

Three Poems · Marilyn Chin

THE NARROW ROADS OF OKU

after Bashō

1.

Some steer a boat across the ocean,
Some ride a horse to its grave,
Your horse may be bold,
Your sails slim,
But better men have lost their way.
I, too, could not resist the wind.
It bends me forward, backward
All night long.
By the time the cocks call
I'll be long gone.
Patched my underwear, corded my hat,
Rubbed moxa on my legs.
What's good for the body
Is good for the soul.
The moons are lovely at Matsushima.
The fish are jumping at Matsushima Bay.

2.

Stranger, I sell you this house—
This weathermauled skeleton
Behind a shaggy head of weed.
You can have your wife, your daughter, her gewgaws
For my name is Bashō.
I have no wife to feed,
No kindling to drag.
I'll tack-tack this ricepaper on your door
For my name is Bashō.
Let my stanzas flap in the wind,
My noble flags of distinction.

3.

Twenty-seventh of the third month,
Faint dawn sky.
Yonder old man Fuji
Pokes out his hoary head.
I'll miss Ueno and Yanaka, family and friends.

I'll miss your cherry-blossoms, your flushed cheeks.
How can words express my sorrow?

Either the wind stopped
Or the trees just turned to stone.

4. (. . . At the "Cloud of Dreams," an inn near Mt. Nikko)

My name is Buddha, Buddha Grosemon,
My personal name is Gozo,
But too many grrrs are bad for the throat.
You ask about my house, how can it be so clean
Without a woman? And wasn't your bed comfortable,
No horsepiss near your pillow? No lice
To confuse your head?

Who could reject my cottage, my "Cloud of Dreams"?
This cloud is not just any cloud;
Its vagueness eludes me;
Its vastness diminishes me;
Its rewards humble me.

Each day I do my chores,
Talk to the Gods through the sycamores.
There is never enough for the divine;
They are greedy and my brethren are thin.

Only once I meditated on the possibility of death.
(Dreamt of termites in rotting hulls).
It's been ten days since Master Wright —

Well, it's all splendid, it's all terrible.
Some saw him clambering up a rainbow to heaven;
Those at his bedside saw death slither up
From his voicebox to his tongue.
What is poetry which cannot speak?

Today, the disciples played the deathknell,
Not a solemn tai-tai-tai-tai-,
But an angry voom-voom-voom-voom.
And I, the innkeeper, could control neither
The volume nor the tempo—
Good old Bashō, turtle's egg,
So, you call yourself "Monk of the Ages,"
I won't complain about "unhappy,"
If you don't pine about "sad."

5.

Autumn is coming—
My heart, a ragged house
With four and a half mats.

I prop my head against a stone
And take a nap
For the rest of summer.

In dream, the City of Nara pulses,
A thousand statues of Buddha
Whose scent is chrysanthemum.

Autumn is coming.
I wonder who my neighbors are,
And who my friends.

Remember the River Shijimi,
The small child
Crying near its brink?

Death is easier by dew,
Quicker by fire.
Who am I to pity the monkey's cry?

How the moon hangs in its sky
like a giant sickle—
“Heaven is cruel, my son.”

And I must go on.

6.
Sir, have faith in me.
I am the world's smallest traveling altar.
I am the altar and its door,
The prayer and the yearning—
For the power of God enters the most humble.

Tomorrow, let us start together
For the road to Matsushima.
Who will greet us there?
Already our shadows have lengthened
To the cliff of no return.

7.
The sunset makes my hemp shirt a little brighter.
Won't you come with me?
This field is dark, our breath is white.
The farmer carrying his dead calf, pick-a-back—
He is our way back into the world.