan Burch (USA)
The runners-up are Debbie Strange (Canada) and Marilyn Humbert (Australia)

Alan Peat writes:

Judging the tanka section of this year's BHS contests has been both a pleasurable and an informative experience.

When reading/judging tanka I consider the following criteria:

1. Is there a sense of emotional sincerity?
2. Is there a lightness of touch...particularly in tanka imbued with sadness?
3. Does the poem repay multiple readings?
4. Does the poem suggest more than it tells?

I do also look for some sort of interaction between the world of human affairs and the natural world though I don't see this as a pre-requisite. Additionally, I lean toward the short/long/short/long/long format but, again, I would not reject a fine tanka that doesn't adhere to this format.

The tanka I rejected first were often 'snapshots' of moments or too self-consciously 'clever'. I also rejected tanka that trod a well-worn path or used clichéd imagery.

My winning tanka leapt from the page:

Winner – *C.X. Turner (UK)*

wild honeysuckle
your shoulder still resting
in my mind
the gulls have scattered
and the wind turns again

The third line ‘in my mind’, is pitch perfect in the way it evokes loss. The closing natural imagery also enhances and develops the opening image. There is a lightness of touch to the whole. An outstanding tanka that deserves to be anthologised and will, I’m sure, stand the test of time.

I chose the following tanka as runner-up:

Runner-up – *Debbie Strange (Canada)*

distant slopes
turning blue at twilight
the soft folds
of this tweed blanket draped
around father’s shoulders

I was struck by the poet’s apt use of natural imagery. The mountains are losing their shape and form as night begins to settle in. Pairing this image with the soft folds of the blanket (draped around father’s shoulders) was so evocative. A fine tanka.

In no specific order my two honourable mentions are:

Honourable Mentions:

soft ground
his snout pressing
deeper into dusk
I hold my breath, unsure
whose sorrow stirs below
— *C.X. Turner (UK)*

the wren
that sang
its heart out...
there’s nothing else
I could have done
— *Susan Burch (USA)*

The two honourable mentions have a sense of mystery that I found appealing. Both also have that emotional sincerity that I think is so important.

Congratulations to all poets who entered the contest. There were many fine tanka among my final longlist of fifty. I’m sure many of them will find well deserved places in the journals.

Michael Dylan Welch writes:

Tanka seem to work best when they express the poet’s heart, saying something distinctive and engaging that only the poet could truly say, meaning that the poem does not superficially repeat what others have already said. Poets are more likely to do this by trusting their hearts, by accepting themselves in what they say. Indeed, in the first imperial waka anthology of 905, the *Kokinshū*, Ki no Tsurayuki’s preface asserts that “Japanese poetry takes as its seed the human heart,” and wholehearted expression is what I look for most when reading, enjoying, and

assessing tanka. I also look for sure-footedness, a feeling that the poem couldn't be written any other way. Clarity and immediacy matter, even while challenge and mystery offer additional options.

This year's British Haiku Society's tanka contest received 236 tanka that I have been grateful to enjoy. I scored each poem and gave one poem 5 points (out of 5), and it became the first-place selection, even after multiple readings of all poems. I gave 32 poems 4 points (13.6% of the total), and 157 poems 3 points (66.5%). I would consider nearly all poems scoring 3 or more points to be possibly publishable, so this is a high percentage compared with many contests I've judged. Choosing the following selections came down to questions of freshness, honesty, vulnerability, beauty, implication, efficiency, and matters of craft—and my own subjective reactions. Here's my first-place selection:

Winner – *Susan Burch (USA)*

the universe
leaves me
a love poem
frosty stars
on my windshield

This poem finds delight in the weather's effect on a car's windshield, a metaphorical feeling of warmth despite the cold. The poem may really be about loneliness, however, as if an appreciation of these frosty "stars" are a private message, a consolation against loneliness—or an expression of longing for love even if the poet is not lonely. It is quite a claim to say that this message has come from the entire universe, yet this is the expansiveness we can feel when something beautiful lands in our lap.

Runner-up – *Marilyn Humbert (Australia)*

beads of dew
in the warm sun . . .
a surgeon
gently explains
her journey forward

This is a poem of compassion, one that earns its selection as runner-up. We are not told the diagnosis, or what the patient's challenges might be. Instead, we are shown that there *is* a journey forward, told in the context of noticing beads of dew that we know will soon evaporate in the sun. Will the person's life also evaporate?

Honourable Mentions:

The following are three honourable mentions, in no particular order, which I hope you will enjoy as much as I do. My congratulations to each poet for these selections, and to the many other poets who participated.

in sleep
my hand falls
to your side
even after knowing
you are not there
— *Nitu Yumnam (United Arab Emirates)*

sky teeming
with scintillating stars
once in a while
it would be nice
to be loved
— *Pamela A. Babusci (USA)*

if only
i were a cloud
when it's too much

to handle
i rain
— *Nitu Yumnam (United Arab Emirates)*

HAIBUN SECTION
The Ken and Noragh Jones Haibun Award

Judge – Diana Webb

The winner is Sue Beckwith (UK)
The runner-up is Sandip Chauhan (USA)

Diana Webb writes:

For me, the winning haibun should contain prose composed with the same constraints as haiku. It needs to be pared down to essentials which also make it a poem, defined as words without the padding of normal conversation so they have maximum impact. Any haiku juxtaposed with the prose should be stand-alone poems which spark with the prose to impart some kind of revelation. The whole piece should move me, be memorable and have a certain musicality. If possible, it should also have a transformative effect on the reader's attitude to some aspect of life. All five satisfied these but excellent haiku linked to titles determined two winners.

Winner – *Sue Beckwith (UK)*

At the end of the day

Stand on a cliff and just watch the sea, count the waves, breathe with them. On a hill above the valley, find pictures in the clouds,
breathe life into them. Sit by the river, watch the reeds sway in the current and breathe.

sunset shimmers
through treetops
a blackbird's song

Repeated use of 'breath', each slightly differently, plus a very long in breath space in the second sentence, took my breath away. Breath is the essence of haiku of which traditional haibun imitate the style. With title as clue, it could both celebrate any day's end or that of life. It stuns with its pared back acknowledgement of the beauty of nature, allowing it to speak for itself in an inspirational way and shares that the venue for a visionary moment can be close to home, without requiring air miles. 'Shimmer' as both transitive and intransitive verb and noun, in the haiku can apply in a synaesthetic way to both sunset and blackbird song making it climactic. Thus, as well as fulfilling all criteria it can transform both a reader's appreciation of their planet and grasp of reducing their carbon footprint.

Runner-up – *Sandip Chauhan (USA)*

Just Short of Now

I was taught that there are three mirrors in life: one for how you see yourself, one for how others see you, and one for who you really are. But there is a fourth, not glass or metal but something mutable, like water before it freezes or light before it bends. It throws back only the smallest weather of the body: a shoulder angling away, a smile that falters, a glance that never quite lands. In that mirror are moments caught at the edge of happening; the ghosts of choices held just short of being born.

Sometimes it brightens without warning. On a late train, a tinny speaker lets an old song leak down the aisle; a sentence breaks halfway through; a hand almost reaches mine and doesn't. Then I can almost see her: the version of me who took the other path, still waiting at the crossroads, watching the snow begin to fall.

hinge of cloud
two sparrows testing
the same branch

This piece moved me deeply with glimpses into the poet's reflections on what might have been. Fulfilling criteria, it transforms through bringing the fleeting nature of insights into awareness, prompting the need to grasp them before they are fully in focus. The haiku where use of 'hinge' hinges it to the prose as the phenomenon which blurs the mirror before which two images for the poet waver, unites human and non-human nature beautifully.

Honourable Mentions:

heart's ease

by Marietta McGregor (Australia)

In your mind's eye you're walking through an old cemetery of war graves . . . war graves with beds of pebbled grey granite greened by lichen and with a few faded wreaths . . . wreaths like those flowers you didn't want at your father's funeral by request . . . by request many decades after your dad died you interred your mother's ashes with her sweetheart, her bronze plaque inlaid on his headstone below the rising sun badge . . . the rising sun badge of his war service which lowered him down far too young under a slope hedged by cypress pines. . . cypress pines that muffle the mourning *carr-carr-carr* of a raven . . . raven-black his hair was in those sweet days before war broke out and when two lovers strolled and held hands by a river . . . a river where they watched the pirouettes of black swans . . . black swans whose descendants graze and nest in reeds on the River Derwent's bank close to where your parents rest, each swan pair raising fluffy grey cygnets, mated and true to each other for life.

filling chinks
between souls
wild pansies

Fulfilling all criteria, this transforms through renewing one's awareness of the tragic wastefulness of war.

where the path forks

by C.X. Turner (UK)

Rain has just passed, lifting steam from the stones. My boots find rhythm again — leaf, puddle, root, soil. Ferns spill along the trail as if the hillside has been quietly reclaiming itself.

The old oak leans a little more each year, holding its ground. I could name it now by touch. Somewhere along the way, I stopped trying to remember the version of you I first loved. Now we pass like deer across a field — still breathing, always out of reach.

crows scatter
through alder shade
sunlight finds me

Relationships both human and also with nature merge and lift this piece into my top five.

COLLECTIONS

by Andrea Eldridge (USA)

Museum masterpieces. Sunflowers.
No better than snowdrops. Or stars.
36 views of Mount Fuji in exchange
For inches of snow on the Sawtooths.
Who would choose the Seine before
The Middle Fork of the Salmon?
Fossilized under our after-dinner skies

This version of our lengthening days
Burnished by the golden hour. As true as
Your Turkish rose, so speaks my trillium.
Scattered to the four winds. Artifacts.
Pieces of scene. Sculpted by seasons.

hoarfrost—
an abundance
of white lace

Constructed like a mainstream poem, this is the pared back essence of haiku, extraordinary within the so called seasonal ordinary, to be gleaned into little known art, within our own uncelebrated patch of earth rather than somewhere illustrious.

Administrator's Note:

I am pleased to report another very successful year, with a record-breaking number of total submissions.

On behalf of the British Haiku Society, I would like to express my gratitude to this years' judges Jim Kacian, Lakshmi Iyer, Alan Peat, Michael Dylan Welch and Diana Webb for their time and hard work spent selecting the winning entries in each category and for their insightful comments.

Warmest congratulations to the winning poets for their achievements! All winners, runners-up and honourable mentions have received BHS Awards certificates. The winners and runners-up have also received cash prizes.

The BHS is very grateful to all participants for supporting the contest and for helping to make it such a success. Compared to last year, haiku submissions increased by 19% and haibun submissions increased by 23%. There was a small drop in tanka submissions of 6%.

We received 914 haiku, 236 tanka 127 haibun from 24 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Croatia, Ecuador, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, UAE, UK and USA.

I look forward to receiving your entries for the BHS Awards 2026 once the contest opens in October.

Nick Taylor
BHS Awards Administrator