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Translator's Preface

John Peters

Man'yōshū (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves) is an anthology of poems from ancient Japan, nearly all of which appear to have been written roughly between 625 AD to 760 AD. 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 three translations included here, two were written by unidentified poets. About Japanese poetry of this time, the Japanese 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 syllables. Man'yōshū consists of two kinds of such poetry Chōka and Tanka, Chōka being long poems of indefinite length with alternating lines of 5 and 7 syllables and Tanka being five-line poems with lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables. Fewer than about 400 of the poems in Man'yōshū are Chōka, and the translations included here are all Tanka. As was true of ancient Chinese poetry, subtlety and understatement are valued in Japanese poetry of this period, and in translating these Tanka, I have sought to maintain the understatement of the original Japanese poems. I have also sought to run the difficult middle course of faithfully translating the meaning of the original Japanese while at the same time attempting to produce good poetry in English.

青柳の張らる川門に
 汝を待つと
 清水は汲まず
 立廻ならずも

巻十四 [3546] 作者未定

あをやぎの はらろかはとに なをまつと せみどはおまず たちどならずも

旅人の
 宿りせむ野に
 霜降らば
 我が子は羽ぐくめ
 天の鶴群

巻九 [1791] 作者未詳歌

たびびとの やどりせむのに しもふらば あがこはぐくめ あまのたづらむ

月待ちて
 家には行かむ
 我が挿せる
 あから橘
 影に見えつつ

巻十八 [4060] 栗田女王

つきまちて いえにはゆかむ わがさせる あからたちばな かげにみえつつ

Selected Poems from Man'yōshū

Translated by John Peters

Waiting for you at the river-ford
 where the blue willows bud,
 not drawing water
 I smooth the place I stand on.

Anonymous
 (14: 3546)

When frost falls on fields
 where travelers seek shelter
 cover my child
 with your wings,
 heavenly flock of cranes.

Anonymous¹
 (9: 1791)

Before returning home,
 I wait for the moon
 to show the shadow
 of red-Mandarin flowers
 in my hair.

Princess Awata²
 (18: 4060)

¹ This is the envoy to a poem by a mother addressing her son as he was about to embark as part of an embassy to China in 733 AD.

² Princess Awata (d. 764 AD) is supposed to have written this extemporaneously at a banquet given by Lord Tachibana Moroe in 744 AD.