

The 2024 Heliosparrow Haiku Frontier Awards

[*The Haiku Frontier Awards*](#) seek to present and praise leading-edge poems and poets illuminating inspiring directions in haiku poetics. These inaugural awards include poems published between January 2023 and February 2024. Our four judges are: Jennifer Hambrick (alterku, haibun, sequence/collaborative), Michelle Tennison (haiku, alterku), and co-editors Clayton Beach and myself (haiku, alterku, sequence/collaborative, short poem). A preliminary comment on our results: In the haiku category, [Jennifer Hambrick’s work](#) was a standout, with four First-Prize poems selected. Her prolific output of over 100 works is well worth reading—she is also our haibun judge this year. In the alterku category (works that extend the haiku form), [Scott Metz](#) is a standout poet, with over 120 publications in the journal. Four of his poems have been selected for the First Prize this year.

In addition to the main judging categories, we are presenting several *Special Awards for innovative works*. Look for these below. Please note that for each category, published poetry by a judge of that category was left out of competition. (Richard Gilbert)

HAIKU

<p>whale fall my ocean’s quiet deaths</p> <p>First Prize (Jennifer Hambrick, 26 May)</p>	<p>A poem of profound psychological resonance. It is difficult to imagine more apt imagery than this to express the sense of being compromised or lost to the point of an almost soul-level sadness. Like many of Hambrick’s haiku, this poem conveys a remarkable depth of feeling in a small space of words, a mere six words in this instance. It is also topical. The haiku opens with a haunting image of the death of a whale, and we sense a tragic falling away of sacred life. Humanity currently must live with the knowledge of losses taking place daily on an oceanic scale. Most happen out of sight, but we can feel them. It’s “my ocean,” and as this is a global home, it is my death, too. A striking poem that carries far both inwardly and outwardly in an age of existential crisis. (MT)</p> <p>Falling into subtly profound mystery with passion and grace, the Japanese aesthetic of <i>yūgen</i> permeates each of these exquisite poems by Jennifer Hambrick. Zeami (progenitor of Noh theatre) offered a sense of <i>yūgen</i>: “To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return. To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands. To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds.” In “my ocean’s quiet deaths” and throughout Jennifer Hambrick’s oeuvre, through her exquisite use of metaphorical nuance, I both find and am found among her poetic insights: carried into contrasts of passionate and ferocious realms, precipices of heart-stopping journey; to be annealed and blessed by the richness of emotion she conveys with awe. (RG)</p>
<p>glass acid you rain right through me</p> <p>First Prize (Jennifer Hambrick, 3 Sept)</p>	<p>Ethnobotanist Terrence McKenna described the universe as an “art-making machine, an engine for the production of ever-more-novel forms of connectedness, ever-more-exotic juxtapositions of disparate elements” (<i>Creative Force and Depth of Understanding</i>, YT video, 16 Sept 2021). I love this analogy, and the haiku in Heliosparrow Poetry Journal demonstrate its veracity. Hambrick’s “glass acid” haiku holds simultaneous multiple threads and templates of thought and feeling with cognitive links that jump – taking nonlinearity to another level while still cohering as a multidimensional whole.</p>

	<p>The effect is rather the opposite of grammatical fluency, but lyrically it is rich. Just the sound of this poem is musical, with alliteration of “s” and “r” sounds and a repeating “a,” allowing the phrases to float and linger in the mind. But the imagery is cutting, with phrases like “glass acid,” the caustic and poisonous substance used to etch glass, cognitively paired with acid rain, which requires a mental jump over the word “you.” Both are disturbing images, especially when juxtaposed with the phrase “you rain right through me,” creating a profound sense of vulnerability, both of the self and the environment. The poem could be about a personal relationship and equally about the environmental crisis in which we are all sharing. As a reader, my encounter with many of Hambrick’s haiku has been similar to my experience with the Magic Eye stereograms of a few decades past. What initially appears randomly patterned suddenly shifts into something much more. It just requires a slightly different focus of the eye. What Hambrick is doing with the haiku form is truly exciting. (MT)</p>
<p>the blue hour bones unraveling two wombs ago</p> <p><i>First Prize</i> (Jennifer Hambrick, 26 May)</p>	<p>A bit of a shocking read depicting entering the liminal state of twilight to the point of immateriality. Calls to mind the famous koan, “What was your original face before your parents were born?” and also intensely challenges logic, gazing into the pause between form and spirit. I love the prevalence of “o” sounds here, which adds an auditory sense of awe. (MT)</p>
<p>ossuary dawn a blood sky turns to dust</p> <p><i>First Prize</i> (Jennifer Hambrick, 28 Feb 2024)</p>	<p>A combination of images creating an apocalyptic whole—containers and rooms full of bones; the metaphor of “dust to dust,” a cautionary vision; dust rains from sky; hubris on a planetary scale; a sobering reminder of our mortality (lest we forget). This one lingers. (Helio)</p> <p>The opening image is a novel construct, an “ossuary dawn” is an unknown dawn, a bone-white dawn, an awakening to the funereal rise of what must be the last day: the sky is the ceiling of a tomb rather than a celestial firmament, spread over a collection of skulls and bones. No life exists below an ossuary dawn, the sun is a harbinger of death rather than a bringer of light; it fills the sky with a spatter of blood as an omen of ill portent and calamity. The final line closes with an echo of the funeral rites, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The sky itself turns from air to ashes, intimating a nuclear holocaust, or a metaphorical crumbling of existence into nothingness. In this haiku, there is nothing left in the empty lands of “death’s twilight kingdom.” T.S. Eliot’s <i>The Hollow Men</i> comes to mind as the world ends, “not with a bang but a whimper.” While the message and imagery are a lament on the eve of an apocalypse, the language itself is rich and colorful, with an alteration of sibilance and soft alveolar stops.</p> <p>The idea that poetry is a song that erupts from the poet’s irrepressible response to the beauty and wonder of nature and existence is central to Japanese poetics, being first described in Ki no Tsurayuki’s preface to the first collection of waka by imperial edict, the <i>Kokin Wakashū</i>, over a millennium ago. Nature was stated as the central topic of haiku when the genre was defined by Masaoka Shiki, and later in the first framing and contextualization of the haiku genre in English. Nature</p>

	<p>has remained a central subject throughout the evolution of the genre of Haiku in English, though the relationship between poet and nature has become fraught as our complicity in environmental degradation has become more and more apparent. With climate change, seasonal phenomena have become unsteady, unpredictable, and increasingly catastrophic. Contemporary haiku poets must wrestle with the realization that we as human beings are responsible for the destruction of the very environment that sustains our lives. Heliosparrow has published many fine haiku that express regret and remorse at the loss of the natural world and the dying planet. Anxiety about a looming Anthropocene apocalypse is perhaps an inevitable feature of haiku in the 21st century, as we navigate our place in the order of a dying world and find solace through poetry. Among all the requiems for a vanishing world that were under consideration. This haiku stood out for the dark beauty of the imagery and language and its layered intertextuality. (CB)</p>
<p>lily-of-the-valley scent opening the labyrinth</p> <p><i>Second Prize</i> (Cherie Hunter Day, 29 Feb 2024)</p>	<p>One of our most ancient and primordial senses, scent memories are among the strongest and most visceral recollections that we can have. Whether the shadow of a lover, a nostalgic reminder of childhood, or a trigger for a traumatic event, scent memories are rare but powerful, and can make one relive a moment from the past in a flashbulb memory from a single waft of a faint and unexpected fragrance. What personal associations the poet has with the lily of the valley we cannot intuit, but the idea that the flower’s scent opens a metaphorical labyrinth leads the reader into a space of reflection. This ku balances a counterpoint between the sweet, delicate white flowers and their traditional associations of purity and resurrection on one side, and the labyrinth, with its dank, dark, animalistic undertones and echoes of the minotaur on the other, linking the divine and transcendental to the dark and chthonic. The labyrinth could be Christ’s tomb, or the sinuous path of the sinus itself that brings us deeper and deeper into the unconscious mind and the fragments of our past. Perhaps it is a metaphor of our journey toward consciousness itself. (CB)</p> <p>There are relatively few haiku about the sense of smell and its mystery. Many people report experiencing a scent associated with a loved one long missed or passed—a favorite perfume, or cigar. Smell may directly unveil a depth of embodied metaphor, as we often become aware of the particular association before we are conscious of the smell itself.</p> <p>Is this lily of the valley growing at the beginning of a physical labyrinth? Perhaps flowers have a spiritual dimension that is perceptible but just out of reach of the knowable. The world that with eyes closed is revealed. (Helio)</p>
<p>shape shifting my gender a coffin of light</p> <p><i>Third Prize</i> (Aidan Castle, 13 Apr 2024)</p>	<p>The word “shapeshifter” has strong supernatural connotations, here the verb is fragmented into “shape shifting,” creating a sense of discontinuity and allowing several different readings. If we read the word “shape” on its own, there is a vague sense of form, with the fragment “shifting my gender” serving as a pivot toward a sense of gender fluidity that then takes on a mythical quality – there is a desire to reshape the flesh and to manipulate reality. The speaker’s gender is</p>

	<p>then likened to a coffin, a claustrophobic and deathly image; and yet, the coffin is made of light – pure energy that has transcended the limitations of matter. The imagery itself is transmuted from word to word, the entire line is unstable and ever-shifting, the inherently paradoxical juxtapositions and collocations underscoring a sense of transformation and redefinition. There is a sense of both the recognition of the limits of language in reshaping reality and a defiant stance of pure will and a phenomenal power. (CB)</p> <p>I am struck by “a coffin of light,” the inescapable - mortality - no matter what gender we land in or on; whatever best expression we find: yet, we are—whether one celebrates or mourns the freedom or inescapability of the Self. I sense the idea of self-expression and self-creativity in the short space of a lifetime—something difficult to discuss, and like all excellent haiku, this ku raises more questions than it answers. (RG)</p>
<p>thunderhead I sew myself into an osprey</p> <p>Fourth Prize (Melissa Allen, 18 Nov)</p>	<p>Through the ubiquity of water, of rain, “thunderhead” can be seen as a kind of unifier. In this setting a mental metamorphosis occurs with another being through clear observation, desire, and communion of spirit. A surprising and original haiku about spiritual union and our inherent oneness with nature. (MT)</p> <p>I know the magnificent osprey from observations in the deep Colorado mountains. On an island in a glacial lake they nest in the tallest trees there. The water must remain pristine and the environment restricted from human habitation for them to return and roost—awesome to see such birds take flight. If I were to be within, my soul sewn; an indigenous image; into a thunderhead, an osprey, fearless in confronting flight. (RG)</p>
<p>war memories just the thin stream of gravity</p> <p>Fifth Prize (Goran Gatalica, 6 Aug)</p>	<p>The novel phrase “the thin stream of gravity” emphasizes the loss of groundedness due to trauma and war. War can become surreal to the mind. We might find ourselves grasping to hold onto the very laws of Nature. “Gravity” here also suggests a profound heaviness or weightedness behind the everyday. A poignant and deeply relevant poem, its theme carrying perhaps all the way back to ancestral DNA. (MT)</p> <p>An imagining of the unimaginable. I’m reminded of a similarly powerful poem by Sugimura Seirinshi (Gilbert and Ito translation) as: “war dead / exit out of a blue mathematics.” A cold science is here all that remains of life. Blue with death—“the thin stream” is as abstract as gravity or mathematics, depersonalizing human life uncountably; a wild chaos of terrible war is intimated through the paradoxical simplicity of the poem. (RG)</p>

Haiku Honorable Mentions (unordered)

absolute dream
wrapping the midnight
a raven's shadow

([Hifsa Ashraf, 13 Mar](#))

whispers
from the cowrie shells
bare truth

([Hifsa Ashraf, 13 Mar](#))

funeral rain
the random consistency
of leaves

([Raghav Prashant Sundar, 19 Feb 2024](#))

chambered nautilus
something liminal
in me

([Edward Cody Huddleston, 25 Feb 2024](#))

exit wounds
the legend of
a dreamcatcher

([Elan Chogan, 22 Oct](#))

just more prayers
bullet holes
in the wall

([Nicky Gutierrez, 7 Jan 2024](#))

that cat's grass strays way past all was

([Victor Ortiz, 28 Feb 2024](#))

hearsay everywhere the sky

([Rowan Beckett, 30 May](#))

meeting my vanishing twin paradox

([Jennifer Hambrick, Apr 7](#))

a moon with its own mouthfeel mother tongue

([Jennifer Hambrick, 18 Mar](#))

deep in your eye am so yes

([Jennifer Hambrick, 30 Aug](#))

deep in ghostweather the bone light of chyrons

([John Pappas, 11 June](#))

ripples in the dreamlake *a better simulation*

([John Pappas, 11 June](#))

yellow maple
not an accusation
not a tone-deaf leaf song

([Cherie Hunter Day, 22 Dec](#))

at the edge of sleep
writing words in the sand
for my daughter to spell

([Philip Rowland, 19 Feb 2024](#))

life begins
the salt of the sea
as unseen as assassins

([Peter Yovu, 25 Mar 2023](#))

toward the abyss
all my particles
decelerate

([Peter Yovu, 25 Mar 2023](#))

rustling
in our never
leaves

([Jonathan Humphrey, 31 Oct](#))

Alterku

Part of the Heliosparrow mission is to invite haiku frontiers; alterku is the term coined for haiku that stretch the normative concept of haiku form, while retaining elements of haiku aesthetic and technique. Such poems tend to be marginalized, when it comes to award recognition in haiku journals—is this because these works haven’t been codified by name? The Frontier Awards aim to present the best of some of these types of poems, and illustrate via commentary how they expand on haiku, thus shining a spotlight on their artistry. Heliosparrow currently hosts a wide range of modern-haiku styles; it is worth noting that alterku (and explorative, avant-garde haiku as well) align with contemporary trends in free-meter, free-form (*gendai*) haiku in Japan: these forms of poetic experiment speak to a freshness of international contemporary spirit.

Scott Metz is a pioneer and leader in alterku experiment, and has numerous published works in Heliosparrow. Our four First Place awards reflect our collaborative estimation. Many of our award-winning authors will be familiar to those in the haiku world. The judges for this category are Clayton Beach, Richard Gilbert, Jennifer Hambrick, and Michelle Tennison.

<p>First Prize (Scott Metz, 7 Feb)</p> <p>a fallen tree in full</p> <p> . Bloom</p> <p>outside the day. Outside</p> <p> the night</p>	<p>An experimental style poem that takes a familiar subject and expands upon it while highlighting some of the more transcendent aspects of haiku.</p> <p>This poem’s form, with its seemingly random spacing and punctuation, emphasizes an irruption of grammatical sentence structure. It is still a haiku, and thus not so much a story as a happening, a juxtaposition of co-evolving elements and images. As a portrait of a kind of eternal now, the poem’s subjects – fundamentally life, death and beauty – exist in their own realm, outside the day. Outside the night. A fallen tree like a cut flower with no attachments is blossoming, still unfolding according to its dharma. (MT)</p>
<p>First Prize (Scott Metz, 30 Aug)</p> <p>. The stars of</p> <p> . Spring</p> <p>. If we lift</p> <p> . So much</p> <p> . As a finger</p>	<p>Though spaced graphically on the page like a constellation of stars, this poem embodies in its internal form as a haiku with <i>kire</i> and even <i>kigo</i>. But far from gratuitous visual play, the poem’s disposition on the page enhances the opening celestial image without overdoing it and suggests a fragile disarray, which the juxtaposed image and idea convey lexically. The juxtaposition is beautifully evocative but logically elusive. Compelling are the elements of mystery and danger in the familiar expression “if we lift so much as a finger” – if we lift so much as a finger, what will happen? Will the stars of spring break? Drop from the sky? Scatter? Will something else cataclysmic happen? Will something wondrous happen? The poem keeps us in suspense. It’s one of those great poems you love to keep turning over and over in your mind, the way a tide tosses a stone. (JH)</p>

<p><i>First Prize</i> (Scott Metz, 4 Nov)</p> <p>. Closer to her. Flowering closer. To her</p>	<p>This poem comes close to a normative 3-line ku, and except for its unusual lineation and full-stops, it might be accepted as haiku, but frankly I imagine most editors passing on it. Sometimes repetition works, but it's hard to pull off, due to redundancy, which is usually intolerable in haiku.</p> <p>“ . Closer to / Her. Flowering / Closer. To her” — the repetition is not only unexpected, the irruptive periods inserted in alien places break up textual coherence into fragments: cut, and unbind. That is, the empathic “closer” is contravened by the cutting, which semantically indicates: completely cut, separate, completely apart. And yet the repetition in magnetic desire pulls one in, centripetally. This poem feels both deeply romantic and—due to pauses and breaks in time—dissects the romantic-narrative story. The unknown; ambivalence; hesitation; momentary halting-states. Here is intuited an evocation of the see-saw interplay between lovers as ancient as the dawn of subjective consciousness. (RG)</p>
<p><i>First Prize</i> (Scott Metz, 7 Dec)</p> <p><i>not</i> <i>now</i></p> <p>the trees</p> <p>the voice</p> <p>in those</p> <p>two words</p> <p>the wind</p> <p>of the sea</p>	<p>This poem resonates with intimations of life and death. All nature is continually dying and being reborn, but only human beings fear and question this inexorable cycle. We wonder, when our time comes, what will dying and death be like? In this poem nature speaks for itself, maybe also for the poetic speaker and the reader: not now, it's not time yet for the sea, the trees, the wind to change course. It's not time yet to go. A poem with heart and mind as expansive as sea and sky. (JH)</p> <p>A 3-column poem; I note that “<i>not now</i>” is italicized, setting off the first stanza from the rest, and creating a counterfactual effect. The two-word pairings create much space and breath, with space as silence between the verbal/word forms. The poem is elemental: voice, sea, trees, wind. But also words, language—so, language as an elemental thing. Or more reflectively, the poem (as words, language) <i>proposes</i> the elements. The “sea” is dropped off at the end, the only single-word line—so the sea resonates into a rippling (<i>zengo no kire</i>) space. If this were but an elemental evocation the poem might seem too bald, but there is this mid-poem phrase: “in those two words,” referring back to those first italicized words “<i>not now</i>,” as if the sea is speaking in its wind and wave: “not now. Not now, not now,” in the waves. So there exists a darker tone or tonal layers regarding the wish for union and its negative. I find this both a disturbing and very open, contemplative poem, inviting social and literary consciousness. (RG)</p>

<p>Second Prize (Peter Yovu, 22 Sept)</p> <p>waves that begin mid-ocean. A horse to a young girl's hand.</p>	<p>The alterku elements of this poem suggest sentence structure and a narrative, but it is a story that is not a story in the traditional sense. This poem plays with the haiku form suggesting that there could be linearity to the link between the two events, but ultimately it is radiant with mystery and wildness. (MT)</p> <p>What begins and blooms from the norms and constraints of land, amid limitless regions of beating-heart wilds? If you are a lover of horses, now there's a ku for you. (RG)</p>
<p>Third Prize (Sabine Miller, 23 Feb)</p> <p>lonely for the empty</p> <p>mirror desert wind</p>	<p>Most Creative Cut Award (1)</p> <p>This alterku stands apart due to a simple shift in the way it is cut, opening it to multiple combinations and enhancing the feeling of spaciousness exponentially. The unique phrase “lonely for the empty” sets the tone.</p> <p>lonely for / the empty mirror / desert wind</p> <p>becomes: lonely for the empty / mirror desert wind</p> <p>and the mind seeks meaning in new associations:</p> <p>lonely for the empty mirror lonely for the empty desert lonely for the empty wind</p> <p>Together with the uniquely phrased last line “mirror desert wind,” the piece evokes a quality of both infinity and finality. Miller's insightful turn of the haiku form creates a profound creative and emotional impact. A poem that rewards multiple readings. (MT)</p> <p>Here, two style aspects create a powerful contrast between inner and outer worlds, which are entirely opposite yet also perfectly mirror each other. The first style point concerns the semantic gap between the subjective “lonely” first line and objective “desert wind” in line two. These two lines are unlinked, are completely cut—this cutting is further reinforced by the vertical gap of white space between the lines. Desert mirrors emptiness. Or, the desire for (lonely for) “the empty” mirrors desert wind. Two possible and opposite readings or senses of interpretation create a potent, paradoxical, polarity. A profoundly contemplative poem that drops the reader like Newton's apple into its well. (RG)</p>

Alterku — Special Awards and Honorable Mentions

Most Creative Cut Award (2)

sin king in to . . .

([Victor Ortiz, July 7](#))

I love how the form of this poem mirrors its subject – that of being visually sliced by a tubular medical device (does it feel like a coffin?) and the mortality crisis it can induce.

The words that are created in the process: sin, king, ear, and the unique “MR I” (Mr. I) work together to suggest a loss of a center of identity and call to mind how even Ozymandias might have felt in the auditory and sensory overload of modern technology. (MT)

Mysterium Magnum Award

wildflower memories . . .

([Scott Metz, July 28](#))

At this point I feel that more words can only place limits on Metz’s transcendental and transformational poems, this being one of many.

Simply, I love this poem and how its imagery – wildflowers, arguably the most vibrationally refined expression of the plant kingdom, and butterflies, a nearly universal symbol of the spirit – work together as an expression of ascension of consciousness. As a poet Metz has a touch of the mystic. (MT)

Additional Honorable Mentions (unordered)

an y re semb lance . . . ([Victor Ortiz, 7 July](#))

blue sc reen . . . ([Victor Ortiz, 18 May](#))

job. . less . . . ([Scott Metz, 7 Feb 2023](#))

let me . . . ([Scott Metz, 7 Feb 2023](#))

a few leaves left . . . ([Scott Metz, 4 Nov](#))

too much . . . ([Scott Metz, 23 Aug](#))

Haibun

As program chair at the 2023 Haiku North America Conference, Jennifer Hambrick conceived the Haibun Innovations panel, “to showcase some of the exciting creative possibilities for haibun and, thus, ignite interest in the genre.” Having in addition published awarded haibun, including the award-winning haibun collection *Joyride* (Red Moon Press, 2021), she graciously accepted our invitation to judge this category and has added her commentaries.

<p>First Prize (Diana Webb, 17 Sept)</p> <p>Cut from Memory</p> <p>She trims her own hair. Those ringlets long since spiraled to the stars. The ribbons others wear, the trendy dyes that show a person's facets, all the way from emerald to aquamarine, denied her now. All in a mindful moment, the scissor-like beak of a warbler opens, flutes a note that frees a jewel lodged deep within her soul, eclipsing every cry that mourns her outer self.</p> <p>green thought at one with the willow</p>	<p>This haibun continues the conversation about time, aging, and beauty that Shakespeare’s Sonnet 63 begins, and brings it beautifully into a space of self-affirmation that anyone can appreciate. There’s a poignant and powerful message in this piece: the older, perhaps elderly, subject finds her own beauty again in nature, and rediscovers her true purpose in life, namely to exist as part of the expansive realm of nature and the cycles of the seasons. Nothing short of this majestic context defines the subject’s beauty, and she needs no help from the fads of ribbons and dyes invented by those who would profit from her self-doubt. The subject, who now humbly trims her own hair with scissors, is (re)connected seamlessly to the much larger realm of nature by way of the image of the “scissor-like beak of a warbler,” whose song “frees a jewel” deep in the subject’s soul. In the end, the message of this haibun is one of accepting and recognizing oneself in the eternal beauty of nature. The author delivers that message with sensitivity and humility. (JH)</p>
<p>Second Prize (Don Baird, 22 Apr)</p> <p>over-it</p> <p>. . . walking backward the size of everything changes along the path of old leaves finding themselves in turbulence where stop signs don’t matter matter doesn’t matter in the coffee house of chatter as two cops eat what they don’t care . . .</p> <p><i>several shadows were more not</i></p>	<p>The situation here – ruminating on something in the past (“walking backwards . . . along the path of old leaves”) – is human and familiar and expressed in fresh and unusual language. The sound-play with “matter,” “matter,” “matter,” and “chatter” gives the prose some poetic spice that also suggests, by way of patter (another rhyming word), the foolishness of rehashing events long past. I like the idea that “matter doesn’t matter,” and it’s clever that the concluding haiku is incomplete and inconclusive, as though the poetic speaker just gave up because even the haibun itself doesn’t matter. This dismount, which ends the piece without concluding it, along with the haibun’s title, suggests that the speaker is just plain done ruminating – until, perhaps, the next time. (JH)</p>

Third Prize

[\(Diana Webb, 29 Jan 2023\)](#)

On the Crest

In his voyage over the wave he has scissored many a snatch of sky to patch his trousers leaving them threadbare in places to filter light with some of the dove grey cloud fray-splashed with white. The foliage green with many shaded spring goes swishing over steps which gleam with fall. Time present past and future all swept up.

silver birch
denuded of leaves
the reach of stillness

The challenge with all ekphrastic poems is to do more than describe the source artwork. This haibun draws a deeply human connection from Cézanne's painting (*Sous-bois, Chemin du Mas Jolie au Château Noir*), rendering it much more than a nature scene. There's a provocative sexuality in language like "scissored", "snatch," and "denuded." The author makes the "he" look very much like the patches of blue and white and light in the Cézanne painting that inspired this haibun. Also notable are the clever appearance in the haiku of the silver birch – a tree that might or might not be the one in Cézanne's painting – and the evocative descriptor "fray-splashed with white." This haibun makes a surprising connection between a still-life and human sexuality, putting flesh on the painting's subject. (JH)

Collaborative poetry, Linked-verse and Haiku Sequences

There is a small group for selection this year, yet with authors such as Johannes S. H. Bjerg (who first defined the “parallel” haiku form), and Grant Hackett’s novel “haikoan,” these poems make for mind-expanding reading. Peter Yovu’s prize-winning poem uniquely merges the haiku form with longer-form contemporary poetry.

<p>First Prize</p> <p>“<u>For Hōsai Ozaki</u>” . . .</p> <p>(Peter Yovu, 1 Oct)</p> <p>19 lines, four stanzas; sequence https://heliosparrow.com/2023/10/18-13</p>	<p>The title tells us that this poem is a tribute to the early 20th-century Japanese <i>haijin</i> Hōsai Ozaki (Ozaki Hōsai), who was influenced early in his life by the modern free verse haiku stylism of Seisensui and fell into a desperate struggle with alcoholism before becoming a Buddhist monk. Yovu’s poem is far more than a description of Ozaki’s life; it is an exploration of the tenderness, the frailty, and the potential brokenness of every human life. <i>Wabi-sabi</i>, the loneliness and impermanence of the world, carries through this poem in fresh images of profound emotional import: “midnight milk out of a carton,” “cold air on my feet,” “even the sunlight looks old,” “koi under thin ice / passing me,” “worms turn white / looking looking but it is only the fog I see,” “boat in fog we think along slowly.” Yovu layers these images line by line in a masterful disjunctive narrative of loss and searching, leaving us to continue our quest for meaning by picking up the poem’s shards of story and mixing them with those of our own lives. The poem closes with an image laden with ominous mystery: “at cliff’s edge I listen to what my back says.” What, at that cliff’s edge, will happen next? (JH)</p>
<p>Second Prize</p> <p>“<u>who settled for the syllables</u>” . . .</p> <p>(Johannes S. H. Bjerg, 20 Jan 2023)</p> <p>8 lines, four stanzas; list sequence https://heliosparrow.com/2023/01/17-13</p>	<p>Johannes has composed a set of four “, who” poems, each presenting a series of disjunctive couplets beginning with a “who” phrase (all published on 20 January 2023). The first couplet of the prize-winning poem is:</p> <p>, who settled for the syllables ah and um and built a house <i>the rook clock cries sunset above the village</i></p> <p>The disjunctive question and answer or call-and-response pattern feels both avant-garde and anciently bardic, taking the reader on a fantastic meander through space, time and story. (RG)</p>
<p>Third Prize</p> <p>“<u>the dead fly</u>” . . .</p> <p>(Johannes S. H. Bjerg, 12 Oct)</p> <p>12 lines; roughly, parallel in style https://heliosparrow.com/2023/10/24-10</p>	<p>There are enough concrete details in this poem to make it seem easily graspable, but it is the information withheld that makes the poem sing with mystery. The first image of a dead fly “barely touching the heat” functions much like an opening still shot in a film, but it is incomplete and so prompts any number of questions – Where is this fly? What type of heat? A hot sidewalk? A stove burner? An open flame? The camera cuts disjunctively from this opening image to the scene below on the left side of the poem: a phone next to a bottle of lotion rings. On the right</p>

side of the poem unfolds a conversation that is equally mysterious to the parties on both ends of the line and to those of us eavesdropping. The poetic speaker tells the caller *irgendwo* – German for “anywhere” – punctuating the phone conversation into a state of ambivalence for the speakers and the reader. The poet limns the tension between the real and the assumed, between the concrete sensibility of objects of everyday life and the vagaries of human relationships with masterful restraint and economy. (JH)

Special Awards for Innovation, Honorable Mentions

“nothing for free” . . .

([Hifsa Ashraf & R.C. Thomas, 30 April](#))

(tan-renga)

With an impressive economy of means, the authors paint a picture of a late-night sugar craving, in the literal and figurative senses. The “tryst” with the vending machine in the haiku can be read as a lone snacker inserting bills in exchange for gustatory gratification. But the sexual overtones of “tryst” open the door for waking up (stifling a yawn) to other possibilities for gratification in the two-line capping verse. One can read this tan-renga as a poem about the late-night munchies, but under its skin it’s a poem about discovering and satisfying all manner of desire in the darkest corners of ourselves. A vivid, wickedly suggestive little poem. (JH)

Special Award in Formal Creation: Haikoan

“whose vision dies” . . .

([Grant Hackett, 29 Feb 2024](#))

The haikoan — Grant writes: “The form is three questions. A poetic trigram of questions. Haiku-like in immediacy and terseness. And koan-like in respiring with extra-rational oxygen. Restless with the interplay of possibility within and between three powers. Vehicle of reverie.”

Heliosparrow has published [19 haikoan](#) to date. (Helio)

Grant Hackett invented the form of the haikoan, which he describes, in part, as “a poetic trigram of questions. Haikulike in immediacy and terseness. . . restless with the interplay of possibility within and between three powers.” Paradoxically, this poem opens immeasurably vast horizons as an invitation to the reader to turn ever inward. Only the most enlightened sage could answer the first two questions, which begin with a wide shot on the wonder of daybreak, then cut to a tight shot of a human against the backdrop of sky – or maybe the sky is contained within our human limits. The third question cuts from a familiar worldly setting to a thought that lands like a pebble in the center of our human existence and ripples outward seemingly infinitely into the realm of mind. Here we discover our freest and most primal manifestations – but who does that make us? This poem’s story unfolds by way of images that center, dislocate, and expand our perceptions of reality and of our very selves, leaving us with a tantalizing desire to enter more deeply into their mysteries. (JH)

Special Awards for Innovative Works

Best Bilingual Haiku/Translation

post satie
la siblo de la grifelo
sururantaj folioj

after satie
the hiss of the stylus
rustling leaves

[\(Mark Valentine, 19 Feb 2024\)](#)

At Heliosparrow, we wish to bring haiku from many languages to English speaking audiences through side-by-side bilingual translations. Parallel translations offer a window into other cultural traditions and help to expand the haiku genre beyond its native Japanese and beyond the tendency for English to act as lingua franca for global poetry. Valentine's use of Esperanto for haiku is both novel to me as a reader, and appeals to the need for a cosmopolitanism approach to global poetry. A fine haiku in both languages, the Esperanto and English versions each have a sibilance that accentuates the gentle atmosphere of susurrations. (CB)

Special Award for Spatial Resonance

shade garden
for my husband's peace
i empty my womb

[\(Kate McQueen, 10 Feb 2024\)](#)

This haiku has a profound gravitas that embodies the Japanese aesthetic of "ma:" void, or empty space. Junichiro Tanizaki's essay "In Praise of Shadows," comes to mind. This haiku draws its power from that which is missing. It opens with a peaceful image and the sense of a gesture of goodwill toward a loved one, but closes with a sharp turn toward grief, remorse, and loss. The garden and the womb, two images associated with life and fertility, become tombs haunted by the shade of what might have been. (CB)

The Ouroboros Prize

Penrose triangle
You won't even agree
to disagree

[\(Joshua St. Claire, 14 Feb 2024\)](#)

Irony and paradox are central to the haikai sense of humor. This poem blends elements of science fiction and humor in order to create a paradoxical commentary on the nature of the haiku genre itself. Given the tripartite nature of haiku, combined with its tendency toward disjunction and incongruity, this ku suggests it is possible to view the haiku form itself as a sort of poetic Penrose triangle, a form that engenders literary improbability and the impossibly true. (CB)

Special Award for Musicality

syllable
in the speck of a feather
a grain of salt

[\(Dianna Webb, 10 Feb 2024\)](#)

The rhythmic play in the lines of this haiku have a sense of motion; the words dance lightly across the line with a classical elegance as the imagery shifts from the nebulous to the infinitesimal. The opening line of a single dactyl drives the reader toward the rolling anapests of the second line, only to land gracefully and come slowly to a full stop with the closing line of iambic dimeter. This haiku shows that the form can embrace the metrical variety of English language free verse in a way that transforms the short poem into a musical statement. The language of this haiku luxuriates in an sonic opulence reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins. (CB)

Special Award for Micronarrative

it is not
as it was – we blame
the nightmare thief

([Richard Magahiz, 27 Jan 2024](#))

This haiku brings in elements of microfiction, calling to mind the genre of “seven word stories” and other trends in short-poem length storytelling and micronarrative. This verse evokes a surrealist sense of mystery and unresolved narrative tension, bringing elements of weird fiction and horror to the haiku genre. (CB)

Special Award for Formal Creation

[Cherie Hunter Day](#) has created and published a “visku,” series of visual collages. We celebrate this new formal idea: Visku (visual-ku) is a term coined by Cherie Hunter Day in 2022 as intermedia which contains text possessing some of the attributes of haiku, such as brevity, disjunction, etc. Cherie writes, “I see visku as more of a trunk in the [visual poetry] hallway. It is primarily visual and may use features of these other forms, but it maintains some aspects of haiku—a reference to nature, discrete units that act as language elements [mora] without actually forming words, movement from element to element. It’s different from haiga, which is more text-based.”

These and related works have been published October—December, 2023, and can be seen on [Cherie’s author page](#).

Special Award for Forensic Metalinguistics

false cognate
the flesh of a dead
lexicon

([Jennifer Hambrick, 25 Dec 2023](#))

Heliosparrow published many strong haiku by Jennifer Hambrick in which the creative act of poetry is paralleled with childbirth. These visceral haiku blend medical terminology and linguistic terms in order to create a sense of embodying flesh within words—constructing a sense of vitalism through wordcraft—and giving birth to language through metaphors of flesh and blood. It was difficult to pick a standout among them. However, in this verse, Hambrick stretches the metaphor to the point of eviscerating the language itself. The haiku becomes an interrogation of logos to the point of negation; the creative process is stillborn as it comes into being, questioning its own ability to embody a referent by speaking of a language that has already been lost, thereby showing the limits of vitalism in poetry. If the referent of the poem is a false cognate to an unknowable reality, the ersatz body of the text is dead flesh, empty of meaning. We could extrapolate from this haiku a criticism of the realist school, of the concept of haiku as a “wordless poem” that evokes an objective reality. When the poem is dissected and reveals its lack of concrete substance, we are shown there is no living blood or palpable flesh to be found in the exercise of poetic creation. We are left with only a sense of loss and the unfulfilled desire to create life itself, a feat which even the most vivid of poetic statements fails to perform. (CB)

Judges — Brief Bios

Jennifer Hambrick is the author of three award-winning poetry collections, including the haibun collection *Joyride* (Red Moon Press), and of *a silence or two*, a collection of haiku and prose poems (forthcoming, Red Moon Press). Her poetry appears in *Rattle*, *The Columbia Review*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Santa Clara Review*, *New Resonance 13*, all of the English-language *haikai* journals, and elsewhere. Hambrick is the winner of the Martin Lucas Haiku Award, the Haiku Society of America's Haibun Award Contest, the Stevens Manuscript Award of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, the Marianne Bluger Book Award, and many other awards. Jennifer Hambrick is a classical musician, public broadcaster, and cultural journalist in Columbus, Ohio. jenniferhambrick.com

Clayton Beach lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife and children. He studied Japanese language and culture at the University of California, San Diego. His poetry is syncretic, drawing inspiration from both Western and Eastern traditions, and has been published in a wide range of journals including *Modern Haiku*, *Bones*, *Rattle* and *NOON: journal of the short poem*. When not researching or writing haiku he enjoys gardening, cooking and hiking the Oregon woods. He co-founded and co-edits the Heliosparrow Poetry Journal with Richard Gilbert (2020-present).

Michelle Tennison lives in New Jersey in the United States and has been writing and publishing haiku for over two decades. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies of the best haiku in the English language including *The Red Moon Press Anthology*, *Haiku 21 (Modern Haiku Press 2011)*, and many of Modern Haiku Press's annual anthologies of 100 notable poems. Her haiku "raven shadow" was featured in Richard Gilbert's seminal essay *The Disjunctive Dragonfly (Red Moon Press, 2013)*. Michelle's first collection of poems, *murmuration*, was published by Red Moon Press in 2016.

Richard Gilbert, Professor of English Literature, Kumamoto University, studied poetics at Naropa University and gained his PhD in Poetics and Depth Psychology from the Union Institute. He founded the Kon Nichi Translation Group in 2002. Recent essays include "The Disjunctive Dragonfly" in *The Routledge Global Haiku Reader* (2022) and *Creative Blooms* (18-parts, THF, 2020-21). Books include: *Poetry as Consciousness: Haiku Forests, Space of Mind, and an Ethics of Freedom* (Keibunsha, 2018), *Haiku as Life: A Kaneko Tohta Omnibus* (2018), *The Disjunctive Dragonfly* (RMP 2013), *Poems of Consciousness: Contemporary Japanese & English-language Haiku in Cross-cultural Perspective* (RMP, 2008). Selected haiku are housed at the [Living Haiku Anthology](#). He co-founded and co-edits the Heliosparrow Poetry Journal with Clayton Beach (2020-present).