



The Results of EFSLE Haiku Contest 2020 (Judge's Remark)

When Rishikesh Kumar Singh, Founder and President-cum-Director of the Ecosophical Foundation for the Study of Literature and Environment (EFSLE) asked me to judge the EFSLE Haiku Contest for India and the nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), I was, to be frank with you, clean bowled on the one hand and sceptical on the other – haiku is not that well-known in SAARC Nations and to have a contest with huge prize money attached was, I felt, a bit too ambitious!

Plus, Rishikesh said they would have themes such as Urbanization, Indian Species in Danger of Extinction, Ethnic Minorities in India, Globalisation and Digitalisation and Population Growth – I wanted to say, hey, hold on! As haikai poets we know that specific topics like these rarely occur in haiku!

I was pleasantly surprised to see 65 submissions in my mailbox. The judging was blind and I gave the poems several readings ... some spoke to me immediately and others opened out slowly after repeated readings. On the whole it was most rewarding. I was pleased to know that my worst fears were proved wrong. The 1st and the 3rd prizes went to poems on the theme of Indian Species in Danger of Extinction and the 2nd prize went to one on the theme of Ethnic Minorities in India.

The prize winners are:

**powdered pangolin scales
the smell
of a dead warrior**

To be honest I had to Google pangolin scales, but once I was armed with all this knowledge, each line and each word seemed to talk volumes.

Let's take the first line:

powdered pangolin scales

Pangolin scales, like rhino horn, have no proven medicinal value, yet they are used in traditional Chinese medicine to help with ailments ranging from lactation difficulties to arthritis to cancer. The scales are dried and powdered and then made into pills.

Though pangolins are protected by an international ban on their trade, they suffer from illegal poaching and trafficking. The figures are staggering.

Now we come to the winning Ls 2 & 3:

**the smell
of a dead warrior**

Though many think of pangolins as reptiles, they are actually mammals. They are the only mammals wholly covered in scales, which they use to protect themselves from predators in the wild. If under threat, a pangolin immediately curls into a tight ball and uses its sharp-scaled tails to defend itself.

While well-equipped to defend against natural predators, they are easily caught by [poachers](#), who simply pick up the animals when they roll into a ball.

I was reminded of this beautiful poem:

D. H. Lawrence.
Mountain Lion

So, she will never leap up that way again,
with the yellow flash of a mountain lion's long shoot!
And her bright striped frost-face will never watch any more,
out of the shadow of the cave in the blood-orange rock,
Above the trees of the Lobo dark valley-mouth!

And I think in this empty world there was room for me and a mountain lion.
And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might spare a million or two humans
And never miss them.
Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain
lion!

And so the 1st prize goes to this powerful and most poignant haiku.

**powdered pangolin scales
the smell
of a dead warrior**

Each word is measured and nothing is misplaced or redundant. My deepest regards to the haijin who gave voice to the urgent need to protect this endangered species.

The 2nd prize goes to:

**kodava bride—
the scent of rain in sun-filled
coffee blossoms**

A Kodava bride is from Coorg, a district in the state of Karnataka in South India.

What surprises visitors coming from outside into Coorg is the absence of the Brahmin priests and rituals that solemnize a typical Hindu wedding. Instead, prayers are offered to ancestors before a sacred lamp and the wedding ceremony is guided by elders whose blessings are sought. It is these simple but meaningful acts that make a Coorg wedding unique.

Next two lines come as a surprise:

**the scent of rain in sun-filled
coffee blossoms**

Coorg is coffee country that looks beautiful during spring. The coffee trees at this place have lovely white blossoms all over, filling the coffee estates with their lovely aroma, jasmine-like, soothing to the senses.

Isn't it time to have our own Coffee Blossom Festival like the Cherry Blossom Festival?

The 3rd prize goes to:

**world wildlife day
the sheen of snakeskin
in a window display**

Coats, bags and footwear from 100% handmade genuine exotic cobra snakeskin is what it's all about. Why do we assume that the animal world is there only to serve us – the human race? When are we going to wake up from this deep slumber? Will Covid-19 be a turning point to make us believe in this maxim – live and let live?

I chose 21 ku in total, out of 65 entries. I'm told that these will go into a three-dimensional eBook.

Each and every participant is a winner for they must have spent time mulling over these themes – each one more challenging than the other. My heartfelt congratulations to all the participants. It was tough to choose just three but I enjoyed reading all your poems. Thank you.

Kala Ramesh
Chennai, India