The World at Peace through Haiku

The Haiku International Association held its annual general meeting in Tokyo in November. Sano Kentaro was there.

On November 24, 2012, the 14th General Meeting and Lecture of the Haiku International Association (HIA) was held in Tokyo. Lars Vargö, the Ambassador of Sweden to Japan, delivered a lecture and about 130 people participated; among them were the winners of the Haiku Awards.

Arima Akito, president of the HIA, chairperson for the Ten-i haiku poetry group and one of Japan’s leading haiku poets (Arima is a former president of the University of Tokyo and former Minister of Education), delivered the opening address. “Our mission is for people around the world to discuss the form of writing called haiku, and to promote peace throughout the world,” he said. “We want to make the world peaceful through grassroots exchanges among the world’s lovers of haiku, and through the cooperation of all of you, we want to more widely internationalize haiku.”

About 700 haiku were sent in from Japan and other countries. Sixteen judges selected two prizewinners and ten honorable mention recipients, from which seven final winners were chosen. Winners were named in the Haiku International Association Award (two haiku), the Association of Haiku Poets Award, Gendai Haiku Association Award, Association of Japanese Classical Haiku Award, Nihon Keizai Shimbun Award, and the Japan Times Award, in addition to selection of four haiku in foreign languages.

Hoshino Tsunehiko, vice president of HIA (and professor emeritus at Waseda University), spoke on reviewing the prizewinning haiku, and Kimura Toshio, an HIA board member (and professor at Nihon University) commented on foreign-language haiku.

Arima commented that, “There were many interesting haiku, and many were ambitious and high in quality. There were also haiku that reflect the mindset of foreign people, and these also received prizes.”

Prize-winning Haiku

Here are the award-winning haiku and comments on them.

Haiku International Association Award

蜩の
集まって来る
無言館

Higurashi no
atsumatte kuru
Mugon-kan

Kamisaku Hitoko (Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture)

Mugon-kan in Nagano Prefecture is a museum that collects paintings left by art students who fought and died during World War II. The haiku depicts the sorrowful sound of cicadas resonating around the museum in place of the voiceless war dead.

不器用に
生きて八十路や
花茗荷

Bukiyo ni
ikite yasoji ya
hana myoga

Hasegawa Harue (Kasugai City, Aichi Prefecture)

This haiku associates the detached feeling of the poet with pale yellow myoga (Japanese ginger) flowers.
Gendai Haiku Association Award

昼顔や
破船の舳
沖を指す

Hirugao ya
hasen no hesaki
oki wo sasu

Tsuboi Saisei (Tama City, Tokyo Prefecture)

Hirugao (Japanese bindweed), a seasonal word (in haiku) for summer, is reminiscent of the ocean. This haiku depicts an abandoned ship by the shore that seems to have begun sliding into the sea.

Association of Japanese Classical Haiku Award

風向きを
少し気にして
秋刀魚焼く

Kazamuki wo
sukoshi kinishite
yaku sanma

Ito Setsuko (Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture)

This is a so-called kitchen haiku, at which many women excel, and reflects the feelings of the poet who is concerned about the smoke from the grill when cooking sanma (saury), an autumn specialty, that wafts in the neighborhood. The word sukoshi (a bit) adds to the poem’s effect.

Nihon Keizai Shimbun Award

広重の
絵が動き出す
大夕立

Hiroshige no
e ga ugokidasu
oyudachi

Yoshimura Reiko (Sanda City, Hyogo Prefecture)

This haiku was composed when the poet encountered an evening shower reminiscent of a ukiyo-e woodblock print by the late-Edo period artist Utagawa Hiroshige titled “Great Bridge, Sudden Shower at Atake.”

Japan Times Award

フィヨルドに
グリーグを聞く
白夜かな

Fiyorudo ni
Grieg wo kiku
Byakuya kana

Fujino Naoyuki (Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture)

This haiku was composed while the writer was traveling in Norway and fell into the embrace of the region’s natural phenomena including the short Arctic nights, and listened to the music of Edvard Grieg, a leading Scandinavian composer.

Foreign-language Haiku Award

Two blackbirds
fighting for a breadcrumb—
sparrow is faster

Tugomir Orak (Croatia)

This haiku depicts a situation that can be described as good fishing in troubled waters, and how the poet felt about the comical scene.

Air plane and bird
different speeds
but parallel

Anusha Tennakoom (Japan)

This haiku captures a feeling of mysterious illusion when two completely different moving things were placed next to each other.

unable to shut it out
even when I close my eyes
full moon

Seren Fargo (U.S.)

This haiku depicts an overwhelming and absolute impression of the full moon.

early thaw
paw prints
to oblivion

Scott Mason (U.S.)
The haiku depicts the mysteriousness of beings, as the poet sees footprints of small animals gradually disappear as the snow melts.

**Japanologist Lars Vargö**

Following the comments on award-winning haiku, Lars Vargö, the ambassador of Sweden to Japan, delivered a lecture titled “Poems, Songs, Haiku and Poetry.”

Vargö is a scholar of Japan and also known as a haiku composer. He has edited and published haiku magazines and books in Sweden. He studied Chinese while attending Stockholm University and wanted to study in China, but since the Great Cultural Revolution was underway in China at that time, changed the focus of his studies to Japan. In 1973 he was offered a scholarship from the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), studied the ancient history of Japan at Kyoto University, and earned a doctorate after returning to Sweden with a thesis on seventh-century Japan titled “The Process of Formation of the Ancient Japanese Nation and its Socioeconomic Circumstances.”

In his lecture, Vargö discussed how both Japan and Sweden are located at an edge of a continent, and how people and culture flowed into them. He went on to mention many commonalities between the countries and noted that among the many things brought in from the continent, poetry (poetry) was extremely important and rulers were required to understand and appreciate it in addition to possessing military prowess. Japan, in fact, was strongly influenced by Chinese poetry while Japanese poems were highly appreciated during the Heian period, mainly in the imperial court. Poetry was at the core of the ruling body or government. The fact that as many as twenty-one imperial-commissioned anthologies of poetry were edited mainly during the Heian period is evidence of this point, and the tradition continues to this day as exemplified by Utakai hajime (New Year poetry reading) in which the imperial family composes waka poems with the people and celebrates the New Year. (See “Shinkokinshu: An Anthology for Our Times,” August 2005, The Japan Journal)

Vargö also mentioned another commonality in that both Japan and Sweden enjoyed periods without war, during which nationally renowned poets emerged and laid the foundations of the society of poetry that has lasted to this day. There was no war during Japan’s Edo period (1603–1867), and Matsuo Basho emerged in the process of formation of the Bushido philosophy and spirit to establish the world of seventeen-syllable verses, which has been passed down to the present. In Sweden, peace has been sustained since 1814, and nationally famous poets have emerged in this time who are different from religious poets. Many, Vargö said, have been influenced by haiku poetry. One example is Harry Martinson (1904–1978), who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1974. Martinson studied Chinese poetry and haiku while traveling around the world when he was young, which led to the three-verse haiku that characterize his works. Many outstanding haiku were also found in the diary of Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations and died in a plane accident while performing his duties. A collection of his haiku was published in 1963 under the title Vägmärken (Markings).

Many of Sweden’s short poems are three-versed, reflecting the influence of haiku. There are many haiku lovers in the country, and an increasing number of occasions enable exchanges involving haiku. A symbol of these exchanges is Snow in April, published in 2000. Kaj Falkman, president of the Swedish Haiku Association and special adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and poet Shimizu Tetsuo selected this collection of 100 haiku each from Sweden and Japan. Among them is a haiku by Tomas Tranströmer, winner of 2011 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Below is the famous haiku found in The Sorrow Gondola, his magnum opus.

The power lines stretched across the kingdom of frost north of all music

Finally, Vargö mentioned the two outstanding haiku poets who emerged in Sweden in 2010. The poets use lowercase characters only, without any colons or hyphens. Vargö closed his lecture by stating, “Poets who can be described as true haiku poets have emerged, and they will improve haiku in Sweden.”

Vargö’s lecture, delivered in fluent Japanese, revealed the situations surrounding haiku and other matters in his country and common points with Japan, and exemplified the international exchange through haiku that Arima mentioned. Arima enthusiastically stated, “The Association celebrates its fifteenth anniversary next year. We are considering making an overseas haiku tour composed of our members. And we hope to hold a large-scale meeting next year, inviting haiku poets from Europe, the United States and China.”

The sky was clear over Ichigaya in Tokyo, where the meeting was held, and trees along the outer moat of the Imperial Palace had begun to show their colors.

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