archival haiku
The haiku are ©2009 by their respective authors.

Cover translation: “The brush in my Grandchild’s hand leaps as he/she writes.”
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Now we have arrived at the "light" portion of "Archives After Hours: The Light, Literary, and Lascivious Side of Archives." I would hardly call haiku "light verse," however. A Japanese poetry format, haiku is centuries old. It was discovered by the Western world in the mid-nineteenth century, and ever since we’ve been trying to squeeze our large, ungainly words into this spare and graceful form. Japanese haiku are often about nature or the seasons. They are written to capture a feeling and image, rather than to tell a story. Their proscribed form is simple: five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables.

I will admit that my own favorite example of this form of poetry is from the recently popular set of cat haiku:

You must scratch me there!  
Yes, above my tail! Behold,  
elevator butt.

And if you wonder if this is a perversion of the Japanese concept, I can tell you that there is even a Japanese term for silly haiku: senryu.

American poets from Marianne Moore and Carl Sandburg to Allen Ginsberg, Richard Wright, and Jack Kerouac have written or been influenced by the structure and elegance of haiku. But, luckily for all of you, there isn’t time today for a full history and analysis of the haiku form, nor for a literature review of all things haiku. I will simply share a few observations about our archival haiku contest (held in summer 2009), and then get on to the main agenda: reading some of the wonderful poems submitted for this competition.

When Arlene Schmuland, Danna Bell-Russel, and Frank Boles first asked me to join their merry band for this session, I was certainly game. I wrote back:

Archivy in verse  
Can I rise to the challenge?  
Dude . . . Of course I can!

We put out calls for entries on the Archives and Archivists list, and Teresa Brinati, Director of Publishing for the Society of American Archivists, was kind enough to run calls for submissions in Archival Outlook—as well as joining us a distinguished judge.

The entries came from as far away as the United Kingdom. In all, we received 65 poems and were delighted at their quality and variety. Interestingly, very few were humorous; most took on the task of translating the archival mission, or the experience of arranging, describing, or providing access to archival materials into verse. We are such a serious lot!

So, without further ado, enjoy the archival haiku!
first place

Speaking to the dead
Through a paper veil requires
A necromancer.

Terry Baxter

second place

I describe your life
Everything you thought you’d wiped
I show to the world

Ian McCulloch

third place

Endowment way down
Budget cuts everywhere. Here,
A silverfish sighs.

Kathy McCardwell
honorable mention

“What Archivists Do All Day”

Read dead people’s mail,
Snoop through their diaries, and
Help you do the same.

Elizabeth Engel

anticipation

“How long,” I wonder,
as I put on these white gloves,
“can I make it last?”

Chris McDonald
more haiku!

Micro-spatula:  
The staple element of  
A diet breakfast.

Chris Abraham

Archives saves the world  
From mem’ry’s oblivion  
For tomorrow’s child

Linda Barnickel

Impatient patrons  
Can’t wait, need it yesterday  
Smile breathe deep, don’t scream

Nicole Feeney
flooded dirty box
reboxed and trucked to freezer
now dry, clean and safe

dusty boxes here
papers full of bugs and things
quick, get the brushes

Pamela R. Cornell

Folders in boxes
Neatly aligned side by side
Fill the stacks five high.

Susan Hamburger
Introductions

“You’re an archivist . . . ?
Oh yeah, I know what those are—
National Treasure!”

Rules

“No coats, pencils only,
You may not take papers home—
Donations welcomed.”

Tim Gladson

“Digitize!” they cry.
“Too expensive!” you reply.
Who will win the fight?

Veronica Marshall
Deadline tomorrow
Primary source required
Poor frantic student.

Snake in a jar
First edition of Darwin
Archives exhibit.

Kathy McCardwell

content standard
arrange and describe
in seventeen syllables
what this is about

Chris McDonald
Papers donated
Processed and accessible
They are here somewhere
Karen Osburn

nostalgia
opening the box,
a whiff of camphor sends me . . .
there’s nothing like it.
Chris McDonald

Organized Chaos.
We guard Past for Future’s sake.
Our sleeves, tinged with dust.
Brittany Parris
The Manuscript

Laid bare before you
Springs flower bud, bursts open
Friend and foe are found

Karen Lea Anderson Peterson

Write, edit, type, scan
Papers, folders, labels, box
Index, greet and show

Erin Santana, Nicole Shuey, and Michael Zaidman

Am I Archivist?
Records Keeper, Anarchist?
Id is confusing.

Mary Schleifer
Records management—
the dreary side of archives—
who can escape it?

PRODUCT! LESS PROCESS!!
Isn’t it the processing
that makes life so good?

Anna M. Stadick
So I wonder why
The previous archivist
Used pen on folders

And I wonder why
The previous archivist
Wrote on the front not the tab

Susan Woodland

Illuminating the Past: An Archiving Haiku

Yellowed leaves lit by
fireflies’ glow; preserve our past
in linear feet.

Anna Kalina and Michael Boyd
Boxes from donors  
Awaiting my careful eye  
Truly, do we want?

Fragile paperwork  
Take care while processing it  
Irreplaceable

I open boxes  
Filled with valuable papers  
Researchers delight

Piece by piece I sort  
Remnants of this person’s life  
With care and concern

Remains of one’s life  
Unbelievable treasure  
Joy for the scholar

Sometimes boring work  
Sorting through bits and pieces  
What thrill awaits me?

Little old lady with bun  
Archivist stereotype  
Not this wild woman

Kathie Johnson
Online finding aid
Helps researchers greatly but
they want all online

This is what I do
I can’t help myself at all
Academic voyeur

Same question daily
What does an archivist do?
Preserve history

Your life is nothing
Without your own history
We keep your story

Secrets that I learn
Would make many donors blush
Should I blackmail them?

This is my life’s work
Preserving for the future
Remnants of the past

Kathie Johnson
Sneezing at my desk
These papers smell like cigars
I need more tissue

This fiddle music
Must be preserved forever
I prefer disco

Laura R. Jolley

See Best Practices,
History in the making,
In Austin, Texas.

Hi-re, Acquire,
next, sorting through the mire,
all done, Retire.

Maria Jolley
A jumble of junk
But to us, a collection
Worth all the work.

Collections online
Show the world papers we’ve got.
Throw away your gloves.

Preserved for future,
Used to write a book or two,
Meet history here.

Reach out and tell them
How interesting this stuff is;
Maybe they’ll come see.

Data and records
Folders, Boxes, series, fonds
Nested knowingly.

Lisa Holzenthal Lewis
archival haiku