

KEISELIM A. MONTÁS. *LIKE WATER (A HAIKU COLLECTION)*.

Translated by Elizabeth Polli. Zompopos, pp. 74.

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The seventeen syllables of haiku in Spanish were introduced by Mexican poet José Juan Tablada, a modernist/avant garde poet that went to Japan in 1900 and cultivated the Japanese haiku following masters such as Basho, Shiki, among others, and was inspired by a Modernist appeal to incorporate exotic elements in his literature. Haiku is a form of satori, a search for illumination and a condensation of sensations in an image. As an economical form, it seeks to communicate the immensity of the world with the simplicity of an image that captures the profundity of the natural world and the contemplative capacities of the poet. Rhyme is not important, but the number of syllables, the computation, is key because it restrains the poet to look for the right combination of words that composes the right image with the least number of utensils. Tablada called it “miniature poetry”.

Since those first examples and traces by Tablada, there has been a robust tradition of Latin American poets that have cultivated the poetic form of haiku. This tradition continues live and well with the book *Like Water (A Haiku Collection)* by Dominican poet Keiselim A. Montás (1968). According to his biography he emigrated to the US in 1985 and completed a B.A. and an M.A. in Spanish Language and Literature. Montás has written poetry, narrative and essays, and has received several awards in poetry and narrative, the latest one being the 2015 Letras de Ultramar in the genre of essay.

The book is divided into four sections: water, nature, life and writing, and the poems are accompanied with illustrations by Andy Castillo. The book is also a multilingual effort as it is the result of translations from the Spanish by Elizabeth Polli, and is followed by a forward from Ana Merino, a preface by the author, and an introduction by José Kozer. The following poem exemplifies the ekphrastic elements of the haiku, the vivid description of scenes that dialogue with the image and expand the poem.

The rains of autumn
remove the leaves that are placed
by rains of April. (11)

The poem is in dialogue with a drawing of a minimalistic landscape of an autumn leaf in black and white with, in a dreamlike scene that continues what is described in the poem: the rains that help the circular process of the seasons, but that is also the circular wheel of life, being born, then in the autumn of life, the decay of life that fades away. The profundity of the landscape talks about the passage of time, and memento mori, as the constant themes of poetry. A similar subject is present in the following poem:

Snow flurries in March;
waltz of departing winter
and arriving spring. (16)

The time that runs in the haikus is the time of the seasons, the slow flow of water under a bridge, fluttering fireflies, mountains dressed by the morning fog. Yes, the haiku is a small form, but charged with all the plainness of nature. It is a revelation that shines in the poem that makes us see the landscape as if for the first time, and also, as traditional haikus, it includes a signal of the season that the poet is touching upon, as in this poem:

April is verdant
-summertime is a bridge- and
October blushes. (24)

The sudden rouge of autumn demarks the passage of time, like the winter snow, the bridge of the rainbow tying the mud with the firmament. Important zoological animals from the haiku appear in the poems, such as the heron and butterflies. I include one last haiku from his closing section on the process of writing:

Fine strokes of black ink
vociferating clear words
on a hung silk scroll. (69)

The image complementing this last poem shows the soft strokes of a haiku written in Japanese stating that living without words, is like living without water. In this form the book closes coherently with the title. *Like Water* is a book that shows that the poetic form of the haiku that was introduced into Spanish in the beginning of the XX Century is still a vibrant and plastic form that has been practiced by poets in Spanish language, such as Antonio Machado, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, José Watanabe, and Mario Benedetti, among many others, that have introduced new topics and words that refreshed the synthetic form of haiku in its calm and profound simplicity but reverberating with a powerful image where the “I” of the poet is dispersed and we only see his eye, as if nature was contemplating itself.