

## To Live is to Move

*Snow Bones* by Masaya Saito.

Tokyo: Isobar Press, 72pp.

\$15.00.

Among my favorite books in translation is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and it was with great surprise that I felt the same excitement at the world creation in the micro- to macrocosmic sequences of haiku, at the beginning of *Snow Bones* by Masaya Saito. This is story-telling of beginnings: sky ("blue day silence ..."), water ("Winter carp ..."), color ("one of them red ..."), breath ("my last day ..."), rock ("frozen ..."), depth ("my footprints/each one ..."), fire ("in the distance/a house ..."), sleep ("each mountain ..."), sound ("inhabiting ..."), time ("the threshold . . . of a pendulum ..."), earth ("feeble earthquake ..."), night ("coming on ..."), and aloneness ("sleeping alone"). Thus the world begins, limned by new usage of a venerable poetic form, here woven into deep skeins of literary history, yet surfacing always in the simplicity of a life keenly observed. This, in the first few pages.

Saito's intellectual and compositional knowledge of haiku in both English and Japanese is deep, and his innovative approach to the use of haiku in *Snow Bones* is a creative and welcome expansion of the form. In various publications, haiku sequences can be found in which a series of haiku are presented as a whole-of-parts which might synergize; but these seem mostly to remain disjunctively disgruntled jostlings of modernist fragments. Yet the urge to do more with the power inherent in the compression and forceful cutting through space and time which haiku allow is apparent. And Saito has succeeded marvelously in this, exhibiting a natural style in which each haiku is distinct, but also flows through its neighbors, and sections, with the pleasurable wending of a walk down the edges of a watercourse.

Partly this is due to layout (which I'll get to in a moment) and partly due to thematic linkage, but what I'm most drawn to is the storytelling, the sense of narrative propulsion, which is not only unexpected, but a nigh unclassifiable achievement. After all, haiku, even in sequence rely on indeterminacy and "cutting" (*kire*) and syntactical removals to achieve nuance, humor and depth. Yet inference there is – the plainspeech style and sectional divisions might be biography, autobiography, the voices of family, friends, imaginings – though they arise as moods, notions of separate selves, selves in activities (the office, the kitchen), in seasons.

The layout of the poems is relevantly innovative in that one line (the first or last) is always broken off from the triplet by a line-break, creating (depending on whether it begins or ends) suspense or a fermata-like pause that beckons the haiku-story that follows. To give an example of this technique, the beginning of "Urns"

No handcuffs

no leg-irons

basking in the sun

To live  
is to move  
a winter sparrow

From slum to slum

I cross  
a cold bridge

Always, between the lines, there is a quietude, a silence. The poems invite me to pause and linger, reflecting on the inferential environments created. If there is allusion the depictions are neither overly fraught with wordplay nor are they reminiscent of Language poetry techniques that have become quite popular recently in “new” or 21st-century haiku form, in English. The style of play is more that of contextual inference, of the subtle surrealisms of imagination, as “to move a winter sparrow from slum to slum” does seem to repeat, receive and challenge the freedom implied in “basking,” yet always as islands in the stream—each distinct—of the reader’s and author’s collaborative design, and less indeterminately than inferentially. The pacing of the short lines and spatial placement on the page contributes greatly to the effect—this is a book to be held in the hands, with all the senses engaged.

My thoughts tangled

I cross  
the threshold

reflected . . .

Masaya Saito, who previously gave us his haiku and prose translations of noted poet Saito Sanki in *The Kobe Hotel* (1993), has crafted a masterpiece which illuminates further possibilities for haiku in English, crosses and perhaps eliminates the threshold separating the genres of “haiku” and “modern poetry” as such. Always, I felt as though I were reading what has been left, those evaporating bones of lived experience, which Saito invites me to re-create in flesh. There is an underlying question in this poetic life, concerning the bravery it takes to incarnate, to fully live with one’s imaginative faculties, emptinesses, abysses, and longings intact.

Blue sky

I uncross  
my arms

– Richard Gilbert

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