

in memoriam

JOHNNY BARANSKI: A POET OF CONVICTION

Michael Dylan Welch

One of North America's longtime haiku stalwarts has died. After a struggle with lung disease, Johnny Baranski passed away at the age of 69 on January 24, 2018 in Vancouver, Washington, surrounded by his children—and surrounded, through online messages and email, by a worldwide family of haiku poets and other friends. Johnny's family read many messages of love and support to him before he died.

On the back of *White Rose, Red Rose*, his December 2017 haiku book with David H. Rosen, we learn that "Johnny Baranski has been writing haiku and its related forms for over forty years. He is the author of several chapbooks, including *Pencil Flowers: Jail Haiku* [1983]; *Convicts Shoot the Breeze* [2001]; *Just a Stone's Throw* [2006]; and *Blossoming Pear* [2013]. His newest collection *Fireweed* will appear in the *Folded Word* chapbook series in 2019. A member of the Haiku Society of America, Haiku Canada, and the Portland Haiku Group, Mr. Baranski lives in Vancouver, Washington." What we do not learn, but see hints of, is that Johnny spent time in prison after his arrests for nonviolent resistance to war and the Trident nuclear weapon system. As a result of repeated protest actions over many years, he spent two to three years of his life in prison. He was also active with the Catholic Worker community, for which he fought for farm worker rights, social justice, and other issues affecting marginalized communities. He was a man of firm conscience, yet his resolve was quiet, as shown in his many poems about prison life and poems of social consciousness. No one can write prison-related haiku without standing in Johnny Baranski's long shadow.

Johnny also published *Poems from Prison* in 1979, *Silent*

Silos: A CounterBOMB Haiku Sequence in 1985, *Fish Pond Moon* in 1986, *Hitch Haiku* in 1987, and *Beads of Glass: A Rosary Haiku Sequence* in 2016. For the Seabeck Haiku Getaway, which he attended regularly, he also produced energetic and thoughtful trifolds of recent haiku to share with others. He received the 2001 Virgil Hutton Memorial Haiku Chapbook award, and numerous awards in the Haiku Invitational contest sponsored by the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival. He cojudged the Haiku Society of America's Henderson haiku contest in 2013, and edited the Haiku Foundation's "Per Diem" feature on the theme of war and peace for August 2014. Johnny's poems appeared in Jim Kacian's 2013 Norton anthology, *Haiku In English: The First Hundred Years*, in Dimitar Anakiev's 2013 *Kamesan's World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence and Human Rights Violation*, in the 2014 Haiku Northwest 25th anniversary anthology *No Longer Strangers*, and in many dozens of journals and websites around the world. Johnny also posted on Twitter as @haikumonk, and contributed regularly to various haiku-related Facebook pages. Here are three poems from *Jumble Box*, a 2017 anthology of poems by National Haiku Writing Month (NaHaiWriMo) contributors:

the food bank
shelves picked clean
snow moon

winter moon
the A-bomb dome
casting a shadow

our time together
short but sweet
prison yard snow

When Johnny died, hundreds of condolences appeared on social media. Writing on Facebook, Tom Clausen said "Johnny had a sage sense for the ages to go with an eternal child quality of wit and wonder that will live on in everyone who knew and loved

him,” adding that he was “Much beloved in the haiku community and well known for his political activism, his devoted faith, his love of his family and friends, the sports teams he followed [the Chicago Cubs baseball team, the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team, and Notre Dame—he was born in Chicago] and his interest and ability to identify classic cars no matter what condition they were in [Johnny drove a Mustang, and before that, a Camaro, and sometimes referred to himself as an old jalopy]. Although I never met Johnny he was someone I always admired and viewed as a kindred friend. Johnny leaves anyone who knew him with wonderful good memories and gratitude for the gift of his indelible being him.”

Here’s a selection of other Facebook comments in response to Johnny’s passing: Peggy Hale Bilbro wrote, “I felt as though I knew Johnny’s warmth and sensitivity through his poetry.” Cameron Mount said, “Everything I know about him and his history as a poet and political activist convinces me the world has lost a good man. He’d been writing haiku longer than I’ve been alive, but that didn’t stop him from encouraging new haiku poets.” Mary Davilla said, “I never met him personally, but was always encouraged by his faith which he showed in his poetry.” Gabriel Bates wrote, “The world has lost a one-of-a-kind poet and human being. You’ve left your mark.” Jerry Dreesen wrote, “I always enjoyed his poetry and his take on the world.” Susan Burch said, “Loved all his prison and old jalopy ku. He is a great writer who will be missed!” Kris Lindbeck said, “His poetry has touched me. His intelligence, faith, humor and toughness shone through in his haiku.” Beverly Acuff Momoi wrote, “I have been moved by his haiku for many years. He was a very special person and will be missed.” Jessica Malone Latham said, “What a spark of light that illuminated our world.” David John Terelinck said, “How rich we all are for having known and loved his work.” Brendan McNassar said, “I’ve been lucky enough to know Johnny my entire life. He was a formative force to me as a child and aspiring poet/lyricist. I keep a copy of his book *Pencil Flowers* with my treasured belongings. His art, his coolness and his smile will be missed.” Margaret Chula said, “I feel blessed to have known this

gentle, quietly humorous, and highly ethical man.” Yvonne Cabalona said, “I always enjoyed Johnny’s poems. I looked forward to them each day on Facebook.” Claire Everett wrote, “Such respect for Johnny and huge admiration for his poetry and the life he lived.” Michael Henry Lee said, “A great poet and champion of peace.” Randy Brooks said, “A wonderful haiku poet and man! We will miss his good humor. It has been such a joy reading his haiku over the years.” Alexis Rotella said, “We will all miss Johnny Baranski... a moment of silence heard round the world.” Rebecca Drouilhet said, “A wonderful humanitarian, poet and haiku friend. He will be sorely missed.” Michele L. Harvey said, “Johnny was a fine poet with a kind, generous heart.” Barry George said, “God bless you, Johnny. Thank you for your kindness, your courage, the spark in your eyes, your sense of humor.” Sandi Pray wrote, “I honor you, I learned from you, I laughed with you, I cried with you and now... I miss you.”

The following are six of Johnny’s poems, one each from *Frogpond* (36:2), *The Heron’s Nest* (13:4), the 2013 HSA members’ anthology, and the 2011 Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, and two from *Blossoming Pear*:

dragonfly
 where have you flown off to
 first frost

in ten summers
 the convict’s first visit
 dragonfly

a walk-off home run
 up and over
 the prison wall

for a moment
 the war be damned
 cherry blossoms

prison lights out
 drifting off to distant places
 a train whistle

long before I came
 long after I leave
 blossoming pear

The back cover of Johnny's last book, *White Rose, Red Rose*, says that "While the world is under threat from so many dangers... the language of flowers will prevail." This belief was central to Johnny's life, part of the thread that guided him. In his last few days, Johnny wore a mask to assist his breathing and could not speak. Before deciding to remove the mask, two days before he died, he motioned to his children for a pencil and paper and started writing. It was his last haiku, his *jisei*, or death poem. It is a poem filled with hope, the language of flowers, his last gift of haiku sharing:

one last breath
 before dying—
 plum blossom

Thornton Wilder once wrote that "The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude." The haiku community offers its deepest gratitude to Johnny and his family for his life and for his haiku. When others died, he was always quick to post the following message on Facebook as an expression of his faith: "Eternal rest, grant unto him O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him." Now it is Johnny's turn to receive this blessing. May the perpetual light shine upon Johnny Baranski.