

Tadanori



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A monk (we do not know his name) travelling in the west passed a decaying tollgate on the way to a bridge over a gushing river and so came after a while down into marshland, where the wind sighed through the reeds as the moon, shining not only above but below, in dark pools on either side, showed him the causeway that led on eventually to the beach. All these things would once have stirred poetic sensations in his mind, but not now, not now.

By the time he reached the beach it was full night. Still the moon, though, fell across pebbles and sand. Still it picked out stalks of dune grass wind-bent like so many bows. Still it let the heartbeat of the sea be revealed in periodic bursts of pale silver foam.

In the landscape one figure: the monk. But then in the landscape two. Emerging out of the dark, more as if going about his regular business than coming to greet the stranger, an old man, by his look a peasant, was talking to himself of his work, which was that of gathering wood, making fires, burning seaweed, steeping the ash and boiling down its soluble matter to make salt, and talking also of the memory of the place, where a poet long ago had been stranded in exile and had written back to his friends in the capital:

If someone should ask
 Say that here by the wave
 There drips from the wrack
 Slow salt as I grieve

Stepping forwards, the monk enquired of the man if he was from the hills. Yes, said the man, I am of the seafolk hereabouts. In that case, said the monk, you are not from the hills but must be living here on the shore. Does it have be the one or the other? said the man. Should we seafolk throw away our brine because we cannot collect wood from the hills to boil it down? Should we hillfolk throw away our wood because we have no use for it? You, I see, are a monk. Is that all you are?

The monk, however, did not answer, because his eye had been caught by something curious to see on a beach, quietly glowing in the moonlight: a cherry tree in full bloom. On other coasts, he mused, icy blasts ride down from the mountains, but here the prevailing wind is a warm sea breeze that encourages such a tree and gently scatters its petals.

Collecting himself, shivering a little because even here it grew cold at night in early springtime, the monk asked the peasant if there was an inn nearby. Come, said the latter, do you not remember the lines of Tadanori?

Should blackness block my way
 Might I lodge at a tree
 Sheltered by branches
 Welcomed by blossoms

His bones lie here, the man went on, beneath where we stand. I, a peasant, stop by to pray for him. Should a monk not do so?

Especially one, said the monk, who has a connection with the deceased. My wandering turns out to have led me where I ought to be—I who am a brother in art of Tadanori, for, though we never met, I like him was long ago, before I assumed a monk's habit, a pupil of the venerable Shinzei in the disciplines of poetry, and these lines of his were close to my heart, as clearly they are to yours. (Here he repeated Tadanori's poem as the peasant had spoken it.) Yes, he continued, I will say a prayer for the poet and warrior, warrior and poet.

He began a chant for the dead, and at once could see in the moonlight how calm overcame his companion. The muscles of the man's face slackened; his eyes opened wide; and he took on the

appearance of a young man, not one who had been carrying wood, seaweed, buckets of seawater and baskets of salt back and forth for decades. As much troubled as astonished, the monk carried on with the chant and watched as the transfigured peasant seemed to dissolve into the wavering petals of the lone cherry. I must be tired, the monk thought, and taking the advice he had been offered, he settled himself on a bed of fallen petals, where soon he was asleep.

You might have thought the wood would creak, but no, as out from the trunk of the cherry tree stepped the left leg, followed by the whole body of a man in armour. Did he need to introduce himself? Tadanori.

I return among the living, he said, because, though slain, I cannot die. The dead should leave contented, he said, but I hunger for my highest achievement to be acknowledged. It is not a deed of combat; it is not the death of a great enemy. It is this. My teacher, the venerable Shinzei, was entrusted with compiling an imperial anthology – one that would stand for centuries, with a very few others, as a record of ultimate literary merit. A poem in such an anthology is not forgotten; it is copied on and on for generations. Schoolchildren learn it, and the old whisper it on their deathbeds. What else, for a poet, is immortality? You can imagine how I felt, then, when I received a message from my teacher that he would include in his collection a poem of mine. And you may imagine how I felt when, shortly after, a second message came from him, saying that, because my family was in disfavour at court, my poem would have to be entered as “from an unknown hand,” no name attached. Glory is not glory if the world does not know it. Fame does not hide itself. My immortality was gained and, almost in the same breath, lost.

I was ready for death, and I found it not long after, when the forces of my family were ranged against those of our rivals here on this beach. When it was obvious we were being defeated, we all made for our ships, but I looked back and saw one of their generals, half a dozen guards with him. Of course I wheeled my horse around in the surf. This was what I had been waiting for. No sooner had I reached my foes than I had the general down from his mount, and jumped down myself. I held my foot on his neck at the tide’s edge and reached my right hand back for my sword, not seeing one of his retainers behind me, who seized the opportunity to slash my whole arm off from the shoulder. There was red smoke in the water. I knew

my time was up, and began to pray, but then another of them sliced off my head, and I went into nowhere.

They tell me the general looked in my quiver for some mark of identification and found there the poem I always had with me:

Should blackness block my way

Might I lodge at a tree

Sheltered by branches

Welcomed by blossoms

As the general stood there in the waves, my poem fluttering in his hand, he wept, salt falling into salt.

The great Shinzei, I know, has followed me into the tunnel of death. Now his son is arbiter of the anthology. Go to him. The feud is over. My family is rehabilitated. Ask that my name be added now to my poem. You have been sheltered by my leaves and welcomed by my blossoms. You owe me this blessing. Obtain it.