

To Contest or Not to Contest

by Bob Lucky

I'm feeling inadequate this morning, a little down. The birds are singing but no haiku springs to mind. I suppose I could write a tanka instead of this message to you, but it's too late. The pull of verbosity has won and I'm going with the flow, even if it's down the drain.

I've spent the last week reading all the haiku and tanka journals and publications that piled up over the summer in my absence, as well as online publications that I can't manage to get to when I'm travelling. I have to say, we short-form poets are an accomplished lot. If the brief bios are any indication, most of us have won more prizes and contests than Idi Amin had medals. Not all of us. I haven't.

Before you turn the page, let me assure you this is not a self-pity piece. I have no illusions as to my abilities as a poet. One reason I haven't won many prizes or contests is that most of what I write is merely okay. It shows an understanding of the craft but the need for practice. (And many of the pieces I send out thinking are near masterpieces look pretty meagre in print surrounded by much better work.)

I also haven't won a lot of contests because I rarely participate. There are several reasons for this, a lack of contests not being one of them. First of all, there is the impracticality of the process for me. When I began seriously attempting to publish my short-form poetry a couple of years ago, I at last had a reason to love the internet. I was living abroad, in Bahrain, and going to the post office and dealing with IRCs and weighing this then that and licking envelope flaps and stamps and thinking of that scene in Seinfeld in which George's fiancée dies from sealing wedding invitations got to be too much. When I moved to Thailand, I vowed only to submit to journals that accepted online submissions. I've been faithful to that vow, which is why, well, at least partially why, none of my work has appeared in a couple of reputable publications or crossed the desk of a contest judge in a postmarked envelope with the stamps peeling off at the corners.

Then there's the question of money. I don't begrudge anyone a reading fee, it's just that sending money, cash (stupid, I know) or check, from China, where I live now, is a bit like playing a slot machine. One is always warned that he sends cash at his own risk. In China, it is a guaranteed loss, or a donation to a needy postal worker if you try to look on the bright side. I can't find my check book most of the time, and 25% of the time the check I send never arrives. Most expatriate Brits and Aussies I know don't even have check books, unless they are of a certain age. They've gone electronic, plastic. Which deepens the mystery of why Australian and British publications view PayPal with suspicion and fear. If I can use it, anyone can.

And another thing . . . What's with the 3x5 note cards? I haven't seen a note card since I

went through my late grandmother's recipe collection. I exaggerate, but only slightly. Just because you have a horse doesn't mean you have to ride it to school. Having said all that, I'll confess to having entered a few contests, all of which accepted online submissions and required no reading or entry fee. In one, my haiku was commended. Yes, it felt good, but then all those other contests beckoned, and the next thing I knew I wasn't writing poetry, I was manufacturing themed pieces about frogs or trees or erotic moments (or if I was really inspired I might capture that moment in nature when frogs get it on in the trees). The feeling I now have toward contests is similar to my love-hate relationship to taking photographs. If you give yourself over to finding that perfect shot, you miss all the wonderful imperfection around you.