

About the 11th International Kusamakura Haiku Competition

The Kusamakura competition is one of the most prestigious haiku competitions in Japan. It is quite an honor to have won the grand prize, which includes round-trip airfare to Kumamoto and accommodations for 4 days and 3 nights at a local hotel.

The Kusamakura Haiku Competition Web site says:

"In 1996, the Kusamakura Haiku Competition was held in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Natsume Soseki's arrival in Kumamoto. This contest strives to celebrate the novelist and haiku poet Soseki, as well as to bring awareness of 'Kumamoto city charm and Haiku' to the international level and further develop Kumamoto's haiku culture."

The Kusamakura Taishou (Grand Prize) was presented to North Carolina Haiku Society member Thomas Heffernan at ceremonies in the Sangyo Central Hall, Kumamoto, Japan, on November 26, 2006. The judges' comment, in English and Japanese, appears in that day's Award Ceremonies program. Tom's gracious and insightful acceptance speech is included in this document as well, along with a photo of Tom in Japan.

Kusamakura Taishou (Grand Prize)

equinox
kayak paddling
two sides of dusk

Thomas Heffernan (America)

Judges' Comment

Unfolding in symmetry, Earth in space, with sun touching the equatorial center meets a kayaker's alternating paddle, as duality embraces the oneness of twilight. A sense of aloneness in the wild and hint of nature's infinities unfold, entwined with the kayaker's (and poem's) powerful rhythmic beat, the paddling ending in an apparent semantic paradox, as the uncountable noun "dusk" is given "two sides." This innovative move reveals a deeply felt poetic sense, akin to the Japanese aesthetic of *yu-gen* [yuu-gen], pointing toward a new direction for haiku in English, as "mind" enters environmental scene. The poet evokes a cutting edge, hopes linked with fears, the sharpened poise of space-time opens the reader to a haiku cosmos.

Tom's Acceptance Speech

My name is Thomas Heffernan. I am greatly honored to be named recipient of the Grand Prize in the eleventh annual Kusamakura International Haiku Competition. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Competition sponsor, the City of Kumamoto, International Exchange Section; to the Director and members of the Secretariat, the "Kusamakura" International Haiku Competition; and to the Competition judges, Professors Morio Nishikawa and Richard Gilbert of Kumamoto University. I give thanks also to all the Competition participants, and to the haiku writers past and present whose work is an inspiration.

This Competition commemorates achievements of Natsume Soseki, whose novel *Kusa Makura*, or *Grass Pillow*, names in its title a traditional symbol for a journey. Soseki's novel shows a brief springtime journey of an artist whose reflections from time to time take the form of haiku.

Just as Japan is famous for haiku, so is Japan famed for gardens that extend beyond their borders by making use of "borrowed scenery". Some Japanese gardens borrow scenery of visibly distant hills or mountains. Others borrow by constructing copies of invisibly distant scenery. Not far from where Soseki lived in Kumamoto lies the famous Suizenji Garden whose design includes hills in the shapes of Mount Fuji and of places along the Tokaido, hundreds of miles away. I think now of this theme of distance, this theme of bringing near or including what is far away, because I am struck by something I recently read in Soseki's *Kusa Makura*. It is a sentence that I can imagine as a sort of "borrowed scenery" to the haiku that brings me to Kumamoto today:

equinox
kayak paddling
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This haiku seems to me to be in a continuum with the wide-angle of Soseki's haiku-like sentence, where "beneath the heavens" his artist-narrator sees "a limitless expanse of sparkling water on which the only discernible object was a white sail the size of a moth's wing" (Natsume Soseki, *The Three-Cornered World*, trans. Alan Turney. New York: George Putnam's Sons, 1982, p. 165).

Far from Soseki's limitless springtime sea, the scene of the haiku is an autumn lake on the campus of the college where I teach. Yet this lake and Soseki's sea relate in a way that suggests how, today, international haiku reduces, and closes, distance in time and space. Years ago I paddled a kayak in the seas around Okinawa where I first began to seriously make haiku. Now I bring you greetings from haiku writers of North Carolina and from the many other states where my fellow members of the Haiku Society of America live. Visible or invisible, distance is foreshortened by haiku's little worlds. By haiku's miniature worlds, the world opens.



Thomas Heffernan in Natsune Soseki's house, in the Tokonoma Room with a portrait of Soseki in the Tokonoma.