

IRIS LAW



*Book review*

**THE PALACE OF CONTEMPLATING DEPARTURE BY BRYNN SAITO**  
RED HEN PRESS, 2013, \$16.95

*The Palace of Contemplating Departure* begins with the memory of a leave-taking: “I was born from a wolf” (19) says the speaker at the start of the opening poem, and as she exits the womb, we are launched, along with her, on a journey of many points of transience and departure.

At times transparent and vulnerable, at others, sinuous with history and the breath of the supernatural, the heart of Brynn Saito’s first full-length collection beats dangerously, exhilaratingly, close to the surface. As it weaves its network of tales and voicings, we are confronted at every turn by the poet’s delightful knack for lyric surprise. In “First Incantation,” a palm placed on the speaker’s chest opens it to reveal an interior landscape with sudden and gorgeous clarity: “the sky inside me / widened. Now the night slips me her best skin / and my mouth takes no prisoners.” Later, in “[First Daylight],” the dark wit of the image—“you took your skull / for a walk”—gives way to a moment of pale, pulsing vulnerability: “you stood in the book aisles, / breathing like a broken tulip.” In these poems and elsewhere, Saito’s lyric interventions parallel the nature of the journeys that her speaker takes throughout the collection: achingly restless, like quicksilver, never with two feet under the same sun for long.

The structure of the book is divided into four parts. In the first, “Ruined Cities,” Saito’s speaker revisits landscapes that were once important to an abandoned relationship, weaving a portrait of loss that, at times, drips quietly with sorrow, as in “Winter in Denmark,” when she recalls the tenderness of her father-in-law examining her scars: “like rain on a valley” and, at other times, vibrates with an almost animalistic ferocity, as in “Leaving New York,” where the city streets become “small black scars / crawling towards water.” In the second and third sequences, “Women and Children” and “Shape of Fire,” Saito delves more deeply into history, threading the speaker’s own present-day experiences of displacement with family traumas of estrangement and grief (a troubled sister, a brother who disappears or dies, his body bent “to the hungering earth”) and inherited narratives of loss and exile (family memories of Japanese American internment during WWII mingle with those of a Sikh roommate who is harassed after 9-11 in “The Gathering Mind,” while in “California Heartland,” the speaker watches brush fires devastate the landscape of her home). In the fourth and final sequence of the book, “Steel and Light,” Saito departs from the speaker’s voice itself, instead inhabiting the gaze of forces in her immediate environment—moonlight, a gun, railroad tracks, dawn—as she traces the progress of her grief in exile.

Throughout this luminous collection, the poet continually returns to touchstones of body, of spirit, of memory—to knife scars on the speaker’s arms; to the lidless eye of death, kept at bay by prayer, prophecy, and divine command; to the ghosts of lovers and strangers, wending their way through streets and gardens to meet the speaker wherever she goes. Saito’s speaker is perpetually transient, propelled from memory to memory, and from city to city, her continual unrootedness symptomatic of the diasporic condition; and yet, these “touchstones” serve as a binding thread, a unifying center that ultimately draws together the many nodes of her journey with “tireless wonder” and a surprising transcendence: “you exalt everything / that cannot contain you—” the speaker is told in the final poem of the collection. When she finally arrives, “I’ll know you by your joy.”