REVIEWS

Sanki Saitō: Selected Haiku 1933 – 1962, ed. Masaya Saito (Japan: Isobar Press, 2023). 294 pages; 6″×9″. Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-4-907359-43-0. Price: $25.00 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by David Burleigh

Masaya Saito, whose name will be familiar to many readers of this journal, is one of only two Japanese poets appearing in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, the landmark anthology edited by Jim Kacian and others a decade past. The other one is Fay Aoyagi, and what makes them unusual is that they compose haiku in both their native language, Japanese, and in English. The difference between them is that Masaya, while much travelled, lives in Japan, while Fay is resident in California. Masaya, originally from Akita in the northeast, has won prizes for his haiku in both languages, and lives in Shinjuku in Tokyo, though he still returns to his family home in the north. I will call him 'Masaya' here, partly because I have met him, and partly to distinguish him from the modern haiku poet who is the subject of this important book. (Though they share a family name, the two are unrelated.) A note inside the book explains that Japanese names are given in Japanese order, and only on the cover in western order ("for the convenience of booksellers"), which is only confusing until you begin to read.

Sanki (who has a macron on his family name) was born in Tsuyama, a small castle town in the western part of the main island, in what is now Okayama prefecture, as Saitō Keichoku, in 1900. He was the third son in a prosperous and educated family, though his brothers were considerably older: one ten and the other twenty years. Both of them provided him,

in his youth, with opportunities to visit the countries overseas where they were working in East Asia, and rescued him from debt later on, especially the older one, Takeo. The poet hoped first of all to become a painter, but was persuaded out of this, training as a dentist, before joining Takeo in Singapore and opening a clinic there but spending more time working as a dancing teacher, for which he had obtained a license as a student. He had married in Japan, and his wife evidently enjoyed dancing too. But these gay times were interrupted by the fall of Singapore, and then the Pacific War, which found the young man back in Japan, once more working as a dentist, in a hospital rather than a private clinic this time. It was there that he discovered haiku, through the good offices of a colleague, an accidental enthusiasm just as dancing had been, but taken up with brilliant and immediate results.

The eventful story of the poet's life is related in engaging detail, but also against the changing political landscape, the exigencies of wartime, and the challenges for haiku poets then. The shifts in haiku practice are well explained, from Sanki's engagement with the New Rising Haiku movement, that marked a break from the more conservative tradition established by Takahama Kyoshi, to the liberal and left-leaning tendency of the Kyōdai haiku group, based in Kyoto University, some of whom were imprisoned by the military authorities. Sanki too was held for seventy days, and then released without charge, after which he moved to Kobe, where he spent the rest of the war. Living at first in an old hotel, with a miscellaneous and even disreputable group of foreigners and ladies of the night, Sanki was able to recapture some of the cosmopolitan atmosphere that he had enjoyed in Singapore, and later wrote engaging prose accounts of his experiences there. After the war ended, he worked in Osaka for several years, and took part in new haiku ventures, until in 1956 he was offered a job as editor of a major haiku journal put out by the Kadokawa publishing house in Tokyo, and moved to Hayama in Kanagawa prefecture, to the southwest of the city.

The cover of the book shows a picture taken on a beach in Hayama, with the poet leaning or sitting on a boat that has been pulled up on the shore, holding a walking-stick and with a dog beside him, cliffs and a further bay in the background. This peaceful scene belies the various

disruptions in the poet's life, which had now reached a calmer phase, even though he had already separated from his wife and child. It may be worth noting here that the puce cover of the book is the same shade as that of its predecessor, *The Kobe Hotel*, published by Weatherhill thirty years before, and from the hand of the same translator. The earlier book featured prose accounts of the poet's life in Kobe, with about 300 haiku, and a different cover illustration, while this expanded version contains over a thousand haiku, and is to be followed by another volume with the prose later in the year. I reviewed the original collection with enthusiasm for a newspaper in 1993, and am delighted to say that this expanded edition merits all the work that has gone into it, as well as the attention of new readers. It is a magnificent collection.

The new book, like its predecessor, is solely in English, elegantly rendered, and with the poet's life clearly explained in the context of both his times and of the haiku movements of which he was a part. Like many haiku poets he used a poetic pen-name, chosen at random when someone asked him for one at the start of his career: the one-word haigo 'Sanki' ('Three devils' 三鬼) by which he is generally known, while even the characters of his family name Saitō have been exchanged for others, with the same sound but a different meaning ('West-East' 西東), all of which is quite colourful but has no particular significance, as Masaya explained at the book-launch. Some of the better-known haiku may be familiar from earlier anthologies, but the reader's appreciation will be greatly enriched by what is on offer here. The poet states himself:

> Shouldn't we change the definition from 'Haiku is a poetic form to sing about seasonal phenomena' to 'The seasons are a gate for reaching *kongen*'? What certainly exists in the most profound depth of haiku is not the gate, but rather this primal source. The purpose of haiku is to immerse ourselves in the truth of actual being and finally recognize it. (31)

This was written in 1948, and it was an exciting time. The Modern Haiku Association had been formed the year before, with Sanki central to the enterprise, and Ishida Hakyō (1913–1969) as the first head, while others like Hino Sōjō (1901–1956; see issue 53:2), and the singular Tomizawa

Kakio (1902–1962) involved as well. Sanki died, just a few weeks after Kakio, of cancer in 1962, on April 1.

Even from the limited selections of Sanki's haiku that have appeared before, it is quite clear that he was exceptionally gifted, and this becomes even more apparent over the whole of his work. He has a quick eye for seizing upon details that not only evoke, but somehow query what might be going on. The rapid apprehension of a scene or circumstance, and its fresh transmission in a minimalist form, somewhat remind one of the distinctive vision of the youthful Arthur Rimbaud. The many titled sequences begin with the conventionally pious "Ave Maria," quickly followed by "A Season and a Young Boy," the boy looking at a distant castle on a blue morning, biting a plum while the light shines through "transparent ears," catching fireflies, and drawing only fish in summer:

In a blue mosquito net
a boy and his picture
of fish, both blue

Sequences are seldom translated, yet the poems reverberate more fully when they are. There are others on "War," that describe the rigour and hardships of that time, even for civilians, while "A Lion in Kobe," shows the poet's bohemian existence, with other scenes at once coolly observed and perplexed:

Thundery night —
an elevator
silently ascending

The plane's wheels
in the sky above the winter sea
stop spinning

The postwar collections have a more reflective tone, still with surprising images:

Middle age —
ripening in the distance,
a peach in moonlight

My journey
thus far ... a starfish
dried in moonlight

Numb with cold,
I make false teeth
for the poor

The past, immutable —
an icicle stabs
directly downward

Hiroshima —
to eat a boiled egg
a mouth opens.

It is notable that Sanki manages to make haiku even from the rather unpromising subject of dentistry (and there are three or four more). The city of Hiroshima is not far from where he grew up, and there is a series about it composed in 1947.

In later life, especially after he became a professional editor, Sanki travelled around Japan, so that there are many sets of verses evoking different locations. Yet even when he has been diagnosed with the disease that will eventually kill him, he retains a sense of wonder:

My feet would soak
in the ocean if I hanged myself
from the crescent moon

If surprise is one of the qualities that good haiku possess, then Sanki has it in abundance, throughout his work, even when it takes a sombre turn. One of the best features of this wonderful book is that it contains a good deal of supplementary material, including the prefaces and afterwords that appeared in different collections. There is an informative and very useful note by Yamaguchi Seishi (1901–1994) that discusses a late verse by Sanki, and tells us why it is significant (159–160):

An autumn nightfall —
the skeleton of a huge fish
drawn back by the sea

Seishi's reading of it is instructive, and brings to mind the sombre picture on the cover of the book, while there is an even later version of the poem,

in which the fish has been drawn by Sanki on the sand (215), that adds some further resonance.

When I was teaching, poetry or haiku, I sometimes asked students to consider whether William Blake's poem "The Fly" represented the same thought as Issa's well-known verse "Do not swat the fly" (*yare utsu-na*), or a different one? Likewise, I noted how one of Sanki's wartime haiku, "A machine gun — / in the middle of the forehead / a red flower blooms," might be read alongside a poem by Rimbaud, "Le Dormeur du Val," even though the latter is a sonnet, to see if they in any way resemble or speak to one another. Again, it might be interesting to compare Sanki's wartime haiku with those of Julien Vocance (1878–1954), while noting that he was a combatant, while Sanki was not. There are many ways to approach this rich collection of Sanki's work, perhaps the largest number of haiku by any modern Japanese haiku poet yet translated. It is a fine achievement, and clearly it has been Masaya Saito's avocation to undertake it.

After the book-launch at a Shinjuku bookstore, I had a chat with Masaya, and then went for a drink with him and a couple of his friends, first in a rickety building near the station. After that he led us to another place, across the red-light district and up an alley so narrow that you nearly had to turn sideways, for another snack. I recall the deep sigh of satisfaction and relief that he gave, the book-launch over, taking his first sip of a Tsingtao beer. Now the reader can share that satisfaction too, enjoying the result.

The Empty Field, by Matthew M. Cariello (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2023). 126 pages; 4¼″×6½″. Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-958408-08-7. Price: $20.00 from www.redmoonpress.com

Reviewed by Rebecca Lilly

Cariello's *The Empty Field* is a compilation of haiku he wrote over forty years (between 1982 and 2022), and it was unclear to me to what extent these poems were culled from a larger body of haiku he