

OPINION

Haiku this, cherry blossom lovers

Celebrate with a poem: Instead of grumbling, compose an ode to springtime, you might win a prize



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As much as I relish getting emails liberally sprinkled with exclamation marks and uppercase warnings that VANCOUVER IS BEING DESTROYED, I thought that rather than writing about the real estate market again, it might be a nice change if we paused, took a deep breath and marked the beginning this week of the 10th annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, and with it, its attendant Haiku Invitational contest.

It might do us some good, if just for a moment, to stop fomenting about Chinese billionaires buying up Vancouver, and taking the time to look at a cherry tree so that we might write a poem about it — that is, while we still can, before the billionaires buy up all the cherry trees in the city and use the wood to panel the dashboards of their Bugattis.

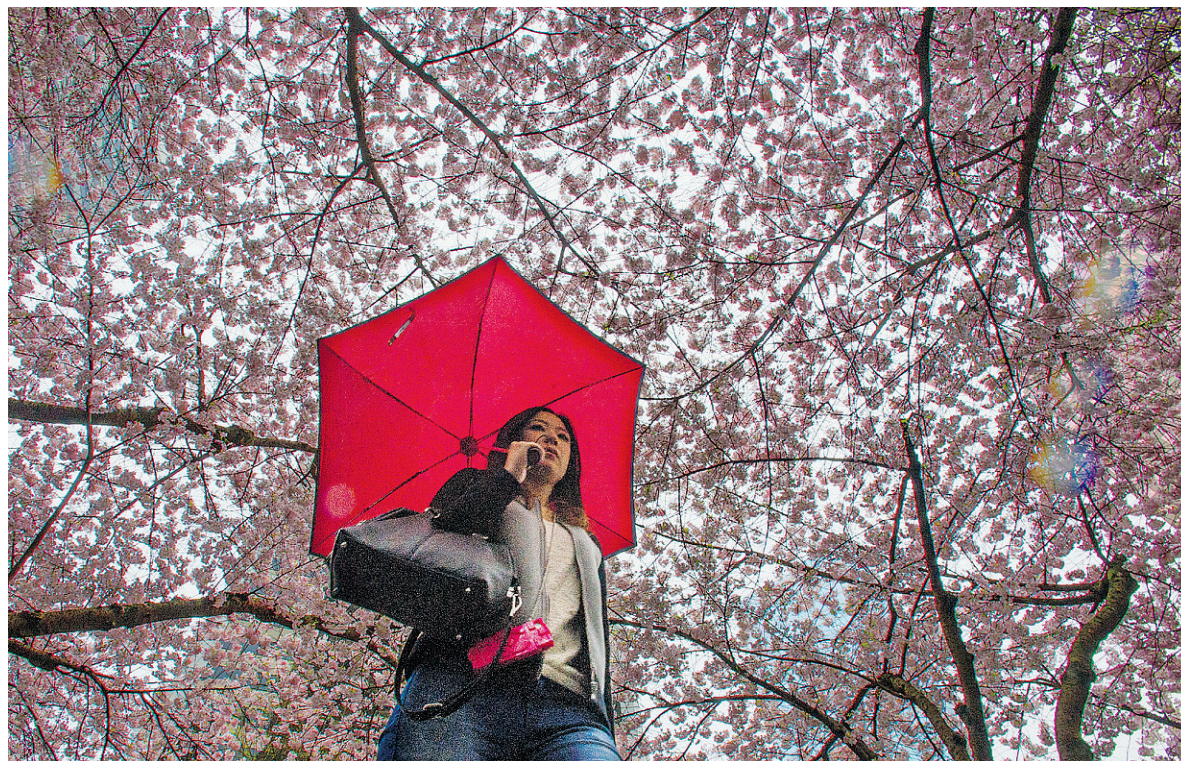
Are we all clear on what a haiku is? It's the little poem form your elementary school teacher had you try your hand at, with the teacher insisting the haiku contain exactly 17 syllables, with the first line five syllables long, the second seven syllables long and the third five again. But as the folks who run the Haiku Invitational point out, that needn't be the case in the contest.

"In Japan," states their press release, "the haiku is traditionally written in a single vertical line with sound symbols arranged in a 5-7-5 rhythm, but Japanese words tend to be longer than their English counterparts, so literal translations end up as English poems with fewer than 17 syllables. While some haiku poets writing in English do follow the 5-7-5 pattern with wonderful results, most view the haiku as a poem in three lines of 17 or fewer syllables."

Because of its brevity, a good haiku uses concrete images to imply emotion or experience without stating them. Here's one I like from a past contest winner:

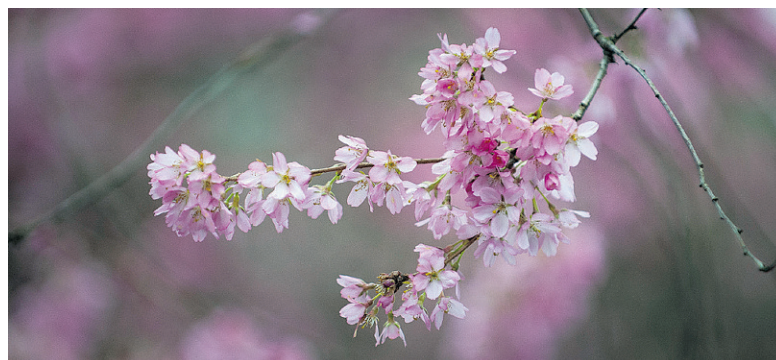
*late for school
cherry blossoms in the way
i can't get through*

It was written by Pearl Bird, 11, of Winnipeg, who won the Haiku Invitational's Best Youth category in 2009. In three lines and 14 syllables you see the little girl running to school and, awestruck by the blossoms, stops in her tracks against her will, a case



PHOTOS: ARLEN REDEKOP/PNG FILES

Cherry blossoms are in full bloom in Vancouver. Why not write a haiku about it?



of obligation undone by beauty. You can't teach that in school.

Back in the festival's inaugural year, the organizers even asked premier Gordon Campbell to write a haiku. He obliged. He wrote:

*Feel the blossom's breath
White petals fall at my feet
Life each day is new*

(Interestingly, the festival organizers never considered asking Premier Christy Clark to submit a poem. Perhaps they figured she would triple-delete it.)

The contest averages around a thousand entries a year, and from far-flung places — Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., Britain, Ireland, Brazil, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia (the Slavic countries are a haiku hotbed for some reason) and all across Canada. Some

have come from Japan, but not as many as one would think. It may be that their poems lose something in translation, or perhaps they feel this is a case of cultural appropriation.

The contest runs to April 30, with winners announced in six categories: Best Vancouver, Best B.C., Best Canada, Best U.S., Best International and Best Youth. The winning poems will be published in the Vancouver Courier, a Leaf Press hand-bound volume, the Haiku Society of America's Ripples newsletter, the Haiku Canada Newsletter, the Bulletin Magazine, Ricepaper online magazine and the festival's website. The winning poems will also be read by the Bard on the Beach's Christopher Gaze at the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra Tea & Trumpets Concert. Participants can enter at vcbf.ca

I don't want to dissuade anyone from entering, but in the interest of transparency, I am compelled to declare that I will be entering this year's contest, and as a journalist who makes a living at writing, I think it only right that I let amateurs know what they're up against. They might consider some of my efforts before entering. Such as:

*Wet cherry blossoms
The sidewalk a slick pink carpet
I smell lawsuit*

Or this one:

*Boulevard trees bloom
The street, a tunnel of pink
My tax dollars at work*

Or:

*Blossom petals fall
My lawn confettied in pink
Sing, leafblower, sing!*

And finally:

*Blossoms bring thoughts
Of love and longing to poets
Bad metaphors bloom*

Don't say you weren't warned.

The 10th Annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival is March 24 to April 17. pmcmartin@postmedia.com