

SELECTED HAIKU 1933-1962

OTHER BOOKS BY MASAYA SAITO

HAIKU

Ash (TELS Press, 1988)

Snow Bones (Isobar Press, 2016)

TRANSLATIONS

Sanki Saitō, *The Kobe Hotel* (Weatherhill, 1993)

Sanki Saitō, *The Kobe Hotel: Memoirs* (revised edition:
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SELECTED HAIKU 1933–1962

Sanki Saitō

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Some of the haiku translations in this book previously appeared, often in earlier versions, in Sanki Saitō, *The Kobe Hotel*, translated by Masaya Saito and published by Weatherhill in 1993.

COVER IMAGE: Sanki and his dog Benjamin on the beach at Hayama, Kanagawa Prefecture, near the house where he lived from 1956 to 1962; the photograph was taken in January 1962. Every effort has been made to identify the copyright holder for this image and obtain their permission for its use; any information concerning this would be greatly appreciated and will be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book. IMAGE SOURCE: Sekiryusha, <http://sekiryusha.blog28.fc2.com/blog-entry-61.html>

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from *A Peach at Night* (1948)

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This collection includes the following:

- I Fifty haiku, selected from my two prewar collections: *Hata* (Flag), published by Sanseido, and 'Airport,' part of *Gendai Haiku* (Modern Haiku), Vol. III, published by Kawade Shobō.¹
- II A selection of 250 of my postwar haiku, which were published in haiku periodicals from the winter of 1945 to the autumn of 1947.

Among the pieces in part I, there are some which – in the light of how I see things today – I would prefer to omit. But haiku collections are their authors' histories, so I have decided to save them.

Summer 1948

¹ Many of the fifty haiku in part I of *A Peach at Night* appear earlier in this translation; they are not repeated here.

II

My country in hunger –
I too stand
watching a winter rainbow

Each of them separate –
the cold lights
of the defeated nation

Dawn, New Year's Day, 1946

Snow falling
faintly luminous ...
the flag at night

Middle age –
shocked by my own soliloquy
climbing a winter hill

Under a cloudy sky
a hairy caterpillar struggling
to cross the street

Emerging from the temple
of the Great Buddha – how warm
amid the cherry blossoms

Cutting a rose,
I curse its thorns –
my birthday

The rainy season approaching ...
I sleep among
the Buddhist statues of Nara

Here on the table
an opium poppy ripens –
my face at night

An illegitimate child's
father; a mosquito's drone
comes and goes

The rainy season deepens ...
I can't call any of them
'my lady love'

In green Nara
the Buddha statue that I
have finally arrived at

A woman talking to
a cat in heat –
I ought to hate her

A man's shadow
moves as he laughs –
the house in the rainy season

How awesome
women's breasts are –
summer has come

In an eggplant field
my old cousin and I –
both squatting

In a woman's hand
a cast-off cicada skin crumbling
into pieces

Middle age –
ripening in the distance,
a peach at night

Cool sound of
an old man's whistling – the pale
crescent moon

Close to my face
a cicada flies away ...
I miss my mother

*

A herd of weevils –
seen as if
from Heaven²

A weevil
high in the highest of heavens
on my palm

Hundreds of them ...
weevils
heading to dark places

² The Japanese word for 'weevil' is *kokuzō*, whose literal English translation is '(rice-)grain elephant'; hence 'herd.'

Weevils –
some big, some small
ah, hurrying along

Weevils escape
across the wooden floor
making it feel itchy

Weevils –
not one
looks back

Creatures born as weevils
which I watch and
love

*

Crescent moon at midday –
a lizard somersaults
and vanishes

Neglected in summer,
this vegetable garden ... I am
half-waiting for a woman

Middle age –
stumbling, I leave home
after a nap

Street urchins
all watching a distant
summer ship

A woman stands, waiting
while I pee –
red star in a drought

Ravenous this morning
since the end of
the koto piece on the radio

Starving,
how intimate everyone is –
autumn gale from the distance

Round and round
the insane asylum – dark
Bon Festival dance³

Moonlit night –
a man and a woman
jump over water

An autumn wind –
how distant that
burnt tree

Autumn nightfall –
in the distance, someone
playing the piano

A green persimmon –
its solidity sits
on a woman's palm

³ Bon is a festival to honor and console the spirits of family members who have passed away. During this event, held from the 13th to the 16th of August, it is customary for people to dance in a circle at night in places such as the precincts of Buddhist temples or in open village spaces.

All of us carrying
huge sacks on our backs –
migrating geese⁴

SHINTO RITUAL NOH IN MID-
AUTUMN AT KASUGA SHRINE

Old age –
in the moonlit wood
dancing with a mask

The moment a Noh mask
turns toward me ...
autumn night

*

A rooster –
beneath the fallen leaves
there's nothing

⁴ This is a typical postwar scene. Sanki wrote this poem at Kobe Station. All stations in big cities in Japan were crowded with hungry people carrying huge sacks on their backs filled with food and/or other necessities of life. People survived by buying food and other things on the black market or by bartering with farmers in the area of countryside they traveled to.

An autumn rock
lets a baby wasp
play on it

A snail
crawls on and on
from autumn to winter

Withered lotuses ...
when the time to move has come
they all move

The Russian Vasikov
with a shout
strikes down a pomegranate⁵

Hoeing –
a pebble
sparks cold fire

5 Sanki writes in *Sanki Hyakku* (Sanki's One Hundred Haiku), published in September 1948 by *Gendai Haiku Sha*: 'Mr. Vasikov is my neighbor. His garden is fully visible to me from the second floor of my house. His trade, unknown. His age, fifty-six or -seven. He is a ruddy-faced, fat white Russian. Ever since his Japanese wife died of lung disease, he has been living alone.'

Paring a persimmon,
her hands
like my mother's

A shrike's voice
bounces off a piece of tofu
which I cut

A gleaner
face toward the soil
arm drooping

The fall
of a scarecrow –
above its face, the sky

In moonlit mist
how crude
the electric light

A waterfall –
how cold, collapsing
and collapsing

Winter ploughing ...
black cattle,
all moving

Along the winter beach
an old woman recedes, grows smaller
and smaller ... disappears

Facing the open sea,
mouth agape, a child cries ...
winter beach

On the winter beach
the child gazing at the open sea –
no longer there

In the distance
with a seaweed-harvesting pole
a woman smacks a man⁶

⁶ The Japanese phrase translated here as ‘a seaweed-harvesting pole’ is *nori-soda*, a seasonal word for spring, whose literal translation is ‘seaweed-branch’. Wooden or bamboo poles are planted in rows on the sea floor in shallow water as props to sustain nets for the cultivation of seaweed attached to them. In this poem, the speaker, who is on the beach, sees two seaweed cultivators playing around while working on the same boat.

A wintry sun
as if only existing to dry
sliced sweet potatoes

Plonk!
a mountain orange drops
onto an oiled paper umbrella

Biting midges ...
listening to their pandemonium
alone

Inside the cloud
of biting midges
an evening star

Withering wind –
a horse's large eyes
suffused with tears

Cold moon
illuminates the greens
in the debris

An egg in my
hand in my pocket –
Christmas Day

Steaming sweet potatoes
and eating my fill –
Christmas Day

A black man's palm
tinged with pink –
Christmas Day

Sticking their legs
up toward the frozen sky ...
those naked chickens

Outside the windowpane
a passing bird, distorted –
the end of the year⁷

⁷ Suzuki Murio writes in *Saito Sanki Collection*: 'An era in which each and every structural feature [of Japan] began to look distorted. Such a year is about to end. Even a bird's reflection on a glass window looks distorted' (p. 49).