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## *Ryōan Temple Rock Garden by Murō Saisei*

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Michael Stone Tangeman  
Ryōan Temple Rock Garden

Murō Saisei  
龍安寺石庭

I caught the sound of water  
Faint perhaps debilitating  
Smothering sound of water  
I saw someone's passage aslant through the hall  
Black hair hanging  
Glistening ebon pupils

I counted the number of stones  
The stones were perhaps a mere seven  
Carefully looking there were naught but three  
Again I looked carefully  
There was but one alone

I was however interrupted in the end by  
The stones countless in their cluster  
The stones all shone with rage  
The stones all once more fell silent  
The stones all yearned to scream and stand  
Ah the stones all strained to return to the heavens

Murō Saisei (1889–1962), apart from being known as one of three famous early twentieth-century men of letters from Kanazawa on the Japan Sea, was a prominent poet, novelist and literary critic whose works are admired as exemplary masculine literary Japanese.

The subject of this 1932 poem is the dry rock and sand garden at Ryōan-ji (Temple of the Peaceful Dragon) in Kyoto. This Zen garden is one of the iconic sites of traditional Japan. The arrangement of the fifteen rocks in the garden prevents all fifteen from being viewed at one time, creating an allusion to the Buddhist principles of impermanence and imperfection.

The space is small, smaller than it appears in photographs, but there is a calming power exuded by its confines. Even boisterous schoolchildren who flock to the temple by the thousands each year are compelled by some ineffable force to quiet themselves—a perceptible change comes over them—in the presence of these deceptively simple, physically unimposing, seemingly organic structures.

Saisei's poem imagines the power contained within the clusters of rocks, the mystery of the clusters, and an almost-biological (rather than geological) essence contained in the seemingly inert forms. His speculation on the divine origin of the rocks, however, does nothing to speak to the purpose of their placement. They remain mysterious.

It is the sound of water that catches the poet, and threatens to paralyze him. Traditional poetic notions associated with water—movement, change—are juxtaposed with the stillness and immutability of rock. Saisei reveals the power—a power able to distract the poet's eye from a beautiful woman—contained within the stones. If he is unable to unleash the rocks from the tether of gravity, he is at least able to give them a voice.

In translating this poem the challenge was to keep the natural elements (water, rock) in the states in which Saisei describes them: to anthropomorphize only when Saisei does so. Preserving the noun phrases in the first stanza, rather than turning them into verb phrases, was important, but not terribly easy given the vibrancy of Saisei's phrasing. And in the final stanza, I attempted to approximate Saisei's alliteration (*musū...muragari...*) in the translation “countless...cluster.”