Daniela Kato

# Hiromi Ito.
# *Tree Spirits Grass Spirits*

Translated by Jon L. Pitt,
Brooklyn, NY: Nightboat Books, 2023. 192 pp.
ISBN 9781643621920

rom her very first poetry collection, *Somoku no Sora* (The Sky of Plants, 1978), plants have been at the root of the work of Japanese poet Hiromi Ito. Her poetry underscores her fierce and boldly innovative portrayals of the female body and sexuality, motherhood and childbirth. Plants gradually took centre stage in her writing after she settled in Southern California in the late 1990s and began a life of shuttling back and forth across the Pacific to take care of her ailing parents in Japan and her partner and children in the States. Ever since, Ito's wide-ranging explorations of the qualities, names, movements and potentials of plants have provided her with a prismatic framework to articulate a whole new set of pressing concerns: immigration, transnational travel and the boundaries between life and death, as well as the burdens that fall on women as caregivers due to gender and social expectations. In the Anglophone world, the author's international reputation now rests solidly on translations of the long poem *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* (2015; *Kawara-arekusa*, originally published in 2005) and the novel *The Thorn Puller* (2022; *Toge-nuki Jizo: Shin Sugamo Jizo engi*, 2007) by Jeffrey Angles.

Jon L. Pitt's luminous new translation of *Kodama-kusadama* (2014), *Tree Spirits Grass Spirits* (2023), is a crucial addition to Ito's growing plant-based international canon. Plants take on a more forceful, nearly

**PLANT PERSPECTIVES - 2025**: 254–257
DOI:10.3197/WHPPP.63845494909746

obsessive, presence in this collection, comprising 22 pieces originally serialised in publisher Iwanami Shoten's periodical, *Tosho*. Ito acknowledges in her Afterword that, during the writing process, 'plants were the only thing that I noticed ... I had a strong feeling that I might actually be made of grass. More grass than human. Or that maybe I was a tree' (p. 162).

Such interplay between self and plant and, more importantly, the crossing of boundaries between self and plant is the spirit that informs the collection at multiple levels. While all of the poems are sustained pieces of creative and critical thinking, they do not fit any received notions of the essay, lyric or otherwise. There is a rhizomatic quality working within and across the texts that resists beginnings and endings, gates and fences. Hence, I find Pitt's comparison of their workings to a garden of limited explanatory value. The anarchistic, vegetal-like agency that narratively shapes the pieces seems to relish uprooting the garden's proprietary vigilance as a form and, instead, tends to seek landscapes where plants can be encountered and known on their own terms, despite the unsettling nature of these encounters.

The most paradigmatic and accomplished piece in this regard is, in my view, 'Covered in Grass, I Slept'. It might have inspired the choice of the book's intriguing cover art, a photograph of a giant and lacey tumbleweed sitting cryptically, at the centre of the frame, on a green lawn. The piece takes us on a journey across a windswept, dusty wasteland in northern California, as the narrator observes all manner of tumbleweeds doing their thing: getting stuck in fences and highway railings, drifting off towards the roots of trees, tumbling up to mountain tops and into fields of green. Here, interestingly, the narrative shifts from a travelogue to an intimate meditation on life and death, on vegetal agency and submission to elemental, cosmic forces:

> The tumbleweed is an object which cannot be called a plant. This is because they are not alive, and they are all dried out. And yet in this we find the cosmic law of plants in motion. As a result of many years of observation, I have discovered the cosmic law of plants: " Dying" is "Living", and "Living" is "Not Dying".' Although not alive, tumbleweeds move and turn and spread their seeds about. Spreading comes from the plant's own volition, but movement comes from the wind. Blown by the wind, plants simply tumble on. (p. 117)

And then, in a swift temporal-geographical movement from the past to the present, from America to Europe and back, we are taken

through a compelling natural and social history of the plants' arrival in the States, to learn that 'tumbleweed isn't merely a type of grass. It's a metaphor for those people who lived and died on those plains, blown by the wind. It's a reality, an existence, a fate that you can't run away from. It's a way of life, and a way of death.' (p. 118)

This profoundly evocative, rhythmical weaving of vegetal and human stories across multiple spaces and temporalities is a defining feature of most of the pieces in the collection, ranging from 'Respective Autumns' to 'Traveling with *Seitaka-awadachisō*'. Another astounding piece, 'Kudzu-san', revolves around the expression of plant desire through wild growth along a neglected riverbank, a vital space of both dispossession and transgression that often features in Ito's writing. Despite the widespread reputation of kudzu as a nasty invader, our narrator encounters the plant outside such judgements; instead, she playfully brings to the fore the affectively charged quality of the encounter:

> The tips of the vines were covered in fuzz, like puppies, and would sway back and forth, and even though vines *should crawl* along the ground, these would stand erect and move in close. They really seemed as if they were full of desire. My daughter was small, so she was able to laugh at them, but if I had been accompanied by a young girl that had already gone through puberty, I would have tactfully tried to ignore the vines' shamelessness, their salaciousness. (p. 132)

Even though the piece moves on, tangentially, to a learned exploration of kudzu-related tropes in Japanese myth and classical literature, we never lose sight of its deeply personal, embodied, contextual dimension as a memoir written by a Japanese woman in transit who conspires *with* plants to re-story her subjectivity *and theirs* across cultures. Again, this entangled situatedness is the hallmark of the whole collection, signalling an existence that refuses to be curated by worn-out tropes of domestication and that thrives on anti-authoritarian dissonance and disorder. The harsh winds that blow across the pieces are the pervasive, multisensory force sustaining and yet unsettling Ito's affective poetics of place. In 'Why I Killed the Pampas Grass', she writes: 'Leaving the house and coming back home was, for me, a regular, everyday occurrence. Shopping, picking up the kids, taking the dogs for a walk. Even though this was the case, whenever I returned home, I got the feeling I had returned to a wasteland. The wind blew through it.' (p. 71).

Reverting to the translator's illuminating preface, it is significant that Pitt should note that this transnational quality of the book makes it

already a work of translation: 'Ito writes often about plants not found in Japan, but for a Japanese audience. And when she *does* write about plants a Japanese readership would know, she regularly invites them to see these in a new environment' (p. xii). Here, Pitt thoughtfully addresses the complex challenges such circumstances pose to a translation aimed at an international audience, which attests to his fine qualities as a translator. He brilliantly captures Ito's flowery yet never gratuitous prose.

*Tree Spirits Grass Spirits* is a luminous read that will immensely reward those willing to give it the requisite time to grow, plant-like, on them. At a time when we are witnessing a fascinating narrative turn in cultural plant studies, researchers and practitioners interested in vegetal storytelling will find much to explore in Hiromi Ito's multistoried meditations with haunting, uncanny plants.

---

**Daniela Kato** is a Japan-based independent scholar with an academic background in the environmental humanities and training in ecotherapy. Through the lenses of autoethnography and storytelling, her research practice navigates the cross-fertilising hinterlands of folklore and mythology, the rural imagination and creative practices of place-making in community, with an emphasis on Japan and East Asia.

*Email: kato.daniela@gmail.com*