



“serqet” by r'r'r © 2009

The Scorpion Prize of Issue IX:3

After studying this collection of some 80 or so haiku, I've come to the conclusion that it is, more likely than not, the judge who needs judging.

There is much here I am unqualified to read, no less deliberate over. We are deep in the land of modern English language haiku (or ku), advanced division. Reading through I was often confused, frequently bemused.

So, what manner of judge is this, one might rightly ask?

Well, let's put it on the table: if I have a bias (and I'm an editor, so what's

with the "if"), it is toward what is known in English language Haikuville as the one-breath poem: screw the syllable counting, the poem is the length of one breath - in, out, pause.

Period (or not).

The groaning in the distance is, no doubt, audible over large land masses, as well as sizable bodies of water.

Still, much of the work here leans to serious brevity, so at least there is that. Again on the bias side, I also have a huge weak spot for poems of the moment, though the union is by no means monogamous. From another tack, the Zen-like approach of direct pointing has its appeal; the seasons be damned, along with the Eastern adherents of the ego-less poem.

Well, maybe not so much damned as summarily ignored for the purpose of this prize.

Senryu and senryu-like poems abound here, so that's a big plus.

That about covers the basics. Judging the judge being, for all intent purposes, concluded, those who are wise enough to rise and leave the room are now encouraged to do so. No one? I take it, then, it's time to earn my pay.

There is some fine work here by Wilson, Stanford, Sweeney, Buckingham, Willis Lyles, Stevenson, Kalinowski, paul m., Ramsey, lanternfish, Gordon, Pfleuger, and Metz. Other work here is very good also, some that, in another month, another mood, another life, might grab hard and hold.

Let's home in a little further: from 13 poems to 9. Hmn. Some of this work positively dazzles: Wilson, Stanford, Sweeney, Buckingham, Wills Lyles, paul m., Ramsey, Pfleuger, and Metz.

Ok, further still, to 5: Buckingham, Willis Lyles, paul m., Pfleuger, and Metz. Now it is the judge who begs for mercy: "Don't make me choose." Yet, there is that payday, eh? I've been told not to choose the purveyors of *Roadrunner*,

so I'll take it down to 3 by eliminating 2, saying only that Scott Metz's "from an old dream" traveled quite a distance, in so many ways, and Paul Pfleuger may have taken it all. Very solid, folks.

It's the final three, now. Let's see them.

blood room counting the tiles

Helen Buckingham

**returning body bags
my DNA
in a mosquito**

paul m.

blossoms I don't want to change your voice

Peggy Willis Lyles

For just a moment, let's look at these 3 poems and think again about that judge. There is one thing that all 3 of these ku do and that is they resonate like hell. You can see how very far away we are here from counting syllables and seasonal fixations (though there are a couple of possible seasonal words) and ego-less

poetry. All three have a perceivable poetic persona. One poem gives us a situation we've all experienced, ostensibly a doctor's exam room. Two have a distinctly ominous quality. All actually have a hint of nature, but only one is engaged with nature per se, and that tangentially. Two are what a friend of mine who is a master at this sort of thing would call monostich: one line poems.

We readers and writers might learn a lot from these three poems. None of the 3 has any punctuation yet all clearly express where the pause or turn in the poem is. Reading them aloud one should have no trouble with clear presentation.

Now, one at a time. Helen Buckingham has perfectly captured, in a mere 5 words, a universal moment in "blood room" and has managed to layer on top a possible troubling parallel text. And that is the beauty of this little gem for, you see, the reader completes the poem. And *that* is one of the original intentions of traditional Japanese haiku; by removing the ego and presenting a dispassionate nature poem the reader brings her/his engagement with existence to the piece. If you have never experienced waiting for potentially fatal news in a waiting room, this poem does not have the troubling potential. Yet still, there is something else; if you are waiting for a nurse practitioner or some routine results or a late G.P., you might just be bored out of your gourd and start counting tiles to pass the time. In the troubling scenario, that same counting might function as a type of mediation. Suddenly, we see the universal element in these carefully chosen 5 words.

Less, you see, really is more.

In paul m., we experience with his short 3 line, 8 word poem the weight of an entire war or, perhaps, the weight of all modern wars. That is a lot for a poem to bear. There is more than a hint of the ominous here yet, again, there is something else. Immortality, the genetic predisposition of DNA, man as a creature of war. Again, a touch of nature. What is it that might be passed on in DNA via a mosquito? So, a bit of horror/sci fi, perhaps, too, but that might be a bit of a

stretch.

Finally we come to Peggy Willis Lyles's monostich, "blossoms" Again, an 8 word poem, this time reduced from three lines to one. The natural break comes after the first word, "blossoms." There is an "I" speaker in the poem, there is a "you" ("your") character. Now we are down to 6 words. Of the six, two are nouns: "blossoms" and "voice." The action, or non-action, of the speaker is a desire not "to change" the voice. Whose voice? Another character or that of the blossoms? Might the "blossoms" be the character whose voice is being referred to?

There is mystery here and there is a hint of magic. We are outside the realm of everyday experience, as with Paul M.'s poem, and we are deep into poetic experience of the possible or improbable. What might happen if the voice does change? Will the relationship between "you" and "I" change, by implication for the worst? If a blossom's voice changes, is it still a blossom? Is it still alive?

I am torn between these 3 poems. Buckingham's is the tightest, the most concise, and it resonates. Paul M.'s feels important, in many more ways than a 3 line poem perhaps even should.

But, ultimately, Willis Lyles's is the most lyrical and it resonates every bit as much as the other two. For me, the lyricism and the mystery are the tiebreakers, and so the Scorpion Prize for October 2009 goes to Peggy Willis Lyles for her beautiful poem, "blossoms."

Did I forget to mention that the judge also has a lyrical bias?

Don Wentworth, Editor, *Lilliput Review*