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Selections from Man'yōshū by Various Authors

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John Peters
Man'yōshū 11: 2653

Anonymous

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

Anonymous

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

John Peters
Man'yōshū 2: 105

Princess Ōku

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

John Peters
Man'yōshū 2: 107

Prince Ōtsu

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

John Peters
Man'yōshū 2: 108

Lady Ishikawa

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

John Peters
Man'yōshū 19: 4139

Ōtomo Yakamochi

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

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 unidentified. 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.