

# Traditional Japanese Poetry

AN ANTHOLOGY



*Translated, with an Introduction, by*  
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# The Classical Age



*In the late eighth century, the capital of Japan was moved from Heijō to Heian-Kyō, the city of peace and tranquility. Again the model for the city was to be found in China, with which the Japanese court was carrying on an active correspondence through ambassadors, traders, artists, and Buddhist priests. For the first years of the new era, continental models dominated poetry as well. But by the mid-800's the Tang dynasty was in collapse, and for this and other reasons the Japanese began to turn away from the continent. In the past they had assimilated Chinese models in almost every area of cultural life; now the time had come to refine them, to make them more distinctly Japanese.*

*This inward turn resulted in one of the greatest flowerings of court culture in Japanese history. Made wealthy by their sinecures and private estates, the aristocratic classes—meaning particularly the Fujiwara clan, which dominated the court for most of the Classical Age—adorned themselves in fine silks and the costliest appurtenances, from ornamental swords to carts and carriages. Competing among themselves, they built grand mansions, which they surrounded with gardens and lakes and decorated with paintings and furnishings commissioned from thriving craftsmen and artists. Even their chapels were decorated*

with fine statuary and furnishings whose bright colors failed to strike them as out of keeping with the innate somberness of the Buddha's message.

Poetry figured large in this efflorescence. In fact, throughout the Classical Age, or the Heian period (794–1185), poetry was at the very heart of court life, used in witty conversation at court, for correspondence between friends, and—perhaps most importantly—for messages between lovers. Along with calligraphy and musical talent, the ability to compose a good poem was considered an essential accomplishment of the highborn and their minions. As mentioned in the Introduction, Chinese influences in diction and imagery, theme and tenor, were again prominent: composing poetry was no idle pastime, but a serious business involving the mastery of rhetorical techniques and knowledge of a canon.

Much of the poetry of the period, nearly all of which was in the *uta* form, was of course never recorded. But tales such as Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji) make it clear that it was indeed a constant feature of court life. Diaries and memoirs of the time are also filled with it; seldom do even historical works fail to spend a good deal of time recording their subject's poems.

It was at this time that poetry contests (*uta-awase*) became a constant feature of aristocratic life, providing one means of "publication" for avid poets. And these contests in turn became raw material for imperial anthologies, six of which were compiled by imperial order during the years between 905 and 1151. Recorded on the finest paper by the finest hands of the day and then stored in elegant boxes of the same sort used to store Buddhist sutras, these collections came to symbolize the heritage of court society. Along with the personal collections of family members, handwritten copies of *Kokinshū* (Collection of Early and Modern Japanese Poetry; 905) and its successors became the central holdings of aristocratic libraries, whose owners cherished the ambition of one day having some of their works memorialized in the same way.

Among these poets, the finest came from the middle classes of court society—ladies in waiting and middle-ranking officials who could win through poetry the sort of fame denied them by family background and rank. It is a tribute to their energy and perseverance that what they deemed appropriate in the way of subject matter, vocabulary, and sentiments for their own poems remained the standard for several centuries to come. If Man'yōshū had left any doubt about the matter, men like *Ki no Tsurayuki* (ca. 872–945) made it clear that poetry in Japanese—

or, for that matter, in Chinese, when it was still being produced—was a product of court culture meant for a courtly audience. Others could be allowed into the circle of the higher culture the *uta* represented only by mastering its strictly defined conventions and standards of taste.



## Ariwara no Narihira (825-880)

For nearly a hundred years after the compilation of *Man'yōshū*, the Japanese court continued to show intense interest in those things Chinese that had first attracted Ōtomo Tabito and his circle. Unlike the members of the Kyūshū salon, however, the emperors and courtiers of the capital composed their works almost exclusively in Chinese. Meanwhile, poetry in Japanese, although remaining a medium of informal communication, languished. Not surprisingly, then, even when the native tradition did reassert itself in the mid-800's, it was with preoccupations that showed the influence of the Chinese poems of the Six Dynasties, which were characterized by witty expression involving the use of elaborate metaphor and wordplay, an emphasis on intellect and often convoluted reasoning, and a preoccupation with problems of perception—in all, an approach that departed from the directness of Hitomaro and Akahito.

One of the first great figures of this new tradition was Ariwara no Narihira, a man who could trace his genealogy back to the imperial family but who remained a minor figure in a hierarchy increasingly dominated by the powerful Fujiwara clan. His highest office was that of head chamberlain, a post to which he was appointed just months before he died. The records of the time are fairly specific in their delineation of Narihira's traits, saying that he was a handsome man of passionate disposition who had little Chinese learning but excelled in the poetry of his own land. He was much involved in the poetic life of his age, leaving behind occasional poetry (poems 109, 119) that displays a total mastery of technique—but with serious overtones that set much of his work apart from the mere playfulness of many of his contemporaries. Thus even in what first appears to be a straightforward declaration on the beauty of the cherry blossoms (see 108)—an old topic even by his time—he manages to hint at a truth that one might call the aesthetic paradox: yes, we might be more at peace without the blossoms; but without their beauty, would spring be spring?

This introspective bent is particularly obvious in his love poems. Himself a legendary lover whose exploits are partially chronicled in *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise), Narihira can play the rake (116–17, 120–21), using all the tools of the language. But for him love is more than a conventional topic; it is a feeling of losing control, and hence a fitting example of what it means

to be a human being—to have powers of reason that the stronger forces of emotion refuse to obey. Time and again he asks questions. Why can I not argue my way out of feeling (111)? Is it the waking world that is reality, or the world of dreams (113–14)? As the objective world changes, why doesn't my heart? Or vice versa (115)? In the end, he has no sure answers, choosing (as in 114) to let other men make such pronouncements. He is content merely to express, albeit with great artistry, what he feels.

108. SPRING. On seeing cherry blossoms at the Nagisa no In<sup>1</sup>

Ah, if in this world  
there were only no such thing  
as cherry blossoms—  
then perhaps in the springtime  
our hearts could be at peace.

yo no naka ni / taete sakura no / nakariseba / haru no  
kokoro wa / nodokekaramashi

1. A palace anciently located in what is now Hirakata City, Osaka Municipality.

\*109. FELICITATIONS. Composed when there was a fortieth-year celebration for the Horikawa Chancellor at the Kujō Mansion<sup>2</sup>

Scatter at random,  
O blossoms of the cherry,  
and cloud the heavens,  
that you may conceal the path  
old age is said to follow.

sakurabana / chirikaikumore / oiraku no / komu to iu  
naru / michi magau ga ni

2. The Horikawa Chancellor was Fujiwara no Mototsune (836–91).

\*110. TRAVEL. Once Narihira was traveling toward the East Country with one or two friends. . . . When they reached the bank of the Sumida River, which flows between the provinces of Musashi and Shimōsa, they were miserably homesick for the capital. They dismounted and stood for a time on

the bank, thinking, "How very far we have come!" The ferryman interrupted their laments. "Come aboard quickly; it's getting late." They got into the boat and prepared to cross, all in wretched spirits, for there was not one among them who had not left someone dear to him in the city. A white bird with a red bill and red legs chanced to be frolicking near the river. Since it was of a species unknown in the capital, none of them could identify it. "What kind of bird is that?" they asked the ferryman. "A capital-bird,<sup>3</sup> of course," he replied with an air of surprise. Then Narihira recited this poem.

3. *Miyakodori*, a small gull, probably the same as the modern *yurikamome*.

If you are in truth  
 what your name seems to make you,  
 I will put to you,  
 capital-bird, this question:  
 do things go well with my love?

na ni shi owaba / iza koto towamu / miyakodori / waga  
 omou hito wa / ari ya nashi ya to

\* III. LOVE. On the day of an archery meet at the riding grounds of the Bodyguards of the Right, Narihira glimpsed a lady's face through the silk curtains of a carriage opposite. He sent her this poem.

How very foolish!  
 Shall I spend all of today  
 lost in pensive thought,  
 my heart bewitched by someone  
 neither seen nor yet unseen?

mizu mo arazu / mi mo senu hito no / koishiku wa / aya  
 naku kyō ya / nagamekurasamu

\* III2. LOVE. Composed during a drizzle and sent to a lady whom he had been secretly wooing since early in the Third Month

Having passed the night  
 neither waking nor sleeping,  
 I have spent the day  
 brooding and watching the rain—  
 the unending rain of spring.

oki mo sezu / ne mo sede yoru o / akashite wa / haru no  
 mono tote / nagamekurashitsu

III3-III4. LOVE. When Narihira went to Ise Province, he met in great secrecy with the lady who was serving as Ise Virgin.<sup>4</sup> The next morning, while he was wondering how to manage a message without a messenger, he received this poem from the Virgin.

4. See s.n. 21.

[III3] Did you come to me?  
 Was it I who went to you?  
 I am beyond knowing.  
 Was it dream or reality?  
 Was I sleeping or awake?

kimi ya koshi / ware ya yukikemu / omōezu / yume ka  
 utsutsu ka / nete ka samete ka

His reply:

[III4] I have wandered lost  
 in the gloomy darkness  
 that is my heart.  
 Whether dream or reality,  
 let someone else decide.

kakikurasu / kokoro no yami ni / madoiniki / yume utsu-  
 tsu to wa / yohito sadame yo

5. Legend identifies this woman as the daughter of the powerful Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu (775–826) who later (as Junshi; 809–871) became a consort to Emperor Ninmyō (810–50; r. 833–50). But there is little evidence to support the contention that she had an affair with Narihira.

\* 115. LOVE. Once, quite without premeditation, Narihira began to make love to a lady who lived in the western wing of a palace belonging to the Gojō Empress.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the tenth of the First Month, the lady moved away with no word to him. He learned where she had gone, but it was impossible to communicate with her. In the spring of the following year, when the plum blossoms were at their finest, memories of the preceding year drew him back to the western wing on a beautiful moonlit night. He lay on the floor of the bare room until the moon sank low in the sky.

Is this not the moon?  
And is this not the springtime,  
the springtime of old?  
Only this body of mine  
the same body as before . . .

tsuki ya aranu / haru ya mukashi no / haru naranu / wa ga  
mi hitotsu wa / moto no mi ni shite

\* 116–117. LOVE. While Narihira was married to the daughter of Aritsune,<sup>6</sup> he once became displeased with her. After a period of some length, during which he called in the daytime but always left in the evening, someone wrote this poem and sent it to him.

[116] Like a proper spouse,  
you have remained visible—  
but for what reason  
might you be growing distant  
as a cloud in the heavens?

amakumo no / yoso ni mo hito no / nariyuku ka / sasuga  
ni me ni wa / miyuru mono kara

6. Dates 815–77; a middle-ranking courtier of the Ki family.

His reply:

[117] That I spend my days  
going and then returning,  
ever in the sky,  
is the fault of the harsh wind  
on the hill where I would stay.

yukikaeri / sora ni nomi shite / furu koto wa / waga iru  
yama no / kaze hayami nari

\* 118. LAMENTS. Composed when he was ill and failing

Upon this pathway,  
I have long heard others say,  
man sets forth at last—  
yet I had not thought to go  
so very soon as today.

tsui ni yuku / michi to wa kanete / kikishikado / kinō kyō  
to wa / omowazarishi o

\* 119. MISCELLANEOUS. Once Narihira accompanied Prince Koretaka on an excursion.<sup>7</sup> Back at their lodgings, the Prince's party drank and talked all through the night. When the eleven-day-old moon was about to set,<sup>8</sup> the Prince, somewhat befuddled, prepared to retire, and Narihira composed this poem.

Must the moon vanish  
in such great haste, leaving us  
still unsatisfied?  
Retreat, O rim of the hills,  
and refuse to let it set.

akanaku ni / madaki mo tsuki no / kakururu ka / yama no  
ha nigete / irezu mo aranamu

7. Dates 844–97; a son of Emperor Montoku (827–58; r. 850–58). Narihira served in the Prince's entourage.

8. According to the lunar calendar, the full moon comes at mid-month, on the fifteenth. Thus the moon would be near full on the eleventh.

\* 120-21. MISCELLANEOUS. Sent to someone at Fukakusa—"Village of Deep Grass"—as he prepared to return to the capital after having lived there

[120] This Fukakusa,  
my home for so long a time—  
if I go away,  
will it become a wild field,  
"Deep Grass" deeper than ever?

toshi o hete / sumikoshi sato o / idete inaba / itodo fuka-  
kusa / no to ya narinamu

Her reply:

[121] If it be a field,  
I will spend the years crying  
like a calling quail—  
and surely you will at least  
come briefly for some hunting.

no to naraba / uzura to nakite / toshi wa hemu / kari ni  
dani ya wa / kimi ka kozaramu



Ono no Komachi (fl. ca. 850)

Her poetic exchanges with several other ninth-century poets provide most of our information about Ono no Komachi, who ranks alongside Ariwara



*Ono no Komachi*

no Narihira as one of the greatest poets of the Early Classical period. Those same poems indicate that she was a lady-in-waiting at court in the 850's and 860's. However, nowhere is there evidence to account for the legend, most fully articulated in a number of medieval Nō plays, that portrays her as a beautiful but coldhearted lover who, in symbolic recompense for her cruel treatment of men, ended life as an impoverished old hag living on the outskirts of the capital.<sup>1</sup>

Legends aside, her poetry does evince a passionate temperament that may have provided the impetus for later storytellers. A number of her works (poems 122, 127, for example) state a preference for the world of dreams, which in her case is a realm free of social restraints on romantic and erotic fulfillment. And one of her most famous poems (131) is also one of the most open avowals of passionate physical desire in the classical canon. It should be added, however, that Komachi is also a consummate craftsman, whose use of pivot-words, prefaces, and associative technique makes her poems some of the most rhetorically complex and yet wholly successful in the language.

1. The most famous of the plays are *Kayoi Komachi* (Komachi and the Hundred Nights) and *Sotoba Komachi* (Komachi on the Stupa).

\* 122. LOVE. Topic unknown

Did you come to me  
because I dropped off to sleep,  
tormented by love?  
If I had known I dreamed,  
I would not have awakened.

omoitsutsu / nureba ya hito no / mietsuramu / yume to  
shiriseba / samezaramashi o

\* 123–24. LOVE. Abe no Kiyoyuki [825–900].  
Suggested by the monk Shinsei's sermon during a  
memorial service at the Lower Izumo Temple;<sup>1</sup> sent  
to Ono no Komachi

[123] They are only tears  
shed for one I cannot see—  
those fair white jewels

1. Located in the  
Yamashina area, in the  
Eastern Hills of Kyōto.

that will not stay in my sleeve  
when I seek to wrap them up.

tsutsumedomo / sode ni tamaranu / shiratama wa / hito o  
minu me no / namida narikeri

Her reply:

[124] Tears that do no more  
than turn into beads on sleeves  
are formal indeed.  
Mine flow in a surging stream,  
try though I may to halt them.

oroka naru / namida zo sode ni / tama wa nasu / ware wa  
sekiaezu / takitsuse nareba

\* 125. LOVE. Topic unknown

There is no seaweed  
to be gathered in this bay.  
Does he not know it—  
the fisher who comes and comes  
until his legs grow weary?<sup>2</sup>

mirume naki / wa ga mi o ura to / shiraneba ya / karenade  
ama no / ashi tayuku kuru

2. This poem is an  
example of complex  
rhetorical technique  
involving pivot-words  
(*mirume naki* meaning  
both “there’s no sea-  
weed” and “you cannot  
see me”) and a string of  
associated words: sea-  
weed, bay, fisher, and  
so on.

\* 126. SPRING. Topic unknown

Autumn nights, it seems,  
are long by repute alone:  
scarcely had we met  
when morning's first light appeared,  
leaving everything unsaid.

aki no yo mo / na nomi narikeri / au to ieba / koto zo to  
mo naku / akenuru mono o



## \* 127. LOVE. Topic unknown

Yielding to a love  
that recognizes no bounds,  
I will go by night—  
for the world will not censure  
one who treads the path of dreams.

kagiri naki / omoi no mama ni / yoru mo komu / yumeji o  
sae ni / hito wa togameji

## \* 128. LOVE. Topic unknown

Though I go to you  
ceaselessly along dream paths,  
the sum of those trysts  
is less than a single glimpse  
granted in the waking world.

yumeji ni wa / ashi mo yasumezu / kayoedomo / utsutsu  
ni hitome / mishi goto wa arazu

## 129. LOVE. Topic unknown

What is it that fades  
without a change in color?  
It is the flower  
in the heart of those who love  
in this world of ours.

iro miede / utsurou mono wa / yo no naka no / hito no  
kokoro no / hana ni zo arikeru

130. MISCELLANEOUS. Composed in reply when  
Fun'ya no Yasuhide,<sup>3</sup> who had been named a third-  
ranking official in Mikawa, sent her a message say-  
ing, "How about coming to have a look at my new  
duty post?"

In my forlorn state  
I feel like a floating reed<sup>4</sup>

3. Dates unknown;  
another prominent  
poet of the time (see  
poem 436).

4. *Ukikusa* (lit.,  
"floating grass"), or  
duckweed, is a plant  
that floats on the sur-  
face of ponds and  
inlets but is rooted to  
the bottom. Used in  
Chinese poetry as a  
metaphor for travel.

ready to break free  
at the roots and drift away—  
if the waters would but tempt me.

wabinureba / mi o ukikusa no / ne o taete / sasou mizu  
araba / inamu to zo omou

## 131. MISCELLANEOUS FORMS. Topic unknown

When I cannot see him  
in the dark of a moonless night,  
fire rises in me—  
leaping in my burning breast,  
charring my heart with its flames.

hito ni awamu / tsuki no naki ni wa / omoi okite / mune  
hashiribi ni / kokoro yake ori



## Archbishop Henjō (816-890)

If Ariwara no Narihira is a poet full of questions, his contemporary Yoshi-  
mine Munesada, known by his religious name Henjō, seems to be a man  
with only answers. Born to an imperial prince, he spent the first several  
decades of his career in various posts at court, and then took the tonsure  
after the death of a chief benefactor, going on eventually to become an  
archbishop and the abbot of an important temple. He was fully involved  
in the poetic affairs of his time, numbering several emperors, a prince, and  
many important courtiers among his companions.

Henjō is a master of poetry as a medium of courtly expression—whether