

reviewed

Snow Bones by Masaya Saito (2016, Isobar Press, Tokyo and London). 71 pages, 5½×8½", perfectbound. ISBN 978-4-907359-15-7. \$15 in the U.S. from amazon.com

Reviewed by Dan Schwerin

S*now Bones* opens with a definition before the prologue. Snow bones are the “remnants of snow after a thaw; patches of snow seen stretching along ridges in ruts, or in furrows, etc., after a partial thaw.” By means of this image, Masaya Saito’s poetic narrative is suggested from only the traces of what remains.

Saito has given us an intelligent, innovative, and nuanced collection that features haiku in several voices and finely layered narrative sequences. The preponderance of space, the bare cutting of the lines, and fresh juxtapositions bring rewarding reading from a poet who just uses the bones. This may be Saito’s signature poem—it appears in *Haiku in English* (2013), as well as in his first collection, *Ash* (1988), and now with some changes in this second collection:

An empty plate
smashing it
autumn clearer

The prologue of the book is one poem:

A cold sunset
on the cliff, me
without wings

Saito's form slows the reader, but also moves us through this work almost as if with bread crumbs. Each haiku works on its own, and is satisfying, with many surprises born from language and cutting as in that terrain-modified self, "on a cliff, me." Some key words from poems on the opening pages suggest how he carries the reader: *across, footprints, distance, crossed, nameless, each, plodding*, down through lines that include and lead to: *old, temple, doll, winter, alone, inside*.

In the middle two sequences of the book Saito makes use of three *metropolis* narrators (*first voice, second voice, third voice*), and three *countryside* narrators. The cumulative effect of all these indeterminate, unconnected, monologue narrations is a sense of shared isolation as each individual navigates the transient moments of their inner and outer worlds.

I have been tired of mist haiku for about twenty years, but Saito uses it in one of my favorites of his:

A misty night

I exist
as footsteps

Note the narrative of small departures that take us through the collection as in:

To live
is to move

a winter sparrow

The juxtaposition is layered so that the reader has to search for connections in the same way that the poet writes about his own exploration. The images are just enough to elicit the delight of discovery, and the words move the reader methodically through some cold but bracing inner geography.

The snowfield

those gravestones
crowded together

A visit to a grave

a candle flame
shielded with my hand

Some stretches in this book seem to whisper the same journeying by foot we know from Santōka Taneda. There is a similar sparseness in the voices:

Blue sky

I uncross
my arms

Scholar, translator, and poet Richard Gilbert's review in the *Kyoto Journal* (#87, Nov., 2016) reads in part, "Saito's intellectual and compositional knowledge of haiku in both English and Japanese is deep," and "...Saito 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."

The pilgrimage arrives at the epilogue having led us with innovative form, smashing through the existential bones.

Driving away

in the rear-view mirror
a cold sunset