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O. Mabson Southard's Mother Earth Haiku

O Mabson Southard was born Ordway Southard in Massachusetts to a successful and educated family. After health problems he and his family faced, he decided to pursue an unconventional lifestyle instead of going the traditional route. He married, had a daughter, and traveled around, living throughout North America in Mexico, Canada, the U.S., and the Hawaiian Islands. After learning more of the culture and language in Hawaii, paired with his feminist ideologies, Ordway changed his name to O Mabson (after his mother) Southard. He subscribed to several different philosophies throughout his life, Zen and Taoism being a couple of them, and had a passion for Oriental literature. He died while living in Victoria, B.C. in 2000.

As described by his daughter and very evident in his style, word choice, and voice, Mabson writes haiku to preserve a concrete moment in a simple manner. He is not formal, overly specific, and often does not have double meaning in most of his poems. His words capture either the emotion or the physical state of the event that Mabson is witnessing. Though he does this occasionally in a creative style, the focus is still on the simple experienced, so that anyone can relate and be a part of his haiku and the scene he describes. Living simply, to summarize Mabson, was how we become more perceptive to the natural world around us. We cannot see truth or beauty if we chase material goods and sell our lives to become a cog in some large mechanism of production and consumption.

While writing simply about the natural world Mabson remains true to the Japanese roots of haiku. He writes in 5-7-5 syllable lines and writes all of haiku on concrete experience and rejected critiques of symbolism within his poetry. Holding true to these aspects shows the amount of respect Mabson had for the Japanese culture and style, while remaining true to the original art and to himself. Like so many other great authors and writers, Mabson appears to have a high amount of integrity in what he creates.

The locations and moments Mabson captures vary, sometimes, quite drastically. In *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight*, haiku are organized into sections based on where the haiku was written or what it is in reference to. Some these locations include the Pacific Northwest, from the period of time he lived on Vancouver Island in Victoria, B.C., the Hawaiian Islands, the Grasslands, the Northeast, and the mountains. The haiku in each section detail Mabson's experience with each geographical location. Many of these were written from his wanderings in nature and describe the places he went to get further away from the vices of civilization and the modern world.

Mabson's haiku give off a strong sense of being genuine in the present moment. Below are haiku from various sections in a collection of Mabson's poems, *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight*, that illustrate this presence and perspective.

In the dark water
bright grains of phosphorescence —
and a few deep stars

Southard, DSFS, 17

This haiku comes from the "Morning Mist" section, which I imagine was from the coast of B.C. Phosphorescence in this part of the world comes from a photoluminescent algae, which absorbs light during the day and then glows when is disturbed at night or at lower light, this disturbance could be in the form of a wave or by something splashing in the water, causing the water so glow

for a few seconds. It is a breathtaking sight, and no matter the viewer it is hard not to sit down and just watch the waves break for hours on end. The tides were lazy when Mabson wrote this, I'm guessing. And as the specks of light slowly faded in the calming water, He was not sure if the pinpoints were phosphorescence or stars reflected from the clear sky above.

This haiku brought back a memory of the first time I saw phosphorescence. I was in Southeast Alaska on a southern beach on Revillagigedo Island. The night had grown dark and one of us went to grab water from the ocean to put out our fire. When she scooped some water, it glowed, and she shouted with delight. The eight of us spent the next couple hours splashing in the tide and watching the lazy waves break and make a living, glowing line of light along the rocky beach.

In this haiku there's a lesson, maybe intended and maybe not, that sometimes in order to see the light there must be darkness. The phosphorescence cannot be seen during the day in lit water, this spectacle of nature can only be seen in the darkness. The darker the dark, the brighter the light shines. If it was intended, it would be very in character for Mabson considering the influence Japanese philosophy had in his life and perspective.

From wind and moonlight
the bridge shelters the river —
and this leaky boat

Southard, DSFS, 27

In this haiku, I picture Mabson floating lazily down a quiet river. He passes under the dark shadow of the bridge, and the soft breeze calmed, and he wrote this poem. It is a simple, quiet moment on the river where Mabson notices the bridge is more than just a bridge to cross the river; it can also benefit what is under the bridge, like the river or Mabson's boat. It is no ground-shaking thought, but the feeling of the present moment is captured well here, and because the moment feels so genuine, it has value and is worthy of being written about and recorded.

Company tonight!
Chirping from the window sill
a pair of crickets

Southard, DSFS, 36

In this haiku, Mabson wants the reader to breathe in the simplicity of life. The chirp of crickets seems to generally be perceived as annoying, and sometimes the crickets are either tossed outside or stepped on. But as humans we live and coexist with animals of all shapes and sizes, and we have for thousands of years. Mabson brings back this older perspective on animals, not as things we are forced to tolerate, but as company! Things we are excited to spend time with. Though there is an utter lack of communication and understanding between the species, the two (humans and animals) can still speak or chirp and spend time in each other's presence. How exciting it is to live in harmony with the animals around us.

At the window, sleet . . .
Here in the dark old farmhouse —
the squeaking of mice

Southard, DSFS, 38

Similar to the last poem, Mabson wants to draw a connection between man and animals. We are all just animals, after all, and not too much more complex. The weather outside of the farmhouse is grey, dark, and wet. It is not good weather for people or animals, and both seek shelter. Mabson recognizes and capture the connection of basic needs between man and animal: the mice, like Mabson, seek shelter from the storm. Because of this the voice of the haiku is very soothing, where most people nowadays may think that having mice in the house as appalling, or at the very least the average owner of a home today would not want mice in their home. There's no trace of that in this haiku, though, if anything it is closer to a type of happiness, realizing that the shelter can be shared and support more life.

From the waterfall
over to the shower-tree
a sudden rainbow

Southard, DSFS, 45

A focus on being present in the moment is one of the most important parts of the haiku in *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight*. This haiku captures the present particularly well. Rainbows form waterfall mist appear when the amount of water vapor in the air and the light shines down at the perfect angle. Rainbows, I think, are often overlooked in comparison to other natural wonders, but nonetheless they are amazing. In a single drop of water contains all the colors of the rainbow, and the light can shine through just so that a rainbow is revealed if one takes a moment to pause and absorb the beauty. "a sudden rainbow" is a great way to describe Mabson's surprise as he approached the waterfall and the shower tree. I can imagine he stopped and stood to admire the rainbow until the light changed and the scene became slightly less magical.

Dark pad to dark pad —
one pond-lily's frog describes
an arc of moonlight

Southard, DSFS, 67

Nature has a tendency to describe nature, or in other words, nature mimics itself, and everything is connected in some way. When we think of moonlight, a frog does not come to mind initially, if at all. Mabson here more than anywhere else is a good example of the "Stop. Look. Listen." approach to writing haiku mentioned in David Lanoue's *Haiku Guy*. I can see him sitting by the edge of reeds on a pond during one of his wanderings that took him into the night. He notices the dark lily-pads moving and watches a small frog make soft ripples in the calm water as it traverses. In his calm observation, he sees the moon glint off the back of the frog. The motion, as well as the frog itself imitates and absorbs/reflects the moon.

It is also interesting how Mabson uses the word "describes" in the last line. Typically, when we think of a description it is either verbal or written, not by comparison with things that seem so far apart light an arc of moonlight and a frog. Yet, the image is still crystal clear, and the reader understands exactly how the frog looks and jumps. Nature mimics itself, and this mimicry can also be a form of description of another part of nature.

To the moon-blanching grass
within the ring of mushrooms

my sister lures me

Southard, DSFS, 87

Despite the close relationship with his blood sister, mentioned by his daughter in the author biography, the “sister” Mabson is referring to in several of his haiku is not likely referring to his blood sister. Feminism had a very strong role in his life, so much so that he even changed his name to Mabson (Son of Mabel, his mother). In addition to changing his name, he also referred to most women as his “sister,” not too different from how “bro/brother” is a common greeting between men in the last couple decades. Regardless of exactly whom this haiku is about and their relation, Mabson connects the person with nature, or at least in a natural setting. He does this for two reasons: to show the connection between himself and his “sister” as natural, and to illustrate the connectedness of humans and nature.

The scene Mabson paints is almost something out of a fairy tale. The moon blanching grass and ring of mushrooms give this poem a mystical feeling. The picture before him enchants Mabson as he walks across the earth to the scene he describes in this haiku. It also shows his priorities and total cognizance of the world around him. Where most might be fixated on the woman and her beauty, mentioning only briefly the larger picture, Mabson notices and gives light to the little details of the moment, making the woman in the ring of mushrooms appear as part of the bigger scene, but also even more alluring than if the poem had been strictly about her.

At our dawn brook-bath
blush creeps from my sister's brow
right down to her toes

Southard, DSFS, 89

Where the previous haiku was mostly a description of nature and the last line dedicated to his sister, this haiku is all about his sister, but he describes her, or her blush at least, the same way one might describe ivy creeping up the wall of a brick house, a carnivorous feline slinking down from the branches of a tree, or the brook itself flowing, carrying her blush down her body. His tone does not change when he changes from describing a moment from his vantage on nature or on his view of the woman standing before him. This lack of tonal change alludes to the connection Mabson wants to convey between human and nature.

I chose to write about Mabson's poems because he writes in a style that I not only find very appealing, but that I want to emulate in my own haiku. All of Mabson's haiku had a tie to nature, even if not explicit. Like Mabson, I try to live in the most genuine way I can and part of that is exploring my relationship with nature and going on frequent wanderings into the forest or whatever wilderness I am near. I think capturing a real experience and putting it in few words that paints a picture just vague enough for anyone to put himself or herself into is an amazing characteristic of haiku. Mabson is a master of this, and I hope to take away more lessons in doing that as I read more of his work.

Mabson writes to capture the simplicity of the life we live, especially the nature we surround ourselves with and are necessarily a part of. Following the tradition of haiku, he utilizes the traditional style and syllable count, as well as writing from firsthand experience and understanding of the moment. His poems primarily gravitate around the theme of human experience within nature. Part of this requires a separation from technology and letting go of the overconsumption mindset that is now rampant in America and other developed nations. As technology continues to advance, more and more people lose out on experiences and lessons taught only by Mother Earth. We are

forgetting where we came from and that is never a good thing. Mabson's haiku challenges this and forces the reader to think about nature in a more simplistic way and his or her own experience with nature. Hopefully, after reading Mabson, the reader will want to go out on wanderings of their own to see what they can take away. This is why Mabson is and will likely continue to be regarded as an important poet in the haiku community.

Works Cited

Southard, O Mabson. *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight. Selected Haiku of O Mabson Southard.* Brooks Books, 2004.