Selections from Man’yōshū by Various Authors

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John Peters

Man’yōshū 11: 2653

At the sound of the pounding of horses’ hooves
I go and look out from the shade of the pines
perhaps it is you

John Peters

Man’yōshū 7: 1263

Night crows caw the coming dawn
still it is silent above these summit treetops

John Peters

Man’yōshū 2: 105

Sending you away to Yamato in deepening night
I stood till wet with the dew of dawn
John Peters

**Man’yōshū 2: 107**

In the dew
of the mountain
I stand waiting for my love
in the dew
of the mountain

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John Peters

**Man’yōshū 2: 108**

Waiting for me
at the mountain
you were wet with dew
I wish
I were that dew

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John Peters

**Man’yōshū 19: 4139**

In the spring garden
the scent of
red peach blossoms
illuminates a woman walking
the paths below
Commentary

*Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*) is an anthology of poems from ancient Japan; nearly all appear to have been written roughly between 625 and 760 A.D. The anthology is said to have been culled from no longer extant earlier anthologies and comprises 4,516 poems in twenty books or scrolls by over 400 identified poets and numerous others who are unidentifed. Of the six translations included here, two were written by unidentified poets. The other four have their authors listed. About Japanese poetry of this time, the poetic line is not based upon the number of stressed syllables, as is Anglo-Saxon poetry, or upon the number of stressed syllables in conjunction with the number of overall syllables, as is blank verse, or upon patterns of rhyming, as is much of Western poetry—but instead upon the total number of *on* (sounds), which is the linguistic concept of a mora. *Man'yōshū* consists of two kinds of such poetry, *chōka* and *waka*, *chōka* being long poems of indefinite length with alternating lines of 5 and 7 *on*, and *waka* being single-line poems with divisions of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 *on*. Fewer than 400 of the poems in *Man'yōshū* are *chōka*, and the translations included here are all *waka*. As was true of ancient Chinese poetry, subtlety and understatement are valued in Japanese poetry of this period, and in translating these *waka*, I have sought to maintain the understatement of the original Japanese poems. For example, the image of dew appears with some frequency in these poems and is understood to represent not only literal dew but also tears. Along with trying to maintain the subtlety and understatement, I have also sought to run the difficult middle course of faithfully translating the meaning and spirit of the original Japanese while at the same time attempting to produce good poetry in English.