
REVIEWS

Moon Woke Me Up Nine Times: Selected Haiku of Basho, David Young, trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 106 pages; 20 cm; 5¼"x8". Semigloss black card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-307962-00-3. Price: \$17.00 from booksellers.

Reviewed by Charles Trumbull

Every time a book of new translations of Bashō comes out, I have to wonder why. Do we really need another torte made from those old chestnuts? In this case, though, I think the answer is yes. These versions by David Young really do add something new to the corpus of Bashō translations that we already have.

This is the first time Young has taken on Japanese verse, but he is a well-established translator of other world literatures, notably the Chinese poets but more recently the Italians Petrarch and Eugenio Montale. He is an emeritus professor of English and creative writing at Oberlin College and has eleven books of his own poetry in print. Preparing for his book of Bashō's haiku, Young read all the standard translations, and the bibliography in *Moon Woke Me Up Nine Times* lists works by Aitken, Barnhill, Blyth, Corman, Hamill, Hass, Mayhew, Stryk, and Ueda. Young says he learned the most, however, from Jane Reichhold's *Bashō: The Complete Haiku* (2008), so much so that he includes a key for those who want to compare his translations with Reichhold's.

What distinguishes Young's versions is their lack of fussiness, straightforward simplicity, and attention to the lyricism of Bashō's work. A poet himself, Young's renderings should be read for their poetry. Taking Young's own suggestion, let's compare a few of his translations (on the left in the examples below) with some others in the translational canon.

Young's version of Bashō's "crow" haiku impresses precisely because it says it all, and simply:

Crow perched
 on a bare branch
 autumn evening

on a bare branch
 a crow has alighted ...
 autumn nightfall

Makoto Ueda's translation (*Basho & His Interpreters*, 1992) preserves the order of the images in the original Japanese but inverts the normal English word order to do so. Young's version forgoes any sense of motion ("alighting") or passage of time ("nightfall"), resulting in a quiet, settled feeling.

Translations of the Japanese adjective *omoshiroki* that Bashō uses in another haiku to qualify a day when Fuji is invisible because of the misty rain are all over the map. "Good," "interesting," "happy," "peaceful," "pleasant," "intriguing," "more attractive," "more beautiful," "lovelier still," and "quiet gladness," are the suggestions of various translators. Young approaches this haiku with a modern flair reminiscent of Cid Corman or one of the Beats (though none of these translated this haiku to my knowledge). Compare Young's forward version with the padded-up wordiness of Sam Hamill (*Sound of Water*, 1995):

Too much mist
 can't see Fuji
 —makes it more interesting

Chilling autumn rains
 curtain Mount Fuji, then make it
 more beautiful to see

Young's translations are normally brief and unfussy, in the colloquial style of Corman and the Zen laconism of Stryk (*On Love and Barley*, 1985). In Bashō's "call of the duck" haiku, for example, he finds no need to include information that other translators do, such as the fact this is a wild duck and that the sea is, or has been, darkening. Young may reach too far, however—adding too much, well, color—in using "duck's squawk" rather than the more common "duck's call" or "duck's voice" for *kamo no koe*:

The sea dark
 the duck's squawk
 dimly white

Darkening waves—
 cry of wild ducks,
 faintly white

In a few cases Young wanders off by himself and gets into trouble. For example, I have always understood Bashō's "octopus" haiku to refer to the Japanese method of trapping these creatures in a clay pot suspended underwater on a cord. Young's locution "octopus in a jar" sounds to me like it is pickled or preserved. Like most translators, Young leaves it unclear whether it is the poet or the octopus who is doing the dreaming. Peter Beilenson (*Cherry Blossoms*, 1960), for one, was sure it was the octopus:

Octopus in a jar	Pot-imprisoned now
briefer dreams	Palely dreaming octopus
summer moon	In summer moonlight

Young shows his indebtedness to Reichhold in his rendering of the "old pond" haiku:

Old pond	old pond
frog leaps	a frog jumps into
into the splash	the sound of water

I have always been troubled by Reichhold's radical reading in which the frog jumps into the *sound* of the water, not into the water itself—no other translator to my knowledge does it this way, so I'm troubled too that Young should follow her.

For one last example of Young's artistry, I'll choose Bashō's "summer grass" haiku and compare the poetry of his translation with that of three other poets turned translators. "Summer grass" is a tough nut to render smoothly into English. One poet, Cid Corman, tried at least three times but inevitably got tangled up in all the thorny and cacophonous possessives:

summer grass
 relics of
 warriors' dreams

Cool Melon, 1959

summer grass
warriors
dreams' ruins

Back Roads to Far Towns,
with Susumu Kamaike, 1968

the summer grasses
the mightiest warriors'
dreams' consequences

One Man's Moon, 1984

Hamill (*Little Book of Haiku*, 1995) felt he needed to insert the word "imperial," unnecessarily (and wrongly, insofar as any imperialism is not the soldiers' but their masters'):

Summer grasses:
all that remains of great soldiers'
imperial dreams

Of all the poet/translators, Robert Hass (*The Essential Haiku*, 1994) seems most straightforwardly to have captured the elusive meaning:

Summer grass —
all that's left
of warriors' dreams.

Young ignores the niceties of haiku form, eschews possessives (how do you feel about "soldier dreams" rather than "soldiers"?), and reaches for the poetry within:

Battlefield, now summer grass
all that's left of
soldier dreams

Moon Woke Me Up Nine Times is definitely worth your attention. You may well discover some new favorite translations of Master Bashō's chestnuts.