

2004 Adult Contests – Judges Comments

Tim McNulty, William Stafford judge

The winning poem, “Poison,” has a wonderfully clear narrative quality, a compelling tone of almost childlike innocence, startling imagery that captures the gravity and heart of the experience, and a transcendence and closing image that lift it above the other very fine final entries.

The second-place poem, “Junipers,” is a delightful lyric with a musical sense of language and rhythm that begs to be read aloud. Its images are deft and vivid, and its pace never falters. The poet’s ability to find such delight in a commonplace work task should be an inspiration to anyone who writes.

The third-place poem, “Density,” weaves a bucolic lyric and reminiscence with wonderfully fresh, tactile imagery. The poem captures a traditional realm of experience quickly disappearing from the modern landscape and give eloquent testimony to the beauty and meaning we are losing with it.

Washington Poets Association

2004 Porad Haiku Contest

If a three-line poem uses simple and direct language, includes a caesura dividing the poem into two energized parts, indicates or suggests the season, and objectively conveys but does not state a clear feeling or intuition, it may very well be a good haiku. The winners of the 2004 Washington Poets Association haiku contest typically exhibit these techniques and characteristics and deserve recognition as well-crafted haiku.

Haiku is often thought of as a “form” of poetry, but it is better understood as a *genre*, of which form is only aspect. In fact, haiku need *not* be 5-7-5 syllables in English, despite what many well-meaning school teachers have taught us. More important are the techniques of the cut or pause (*kire* in Japanese), season word (*kigo*), objective description, and intuitive implication. The pause enables the poem to present a context and focus, or a setting and event, and to juxtapose these elements so that the reader might make a leap of understanding in connecting the two parts. Haiku are typically nature poems, but often link human nature with nature in a moment of suchness. They usually avoid rhyme, titles, overt metaphor and simile, and other rhetorical tricks, aiming instead at the simple and

ordinary, pointing to the thing or experience itself rather than to the poem or poet with clever or analytical words.

In Japanese, haiku are typically written in a single vertical line, but in English they are most often (though not always) written in three brief lines, using an organic rather than a set syllabic form. While this matter of form may come as a surprise to some people, a review of the leading haiku anthologies and journals quickly shows “5-7-5” haiku to be nearly completely avoided (or merely accidental) by the best haiku poets writing in English today. For those writing haiku seriously, books such as Cor van den Heuvel’s *The Haiku Anthology* and William J. Higginson’s *Haiku Handbook* make for indispensable reading. Journals such as *Modern Haiku* and the Haiku Society of America’s *Frogpond* serve as the magazines of record for the best poetry, criticism, book reviews, and essays related to haiku in English. Meeting monthly in the Puget Sound area, the Haiku Northwest group is an active and accomplished group of poets dedicated to haiku. The group was started in 1988 by Francine Porad, for whom the Washington Poets Association’s new haiku contest is named.

The 2004 Porad haiku contest received 410 entries. The first-place poem includes an enigmatic “her,” and the reader may immediately wonder who this person is, and who the “my” is as well.

among her things

my birthday newspaper—

deepening snow

The sweep of time is compressed into the present moment here—and not just one life but two. Because the image is juxtaposed with winter, the season of death and decline, we may intuit that a grown child has found his or her mother’s keepsakes of motherhood. We can’t be certain that the mother has died, but perhaps she has, and the son or daughter has found a newspaper from his or her own birth date saved by the mother. And how delicately this is all suggested. One may imagine an attic as the scene, but it could be a den or library—or perhaps a closet in a nursing home. We feel loss here, and a touch of nostalgia but not sentimentality. No feelings are stated, but somehow the context of deepening snow, suggesting the ending of a life, gives us a feeling of sadness amid a memory of happiness and love. Just as the season progresses into winter, which will in turn

become spring, so too does birth give way to death, yet hold, still, the promise of renewal. The poem generates many reverberations, and its seeming simplicity should not be confused with a lack of depth or slightness of feeling.

The second-place poem presents another enigma: Why do the two people stop holding hands?

salmon thrashing

near the base of their ladder—

we stop holding hands

Are they simply curious to look more closely at the salmon, or is something deeper and perhaps more troubling going on in this relationship? Is the thrashing of the salmon symbolic of the relationship, or does that detail hold no overt significance? We are left to wonder, and thus the poem demonstrates the haiku genre's open-endedness. We are free to interpret it in a number of ways, and thus we are engaged. The salmon are mature enough to be heading up-river to spawn, and the poem is anchored in this specific season, so perhaps the relationship is in a similar stage of maturity. Or perhaps, just as the fish cannot help each other up their ladder, so too must individuals in a relationship rely on themselves only for certain aspects of their lives. Or perhaps there is no symbolic intent (and does not need to be) as the two people stop holding hands merely because their attention is drawn to the natural behavior of fish in a fish ladder. We can resolve the poem in a personal way, and that is one of haiku's greatest strengths.

The third-place poem lacks a specific indication or suggestion of a season, but the flaking paint may suggest the feeling of autumn.

bus stop

a pregnant woman picks

at flaking paint

The melancholy of autumn contrasts well with the hopefulness of the pregnancy. Perhaps the mother, in a contemplative moment while waiting for a bus, ponders her personal situation, and how her life is about to change. Perhaps she picks at the flaking paint in the same way that she wants to clean up her own life, in order to make it as perfect as possible for the baby about to be born. Not only will the bus arrive soon, of course, but the baby, too. The waiting is always hard.

Each of the three honorable mention poems, among several other close ones, has much to commend it. In the “family reunion” poem, “lilacs” sets the poem in spring, and the wind catching a plate may symbolize how every family seems to have a renegade. In “deer emerge,” the person’s fascination with the deer on a winter day is shown to be strong enough that his or her tea grows cold. Appreciating the beauty of nature thus triumphs over the desire to satisfy a personal need for a warm drink. Or the person realizes how long he or she has been watching the deer when he or she finds the tea cold. And in “traveling, too,” we are confronted with the oddity of a melon on what may be a bus seat, perhaps a city bus where the melon has been forgotten, or perhaps in a car or taxi where the melon is the poet’s own. The poet is momentarily aware of the absurdity of a melon traveling, and maybe realizes that his or her own traveling is just as surreal or insignificant. The poet sees his or her self in the melon—melons that are green with potential that will come to fruition wherever they (and the poet) are going.

family reunion

the wind takes a paper plate

into the lilacs

deer emerge

from the snowy woods

tea grown cold

traveling, too,

on a seat by the window—

green melons

Thanks to all for entering this haiku contest, and thank you to John Burgess and the Washington Poets Association for the honor to consider each entry. Thank you also to Francine Porad for her leadership in inspiring a generation of Northwest haiku poets. For the Porad contest, a number of entries were senryu (focusing primarily on humor or irony and the human condition)—often strong poems, but not haiku. Other entries were sets of haiku, or longer poems with haiku-like stanzas, and thus inappropriate for a contest seeking to honor individual haiku. Some poems also had titles, rhyme, or excess judgment, analysis, or other subjective assessment, all of which are avoided in haiku. Those wishing to learn more about haiku may want to read “Becoming a Haiku Poet” (<http://www.haikuworld.org/begin/mdwelch.apr2003.html>), and to join the Haiku Society of America (<http://www.hsa-haiku.org/>) and Haiku Northwest (<http://hometown.aol.com/WelchM/Haiku-Northwest.html>). Congratulations to all the winners, and thank you to all for participating.