

Five Favorites: John Brandi

by Michael Dylan Welch

John Brandi's collection of new and selected haiku, *At It Again*, was published in 2015 by Tooth of Time Books. It presents 177 of Brandi's best poems from a decades-long exploration of the haiku art. He says in a short author's note that he sees these poems as twists or snippets, sometimes "private revelry" and "zaps of uninhibited delight, quiet revelations of the mysterious in the everyday." Perhaps more importantly, what he says he's presenting, and I would say seeking, is "a loosely-stitched record of daily life, or perhaps better said: 'the life within a life.'" Here are five favourite haiku, showing the life within a life, from John Brandi's *At It Again*.

Snow-covered tracks
the knock
I never answered

We can bring our own setting to this poem, especially if we've lived in a place where it snows, at the door of our own home. I picture the small town where the author lives, El Rito, New Mexico, which sits at an elevation of just below 7,000 feet. Whoever came to the poet's door left tracks in the snow, and now they've been covered again, suggesting passages of time and perhaps the author's preference for solitude. And yet we feel a wistful sense of wonder with this poem. Who had visited, and what might they have possibly wanted? The answer is only snow, a bit more of which has begun to cover those lonely tracks.

Tree of diamonds
all it took
was the night rain

The first line immediately arrests us with its impossibility, or perhaps overstatement. Yatsuka Ishihara, in his keynote address

at the 1995 Haiku Chicago conference, advocated for haiku that tell the truth as if it were false, through deliberate and sometimes surreal overstatement, and that approach to haiku seems evident here. In this poem the first line represents the wonder of initial perception—wow, diamonds! How can a tree be filled with diamonds? The answer is rain, all those leftover droplets from the night before now sparkling in what I take to be morning sunlight. The past tense of “took” is important for this poem, making it clear that the rain happened earlier, in contrast to the now of perceiving diamonds.

Family reunion
no idea
who I'm hugging

We veer into delightful humor here. If you have a large extended family, it's easy for it to have corners you've never explored. But you'd surely hug them all. The person being hugged is no doubt having the same moment of bafflement. This is a lighter, more amusing poem, a small moment of self-awareness, but it speaks to the deeper reality of being human, of accepting those around us, especially if they're family. One hopes that further conversation will clarify the relationship here—not just for the poet but also for the person being hugged.

New neighbor
so far only his
bald head

Whether one lives in a small town, such as El Rito, or in a larger city suburb, one might be separated by a fence from a neighbor. In this poem Brandi is aware he has a new neighbor, and the height of the fence keeps him from seeing the neighbor—except for the top of his head. The neighbor is tall enough for that bald head to be seen, but nothing more. What makes this poem succeed is the omission of any mention of a fence, yet that is

surely why the poet can see only the neighbor's distinctive head, the partial image of which might be slightly funny for being bald. Also key is the choice to say "so far," suggesting that they will meet later and get to know each other, an affirmation of friendliness.

Staring, staring
at the sea—
the un-tethered pony

Such lovely sounds, and the repetition of "staring" adds a quality of pensive wistfulness. The key detail in this melancholy poem, though, is the fact that the pony is not tethered. It's free, at least within its field, but it's tethered in another way, as I take the poem. It may have no concept of what the sea is, and yet it seems fascinated, as are most of us. The sea remains distant and unknown, whether placid or churning. And perhaps we can see ourselves as being like that pony, not tethered and yet chained in other ways, whether by fear or doubt. And yet, still, we remain endlessly fascinated by the incomprehensible.

I could have chosen many other poems from *At It Again* to describe as favorites, but I hope my limit of five will entice you to seek out more poems from this book, and to look for more of John Brandi's other haiku books too. He's still at it, with many other haiku books that have come out since this one.

Michael Dylan Welch has been investigating haiku since 1976. He is a director for the Haiku North America conference, founder and president of the Tanka Society of America, cofounder of the American Haiku Archives, and founder/director of the Seabeck Haiku Getaway and National Haiku Writing Month. His haiku, essays, and reviews have appeared in hundreds of journals and anthologies in at least 22 languages. Michael lives in Sammamish, Washington, and currently coedits First Frost. His website is: www.graceguts.com.