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Beneath the Moss by Fujiwara Shunzei

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Since the death of my companion of many years (the mother of my children) on the thirteenth day of the second month of 1193, I have endured the empty passage of months and days, until now, near the end of the sixth month, when I find myself beneath the darkening sky of dusk, alone, recalling the past. And so, I wrote,

(172)

How bitter the cost
Of the long years of love
I knew with her.
For so much harder to bear
Is my sorrow now we are parted.

(175)

Had I a wizard
I would send him far,
Beyond the distant mountains
To the very ends of the sky,
To bring me back word of her.

(173)

In a prior life
What were the vows of love
We vowed to keep,
That I should grieve her death
As deeply as this?

(176)

While I mourned,
Spring ended and summer too
Draws to a close,
But my grief is unaltered by time.
I feel we parted today.

(174)

Now and again,
Brief dreams that let me forget
Restore her to me,
Only to be woken once more
To fresh depths of grief.

(177)

Oh, how long
Shall I linger in this world
To gaze at the sky
And be moved by the sight
Of clouds fading into dusk?

*The translator would like to dedicate these translations to Dr. Clifton (Will) Royston, Jr., who first introduced her to Shunzei's verse, and to the memory of her late husband, Eric Darwin Hansen.

Composed at the grave site at Hosshōji temple:

(178)

So urgent my love,
I made my way through the grasses,
Seeking this field,
Where my heart is shattered by thoughts
Of the one beneath the moss.

(180)

There beneath the moss,
Some trace of the soul may remain—
Or so I've heard.
May it let me know
Which way she has gone.

(179)

I made my way
Across the field of grass,
Teardrops shattered by grief,
But no answer does she give
From beneath the moss.

On the ninth day of the seventh month, an autumn day of wind and rain, my son Teika visited me, and as he was taking his leave, left a verse, describing the sorrowful scene before him. To this, I responded,

(194)

Autumn now,
The breeze bears with it
An unwonted chill,
And tears spill like dewdrops
To scatter in its wake.

On the thirteenth day of the second month of the following year, on the anniversary of her death, I went once more to Hosshōji. In the evening, I listened to the wind soughing through the pines and wrote,

(197)

My heart is broken
By the keening wind in the pines,
This rare evening I visit,
But ceaseless is this sound for you,
Listening beneath the moss?

(198)

Did we ever think
When we pledged love to endure
For a thousand years,
That the storm wind in the pines
Would be the limit of our bond?

The next day, at the gravesite,

(199)

How long will it be
That I come here to remember?
For I am as well
Destined to die and decay
There beneath the moss.

(200)

Though I will remember,
And yearn all my days in this world,
It is all in vain;
Immeasurable and without end
The duration of the moss.

On the thirteenth day of the second month of 1198, it being the anniversary of my wife's death, I made my way to Hosshōji and visited her gravesite and composed,

(203)

Six years have passed
Since that day of parting.
Why then does she not
Send word to let me know
Which of the Six Paths she travels?

Commentary

These fourteen, thirty-one syllable *waka* poems were composed between 1193 and 1198 to mourn the death in early spring of 1193 of Bifuku mon'in no Kaga, the wife for nearly half a century of Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204). Shunzei was a renowned court poet and compiler of the seventh royal collection of *waka*, *Senzaishū*, who would be long honored as the patriarch of the Mikohidari family of poets. These compositions, from Shunzei's *Chōshūsō* (Henshū Iinkai, ed. *Shinpen Kokka Taikan*, 10 vols. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1983–92), are, owing to their personal nature, simpler than many of his more formal verse. Part of their evocativeness, nonetheless, arises from Shunzei's use of the technique of allusive variation.

Composed across five years, Shunzei's poems trace the fluid, unsettled experience of loss. The poet looks back to the past for ways to explain present suffering, seeking some form of communication with the dead and reflecting on his own mortality, and finally acknowledges an insurmountable barrier between the living and the dead. Spatially, too, the verses open with the poet presumably in his own home, where he remains confined in his mourning even as exterior time passes on. Then beginning with verse 178, which speaks of a yearning that compels physical motion, he relates his several journeys to his wife's gravesite. In these latter verses, he repeatedly invokes images of the field of grass and of moss, making the latter emblematic of the ultimate separation between the living and the dead.

As is my practice, I adopted the five-line format, and although I did not try to reproduce the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable count, I attempted to maintain shorter and slightly longer lines. I preserved as well I could the order of the lines and images, believing that the sequence in which they unfold to be important. However, if the result did violence to English sense and sound, I abandoned that effort. In choosing diction, I tried to strike a balance between faithfulness to the original and overly expansive interpretation. One decision that English forces on the translator is the use of pronouns, absent from the original Japanese but, in my view, particularly justified in these personal poems. Thus I supply not only the obvious first person pronoun, but “she/her” and, in several later compositions, “you” and “we/our.” These shifts in pronouns came unbidden in my translation of these compositions, in which I felt that the bond between husband

and wife was most emphasized just as the poet recognized it had been irrevocably broken.

This set of Shunzei's compositions also displays the fruitful intersection of actual personal feeling with established forms and tropes. Shunzei writes in a poetic tradition in which diction, images, even sensibilities were severely circumscribed. Nearly every image, at times whole lines of his verses, are canonical and resonate with multiple other compositions. Rather than finding this tradition restrictive, Shunzei argued that it was in the poetic canon that the truest expressions of human feelings were preserved and that the task of the poet was to harmonize his or her voice with that chorus. In this set of poems, the poet invokes compositions from *The Tale of Genji*, so that his experience of loss summons up those of the (fictional) protagonists in that early eleventh-century tale. Shunzei's evocations of *The Tale of Genji*, as his contemporaries would have recognized, were not merely decorative but testify to Shunzei's belief in the unchanging truth of human experience and its expression through *waka*.

Specific allusions and notes:

175. In the "Paulownia Pavilion" (*Kiritsubo*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji* (Royall Tyler, tr., *The Tale of Genji* [New York: Penguin Books, 2003] 11), Genji's father, after the death of Genji's mother, wishes that there were a wizard to find her, to know where her soul has gone. Prince Genji himself will employ the same image of the wizard in a much later chapter of the tale, "The Seer" (*Maboroshi*) (Tyler, p. 776), after the death of his beloved consort Murasaki. Both poems refer back even further to Bai Juyi's "Song of Unending Sorrow," in which the Chinese emperor mourns the death of his beloved Yang Guifei.

178. This image comes from a *Genji* poem in the "Twilight Beauty" (*Yūgao*) chapter (Tyler, p. 76), which the Prince composes after the death of his lover, Yūgao.

179–80. One of Genji's lovers, in the "Under the Cherry Blossoms" (*Hana no En*) chapter (Tyler, p. 76), asks, if she were to die, if he would not seek her out, making his way through the grassy field.

204. The Six Paths refers to the six realms of karmic rebirth: hell, hungry ghosts, animals, *asura*, humans, and heavenly beings.