

The Moon, This Unending Night

1.

I watch the world
through a mountain—

no prying eyes
no seemingness

my griefs moon-thick and close

2.

Mother Moon seems here
but with her rudder lost

she is deep in creeping quiet
thinking nothing
that was not dear (to me)

3.

my little temple
may endure
advanced age (puzzled by frost)

 & recall night by burning
 bitter stories in snow

4.

all is confusion, Mother:
waves scatter and
 hurricanewhirls
lay waste to a downward
 -curving life

you begin to drift; I cannot

see the name I bear on my sleeves

5.

sleep I indeed alone?
silk-white robes seek fields in spring

as I brandish my sorrow
 break the bridge
 paint the river dragon red

6.

new moon
smile and say—

the human mind cannot be known
the waves shall not cross over lonely barriers
the feeling of time does not flow away

ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

“The Moon, This Unending Night” was created from two English translations of the Japanese *Hyakunin Isshu: Hyakunin-Isshu (Single Songs of a Hundred Poets)* by Clay MacCauley (1899) and *A Hundred Verses from Old Japan* by William N. Porter (1909). About the process of composition, Melissa Frederick writes:

This is another group of poems that I’ve based on old translations of *Hyakunin Isshu*, an anthology of tanka (one hundred poets, one poem each) published in the 13th century and including some work written centuries before that. The two translations I’ve been drawing on were published around the turn of the 20th century, when Japanese society had already become more westernized and open to westerners living in Japan. (One of the translators, Clay MacCauley, even spent 25 years there as a Unitarian missionary.)

It gets difficult describing all the layers of words—poems, translations, translations of translations (as in MacCauley’s work, which includes direct translations of the original Japanese). The process of crafting my own poems from this material was relatively simple. I banked words and phrases from the two translations and created my own tanka from those banks. While I stuck with the five-line structure of the traditional tanka, I did not follow the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic convention. I wanted to give myself room to play with form, to tease meaning out of unusual word combinations.

I also decided early on to center the imagery of my pieces around the moon. (The moon! I write a lot about the moon.) In my first bundle of poems (see *Heron Tree* volume 8), I included a mention of the moon in every tanka. Recently, I’ve expanded the symbolic presence of the moon to include terms connected with it in the translations: snow, frost, white, cold, mother.

Melissa Frederick is the author of *She* (Finishing Line Press 2008). Her work has also appeared in the *LA Times*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Mid-American Review*, *Matchbook*, *Blanket Sea*, and elsewhere.

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