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## REVIEWS

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*Snow Bones*, by Masaya Saito (Tokyo: Isobar Press, 2016), 71 pages; 5½" × 8½". Glossy gray and black card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-4-907359-15-7. Price: \$15.00 from online booksellers

*Reviewed by Michael Dylan Welch*

White breath

my last day  
unknown

My first impression of *Snow Bones* was to note its innovative use of a blank line in the middle of each poem to indicate the cut (equivalent to the *kireji* in Japanese haiku). The author used this distinctive technique in his previous haiku book, *Ash*, published in 1988—a gap of twenty-eight years. The technique seems not to have caught on with others, but perhaps it's so distinctive that others might consider it to be the author's exclusive domain, as with Gary Hotham's use of an em dash on a line by itself to show the poem's cut.

Less obvious is this book's ambitious structure, which we learn about on the back cover (explaining it in an introduction might have served some readers better, but might have been too heavy-handed for others):

*Snow Bones* consists of four narrative haiku sequences spoken by seven different voices. The first sequence begins in winter in the north of Japan and is concerned with the death and funeral of the speaker's mother; in the fourth sequence, this narrator once again goes north in winter to attend

his father's funeral. The two central sequences, one set in a metropolis and one in the countryside, pass through the spring and summer to autumn; each sequence is narrated by three different speakers as they move through environments which they share without ever encountering each other except at a distance.

I suspect that few readers would pick up on this structure without being told, but it's an accomplishment to strive for and reach such a vision, a complex narrative arc, seldom seen in other haiku collections. Readers are lured into a saddening story, and we cannot help but take the narrator in the first and last sections as being the author himself (although perhaps with some fictionalization), especially when the book's dedication reads "for my parents." This book is about grief, a coming to terms with the loss of parents. Yet the haiku here are about more than just the author's grief—it could be yours or mine, or anyone's, which is what makes the poems and their arc larger than just a personal story.

My anger restrained

a red rose in the vase  
one petal falls

Also adding to the book's complex structure is the use and return of many prized subjects—mirrors, deserted schools, *shoji* screens, flu masks, wings, icicles, the author's and the father's dialects. A cold sunset in the first poem reappears in the very last poem. "My hands / numb with cold // in prayer" on page 24 becomes "Hands together in prayer // now apart, ready / to leave my hometown" on page 67. A blue sky on page 15 resurfaces on pages 19, 26, 58, and 66. Crossed arms on page 16 resolve into uncrossed arms on page 66, an act of acceptance after resistance—and yet the fourth section ends with a return to rebellion, with "Breaking off an icicle // to stab / the snow" (page 68). "Across a snowfield // my footprints / each one, deep" appears on page 16 and again on page 58, and then "The snowfield // I retrace / my own footsteps," also on page 58, yields to "Footprints / across the snowfield // my dead father's" on

page 62, which returns to the narrator again on page 68, with “Lifting my feet high / right and left // I cross the snowfield.” The tick of a pendulum on page 17 becomes a motionless pendulum on page 43, and then ticks again on page 59. After a “Feeble earthquake // a paper doll / still standing” on page 17, we read “The paper doll / fallen // the house, quiet” on page 25. Dozens of other returns, echoes, and progressions throughout the book show it to be a tightly woven fabric of experience.

Some poems seem slight, but perhaps, by contrast, their sense of *karumi* (lightness) heightens the book’s heavy subject of parental loss. They say more by saying less. Poems with this apparent lightness, as in “A balloon / tied by its cord // breeze” (page 20) or “Soap bubble / gone // blue sky” (page 26), gain a symbolic sadness in the book’s larger context of death and grieving, and in this way the book challenges readers to see the poems holistically rather than just individually. They show subtle change in such lightness, as in “Snow falling / quietly // already afternoon” (page 57), where the narrator is surprised not just by the snow but by the passing of the day while consumed with grief.

The middle two sections, with three voices each, set in a metropolis and then the countryside, are more elusive than the first and fourth sections, as it’s less clear who the voices belong to. Yet they contain intriguing and engaging individual poems, as in “Cherry blossoms // darkness / within my mouth” (page 29) and “An insect cage // a cricket’s feeler / protruding” (page 36). These two sections serve as narrative interludes, from spring to autumn, before the return to death and winter in the final section.

Within the book’s four major sections, subsections are arranged as sequences, and particularly profound for me was the third part of the first section, describing the mother’s death and cremation, ending with “Lingering cold // the funeral procession / passes a utility pole” (page 23). The second voice of the “Metropolis” section offers poems all about balloons (pages 30–31), and we find many other effective groupings of poems, such as in the travel poems to start the fourth section: “Runny nose // my hometown / so distant” (as if the narrator needs his mother or father to wipe his nose), “Holding the train strap // this year / about to end” (as if wanting to hold on to the passing year), and “On the overhead

rack / my winter hat // on its way north” (pages 53 and 53). And in the final section, dwelling on the father’s death, we read “The coffin departs // tire tracks / in the snow,” and “In mourning // letting the icicles / grow,” and “Winter mirror // how quickly / my face grows old” (pages 62–64).

Masaya Saito’s *Snow Bones* offers readers a challenging structure, one that will reward multiple readings. It also offers a challenging subject, swimming in grief and loss—yet not drowning. The book provides redemption and acceptance, even if not cleanly, for no profound grief is ever mended. An original voice is at work here.

In the snow country  
 my parents gone  
  
 a pendulum swinging

*The Windbreak Pine: New and Uncollected Haiku 1985-2015*, by Wally Swist (United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2016). 96 pages; 7¾" × 5". Semigloss black and green card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-903543-42-9. Price: \$25.00 from [www.snapshotpress.co.uk](http://www.snapshotpress.co.uk).

*Reviewed by Bruce Ross*

Wally Swist was for what seemed a long time the in-house haiku poet of *Modern Haiku* under Bob Spiess. I was impressed by his fidelity to woodland flora and fauna as they existed, especially their sounds, highlighting this haiku in my book *Haiku Moment*:

deep bend of the brook  
           the kingfisher’s chatter  
 after the dive