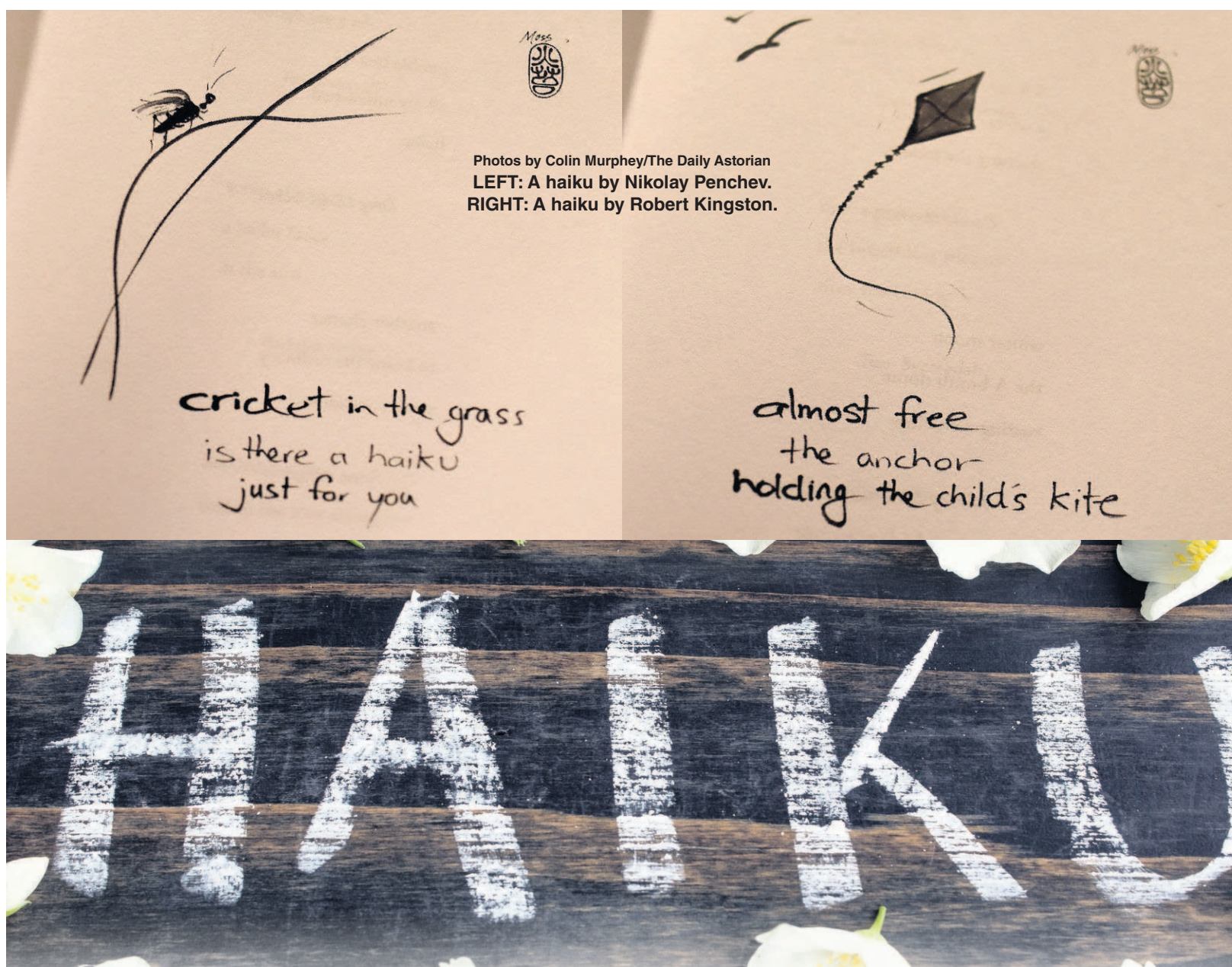


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Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian
 LEFT: A haiku by Nikolay Penchev.
 RIGHT: A haiku by Robert Kingston.

FACTS POETIC

Take haiku beyond grade-school myths

By **PATTY HARDIN**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

When we learn about haiku in school, our introduction is usually to the 5-7-5 formula: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, five in the third.

But haiku written this way focuses mostly on counting syllables and obscures more important aspects of the haiku tradition.

An example of a standard haiku (one of my earliest attempts), as taught in the U.S., looks like this:

*she waits by the sea
 her eyes clouded with sadness
 remembering him*

But Michael Dylan Welch, founder of National Haiku Writing Month (NaHai-WriMo), says this “5-7-5” approach is not ideal.

“The 5-7-5 syllable pattern we were all taught in school is really an urban myth,” Welch said in an email, “and it is actually a violation of the Japanese form, rather than a preservation of it.”

“In Japanese they count sounds that are not quite the same as English syllables. The word *haiku* itself counts as two syllables in English, but three sounds in Japanese,” he continued. “So if you write a haiku of 17 syllables, you’re actually writing a poem that’s significantly longer and with more content than haiku in Japanese.”

More important factors than merely counting syllables, he said, are to use a *kigo*, or seasonal reference, and the equivalent of a *kireji*, or cutting word, a technique of dividing the poem into two parts. A two-part structure creates a question (“What does one part have to do with the other?”) for the reader to figure out “and hopefully get a feeling from,” Welch said.

Here’s a poem by Welch that won grand prize in the Bashō 360th Anniversary Contest sponsored in 2004 by *Mie Times* in Japan:

*first star—
 a seashell held
 to my baby’s ear*

“Haiku are meant to convey feeling, and do so through suggestion rather than judgment, often leaving something out so that it may be implied,” he said. “They should create a feeling rather than naming it.”

Welch has been writing haiku since the mid-1970s. For the first 12 years, he said, “I wrote haiku very badly without knowing it, all of them 5-7-5 and all with titles. Haiku don’t have titles.”

Then he read Cor van den Heuvel’s “The Haiku Anthology,” where the vast bulk of the



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Haiku collections.

HAIKU FACTS

- Haiku don’t have titles
- Haiku don’t rhyme
- The plural of “haiku” is “haiku”

poems are not 5-7-5, and he began to understand why, he said.

“As a result, I shifted my focus away from a misunderstood form and instead concentrated on content. It made all the difference.”

‘Don’t count syllables’

Jim Rodriguez, a poet and flautist from Southwest Washington, first discovered haiku in the fifth grade.

“I had great difficulty getting over the not-rhyming part,” Rodriguez said. “I wrote 5-7-5 for years. The form stuck with me and I constantly came back to it during different stages in my life.”

In his 30s, he began to write more and kept practicing on his own, still in 5-7-5.

Then he, too, discovered van den Heuvel’s anthology and was amazed at the different ways to write haiku, he said. “It no longer had to be 5-7-5 and it could be about anything.”

Rodriguez later connected with members of Haiku Northwest in Seattle. Ten years ago Rodriguez attended his first Seabeck Haiku Getaway and has been hooked ever since.

Here’s a poem he wrote that was published by the World Haiku Association, a organization based in Japan:

*with my glasses
 I have found
 my father’s hands*

The poem’s backstory: When Rodriguez was in his 40s, he was taking knots out of a fine necklace for one of his granddaughters. He had to put on his reading glasses, “and I saw the lines and creases in my hands that I used to see all my life in my dad’s hands. It made me aware of my own mortality.”

“We don’t see ourselves growing older and I suddenly saw myself growing older,” he said. “It was also an important step in my coming to terms with my relationship with my dad and accepting that he was a part of me.”

Kathabela Wilson — a haiku poet and jewelry artist from Pasadena, Calif., whom I met on my first Seabeck retreat — has been writing for about 20 years.

When people ask how they can begin writing haiku, she tells them to have an open mind, a “blank slate.”

“Take a usual walk home or through a garden, or down one block. Note in your mind, phone, notepad, or book, ten different details you notice. Then put the detail in two sentences,” she said in an email. “Add a setting, favorite place or memory in one or two short words on a third line. Don’t count syllables, just keep it shorter than you expect.”

There are countless books about haiku. For fledglings, Welch recommends William J. Higginson’s “The Haiku Handbook,” and the third addition of Cor van den Heuvel’s anthology. He also suggests reading the best how-to books and subscribing to a few haiku journals.

With careful reading and practice, you, too, can take haiku beyond grade-school myths.