

Mora

Ueno, 1665

The cherry is old,
old as the castle, perhaps.
One hundred soft springs.

In winter she is wanted —
her trunk black, gnarled and stunted,

but now she begins
to open her eyes, startled
by her own pink self.

A petal drifts from her bough,
and makes its home in my hair.

What must it be like
being so old and so young
in the same moment?

Sengin sighs with the cherry.
'How goes the poem?' he asks.

I blink at my brush,
silver light upon paper.
'Ever so slowly.'

The temple bell's morning chant.

Sengin smiles. 'May I read it?'

He addresses me
as his friend, or his brother,
instead of his page.

Still, my verse is so clumsy.

As he reads, I look away.

I wrote of the tree,
but how can one capture such
in so few mora?

'Another few lines?' he says,

and we young poets tinker.

We struggle in vain,
stunned, at last, by the grandeur
of our shared failure.

Spring rain marks the occasion.

At an utter loss, we laugh.

Huddling together,
sheltered by blossom, our words
paddle off the page.

Edo, 1686

Sora finds the Master sitting by his banana tree, having a staring contest with the buddha.

Cicadas.

Sora sets down the soup. He is silent, for fear of disturbing. The Master sighs and rests the palm-sized buddha among the bashō's roots. 'Sora.' He blinks. 'Where did you come from?'

'I brought your supper, Master.'

'I pray it's hot. There's a shiver of autumn in the air.' He lifts the lid and smiles into steam. The Master is old beyond his years. Some days he is light as spring blossom. On others he is Fuji, with frost upon his brow. He eats, each spoonful a contemplation, pausing to admire the tree.

'Sora?'

'Yes, Master?'

'You are lingering. What is it?'

He hesitates. 'I would not wish to waste your time...'

A smile creases the old man's mouth. 'You have a hokku for me?' Sora nods, fumbles a piece of paper from his belt. He offers it, but the Master says, 'If you will not read your words, who will?'

Sora swallows, clears his throat.

*'The subtle sword writes
a red poem in the snow,
dark as winter dusk.'*

The Master watches the buddha with half-lidded eyes. 'Have you ever seen a sword?'

'Only while sheathed, Master.'

'Have you seen a man's blood stain the virgin snow?'

Sora looks away. Shakes his head.

The Master chuckles. 'That makes two of us.' A mist falls over his face. 'I once trained to be a samurai.'

'I heard you came from a noble family.'

'Noble?' He hoots. 'My family were farmers and shinobi until a generation ago. Still, my father apprenticed me to a lord's son. I was sure I'd make a fine samurai.' A soft laugh. 'Even then, I was more poet than warrior.'

Sora tucks his poem away. 'I always wondered, when did you write your first hokku? A hokku, with nothing after?'

The Master opens his mouth, but frost glazes his eyes. A hush swallows the cicadas. Sora tenses — has he offended? Met with silence, he bows and turns to leave. The Master sighs. 'One thing. A new last line.' He draws a deep breath, lets it out again.

*'The subtle sword writes
a red poem in the snow,
harder to erase.'*

Ueno, 1665

Sengin chose his name
the same summer I chose mine,
pen names, young and proud.

We leave the trickling garden
and step inside the castle.

Sengin's father waits,
kneeling — short sword at his side,
long sword on its stand.

We sit and incline our heads,
Lord Tōdō's son and his page.

Lord Tōdō begins:

'We carry our swords all through
these years of peace. Why?'

Sengin, his heir, answers first.
'As symbols of our service.'

Our lord folds his arms.

‘One sword for your enemy,
and one for yourself.’

My eyes wander to the screen —
painted dragonfly, mid-flight.

‘We are warriors
without a war — still we must
stay fierce and thoughtful.

For now, your brush is your blade.
I trust you have kept it sharp.’

First comes the hokku,
seventeen mora, no more.
My ink gently dries.

Sengin writes the second line,
fourteen mora in reply.

I describe the room,
royal burnished dragonfly,
the shuttered window.

He writes of quiet moonlight,
stroking the dragonfly’s wings.

This is our renga,
linked verses, words entwining,
our shared paper world.

Lord Tōdō’s eyes walk the page.
‘Matsuo,’ he says to me.

'Your words are rigid.

You must stay within the rules

and yet, you must fly.'

I bow my head to hide my shame.

The poetry escapes me.

To his son, he sighs.

'If only your skill with sword

matched that of your verse.'

Sengin nods and says nothing.

His silence like falling rain.

'Before each battle

when you look upon life's edge,

you sit down and write:

a samurai's death poem.

The last words you leave behind.'

The lesson is done,

we depart to the garden —

the sound of water.

The Road, 1686

The Master is drunk on wind. He sways in straw cloak and straw hat, a scarecrow buffeted by the breeze. Sora tries to take his arm, but the Master waves him away. 'I may be old, but I have roots.' He steadies himself on his stick. The road is a rough path rambling through the hills. If he falls, will he rise?

When he left his hut, the Master heaved a sigh. 'I have meditated,' he said, 'and I have meditated on the point of meditating until I realised I was no longer meditating. Then, I tried to write. Each mora a drop of blood.' He shook his head. 'Only the road can revive me now.'

For Sora, the way is wearisome, but the Master grows lighter with every step. When they make it up the hill, he raises a hand.

'You are tired?' says Sora.

'No, it is simply a good place to stop.'

The ginkgo trees are gold again. Mount Fuji bleeds in the morning light. 'Will you make it into a hokku?'

'When I was your age,' says the Master, 'I wanted to write down everything. Every falling leaf, every dead cicada, every frog upon her lily pad. Now, often I am content to breathe it in and let the moment be.'

Down the hill, the road forks. The Master turns left. Sora frowns. 'I thought we journeyed north?'

'West.' A breeze wraps about him like a robe. 'I am going home.'

Ueno, 1666

The dawn of the year;
the old house where I was born
creaks a sweet welcome.

Mother's tea still tastes the same,
a perfect imperfection.

My elder brother,
our father's lingering shade,
takes a sip and smiles.

Winter dances on the roof.
My sister blows on her tea.

In bed, on the floor,
my thoughts wander up the walls,
closer to the stars.

I see the garden's poem,
still searching for the next line.

Ah, but sleep beckons.
Perhaps I will ask Sengin
tomorrow morning...

The Road, 1686

The Master goes nowhere in a hurry. They rest in village after village and wherever he wanders, there is food and fire for him and his apprentice, men and women praising his words, poets begging him to lead their renga and dogs licking his smiling face. Sometimes he writes. Sometimes he falls asleep under a tree and Sora finds him blanketed by leaves.

They winter in Kyōto. It is only a few days' walk to journey's end, but the Master refuses to struggle through the snow. On the solstice, they visit Kifune Shrine. Red lanterns dusted with white, maples stripped bare. Halfway up the steps, the Master stops. 'Are you well?' asks Sora.

A sigh. 'Just old.' They cross the torii gate to where the gods await. He shivers. 'I hoped to be there by now.'

'Still,' says Sora, 'we will see Ueno in the spring.'

'Spring.' The Master gazes into the sacred water from the mountain, confronted by his reflection. 'So long, I have wandered. Yet it is always so bittersweet, returning to where it began.'

A lone leaf clings to its branch. In a moment of courage, it dances down and settles on the water.

Ripples.

Ueno, 1666

When the morning comes,
I bid my birthplace farewell,
bowing as I go.

I stroll through the newborn snow,
sifting poems in my mind.

The castle looms white
against a grey winter sky,
mourning the blossom.

A servant runs towards me.
I know him from the castle.

His eyes are spilled ink.
The wind whips away his words —
I cannot reach them.

‘We found him in the garden.
No one knows how it happened.’

‘Who?’ I ask, voiceless,
yet I know, even before
he utters his name.

Ueno, 1687

He greets them at the castle steps. The samurai stands hunched. One hand rests on his hilt, securing the blade.

They bow. 'Lord Tōdō,' says the Master.

'Matsuo,' says the Master's old master. 'Although, I hear you prefer Bashō these days.' He smiles the way a mountain might.

The two talk over tea in the painted room. They dust off memories, while Sora studies the dragonfly on the screen, eavesdropping on ancient gods. The Master sets down his bowl. 'Many thanks, my lord.' He draws a breath. 'I am ready to pay my respects.'

In the cemetery, the light has faded. Stone lanterns flicker. The Master kneels. Moss grows over the grave, framing the name.

'Tōdō Yoshitada,' reads Sora, quiet.

The corner of the Master's mouth lifts. 'He wrote under the name Sengin.'

Ueno, 1666

It should be raining,
the sky should be an ocean —
oh, wash me away...

The paper awaits,
blank, disturbingly patient;
the brush finds my hand.

Despite everything,
words unfurl, a lone hokku
with nothing after.

I sit here, waiting

for him to write the next line...
a drop of ink falls.

Moonlight, glimmering
on the unsheathed blade — my brush
trembles in my hand.

*'We samurai write
our poems, never knowing
which will be our last.'*

Ueno, 1687

The cherry is old. How old, Sora cannot say. He lingers at the gate while his Master follows the stream. 'Come along, Sora. The garden is best with company.'

The Master meanders. First to the peonies, then the old pond, then he takes the stepping-stones over the stream. A frog hops by. At last, they reach the tree. Petals on the grass, petals on the pond. The Master gazes at the roots, neck rigid.

'He never told us he was sick. He did not wish to seem weak before his father.' Above, a white-eye warbles. 'We sparred here,' he whispers. 'With swords and with words. With words, he always won.' His smile fades. 'We trained together, to be samurai. So when my young lord died, I came to the cherry. With my brush, and my blade.'

The spring wind chills Sora's lips. 'You meant to follow him? To commit junshi?'
'Any page would do the same.'

Sora hesitates. 'And yet...?'

The Master rests his eyes. 'Sengin never wished to be a samurai. He loved to sit. To write. As my death poem dried, and the old sword shone, I saw two paths ahead.' He releases a long-held breath. 'What is better? The short, swift way of a samurai, or

the long, narrow road of a poet?’ The Master opens his eyes. Slowly, he raises his gaze to the branches.

A moment.

‘Sora...’

‘Yes, Master?’

A soft smile. ‘I have a hokku.’

Sora slips out his notebook. Kneeling, he readies his brush, dips it in ink. Rooted in the world, the Master is as old as the cherry. And as young.

*‘Many, many things
they summon back to my mind,
ah, cherry blossoms.’*

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