

Radu Şerban

AMBASSADORIAL
HAIKU

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The title of this booklet is not inspired by the author's official title as Ambassador in Tokyo. Rather, by the haiku's ability to be a cultural Ambassador of Japan to the world.

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2014

To my son, Cosmin

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PREFACE

The earliest account of Japanese poetry in a western language was set down by a Portuguese Jesuit in the sixteenth century, and this included some notes on what we now call *haiku*. But it was not until three hundred years later, in the Meiji period, when the country had been forced open to the world that translations of this poetry began to be made. Diplomats were among the first translators, and since then the haiku form itself has been a kind of ambassador for the culture of Japan. Its main vehicle of transmission

has perhaps been English, but the poems themselves are written in many different languages today.

There are flourishing haiku groups on every continent, and in many countries, including Romania. His Excellency Radu Şerban, appointed as the Romanian Ambassador to Japan, follows in a distinguished tradition of poetic engagement through the form of haiku, and may count among his forbears in this role the French poet Paul Claudel, who served in Japan in the 1920s, and the recently retired Swedish Ambassador, Lars Värö, both of whom composed with distinction in their own languages. Indeed the recent departure of Dr Värö, a leading member of the local literary

and haiku community, may in some sense compensated by the new arrival of Mr Şerban.

Adeptly translating into English poems that had been originally composed in Romanian, Mr Şerban brings to his haiku a sense of another world, newly perceived in an unfamiliar setting:

Adorned Christmas tree
the moon in Tokyo Tower –
scent of incense

Onto the unfamiliar he also translates a sense of fundamental unity, to form a bridge between disparate languages and cultures:

Under Nippon Bridge
Brancovenian archway –
bilingual ripple

Sometimes his haiku have a Romantic tinge, which is not unusual among haiku composed in eastern Europe, as people in different places take up the haiku form and employ it in their own way. But he can also convey simply and resonantly the experience of being a visitor in Japan:

Over my white head
first sunrise of the year
Land of Rising Sun.

Thus we see the Ambassador exploring the country, from its northern to its southern reaches, and

encountering its people, history and culture in this collection of his haiku.

Romania, like Japan, has its own special history and culture, just as it also has a number of active poets, in haiku as well as more traditional poetic forms, some of whom write in English to communicate with those in the wider world. After more than a century of international circulation, and with a still growing body of enthusiasts, the haiku still retains its freshness of appeal, as the Ambassador notes on a visit to Matsuyama:

Never an old man
at Matsuyama, Shiki
welcomes the poets

The short-lived Masaoka Shiki, commemorated in a large museum in his hometown on Shikoku, not only reformed the poem for modern times, but gave it its modern name of *haiku*, which still welcomes and invites.

David Burleigh

Professor, Ferris University

Tokyo, June 29, 2014

FOREWORD

In this collection of haiku by Ambassador Radu Serban the poet has chosen to classify the poems according to five themes: 'Japan', 'Nature', 'Feelings', 'Time', and 'Home'. In the first category, the reader will find scenes and locations which reveal various experiences of the poet throughout the country. In Kumamoto and Matsuyama he follows in the footsteps of Natsume Sôseki and Masaoka Shiki. Mount Fuji is described from various angles and the beauty of the mountains around Asahikawa have also found their ways

into the haiku. In Tokyo the moon becomes part of a giant Christmas tree decoration. A butterfly on Mount Takao is accompanied by wandering clouds in Fukushima.

In the second category, 'Nature', the poet goes through the various seasons of Japan. Flowers, snowflakes, a flying peacock as well as immaculate swans help paint a sensitive atmosphere of harmony against the background of a dramatic and powerful nature.

Feelings are not commonly expressed in traditional haiku, but although a special category is dedicated to them, the poet does not exaggerate or exploit the emotions of humans. He keeps the feelings low key and often only hints at

what one can find behind them. He sometime also alludes to earlier centuries of poets and their expressions. 'Dew of tears' in one of the poems immediately brings forward associations to the early Japanese collection Manyôshû.

In 'Time' it is especially the passage of time that is alluded to through various poetic expressions. And in 'Home' the poet puts the light on the warm atmosphere created in homes where the holiday spirit is a time of philosophical reflection.

Many of Ambassador Serban's haiku follow the traditional 5-7-5 syllabic pattern, while in others one can find both *jiamari* and *jitarazu*, 'too many' and

'too few' syllables respectively. This is in line with the best haiku written all over the world today. What is important is poetry itself, not the metric uniform.

Lars Vargö

President of the Tokyo International
Literary Society

June 21, 2014

I. JAPAN

1. Under Nippon bridge
Brancovenian archway –
bilingual ripple.
2. In Kumamoto,
ginkgo leaves falling,
on Mayor`s carpet.
3. Moon clipped to her hair,
my girlfriend, Ginza,
courts the New Year.
4. Looking at flowers
the Castle of Osaka –
Hanami decor.

5. Oval window
framing an icon –
still Fuji.

6. Below us – clouds' nest
nurturing liberty –
climbing Mount Fuji.

7. Among pines and mountains,
Matsuyama touches
the cheeks of the sea.

8. Osaka in April –
pink cherry blossom petals
anchoring in port.

9. Sake under cherry trees,
students filtering the moon
through tiny petals.

10. Gray samurai
fulfilled expectations –
blossomed cherry tree.

11. Never an old man
at Matsuyama, Shiki
welcomes the poets.

12. Ginkgo yellow
ablaze in Kumamoto –
guarding the castle.

13. Silent in the rain

Japanese park weeping –
alone like me.

14. Ravens, chrysanthemums,
towers, ginkgo biloba –
walking through Tokyo.

15. Adorned Christmas tree
the moon in Tokyo Tower –
scent of incense.

16. Near the temple
maple leaves fluttering –
appeal to spirit.

17. Samurai garb,
amber marble –
autumn's armour.

18. Morning sun,
white mountains and sakura –
Asahikawa.

19. Millennial ginkgo tree
paradoxical magnet
for one-day butterflies.

20. Yellow in the sun,
snowing ginkgo leaves –
Christmas in Tokyo.

21. Swallows in a row

New Year at the Palace
tailcoats are bowing.

22. Porthole to the stars

New Year's Eve, moon smiling
at Mount Fuji.

23. New Year in Tokyo

wooden bell swinging –
rejuvenating gong.

24. A hole in stone

contemplating the temple –
Japanese lantern.

25. A new rising sun
unexpected in my life –
Japanese moment.

26. Flock of nightmares
flying over the ruins
at Nagasaki.

27. Japanese spirit:
welcome to the business club –
Maneki Neko!

28. Weeping cherry trees,
long haired geishas bowing
to the April sun.

29. Climbing on Fuji,
rarified pleasures –
purification.

30. Over my white head
first sunrise of the year –
Land of Rising Sun.

31. New Year, ancient sounds
warm, from the fireplace –
voice of shamisen.

32. Downstream from April
looking for blossoms –
flight to Sapporo.

33. Ears pricked up
at the seismic warning –
simple ginkgo leaves.

34. Dreaming of white cranes
far, in the Land of Sunrise
I sleep on the engraving.

35. Cerebral earthquake
defying oblivion –
Hiroshima's sigh.

36. The skies vibrate
under the thunderous drum
at the Meiji Shrine.

37. In the summer eyes
live iris petals –
the blue butterflies.

38. In your eyes I read
the 'forget-me-not' flower.
I fly to Tokyo!

39. The coronation:
circle of chrysanthemum
with sixteen petals.

40. To the Imperial Palace
the silk-decorated carriage
cherry petals dance

41. With cherry flowers
the famous Palace welcomes me:
innocent landscape.
42. Vegetal carvings
with celestial colors:
star-chrysanthemum.
43. Time's chandelier
making it blossom
the cherry tree.
44. Buds becoming leaves –
habits of the Golden Week
beginning of May.

45. Purified and calmly
stands the torii
God-dance.

46. Summer in Tokyo
confronting many earthquakes –
the famous Celestial Tree.

47. Between cold and hot
the Japanese equinox
indulges the poppies.

48. From the bamboo pipe
a dragonfly drinks water
like in kabuki.

49. Lilliputian trees

catch the essence of nature:
symbolic bonsai.

50. A new sunrise

after a Japanese earthquake –
floral miracle.

51. Reaching the floral

perfection: rhododendrons
in a Japanese park.

52. Preaching Fuji

the newly fallen snow's
priestly stole.

53. Garland of white pearls
guarding Mount Fuji –
cherry trees blossom.

54. Fuji is wearing
the heavy bracelet of lakes
dreaming of lava.

55. Purple clouds from Fuji
drawing the rising sun
beach seine.

56. Mount Takao
a black butterfly has sucked
the pollen of the night.

57. Human formicary

hurrying towards nowhere –
Shibuya Square.

58. The minimal night

helps the cherry to rest –
Japanese solstice.

59. Rhythmic tunes

of nostalgia for Japan
cherry petals dancing like snow storm.

60. Gently

a necktie of cherry blossoms
Roppongi Hills.

61. In Fukushima

clouds wandering on ridges:
full temerity.

62. Floral perfection

catching the image of love:
the Japanese rose.

63. Mirrored in the pond

amongst floating petals
tall – Mori Tower.

64. Mixed rules and spirit,

green tea and ceremonies –
binary summer.

65. On the dark night's sky
sweet petals of cherry tree
flow on Milky Way.

66. Wheat's autumn's
rectangular dreams
sleep on tatami mat.

II. NATURE

67. Itinerant snowflake
melted on the tip of tongue
tastes bitter and cold.
68. Petals in the sky
blown up from cherry trees –
the stars of April.
69. In the clouds' bells
the flock of storks' wings ring
the autumn's ding-dong.
70. Snowy camellias
concealing the emotion
under the first snow.

71. Flying leaves and cranes –
a forest's kimono,
mid-autumn fashion.

72. Silently floating
on the sky's ocean,
romantic moon shell.

73. Bow of colours,
on the arch of heaven –
echo of rain.

74. Under black clouds
litany of the forest:
the rustle of leaves.

75. Endless snow fall
in parallel mirrors –
paired snowflakes.

76. The first snowflakes
spread over hills
have stolen the autumn.

77. Sunshine galloping
before my eyes –
train through the forest.

78. Skeletal trees,
in calm hibernation,
seducing the year.

79. Smile of sunshine
stealing the identity
of all snowflakes.

80. Like fire,
white snow passes
from house to house.

81. Orphaned leaves,
weeping in the rain –
whimpering denuded trees.

82. Unhappy raindrops
falling from the seventh heaven –
harvest's sacrifice.

83. Winter pond,
inner harmony
under a frozen face.

84. Immaculate swans –
at a time of harmony
silence sings.

85. Sky made of patches,
clouds welded by lightning –
waterproof mantle.

86. Tempo of the rain
on a keyboard of petals –
singing cherry trees.

87. Unassuming tree
grows just so,
even in empires.

88. Born at the North Pole,
the snowflake's chance to live
spans centuries.

89. The storm is coming.
refugees in the forest,
the mountains resist.

90. Peaceful thoughts, strong
the miracle of silence –
all mountains are silent.

91. Meaning of a bridge
misunderstood by the birds –
nest between the banks.

92. Liberated leaf,
drifting away –
never at home.

93. Although we don't know,
each fallen leaf
bears its own name.

94. Deep into winter
frosted glasses
shorten the days.

95. Mixture of colours
ascent towards nowhere –
a flying peacock.

96. The cat of the night,
with lightning claws
is scraping the sky.

97. Petals on the lake
gently floating autograph
poetic cherry tree.

98. Shadow in the night –
everywhere; the dawn
brings it home.

99. Under cherry tree
white eyes, cold viewpoints
scattered by the wind.

100. Leaves like teardrops
from the happiness of trees
accomplished through fruit.

101. Cold lips of leaves
In the frozen mirror of the pond –
a winter kiss.

102. Ice sculptures
ephemeral creations
the test of warmth.

103. Burdened branches,
lofty pine tree under snow;
chin up when you cry!

104. Clear winter sky –
slips slowly into pondering
calm, blissful heaven.

105. Summer's betrayal
leaves lonely denuded trees
without the loved ones.

106. Tear drops of light
through branches of the forest –
draining the sunset.

107. Duel, turned
into duet. Armistice
in the chirping yard.

108. Out of its frontier
the sky in the frozen lake –
defiance.

109. From the river's skein,
two pine trees still crocheting
the dense forest.

110. Shiny drops of light
the rainbow is offering
a fan of colors.

III. FEELINGS

111. Walking on water
towards immortality –
the ripple of faith.

112. Purple maple leaves
temptation of fiction
searching for the heart.

113. The golden years
with the silver crown
through temperance.

114. Falling without wind,
yellow leaves. I will fall
under the years.

115. A grain of coffee
flavour of harmony:
two halves in a seed.

116. Alone in the forest,
faith ignites
the light of the mind.

117. Cardinal crosses
the same all over the world,
guiding the spirit.

118. Empty hanger:
deep, in the sorrowful hearts
winter is coming.

119. Drops of tenderness,
flakes disguised as rain –
thaw in my soul.

120. Tree in winter,
water of life in its trunk,
the spirit within.

121. Bottom of the pond,
leaves from the afterlife –
I await my passing.

122. In the sky and soul,
written with flying snowflakes –
edict of peace.

123. Power of prayer
melting the flakes of drunkenness –
white ghosts.

124. The cold within –
on the retina of love
dew of tears.

125. Winter breathes
sentiment of transition –
geyser of the soul.

126. For soul and body,
grain of mind, grain of wheat
sprouting peacefully.

127. Hand in hand
in shared sleeplessness –
old man and the moon.

128. United in prayer,
palms become wings
flying to the sky.

129. Years of solstice
uninterrupted, glacial,
I'm not losing hope.

130. With white stars
the sky is weeping for us –
snow of forgiveness.

131. Falling leaves, the price
of fruit; my tiredness
completes me.

132. Incandescent words
in verses, ribbons of smoke
to the white paper.

133. Hidden silence
under the motionless bell –
peaceful impulse.

134. Suppressed bitterness
at the monastery gate:
bitter pilgrim.

135. Floating autumn leaves,
tenderness and harmony;
floating within.

136. Dreaming is for two;
a lone wing
cannot fly.

137. Tormented soul,
harmony's calling –
rustle of autumn.

138. With my eyes closed
I listen to the leaves, falling
like dry teardrops.

139. In front of the world
the virtue of modesty –
a weeping willow.

140. Hibernating wish,
agitated silence –
dormant volcano.

141. My identity:
a word at the beginning,
now I'm a spirit.

IV . TIME

142. Out of time's threads
tenderness of old age
weaving harmonies.

143. Silky treads of rain
spun from tow clouds –
distaff of time.

144. A few steps remain
I'd like to relay the crutch,
unused.

145. Burned candles
remain in memory:
famous wax figures.

146. Once a year
the heart is counting my age –
New Year's wind chime.

147. Utter condescension:
feeling the passing year,
the snow stopped falling.

148. Late December,
extracting from darkness
the coming day.

149. Thoughts babbling
on solstice night –
the year ends.

150. My native turf
thousand blades of memories
crushed under feet.

151. New Year's feast,
savouring hopes –
tasting the future.

152. Eye of a pond,
reflecting the past year –
two eyes of leaves.

153. Rings on a tree trunk
years cannot be stolen –
treasure of age.

154. Thousands of years
olive trees don't grow in pairs;
alone towards peace.

155. In the autumn of life
the books' golden leaves fall
as inheritance.

156. Snowing petals
from the anonymous cherry tree –
unread memories.

157. Ripe bunch of grapes,
torn ambitions –
unpicked fruit.

158. The book of silence,
parallel words aim
towards infinity.

159. Dense passwords
time to take a breath –
three times autumn.

160. Confronting the frost,
the winter camellia –
perennial feeling.

161. Like a frozen bridge
towards eternity,
death is beautiful.

162. Album of dead leaves
pressed under heavy snow –
a year's memories.

163. The four-leaf clover
lost among the blades of grass –
the fourth age.

164. Tenacious patience –
a chance of togetherness
for the stalagmite.

165. Lazy solstice
early to bed –
happiness and joy.

166. From a fertile mind
at the age of sagacity
many autumn tomes.

167. Colour of age
defying the frost –
November rose.

168. The next train's platform,
bashful red leaves,
waiting for the wind.

V. HOME

169. A sky collection,
sudden family album:
the sun and the moon.

170. Families nested within
ancestral luggage,
towards a new station.

171. Christmas at home,
rusty sleigh in the cellar,
different carols.

172. Peace descends,
bright from the sky, at Christmas,
immaculate beam.

173. Story of a bell
disguised in Santa Claus –
gift of music.

174. Winter's debut;
parents knocked on my window –
evanescent dream.

175. Angels descending
in the cold of Christmas
warming lonely hearts.

176. The magical blue,
migratory Christmas Carols,
my serene spirit.

177. Tender maple palm –
I feel my Mother's caress,
calm in the air.

178. Olive tree branches –
retired in immortality
our sweet parents.

179. Towards my North Pole,
solstice candles rehearsing
the Christmas Carols.

180. Secret jingle bells
under my own Christmas tree:
nostalgia bag.

181. My Mother's tresses
rooted in the future
defying frost.

182. Low, weeping willows
obtaining through prayer
wellbeing.

183. Shadow of shadow,
sanctuary of silence –
profound prayer.

184. From behind the lights,
vibrating stained-glass –
sacred heart beats.

185. Virtual Christmas
at home only in itself –
carols of the mind.

