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Persistence of Memory After a Poem by Bashō

John Savoie

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, jsavoie@siue.edu

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John Savoie
Persistence of Memory

Bashō
夏草や

夏草や...

this stagnant afternoon
the children grown and gone
and I left here to listen
to that one bird who cries
sharp as a squeaky swing . . .

夢の跡

Commentary

Many waters meet in “Persistence of Memory.” The title comes from Salvador Dalí’s “La Persistencia de la Memoria,” not so much for the melting clocks as for the aptness of the phrase and broader mood of languid reverie. The frame here consists of the first and last lines of one of Bashō’s most plangent haiku, “Summer Grass,” from *Oku no Hosomichi*. You may follow the several stages of translation from his original through *rōmaji* and literal translation to a decent English haiku:

1
夏草や
兵どもが
夢の跡

3
summer grass
strong warriors
after dream

2
natsugusa ya
tsuwamonodomo ga
yume no ato

4
summer grass
what’s left
of warriors’ dreams

“Persistence of Memory” keeps the first line’s quiet vitality and the last line’s mystical awareness of what once flourished in this place. The middle section splices (*stuffs?* O literary turducken!) five lines of tanka-esque trimeter into the heart of the haiku, changing out *warriors* for *children*, the heroic for the domestic, the solemn battlefield for the lonely backyard. The new lines add a touch of aural memory as the bird—a blue jay? the speaker never sees it—sings in pitch and rhythm of a child swinging. Yet the mood remains no less melancholy, perhaps more so, because more common. There are so many things and ways to lose. Where did the years go? How did we come to this?

This hybrid of hybrids crosses centuries, languages, and forms to the mutual illumination of here and now and then and there. The poem actually never translates Bashō’s haiku. My lines blend directly with his original. For the follow-up essay, however, I realized I needed to translate the Japanese. I had read countless translations but did my best to forget them so I could engage directly with Bashō. Happily, the translation I arrived at seems to be an original, no easy task when thousands are translating the same 17 syllables. The key was rejecting the rather common “ALL that’s left” as overly rhetorical and bombastic, at odds with Bashō’s quiet voice, which my “what’s left” attempts to convey. Somewhat oddly, neither “all that’s left” nor “what’s left” are literally present in Bashō’s original; these phrases seek to express the juxtaposition and implication of Bashō’s masterpiece.

Source text:

Bashō, Matsuo. *A Haiku Journey: Bashō’s Narrow Road to a Far Province*. Translated by Dorothy Britton. Kodansha International, 1980, pp. 57 (English), 106 (Japanese).