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2012 Haiku Tanka Senryu Contest results with judges' comments

Don Wentworth, Haiku Judge

HAIKU FIRST PLACE

leaf color of an old song turning

- John Stevenson

Lyricism, often missing in haiku (many would say, in fact, that's as it should be), when done properly evokes exactly the quality at the core of true haiku through its 'rule breaking.' The synesthesia effect here is quite lovely (to say nothing of the interplaying images), not for that lyricism alone, but for that essence with which it resounds. Beautiful.

HAIKU SECOND PLACE

death notice

daylilies divided

for another garden

- Michele Root-Bernstein

In this poem, a common practice is elevated to a ritual that celebrates the one truism at the base of all things. The cycle continues; the reader can feel the living movement in her own twitching roots. Poignant.

HAIKU THIRD PLACE

spring thaw

the stone Buddha

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the stone became

still still

- John Soules

The haiku poet risks all in repetition and, when done correctly, gains it back and more. Here the same word, repeated side by side, elicits its dual definitions plus a certain additional meaning as a two-word phrase. Humor, truth, and beauty, all in 7 words – this is admirably executed. Innovative.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

crocus

after such a long time

saying yes

- Gregory Longenecker

If the reader slows down, she can feel time pass in this poem – the pause after each line, the first, the second, and, yes, the third, is deep and immeasurable – in fact, the pause between each word. The second line serves both the first and third equally, creating the equation and fulfilling it. Perfect.

which way out¾

the exterminator points

with his spray tip

- Scott Mason

This poem gets honorable mention for 1) its sheer audacity in updating Issa's poem of the turnip picker, and, 2) the success of that updating/modernization. Issa's turnip picker points the way with a turnip. Here, the way *out* is pointed with a poison spray tip. What the poem loses in its modernization is, in fact, what we have lost, from Issa's time to now, the Way becoming the way. A perfect snapshot of our time. Outstanding.

Adelaide Shaw, Tanka Judge

Reading over the entries was a revealing experience. I found that those tanka which did not appeal to me immediately were more appealing in a second, third and fourth reading. It proved what many editors have said, that tanka, and haiku as well, require careful reading, a slowing of the mind to understand the nuances present. Of those not chosen, some entries shared common problems: the use of titles (there are no titles for tanka); lines which read like lists, exaggerated words or too many adjectives.

The choices I've made for this contest are based upon my knowledge of the form and the emotions each

invoked in me. Another judge would, perhaps, rate these differently. However, if I were an editor and were choosing tanka for a journal, there were many additional tanka I would have selected.

So, what to look for in a tanka? Tanka can tell a story, create a mood, express the poet's inner feelings, or be an observation of nature. It can be lyrical and use simile, metaphor and symbolism. Modern English tanka can be in the traditional 5/7/5/7/7 syllable form or just follow a short/long/short/long/long pattern. It can have as many as 31 syllables or as few as 14 and have each line a different length. One element that a tanka has is that of emotion. The poet need not say explicitly that he is sad, happy, lonesome, etc., but the feeling should come through. In the tanka chosen below the emotions of the poets are clearly evident.

TANKA FIRST PLACE

knowing sorrow
 won't go sailing
 or for a swim
 I take a long walk
 to the cliffs and back

- Michael McClintock

The scene is at the ocean—clean air, a fresh breeze, a majestic view as seen from a cliff. There is the calming motion of waves, the seemingly endless expanse of water meeting the sky at the horizon. The poet, perhaps, chose this spot because it is one which refreshes the spirit. He or she is feeling sad or despair. What can be done? The poet is aware that these feelings won't go away, won't disappear with some pleasurable activity like sailing or swimming. We don't need to know the why or the what of these feelings, just that they are present and that the poet has found a renewed spirit in an immersion in nature's beauty. *A long walk to the cliffs and back* is sufficient to achieve acceptance of what is.

TANKA SECOND PLACE

peppering
 the morning egg
 I work through
 yesterday's sedation
 and my gift of bad news

- Michael McClintock

We don't know if the bad news is about the poet or about a loved one or a friend. Whatever the news is.

the poet has taken something to induce sleep or, perhaps, to reduce pain. Groggy in the morning, he or she needs a stimulant. Strong coffee would be one choice, but the poet has chosen pepper on the morning egg. Maybe lots of black pepper or even cayenne pepper. That would wake anyone up. Line 1 sets the tone of this tanka with *peppering*, pepper being a condiment that is sharp and biting. Line 5 completes the tanka with the poet's cynical acceptance of the bad news as a gift. I sense that there is a fighting spirit behind this cynicism, and the poet will get through this difficult time.

TANKA THIRD PLACE

sixteen next week
 boys looking twice–
 the wobble
 on your bike
 as you learn to steer

- LesleyAnne Swanson

Lines 1 and 2 are of the present; lines 3, 4, and 5 are a remembrance of the past. We all have the sensation of time flying. Sometimes that realization is sudden, and it hits us especially hard. The poet has successfully coupled a parent's pride at a daughter growing up and a sadness at the memory of a childhood moment. How we remember the little things, like a wobble when a child is learning to ride a bike. The daughter probably doesn't remember the incident as well as her parents who are surely more aware of time passing. This loving memory could have become sentimental, but the poet has rendered it in a matter of fact tone, allowing the reader to provide his or her own sentiment. In that movement from the present to a memory of the past I sense what the poet is feeling.

HONORABLE MENTION (in no ranked order)

paper dictionary
 I search for the right word
 to intrigue you
 morning glory
 slow to unfold

- Garry Gay

The poet wants to impress the one he or she loves, to find just the right word to open feelings which have been kept folded like the morning glory bud which needs the warm sun to open. The poet goes searching in a dictionary, not just any dictionary found on the internet but a paper dictionary. This tells me the poet is not relying on technology to make an impression but wants to use old fashioned words of love and devotion. This is a romantic tanka. a love poem in keeping with the ancient Japanese tradition.

I felt the glory
 wrapped in the wind
 and the sun
 traveling alone
 at about the second mile

- Michael McClintock

How does it feel to leave home, to leave the familiar, to be on one's own? Are we anxious, fearful, sad, elated? Perhaps we go through all these emotions, one by one until we finally feel the freedom of being on our own. This is a song of freedom, whether it is about a young person going out on his own, or a person learning to live alone after a long relationship or even leaving a comfortable job and beginning again. The poet did not feel this freedom immediately, but when it came...how glorious it was. Although I think this tanka would be greatly improved if lines 1 and 4 were reversed it still deserves an honorable mention.

a black rope
 hangs from our childhood tree
 the sound in her chest
 lonelier
 than a winter gust

- Chen-Ou Liu

This is a somber tanka. There is a rope, but not just any rope which could have hung a tire swing, but *a black rope* with its connotations of death and the implication of a tragic event. The choice of *winter gust* adds to the chilling effect of the poem. Of the chosen tanka this is the only one in which the poet writes about someone else. The poet is an observer. *our childhood tree* tells me that the poet knows the story of the rope, knows the woman, and also knows the *sound* that is *lonelier than a winter gust*. Perhaps, the poet feels the same when looking at this tree.

Dee Evetts, Senryu Judge

Any senryu contest implicitly poses the question: what is it that distinguishes senryu from haiku? The qualities of humor or irony probably come to mind for most of us, and reasonably so. Yet it is not difficult to find examples of haiku that make us smile. And conversely, there are certainly senryu that have a serious aspect—that is to say, they show the kind of depth generally associated with superior haiku. The boundary thus eludes definition, and I for one am content with that.

What became very clear to me whilst reading the 150-odd entries in this contest, is that a pun—be it verbal or visual—is not sufficient to make a good senryu. Something more nuanced is required, some aspect

...of haiku is not sufficient to make a good senryu. Something more nuanced is required, some aspect more fundamentally rooted in human nature.

As last year's senryu judge Scott Mason has put it, in an essay recently published in Frogpond: "An effective haiku is one that positively engages its reader or listener on an emotional basis." I believe his axiom is equally valid when applied to senryu, and consider that all five of my final choices below meet that criterion, in an interesting variety of ways.

SENRYU FIRST PLACE

before we say good morning the electoral map

- Bruce H. Feingold

Here is a poem that speaks particularly to our time and its

intensities of political allegiance. We glimpse the suspension or delay of normal exchanges in a close relationship, due to shared preoccupation with the outcome of a presidential election. The compression into a single line is an astute choice, enhancing as it does the tension and irony contained in it.

SENRYU SECOND PLACE

neighbors

now that the fence has blown down

we wave

- Rich Krivcher

I am not generally enamored of concrete devices in haiku or senryu—text that meanders cummings-style down the page, and the like. But in this poem we find form suited to content in a most original way, and at the same time a sense of happy inevitability.

SENRYU THIRD PLACE

sunbather

I elicit a wink

from her navel

- Ernest J. Berry

This senryu would seem to be written in a spirit of pure fun, and it succeeds delightfully on that level. What gives an extra dimension is the voice: unbridled male fantasy tempered by rueful self-satire.

SENRYU HONORABLE MENTIONS

my mother's walker
still far ahead
of my brother's walker

- Garry Gay

Here is an unusual blend of humor and pathos. The exact circumstances of the poem can only be guessed at, yet the inevitable cycles of human existence are clearly evoked.

the perfect host—
directions about
where to find the moon

- John Stevenson

What guest could fail to be charmed by a host who has not only given thought to sheets and towels, but at the same time paid attention to the position of the moon in the sky?

Contest chair: Carolyne Rohrig

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