



I left my picture on the ground when you walked  
 so that someday if the sun was just right  
 & the rain didn't wash me away  
 you might come out of the corner of your eye & pick me up

**Can an SMS ever compete  
 with a Shakespearean  
 sonnet? Helen Russell  
 discovers the joy of text**

Featuring: CP Surendran. Finland. Philip Larkin.  
 Victor Keegan. Viral Messaging.

T Mobile

# HANDSETS AND HAIKUS

**T**xtin iz messin,  
mi headn'me englis,  
try2rite essays, they all come out txtis.  
gran not plsed w/letters shes getn,  
swears i wrote better b4 comin2uni. &she's african

This poem won the first ever SMS poetry competition and sparked off a movement that is now a global phenomenon. The poem's author, Hetty Hughes, was a 22-year-old student, stuck for inspiration mid-essay when she looked at a picture of her gran. A hip-hop fan, she set down the words in minutes by approaching it like a rap lyric.

The competition was the brainchild of poetry fan and Guardian technology columnist Vic Keegan, who wanted a way to combine his passions. He collaborated with poet Andrew Wilson, who was already experimenting with texts. "There was this small, intimate form of written communication with a formal restriction – just 160 characters – and I thought, 'that's just like writing a poem,'" says Wilson. So in 2000, he wrote one while waiting for a bus and sent it as a text to a couple of friends. He wrote *FILM*:

*I'd seen before, so I watched it, turning in my seat  
through you: your face, caught, edged in silver,  
a smile, opening your profile.*

Keegan convinced *The Guardian* that the idea had legs, and by 2001 the competition was up and running. "The calibre of entries was amazing," says Keegan. "Many entrants had two or three degrees from Oxbridge but also there were people who'd never written anything before." They had 7,500 entries in total. The competition was repeated in 2002 and was won by Emma Passmore, a 34-year-old working in TV, with:

*I left my pictur on th ground wher u walk,  
so that someday if th sun was jst right  
& th rain didnt wash me awa  
u might c me out of th corner of yr i & pic me up*

The experience opened up new career avenues for Passmore: she began writing screenplays and teaching classes in text poetry. "I know it seems ridiculous," she says, "but it's a great way to make poetry accessible to teenage boys and other groups of people who'd never normally give it a go."

The literary world began to agree. The world's first SMS poetry magazine, *One Sixty* ([www.textually.org](http://www.textually.org)), launched at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature in 2004, to encourage members of the public to pick up their handsets and have a go. In the same year, an SMS CityPoems project was set up in Leeds and Antwerp, Belgium. But Western consumers are a fickle lot and no sooner had the idea caught on, than we were off playing with

some new toy or other, twizzling around iPhones or stomping on Wii mats. Then mobile phone technology arrived in India. And they loved it.

As a nation that loves to keep in touch, texting became an instant phenomenon and Mumbai's Kala Ghoda Festival launched its own SMS poetry competition in 2005. "Indians love their phones and they love texting," says poet Manisha Lakhe, who helps to organise the SMS contest. "The contest was huge, all over the newspapers and radio." Peter Griffin won with:

*cellular creature now part of my DNA gladden my  
heart: beep.*

"The competition has just got bigger ever since," says Lakhe. "I was a purist, but when new ways of communication show up, who are we stop them? There's one SMS poem that's been around for a while – often people aren't quite sure where these viral messages start – it's called 'Love' and it just reads: Thou, WOW!"

Not everyone is keen. CP Surendran, one of India's foremost poets, is vociferous in his opposition. "Every semi-literate flatters himself that he can write a poem which is now made even simpler with spelling mistakes and the thoughtless grammar that a mobile sanctifies," he says. "Anyone who can work his thumb faster than his mind can send a text, and now every cell user is a poet."

Bombay-based poet Sampurna Chattarji was a staunch classicist until she tried writing her own SMS poem. "I had to drop my prejudices when I realised just how demanding it could be. The format of writing a poem within 160 characters was as rigorous as having to write a 17-syllable haiku."

And there's the rub: short, constrained poems are nothing new. Japanese haikus have been around since the 17th century; perhaps SMS poetry should be seen as a new sub-genre. British poet UA Fanthorpe believes that "poetry has always enjoyed fiddling with the shape and number of words and syllables: haiku, cinquain, englyn and so on. The text poem has become an established form. It's invigorating."

Poet Peter Sansom is also a convert and says that SMS poems can be radical. "Having to scroll down the screen makes the reading experience entirely linear, giving real suspense to each line break." It also gives extra force to punch lines.

The brevity of an SMS doesn't allow for much formal patterning and it's not easy to include more than a couple of images. This forces creativity and, as Hetty Hughes' 2001 poem demonstrates, people form their own vocabularies and ways of expressing themselves — with as much regard to grammar, semantics and form as they chose.

So what next? There are still possibilities to be explored when it comes to SMS poetry. *TXtUal*

([www.txtualhealing.com](http://www.txtualhealing.com)) was set up in 2006 by Paul Notzold as a series of interactive performances using text messages, poems and quotes. Participants' texts are automatically projected inside speech bubbles onto the facade of buildings. This encourages the public sharing of thoughts, experiences and ideas.

In south-west London, Emma Passmore is campaigning for text poetry to be displayed on bus shelters and other public spaces. "I love the idea of it seeping into everyday life. Like getting poems sent to your handset via Bluetooth as you enter a certain area – it could really be uplifting. Just imagine you are having a rubbish day and suddenly something funny or moving finds its way to you. It would cheer me right up."

SMS poetry could even help would-be artists in the developing world, says Keegan. "All over, you see mobiles in favelas and townships — it's an accessible way for people to get into poetry."

It looks like the text poem is here to stay, but will the establishment ever take the form seriously? Keegan thinks they'll have to. "Poetry is all about condensing thoughts and adapting to form."

Keegan himself is semi-retired and pushing 69 but doesn't accept that age is a barrier to embracing new technology – he even runs his own art gallery on Second Life ([slurl.com/secondlife/Taedong/107/165/136/](http://slurl.com/secondlife/Taedong/107/165/136/)) and continues to promote SMS poetry. And his favourite text poem? A pun on Larkin that he was sent anonymously years ago: "They phone you up, your mum and dad." ●

W—Helen Russell I—Nadia Flower

#### THE SMS NOVEL

In 2000, the Japanese entrepreneur Yoshi wrote *Deep Love*, a story in installments that could be downloaded from his website to mobile phones. The story is about a 17-year-old girl, Ayu, who finds love through a chance encounter. It went on to be published in print, became a million-copy bestseller and is now being made into a movie.

Chinese writer and broadcaster Xuan Huang wrote the screen-by-screen "mobile novel", *Distance*, in 2004. It's about a young couple who get to know each other because of a wrongly sent SMS message. The 15-chapter story is 1,008 Chinese characters, with one chapter sent to the reader each day.

French novelist Phil Marso published a book in 2004 written entirely in SMS shorthand, *Pas Sage a Taba vo SMS*. It's a piece of wordplay intended to discourage young people from smoking.

Finland's Hannu Luntiala wrote *The Last Messages* in 2007, a story told through SMS messages that have been sent by the protagonist, Teemu Jokela, to his lover, mother, friends, son and sister. These are printed on the right side of each page and the replies are printed on the left. "Using only SMS demands more from the reader," says Luntiala. "They have to find out, what is happening outside of the messages. We Fins are very shy, especially males. And it is easier to SMS than talk face to face."