

2013 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Poetry Category

Second Place: “*Ghost Ships,*” by Lizzeigh Enos

Tiny ships upon the water
Their lights flickering upon the waves
Ferrying their precious passengers
Back to the afterlife...
I stand upon the shore
Looking out over the darkening sea
At all those carefully constructed crafts
With a heavy heart.

I'd hung the lit chochin
Outside my door
And visited your graves
In the hopes you would return...

Without a glimpse
Or whispered word
For three days, it's now time
To send you back to the world of spirits.

I set my toro nagashi upon the water
Each one elegantly scripted with a name
My heart hopes for one last sign
That you were here...

I cannot help the tears that fall
As I watch my paper vessels

Sail across the waves to a place I cannot reach.
I feel as if I'm losing you all over again...

I watch each lantern carefully
As an ethereal mist creeps across the waves;
Ghostly ships soon to be lost
As they pass the threshold to the afterlife...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Cultural Note: this poem is based on the Japanese Obon festival that lasts 3 days in celebration of the sacrifices and love of the dead. On the first day family members hang chochin lanterns and visit the graves of loved ones to invite the spirits to return to the mortal world. On the last day, they set paper lanterns called Toro Nagashi on the water to show the spirits the way back to the spirit world.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Ghost Ships centers around the speaker's participation in a Japanese festival that celebrates the deceased. This poem teaches the reader about a unique cultural tradition through beautiful images of floating lanterns: "Tiny ships upon the water/Their lights flickering upon the waves." Not only does this poem depict a particular tradition, the emotional weight of the ritual on the speaker is felt: "As I watch my paper vessels/Sail across the waves to a place I cannot reach."

Elissa Cahn was the contest judge. She is an MFA Fiction student at Western Michigan University, where she teaches composition and serves as the nonfiction editor for Third Coast. Her work has appeared in: NANO Fiction, Midwestern Gothic, Harpur Palate, and Quarterly West. She is currently at work on a story collection.