

Haiku Society of America 2020 Merit Book Awards

Comments by the Judges

Marilyn Hazelton and Rebecca Lilly

First Place: Leroy & Mildred Kanterman Memorial

Kon Nichi Translation Group. Haiku As Life: A Kaneko Tohta Omnibus.
Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2019.

Haiku as Life is composed of four previously published books collected into a slightly revised and extended volume:

Ikimonofūei: Poetic Composition on Living Things (2011);

The Future of Haiku: An Interview with Kaneko Tohta (2011);

Selected Haiku with Essays and Commentary (1937 – 1960) (2011);

Selected Haiku with Essays and Commentary (1961 – 2012) (2012).

Each book reveals something of the story and character of Kaneko (1919 – 2018). His haiku and haiku theories were shaped by the tumult of the 20th century, including harassment of certain haiku poets by the Japanese Secret Police before and during WW II, and the aftermath of the war. Kaneko's first haiku was published at age 18. He continued writing and publishing for the next 80 years, including during his service as a Naval Supply Officer in the Truk Islands.

the disappearing wake —
leaving behind the scorched fire
of unmarked graves

In his introduction, Richard Gilbert writes: *"Talking with haiku poets around Japan, the reception of Kaneko's thought concerns not only those sensibilities Kaneko himself values, but how he challenges each poet to be genuine and brave."*

This is Kaneko's final haiku in 2018, at age 98:

from the river, the calling voice
day of the ending of
wandering

Kaneko played a major role in developing “gendai” or modern Japanese haiku. Because the translations, interviews and commentaries in this “omnibus” provide valuable insight for readers (in and outside of Japan) into the forces and influences that shaped his life and his haiku, the Merit Award goes to Haiku as Life: A Kaneko Tohta Omnibus.

Haiku: Second Place Award

John Martone, Homelands

This is an impressive, ambitious collection from a well-known practitioner in the genre, exploring various notions of “homeland,” and what it feels like to be “at home,” whether in the body, in language (“were/words/earth”) in the landscape, in spiritual faith, in one’s country of origin, or simply on earth as a human trying to feel at ease in the world. This book has a momentum and resonance that may take more than one reading to fully appreciate. Its innovative structure (the differing lengths of the poems with varying musicality and structure, the inclusion of words set off in italics, and the repetition of images) creates a remarkable whole and feels entirely “put together,” as if all the broken pieces of a clay pot were reassembled. The variations in poetic form prevent the rhythm from feeling repetitive in such a lengthy book. Martone creates an elegant music that carries the reader with evocative images (bread, lace-leaf maple, shovel, fig, clay pot) that repeat throughout the collection, and reinforce the idea of returning to one’s origins, of repairing a shattered clay pot by picking up shards on the path home, reconnecting the beginning with an end already inherent in the beginning and arising at points along the return journey. This is an outstanding and memorable collection.

Haiku: Third Place

Stuart Quine. Wild Rhubarb. Uxbridge, UK: Alba Publishing, 2019.

Stuart Quine's latest and final book, Wild Rhubarb, continues his gentle examination of the English world around him with the help of monoku. By the time of this publication, Quine had been writing and publishing haiku for over 20 years. He practiced Soto Zen, and until myotonic dystrophy (an inherited illness which can cause muscle loss and immobility) made it impossible to continue, he was an editor at, and long-time contributor to, the British haiku journal Presence.

Following Quine's passing from Covid-19 in March of this year, Matthew Paul, also a former Presence editor, suggested in his tribute to Quine, that his friend's dystrophy ". . . resulted in a body of haiku which is darker and more honestly reflective of mood than most people's."

And yet he could express extraordinary sensitivity to place and time.

just a little light on this short night fireflies in a jar

how little I've learned just the correct use of language and a few simple tools

out of the north summer arrives with swifts

Honorable mentions (unranked, in alphabetical order by author's last name)

Glenn G. Coats. Furrows of Snow. Arlington, VA: Turtle Light Press, 2019.

In Furrows of Snow, Coats introduces us to the geography of his heart in which rivers and streams are language bringing some comfort in the face of his mother's dementia.

He begins with:

*Sunday sermons
rivers that bend
my knees*

*summer currents
I speak more slowly
to my mother*

And later:

*rocky shoreline
my daughter guides a fish
into my hands*

His haiku continue in tribute as if they are whispers of love. Those whispers include photographs of the author, his mother and his very young daughter that deepen the currents of beauty within these pages.

William McCrea Ramsey, umbrellas rising, Red Moon Press, 2019

Ramsey states in his brief introduction that the narrator in his collection grapples with self-definition and recognizes the need for self-identity to be accommodating to uncertainty and change. He rightly identifies wonder and intuition as two keys to living with uncertainty and inevitable change in both the self and the outer world. His haiku wrestle with social and political issues – war, pollution etc.—as well as cosmic questions, with an innovative style and structure. In addition, his poems have a very personal, colloquial feel, as if the narrator and reader were on familiar terms. The haiku surprise and delight with eccentric, unpredictable connections: Two examples:

*a horse with no legs
floats in a jigsaw puzzle
called post-surgery*

*I squat,
the toad hops—*

this estrangement

An exemplary collection of haiku worthy of Honorable Mention.

Jolanta Kajzer. Bread by Bread. Gdańsk, Poland: Marpress, 2019

An award-winning Polish poet, Jolanta Kajzer, was commissioned by the city of Gdansk to write a book of haiku to celebrate the 100th birthday of Gdańsk native Brunon Zwarra (1919-2018). Kajzer found inspiration for her haiku in Zwarra's memoirs and the places he loved. That he was a prisoner in two horrific German concentration camps during WW II is mentioned in the Introduction. The poems echo and re-echo a theme of long-term healing for Zwarra's (and Kajzer's) beloved city.

*dawn
touches roofs
from pink to pink*

*harvest moon
digging the soil
potato by potato*

*sleet
Chopin's music
playing somewhere*

Translated into English by Jolanta and Adam Kajzer, the haiku are quietly elegant and illustrate a focus on recovering community following a difficult or

catastrophic time. Adam Kajzer's photographs deepen the experience of reading Bread by Bread.

Joshua Eric Williams, The Strangest Conversation, Red Moon Press, 2019

Simplicity is the essence of this thoughtfully constructed collection in which natural images appear to present texts and questions, creating a strange and wonderful conversation that often links the big and the small.

stargazers
a lightning bug
signals a mate

Natural objects seem animated by a hidden or coded language that must be deciphered by attending not to thoughts about the object, but to our sensory perceptions of it. The poems convey the feeling that nature is speaking to us, or that nature is endowed with consciousness, echoing back some buried feeling or memory of ours that carries deeply into the image itself. There's a feeling of synchronicity between the natural world and the narrator's spoken or written thoughts, as if natural objects were direct expressions of those thoughts. In addition to this "magical" or "synchronistic" dimension, the poems provoke philosophical reflection on the connections between linguistic terms or utterances and natural objects.

spider's web
the subject, verb and object
line-by-line

a question
i couldn't hear
winter rain

moonlight

*on a still bed
dream speech*

The haiku are high-quality throughout, and notable for the close connections they draw between language and nature, with the result that the natural world feels closer to us, echoing our thoughts, part and parcel of the dictations of our thinking. An excellent book of haiku.

Best Haibun Book

Ludmila Balabanova. Sunflower Field. Plovdiv, Bulgaria: Zhanet, 2019.

In her introductory definition of Haibun, Balabanova describes the task she has set for herself: “Haibun is subtle and sophisticated literature. If haiku poetry is an art of deep suggestions and barely hinted relations, haibun works on a deeper level in that direction.” That she has a Ph.D. in literature and also lectures on computer engineering and communication may be why her plain style feels like it has been polished with the skill of a diamond cutter.

Parting

*A friend of mine tells me about her divorce. The
saddest thing she says is dividing what was till yesterday
“ours” to “yours” and “mine.”*

*sharing the moon
the light part for you
the dark for me*

Balabanova completes a haibun about observing a mother carrying her child with this haiku:

*blown dandelions...
today a sparrow*

called me Mom

She has threaded grief, compassion, as well as craft, throughout the book, as exemplified here:

family album...

lights of a passing train

in the night

Pages of sketches accompany and quietly magnify the experience of reading the prose and poetry of Sunflower Field.

Honorable Mention Haibun Book.

Low Watts. Tick-Tock, Ormskirk, UK: Snapshot Press, 2019.

Tick-Tock includes a dazzling range of location, subject matter and perspective. Childhood (his and his son's) work in countries on different continents that are not named but can be guessed at, the 4th of July, Georgia O'Keefe, and the number of heartbeats in an animal's life.

The shortest haibun (modeled after the format of an old telegraph) indicates the scalpel Watts sometimes uses as a pen.

Blowout

Drilled into a shallow gas pocket. STOP. Lost control. STOP.

One dead, seventeen missing. STOP. Body unidentifiable.

STOP.

art therapy always the same blood moon

STOP.

There is also humor and irony in Tick-Tock. His haibun that is a reflection on the dangers and sweet smell of natural gas ends this way:

*Roswell gas stop sign:
illegal aliens
call home*

Best Prose: First Place Award

_Charles Trumbull, A History of Modern Haiku, Modern Haiku Press, 2019

Well-written, thorough, and meticulously researched, this important book documents the fifty-year history of the journal of *Modern Haiku*, the premiere journal of English language haiku and haiku studies. As Paul Miller points out in his introduction, to trace the history of the journal is to trace the history of haiku itself: because *Modern Haiku* for years has been such a significant forum for haiku, haiku studies, and reviews (and for those of related genres, such as haibun) it serves to document the development and influence of haiku for a half-century. During that period, from inception to the present, there have been five consecutive editors of *Modern Haiku*, and the book is correspondingly divided into five sections, each of which details the unique tastes, editorial challenges, and character of the journal under a particular editor, with the most recent editor, Paul Miller, still at the helm. Of particular interest is that this study of *Modern Haiku's* history includes plenty examples of haiku, chosen as eminent mention, issue favorites, or for the Spiess memorial award. So aside from its essential written account of the journal's history, the book is valuable for the many excellent haiku in its pages. In the opinion of the judges, this is a necessary book for documenting the history of an extraordinary journal at the foundation of English language haiku and is deserving of the First Place Award for prose.

Honorable Mention – Prose

Geoffrey Wilkinson. Going to the Pine: Four Essays on Bashō.

Franksbridge, UK: Geoffrey M. Wilkinson, 2019.

In three of the essays here, Geoffrey Wilkinson examines the history and possibilities of Bashō's much discussed haiku:

*The old pond —
a frog jumps in,
the sound of water*

First, he asks and answers the question of whether Basho and Keats would have had differing perspectives if they had been traveling companions. Then gives us the background for, and a few parodies of, Bashō's frog. Following this, there is a fascinating description of his mind at work translating Basho's cicada haiku in which he argues with himself and other translators until he comes to an understanding for himself:

*A cicada's shrilling
pierces the rock —
unbroken silence*

In his final essay, Wilkinson brings D.T. Suzuki and John Donne to the table before he concludes that "the old pond" haiku is possibly the truest creation story we have. Whether or not the reader agrees, it is exhilarating to imagine the frog, Wilkinson and even oneself at the edge of a pond, about to leap, then leaping and being surprised by "the sound of water."

Best Anthology: First Place Award

A New Resonance 11, Edited by Jim Kacian and Julie Warther, Red Moon Press, 2019

The longstanding *New Resonance* series has been an exceptional addition to the haiku literature in its representation and promotion of new voices in the genre, and this collection from 2019 is no less exceptional and inspiring than those from

previous years. New voices are always refreshing to read for their different takes in style and subject matter, and the poets represented span a wide range, inviting interesting comparisons and revealing diverse approaches. On the more experimental side are Aversano's one-line haiku and Teki's poems on loss and becoming that pull us into presence and absence with sparse images. Alongside them are more personal narrators such as Tia Haynes, whose poignant poems on motherhood are deeply felt and treat subject matter less often found in haiku. She describes being a mother with humor and seriousness, recognizing the sacrifices and psychological toll as well as the cherished intimate moments with her children. In truth, every poet in this anthology is worthy of special mention and the high quality of this annual series on emerging voices is testament to the continuing vibrancy of the haiku genre.

Best Anthology: Honorable Mention

Ferry Crossing, Edited by Patricia J. Machmiller, Haiku Poets of Northern California, 2019

This anthology celebrates the 30th Anniversary of the Haiku Poets of Northern California (HPNC), an organization instrumental in promoting and fostering a wider community of haiku writers and readers. Four highly regarded haiku poets offer us each (12) haiku in this lovely gathering of verses. There is sparkling spring color as well as the wordless silence of felt loss in Terry Ann Carter's work, while Gary Gay offers us reflections on childhood and a moving sense of longing for what isn't and wasn't through images of fairy bells, dragonflies, frogs and chameleons. Jessica Malone Lathan poignantly explores the highs and lows of romantic relationships and motherhood; several of her haiku convey a genuine joyfulness and light-heartedness which is remarkable in not feeling at all sentimental or superficial. And lastly, Paul Miller's deeply-felt haiku on hard realities, the "black ice" of living, and the necessity of "stringing barbed wire" as the wind would—without cutting ourselves---speak to the need for clear vision and consciousness of mortality in a life worth living. This book is an occasion for celebration, with an impressive showing from four established names in the genre.