



California State Poetry Society

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CSPS Poetry Letter

Dear Lovers and Readers of Poetry:

This Poetry Letter accompanies the summer issue of the *CQ*, and what a *fine* issue it is! I hope these months allow you some reading time—perhaps on the beach—like the wonderful readers peopling the shores of Joaquín Sorolla’s paintings! I wish you such a wonderful summer! And please keep sending me your best published poems if you’d like to see them republished (with information as to where and when they were first published).

Your *Poetry Letter* editor,

Margaret Saine
umsainemail.com

Orange, August 2018



Our first poem is by a longtime contributor:

THE BOLDER BROTHER

You stand in night, the hard
darkness. Taking it all in.
With barely a shrug for
the vast drape of constellations.

Off on the sidelines,
I finger pocket change
and look on in silence.

Small eyes watch as
you turn on your heel,
crunch gravel,
kiss off the stars.

Thomas Feeny, Raleigh, North Carolina
First appeared in *The Aurean*, Spring/Summer 2010

ONO NO KOMACHI (ca. 825 – ca. 900 CE)

Ono no Komachi is the only woman poet of the **Rokasén** group, consisting of the six outstanding waka (or tanka) writers of the early Heian [Kyoto] era in Japan, which is roughly contemporary with Europe's Late Carolingian period [after Charlemagne]. Ono no Komachi's poems still seem vivid and spontaneous to us today, while at the same time elegant and sophisticated in their poetic craft.

The tanka, a stanza form of a total of 31 syllables divided into 5 verses, displays the syllabic pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 and often presents a subtle psychogram of emotions. Because lovers used to exchange tanka as if they were letters or email messages, often one writing the first three and the other the last two, tanka are found in most novels of the period, such as "The Tale of Genji." From the first three verses of the tanka, the haiku later developed.

Here is a tanka by Ono no Komachi in three versions: Japanese characters, phonetic transcription in Latin script, and English translation. I have readapted the tanka to the traditional verse scheme, out of respect for Japanese culture:

夢ぢには	yumeji ni wa	Though the paths of dreams	5
あしもやすめず	ashi mo yasumezu	take me, walking without rest,	7
かよへども	kayoedomo	always towards you,	5
うつつにひとめ	utsutsu ni hitome	I would wish for just a glimpse	7
見しごとはあらず	mishigoto wa arazu	of you in the real world.	7

Some tanka by Ono no Komachi are prefaced by sentences that establish their context. In the following they will be rendered in *Italics*, though they may be spurious and anecdotal—or indeed considered self-explanatory and redundant.

Sent anonymously to a man who had passed in front of the screens of my room:

Should the world of love	5
founder in such deep darkness,	7
without our glimpsing	5
the sudden gap between clouds,	7
when moonlight brightens the sky?	7

Sent to a man who seemed to have changed his mind about her:

Since my heart placed me
on board of your drifting ship,
not a day has passed
on this trip that I haven't
been drenched by violent waves.

Sent in a letter attached to a rice stalk with an empty seed husk:

How sad that I still
hope to see you even now,
after my life has
emptied itself like this stalk
in the autumn wind.



In many tanka, nature plays a principal role, but never without the affinity with human life, perceptions, and memories. Ono no Komachi's tanka anticipate the atmospheric qualities of haiku seven centuries later, e. g. by Bashó (1644-1694):

The pine by the rock
must have its own memories:
after thousand years of life,
look how its tired branches
lean down on the ground.

Watching the moonlight
as it spills forever down
through the trees around
where I stand, my heart fills up
with autumn feeling.

Other tanka by Ono no Komachi are moving meditations on the fragility of life and love, in which the poet skillfully intertwines the metaphorical and symbolical relationship between the world of nature and of human beings, in an intensely elegiac lament:

On nights when no moon
lights up your way to my place,
my breast is on fire,
fervent passions rage, flames char
my heart exploding within.

To fade, but without
outwardly apparent signs,
like a flower, is
the fate of the human heart
on this earth, this world of ours.

My body has grown
fragile like a floating reed
cut off from its roots:
if this river would ask me
to follow, I think I'd go.

As I am watching
endless rains fall on this world,
my heart seems to fade
in colors invisible
as those of the spring flowers.

I hope you have enjoyed our little excursion into another culture and era. ☺



Now, back to republishing our own texts! This next poem reads like a comment on Ono no Komachi:

READING AT MIDNIGHT

Give me a jot
by one of those
Japanese women
who wrote in lantern light,
an escaped thread
of her bundled
black mane
twisting itself
around her pen.

Marjorie Power, Denver, Colorado
First appeared in *CQ*, Vol. 43 No. 1

Our last poem, an untitled one, is by another of our cherished poets:

summer sleeps
in seashells
curled inside a wave ...
blue and silver pebbles
fill the sand

Jane Stuart, Greenup, Kentucky
First appeared in *Bard #177*, a periodical broadside
by DJ Tyrer, Atlantean Publishing, Southend-on-
Sea, United Kingdom

Enjoy the rest of the summer, and once again I urge you to take some time for some *good writing!*

Margaret Saine

