

Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY PIPPA PHILLIPS

Lips Licked Clean: Selected Haiku of Sugita Hisajo translated by Alice Wanderer (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2021). 152 pages, 4.25" x 6.5". Matte color cover, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-947271-85-2. \$20 from <https://redmoonpress.com>.

Sugita Hisajo is a notable figure in the history of modern Japanese haiku, both for her status as one of the first modern women haikuists and for the strength of her work. Mentored by Masaoka Shiki's student Takahama Kyoshi, Sugita gained a reputation as an artful practitioner of the *shasei* style of haiku. An early star of Shiki's journal *Hototogisu*, Sugita was later disavowed in those very pages by her mentor in stunning and mysterious fashion. To her heartbreak, her works would be rejected from the journal for the rest of her life, and her reputation remained discredited for decades. However, scholars began to reexamine her legacy in the later part of the twentieth century. *Lips Licked Clean: Selected Haiku of Sugita Hisajo* is a definitive collection of her poems, selected and translated into English by Alice Wanderer.

The volume includes 116 poems, arranged into seasons. The translations are accompanied by *kanji* and *rōmaji* of the original work, and each *kigo* is annotated. The poet's work spans a broad range of topics and images. The poet employs a variety of techniques, arranging images into a delicate and suggestive balance of the daily and the universal, the concrete and the ephemeral.

When Sugita's work first appeared in *Hototogisu*, in a section featuring women poets, it was notable for its depictions of domestic life. It is ironic that her writing of domestic life conflicted with her own housewifely duties. Sugita's artistic success caused tensions in her marriage to her husband, who gave up his painting career. Periods where the poet's work dried up coincided with periods of domestic strife. At times, she expresses her struggle directly:

I stand and watch
 kids picking wildflowers—
 the impulse to paint

At other times, the domestic comes into the foreground of her poetry as a subject. Following Shiki's emphasis on clarity and accessible language, we find crisp but prosaic images made transcendent. Consider the synergy of the infant's itchy gums and the mother's nipple throbbing in tandem.

itchy gums
 the baby bites the nipple—
 hazy spring weather

Sugita juxtaposes these kinesthetic sensations with cool white clouds of early spring—the *kigo* in this poem is *hanagumori*, or flowery clouds characteristic of the cherry blossom viewing season. The bloodied nipple draws to mind the dark pink center of a cherry blossom, and the mother and child are placed under a pale sky, a balm to their inflamed senses, a picture of milk and fertility. Sugita seeds her scenes with deep undercurrents of meaning.

Many of Sugita's contemporaries borrowed techniques from the Western realist art that inspired *shasei* haiku. In Sugita's poems, one finds a painterly eye—impressionistic splashes of color that are sometimes bold. At other times, there is a collision of black and white, the implied movement of a set of wings on the precipice of taking off:

on a daikon flower
 a jet-black butterfly's
 elevated wings

Sometimes, Sugita alights on a more subtle juxtaposition, as in the way the white of the snow is paired with even whiter Christmas lights in the following poem, creating a monotone purity that underscores the picturesque wintertime image. The opening line invites us to travel, peeking into the windows that line our path.

snowy road—
the window lights
of Christmas

Sugita was known for making sketches with compelling foreground and background compositions, in which the reader's eye is drawn back and forth, pendulum-like, through the image. In the following haiku, the warmth and brightness of the foregrounded fire competes with the vast, dark mountain behind it. The image of sparks and a mountain peak are in parallel, yet only one is moving.

a shower of sparks—
the furnace soars up
near the peak

If *shasei* is meant to evoke a sketch, then Sugita animates her sketches. Her work is full of movement, on the cusp of it, in the midst of it, in the aftermath of its completion, and, as in this case, as a counterpoint to the stillness of the mountain.

Some of her poems have the quality of a diary entry, the seasonal allusion framed through a window, or in this case, a mirror that serves as the frame of this poetic image. *Shasei* is about realism, but it is committed to both external and internal truth. Shiki advocated for *makoto*, a truthfulness to an inner reality. In the poem that serves as the namesake for Alice Wanderer's collection, the poet regards herself without decoration and, in doing so, reconciles her subjectivity with realism.

lips licked
clean of red—
the New Year Mirror

Sugita did not live to see the publication of her collected poems in Japan, passing away from a combination of malnutrition and kidney disease in her fifties. Before now, the longest English-language selection of her poems could be found in Makoto Uedo's *Far Beyond the Field*, an anthology of poetry by Japanese women. Alice Wanderer's collection is a well-chosen representation of a

poet whose due is late in coming. This collection establishes Hisajo Sugita as one of the masters. It should be considered essential reading for anyone with an historical interest in haiku and for those undertaking serious study of the *shasei* technique. Having recently won a Touchstone Distinguished Book Award, *Lips Licked Clean* isn't just good; it's important haiku literature. □■

REVIEWED BY TAOFEEK AYEYEMI

Long Rain haibun and tanka by Lenard D. Moore (Wet Cement Press, Berkeley, CA: 2021). 140 pages, 4.25" x 7". Matte color cover, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-7324369-9-2. \$14 from <https://www.wetcementpress.com>.

Long Rain is a collection of 104 rustic yet refined tanka, punctuated with three haibun and one haiku. The book is divided into four parts, coinciding with the elements: "Earth," "Wind," "Fire," and "Water." This division leads to an expectation that a full taxonomy of life will be portrayed in the pages, and the reader is not disappointed.

in an instant
blue jays switch places
on the powerline
I listen to its humming
as the sun goes down

I love the urgency and just-as-it-is-ness of this verse. The singular "its" redirects our focus to a single blue jay searching for a comfortable place to settle. In the verse below, we see the patterns of the broom across the yard:

washing a pan
in the broom-swept yard
a black woman at dawn;
she sings "The Negro Anthem"
as maple leaves rustle