

Haiku Poet Interviews: Kat Lehmann

Questions Provided by Jacob D. Salzer

Country of Residence: USA

Website: <https://katlehmann.weebly.com>

Current Occupation: Associate Research Scientist and Clinical Trial Regulatory Specialist, Yale University

Past Occupations:

1. Regulatory Analyst, Yale University Human Research Protection Program
2. Lab Technologist, Harvard Medical School
3. Benthic Macroinvertebrate Sorter at an environmental impact station that monitored nuclear power plants
4. Salad Bar Tender at Burger King (when they had a salad bar!)
5. YMCA Day Camp Counselor

Education:

1. BA in Molecular Biology (Hampshire College)
2. Ph.D. in Biochemistry (University of Utah School of Medicine)
3. Post-doctoral fellowship in Biochemistry (The Scripps Research Institute)

Interests and Hobbies: momming, wheelthrowing pottery, hiking, gardening, lake-ing

Haiku Volunteer Positions and Affiliations:

1. Panelist for The Haiku Foundation Touchstone Distinguished Book Award (2021-2023)
2. Co-judge of the 2022 Haiku Society of America Harold G. Henderson Haiku Award (2022)

3. Co-founder of the Trailblazer Contest and a former panelist, (2021, 2023)

Journal Publications: Over 600 of Kat Lehmann's poems have been published by literary journals, international contests, and anthologies in the last decade. (In recent years, she has endeavored to write slower and produce fewer poems, favoring quality over quantity.)

Journal Co-Editorships:

1. Co-Founder and Co-Editor, *Whiptail: Journal of the Single-Line Poem* (2021-present)
2. Associate Editor, *Sonic Boom*, issues 22, 23, 24 (haikai forms, haibun and flash, visual poetry, general poetry) (2022-2023)
3. Guest Co-Editor, *Blōo Outlier Journal*, issue 2 (outlier haibun) (2021)

Book Publications:

1. *no matter how it ends a bluebird's song* (Winner of the 2024 *Rattle* Chapbook Prize; TBR 2025)
2. *Helium Moon* (Origami Poems Project, 2021)
3. *Stumbling Toward Happiness: Haibun and Hybrid Poems* (29 Trees Press, 2019)
4. *Small Stones from the River: Meditations and Micropoems* (29 Trees Press, 2017)
5. *Moon Full of Moons: Poetry of Transformation* (29 Trees Press, 2015)

Selected Awards and Honorable Mentions:

1. Winner of the 2024 *Rattle* Chapbook Prize for the haiku collection *no matter how it ends a bluebird's song*
2. Received the Museum of Haiku Literature Award from *Frogpond* 46:2 Spring/Summer 2023 (awarded in *Frogpond* 46:3 Autumn 2023)
3. Touchstone Individual Poem Award 2020 (The Haiku Foundation)

4. Nominated for Best Small Fictions for haibun (*Modern Haiku*, 2023)
5. Nominated for the Pushcart Prize for a multi-haiku form she created (sudo-ku; *Rattle*, 2023)
6. Nominated for the Pushcart Prize for Poetry (*Sonic Boom*, 2021)
7. Nominated for the Best of the New for haibun (*Human/Kind Journal*, 2019)
8. Winner (one of thirty) Basho-an International English Haiku Competition (2020, 2023)
9. Second Place, Haiku Society of America, Harold G. Henderson Haiku Award (2020)
10. Merit Award out of 33,940 entries, ITO En Oi Ocha Shinhaiku (2020)
11. Semifinalist, 2019 Sable Books Women's Haiku Competition for *Sketching My Mother's Shadow: A Memoir in Haiku* (unpublished)
12. Third Place, Connecticut Poetry Award (2016)

Selected Anthologies (contributor):

1. *A New Resonance: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku*
2. *The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku*
3. *Haiku 200x*
4. *Contemporary Haibun*
5. Cornell University Mann Library poet of the month (May 2021)
6. *Dwarf Stars Anthology*

Anthologies (co-editor):

Sea Change: An Anthology of Single-Line Poems (Whiptail Press & Red Moon Press, 2024) (co-edited with Robin Smith; foreword by Jim Kacian)

When and how were you introduced to haiku and Japanese-related poetry?

I was an avid reader of poetry 20 years before I learned about Japanese short form poetry on Twitter/X. At the time, I was writing micropoetry and enjoyed the challenge of precision in word choice ‘back in the day’ when tweets were limited to 140 characters. I loved exploring the depth possible in that limited space. I didn’t have a mentor and (until fairly recently) rarely shared my poems with anyone pre-publication. I just read and analyzed how and why poems work. Sometimes a kind editor would provide feedback. My first haiku (in retrospect, its own kind of birth place!) was published in *Hedgerow* issue 11 in 2014:

my birth place
a distant memory—
fireflies

What do you enjoy the most about haiku?

Through poetry, we can express what cannot otherwise be expressed. I enjoy the awareness and centering that comes with conveying a big experience in a tiny poem. The number of words is finite but the meanings can be infinite, so the space between words is included to help create meaning. The tools available to us can turn haiku into tiny powerhouses that are bigger on the inside than the outside.

I like that I can write haiku in my mind while I’m doing other things. A haiku can become a series of words that I repeat in my mind until it clicks into place. This was particularly helpful when I had young kids. I would sometimes walk around with a satchel containing a notebook or WIP to take advantage of an odd minute for writing. A haiku can be a companion in which we ruminate on a poem then need only a moment to jot it down.

What do you enjoy the most about senryu?

I don't make a strict distinction between haiku and senryu in my work. I consider that I, like everything else, am a part of nature and nature's dynamic balance. So, it feels fundamentally false for me to consider my human activity and foibles as something that is separate from nature. When I think about healing, nature reminds me of the interconnectedness of a brutal winter and the first buds of spring. Even when nature is not explicitly stated, it is present the way a leaf is in the river and the river in a leaf. You cannot truly separate the leaf and the river. So, my haiku are often about me or inspired by an empathetic blurring of boundaries. I am the one with wings. My ocean is pinned. I am the melancholy forest. This feels accurate to me.

What do you enjoy the most about tanka?

I like tanka that creates an unexpected song. I wrote tanka in my early days of writing Japanese short form poetry. Tanka and haiku felt like two different rhythms in my mind, and it was hard to switch between them and feel satisfied with the results. These days, sometimes I realize a one-line haiku is actually a one-line tanka, or at least blurs the distinction between them.

What do you enjoy the most about haibun?

As a new mom, I started what was intended to be a "mommy blog" (when these were popular). The blog quickly became my artistic outlet during naptime as the entries evolved into creative nonfiction works. At some point while exploring haiku, I stumbled onto haibun. It felt tailor-made for the way I like to write, the perfect marriage of CNF and haiku! Haibun continues to feel extremely satisfying and empowering to write. We can write about our traumas and truths to create something that is both cathartic and (hopefully) beautiful.

What do you enjoy the most about single-line haiku and single-line poetry?

Single-line haiku feels aligned to the way I think and process the world. My thoughts aren't broken into three lines. They're slippery and can be joined and unjoined in multiple ways. However, I do not pre-determine the structure of my poems. I try to listen to what a poem wants to be in its heart of hearts and let structure arise organically from that. This is also how I sometimes end up with what I call "beautiful monsters."

You have an impressive educational background in molecular biology and biochemistry. What inspired you to pursue your career as a scientist? How does molecular biology and biochemistry influence and inform your lifestyle, your haiku and other forms of poetry, and your writing in general?

Great questions! Growing up in the shadow of my mother's severe mental illness, I recall wondering whether the things I sometimes heard were true. Was the explanation logical or just an opinion? Through early scientific-like inquiry, I would try to determine the answers for myself, or at least set the question aside until I was older.

I had endless questions about how things worked in the natural world. In college, I started as a botany major, but that didn't answer my "why" questions. I continued to delve more deeply in scale and detail until I was immersed in the world of molecules floating around and binding to one another. Oh! THAT is why. I felt I finally understood something. As anyone who has done scientific research knows, it's a huge rush to be the only person in the world to know something new, even for a moment.

Although I no longer do bench research, this perspective of seeing the grandiose within the details, and the balance of the cosmos within each speck, is something I carry with me and is present in

my writing. A poem can sometimes answer the question of itself, and this can be a way of creating a kind of inner knowledge. Even the tiniest poem holds the universe within it. Each moment holds my life within it.

You are the co-founder and co-editor of *Whiptail: Journal of the Single-line Poem* with Robin Smith. What was the inspiration to start this journal with Robin Smith? What do you enjoy the most about co-editing this journal?

Robin and I had clicked previously while working together on the "outlier haibun" issue of Alan Summers' *Bloō Outlier Journal*. At the time Robin and I started *Whiptail*, I was ill and largely bedridden. It gave me such hope to think that I could co-found and co-edit a new journal given my physical state, and I will always be grateful to Robin for trusting me with that.

Before *Whiptail*, the publishing space for single-line haiku (i.e., monoku) was limited and fairly scattered. Some of the poems we were seeing felt like tercets placed on one line rather than poems that benefited from a single-line structure. There was no central repository or destination where one could consistently read a collection of carefully curated, quality poems in this sub-genre and find a compilation of resources about how to write them. We wanted to showcase the absolute best poems like an art gallery, reinvigorate community interest, and provide craft essays and analysis of single-line haiku. We added "*Whiptail* Challenges" that, we later realized, resulted in the only collection of one-line tanka in English. Each step forward shows a larger landscape of what remains to be explored.

Our initial idea that *Whiptail* would have a blog format quickly changed when we opened the doors and submissions poured in. We changed our tactic to create submission windows and discrete issues. We remain grateful for the trust and enthusiasm that our fellow poets have as they join us on this journey to explore the single-line poem. It's been amazing for us to watch even new

poets increase in skill and confidence, and we continue to learn with them about the nuances of what is possible in haiku that lack enjambment. We receive messages from poets who thank us for the encouragement and providing a safe place for these explorations. It's been joyful to watch the energy in this sub-genre increase in recent years, and we're thrilled and humbled to be a part of that. This year we reached the milestone of our first anthology, *Sea Change*, which we believe is the first anthology of single-line haiku, or poems, in English.

You served as an associate editor for *Sonic Boom*, issues 22, 23, 24 (haikai forms, haibun and flash, visual poetry, general poetry) in 2022-2023. What did you enjoy the most about this experience?

Shloka Shankar, EIC of *Sonic Boom*, was wonderful to work with as she is a highly experienced editor whose journal attracts a broad submission base. I learned a great deal by working with both Shloka and Robin Smith (who was another associate editor at the time) to curate a broad range of works from both inside and outside the haiku community. At *Sonic Boom*, I gratefully had the opportunity to help edit multiple genres, including general poetry, flash, sequences, and visual poetry, in addition to Japanese short forms and hybrids.

You served as the guest co-editor for the *Blōō Outlier Journal*, issue 2 (haibun), 2021, which is a journal started by Alan Summers. What are the main qualities that you look for when reading haibun?

Working with Alan was an amazing experience as he is enthusiastic about helping poets explore their visions. When reading haibun, I like the feeling of authenticity and a sense that the author is digging deeper into their material, even if it's fictional or surreal.

In the molecular world, structure is related to function. A couple years ago, I was kindly invited by Rich Youmans to write a piece on two favorite haibun for *Contemporary Haibun Online*; the piece describes my ideas of structure as the fourth element of haibun.

The structure determines the placement of resonances between the other three elements and therefore creates delicious spaces in which meaning can reside.

You also have experience judging haiku contests. What are the main qualities that you look for in haiku when judging a haiku contest? Do you sometimes get overwhelmed by the amount of contest submissions? How do you manage the psychological stress of judging contests?

I keep my eyes open for a haiku that does something "award-worthy" and different, whether that is in form, content, technique or depth. So, a parallel task with judging is trying to stay current on what has been done. What work is pushing boundaries, either internally or externally? Maybe a haiku is deeply honest and puts together a few simple words to describe an experience in a transcendent, profound or elegant way. It's not about what I like personally and more about maintaining openness to the art of others.

I don't find it stressful or overwhelming to judge contests. Co-judging the Henderson HSA Contest with Matthew Paul was fun, and we had a great time discussing our selections. In my years on the Touchstone Book Panel, I read a few hundred haiku genre books. I would create my own longlist and then return to read them again to be sure I didn't miss anything. The worst part of all that reading was eyestrain if I didn't pace myself. But I found it fun and educational to consider the standards of excellence in various sub-genres.

You served as the co-editor of *Sea Change: An Anthology of Single-Line Poems* (Whiptail Press & Red Moon Press, 2024) co-edited with Robin Smith. What did you enjoy the most about co-editing this anthology? What were some of the challenges?

Working with Robin is always fun as we have a way of getting into each other's minds, and I continue to grow from collaborating with such a deep reader of poetry. We are grateful to Jim Kacian for his encouragement and super-cool foreword, written as one long line!

The atypical square format was a challenge during book design and setup, but this was important to Robin and me. A square book suggests that these poems are not, by default, horizontal but could run in any format, direction, or shape. We also wanted the poems to be read without names and have the names mingling together rather than spreading them throughout the book. Poets from every level of experience are included, so it's a way to not let the "fourth line" (or "second line," in this case!) influence how one considers a poem. The collection has the feeling of a meditative stream.

At *Whiptail*, we include a step in which names are stripped from poems so that we know we are selecting the absolute best works, no matter who wrote them. This creates an extra step of work for us, but the enormously positive response to this "poetry first" presentation confirmed for us that this was the right decision for the anthology as well.

I think the intersection between poetry and mental health is important for us to recognize as poets, editors, and writers. On your website, you mention that you started writing poetry due to mental illness in a family member. This also led to writing a book: *Sketching My Mother's Shadow: A Memoir in Haiku* (Semifinalist, 2019 Sable Books Women's Haiku Competition). How has poetry and memoir writing helped you persevere and cope with significant life challenges?

That manuscript placed but was never published. Writing about one's own traumatic experiences, particularly when stigma is involved, may be the most difficult kind of writing, but it can also be exceedingly rewarding. You willingly enter the darkness and come out the other side. It didn't take all of you. You survived.

Poetry is absolutely therapy for me. It's a method of self-discovery and processing trauma, beauty, and everything between. As an only child of an only child, I often had to remember my stories alone. Poetry has given me a way to process the events of my life and make

art from them. After a poem or a book is published, I don't have to remember it anymore. If I want to revisit an experience, I know where to find it. I think of the small stone:

wrap your sadness with a bow
and put it on the shelf
you can take it back
if you ever need it

You are also the author of *Small Stones from the River: Meditations and Micropoems* (2017). What was the inspiration to write this book?

The works for my first three books arose at a time when I was truly, deeply accepting my mother's severe mental illness and the repercussions of that, such as knowing she would never recover. The process of healing was a rebirth for me. Radical acceptance. Radical forgiveness. Simple abundance. Healing while an ongoing loss is still happening. I decided to share these meditative notes along the path in case they might help someone else, even if it was just one person. This is why I've given away so many copies of *Small Stones from the River* to strangers around the world through my Ripples of Kindness project. I have faith that the book will find the right person. And I believe it does.

Other than the cover art, I did all of the work on *Small Stones from the River* myself. I'm proud of that. The book was selected multiple times by Amazon as a free offer to their Kindle Unlimited members and was a bestseller many times. No one was more amazed by this than me.

Who are some of your favorite poets?

I'll mention poets outside of the haiku community lest I forget someone! E. E. Cummings, Sharon Olds, Diane Seuss, Ocean Vuong, Lucille Clifton, Anne Sexton, and Emily Dickinson.

What haiku/poetry books are you currently reading and/or have you read recently?

My focus recently has been poetry and older haiku books. I'm currently reading Diane Seuss' *Modern Poetry* and Kay Ryan's collected works. In haiku, I've recently re-read books by Chuck Brickley, Cherie Hunter Day, Chris Gordon, and Eve Luckring.

What writing projects do you have in mind for the future?

I've written a great deal inspired by the loss of my mother to mental illness. My first three books were mostly "writing around" the story, so I haven't really told the story itself. It's something I've been working on, either directly or indirectly, for as long as I can remember. I've been working to finally say it. In addition to this, I always seem to have a half-dozen collections in various stages of completion at any point in time, so it's a matter of what feels ready to push forth out of the nest next.

Please share some of your haiku previously published in *Frogpond*:

doing her best motherless rain raises the daisies

Frogpond 47:1, 2024

diameter pi the lake solves for moon

Frogpond 45:3, 2022

curve of her ribs
twelve crescent moons
rise with each breath

Frogpond 44.2, 2021

***Kat Lehmann** is a founding co-chief editor of Whiptail: Journal of the Single-Line Poem. She served as a panelist for The Haiku Foundation Touchstone Distinguished Books Award and is a winner of The Haiku Foundation's 2020 Touchstone Award for Individual Poem. Kat holds a doctorate in biochemistry, and her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net. Kat's Rattle Chapbook Prize winning collection no matter how it ends a bluebird's song will be released in Spring 2025. She lives in Connecticut with her family on the edge of a fairy forest filled with mountain laurel, pillow moss, and tall trees growing around boulders.*