

Devoted to Home:
A Review of Jane Piirto's *Saunas*
By Beth L. Virtanen, PhD

Again, Jane Piirto gives us a touching and earthy set of poems in her latest work, *Saunas*. It is a carefully crafted volume that takes us from Finland to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to Argentina, Denmark, South Dakota, and other places, each described with bright and vivid detail.

Of "Blueberries" she writes:

. . . Further off the path
by rock with lichens
we wander and don't speak
much, but we hear chickadees
and the wind, soft and august.
Blue smudged by fingers
plops into the pail, then falls
soundless and it fills. (p.8)

And her reader is transported to the Upper Peninsula with the pungent taste of blueberries on one's tongue and the stains upon one's fingers, and imaginary pail in hand.

As she reflects on walking the dog near her home in Ishpeming, she shares: "You just go out/to run the dog,/get waylaid by raspberries./Every trip ends up/with treasure" (p. 9). Her reader, again, reflects on the pleasure of simply walking along the footpaths to find, by good fortune, an abundance of fruit, a fruit that sustains both body and soul.

The book itself is divided into four sections: (I) *Saunas*, (II) *Women Like Horses*, (III) *To a Sleeping Child*, and (IV) *Mushrooms*, each devoted to a particular theme. In the first, each poem is introduced by a *runo* from the *Kalavala*. The blueberry poem above is introduced thus: "*I, a berry, fell on other lands. Runo 23, Kalavala.*" (p.8). "Wild Raspberries, the second quoted passage above, is introduced by Runo 50: "*I took a berry I liked.*" The link, of course, is clear, and each *runo* providing a deeper context for Piirto's verse.

The second section is a careful study of women and their loyalties, sometimes in a feminist mode and often reflecting on the trials of being at one phase or another. Of a fifteen-year-old girl's attraction to James Dean, she writes, "Jimmy—Jimmy—with his sidelong grin, those cute/glasses, shucks, blinks, a little wave in his hair,/shy, shambling, no football jock/a poet, not a hood" (46). And of a childhood friend she writes: "Susan,/it is good to be as we are,/friends since we were three,/in love with movement on skis/on snow in woods. . . . (p. 50). Piirto's reader grows as she does in her recollections, from the crush of a fifteen-year-old girl on a tragic rock star into the surer friendship of womanhood, one that shares and builds on that shared experience. The section culminates with a poem dedicated to an Argentinean Saint, a woman who died, crossing a desert with her infant son in her arms. In her arms, he survived, suckling at her breast until, three days later, he was found by muleskinners. There is a shrine to her, there in Argentina, where "Thousands of candles flicker/in the dollhouses along the dusty way/of these mumbling creeping pilgrims [who worship at the shrine]" (p. 58).

The third section, Piirto examines motherhood and womanhood. In “Succumbing,” she writes of a mother who has abused her child: “Being a woman/is not just sexual politics./It’s you, my son,/who cringed, eyes backed/at my terrible anger,/as I sat on you and beat your bottom/with my fist” (p. 61). In this harsh poem, Piirto’s poetic creation of a mother who behaves outside the bounds of what we wish to know, still, teaches something. In the last stanza, Piirto writes in the words of the mother: “Now, afterwards [after the boy’s growing up]/I understand more than you’ll/put up with/about shame” (p. 61). The poem hurts, but it teaches. Also in this section, Piirto examines a three-year-old’s concept of time and the loss of a parent. It is a powerful casting of life’s tougher moments interspersed with some of the simply joyful ones.

The closing section, “Mushrooms,” examines maturity, the knowledge of which wild mushroom to eat and which to pass by, the knowledge that the mushroom in the can won’t look like the mushroom in the bush. It reflects on self-doubt brought about by self-awareness, those bits of knowledge that seep in once we pass beyond the blush of youth. Early in “Tango Argentina,” Piirto writes about being charmed by the country. A fortune teller assures the speaker in the poem that she can be a tango singer and that her true love will come on the tenth day of her stay. On the tenth night, she stays out late at the cantina with her friends, but no love comes. At 5:00 a.m., “This cute waiter tells me/he wants to come to the U. S./*He wants to marry me!*. . . I am drunk on disappointment/and possibility./He is not my love./ Does this mean/I cannot be/a tango singer/either?” (p. 89).

In all, the book is tremendous. It takes the reader on a sensate journey about the globe, and it brings us home to ourselves. It is well worth the read. It is available from Mayapple Press.