

LYRICAL EPISODES

BRANISLAV L. SLANTCHEV

AUGUST 23, 2003

© 2001-2003 Branislav L. Slantchev. Reproduction and distribution in any form without prior written consent of the author is a violation of applicable copyright laws. Unauthorized use beyond the limits permitted and established by these laws constitutes infringement of the author's rights and can be prosecuted. All rights reserved. The author can be contacted at: slantchev@ucsd.edu.



EPISODE 1

Written in recollection of a trip to Upper Calf Creek Falls in Utah. The trail abuts a serene alcove with a small waterfall trickling down the cliffs of the canyon:

Shadows grow,
Chase late visitors
I stay hiding
In the glitter of the emerald pool—
To keep the moon company.

September, 2001



EPISODE 2

With a stick I thrash
Against a shrub
To frighten unruly memories.
They suffer less than I.

September, 2001



EPISODE 3

Once a man was separated from his wife for some time. Upon gazing at a small pine grove near the lake, he composed this poem, which he then sent to his wife:

TO MY WIFE, FAR AWAY

Changeless,
The pines cannot tell seasons—
Exhausted in reaching the clouds,
They succumb, green as ever.

August, 2001



EPISODE 4

Once a man returned to a river he had visited some time ago. After gazing at the stream, he realized that someone was sharing his shore. He looked around and noticed a shepherd, whom he recognized from before. Alas, the other did not seem to recall the previous meeting. The man sighed, reciting

The waters that knew me
Have passed long ago to the sea.
Strangely,
The river tastes the same.

October 13, 2001



EPISODE 5

Once a man had a hard time sleeping at night, perhaps troubled by some misgivings about the future. One night, he dreamt that

This night I toss
Between dream and undream.
Having travelled so far,
Your spirit cannot have come
With good news.¹

September-October, 2001

¹This refers to the belief that when people dream of someone who is far away, the spirit actually travels to visit the dream. The implication here is that if the spirit went to all the trouble of coming this long way, it only comes with bad news. See, for example, Ueda Akinari's "Chrysanthemum Tryst."



EPISODE 6

To no avail
People in the capital
Wait upon the cuckoo's call—
This evening
It sings at my mountainous retreat.

September 24, 2001



EPISODE 7

There was a woman, whose husband went away for a long time. Although they frequently wrote each other, she fretted that he might grow distant from her from his association with new acquaintances. She sent him this poem:

Plovers now nest in dry province,
Their old cries familiar.
Would they speak to me
In their new tongue as well?

September 22, 2001



EPISODE 8

Once a certain man watched some wind-torn blossoms carried away by a spring. When he returned the next year, it appeared that the same blossoms were floating again. Knowing this could not be the case, the man composed the poem:

Looking the same,
Plum blossoms float in the creek
Rushing to meet yesterday's.
I alone remain,
changing and unchanged.

October 11, 2001



EPISODE 9

It is commonly believed that fall rains bring out the full color of the foliage. Yet, a certain lady, her passion undiminished by the rejection of a scornful man, hoped that perhaps she would endure by composing the poem:

The scarlet leaves
Refuse to fade
In the cold autumnal rains,
 Yet ravaged,
Lie strewn in the mud.

October, 2001



EPISODE 10

A DOG WALKING A MAN

In the rain — a dog and a man.
Perhaps he thinks of a lover,
Or perhaps dreams
Of a lover thinking of him.
I hope the dog leads them home
Before they are drenched.

October 14, 2001



EPISODE 11

A certain man once traveled to the ruins of a monastery on a small island in lake Ohrid. Little remained of the nuns' abode except several stones scattered in the garden. Upon walking amidst these stones, the man recited:

Hewn stones rest in disarray,
Moss inscribes ancient poetry:
Who can decipher it?

October 7-16, 2001



EPISODE 12

Once a certain man went out during a fall rain to admire the foliage of the Japanese maples at the park. As he walked about with no one in sight, he came across a woman, whom he thought a kindred spirit. He composed this poem:

On a stormy morn as this
no one strolls beneath the maples
except a woman — I admire her
until I notice her dogs.

October 20, 2001



EPISODE 13

A certain woman enjoyed a walk in the garden when the hot afternoon sun compelled her to seek shelter in the shade of a huge oak tree by the small pond. As she sat, she recited the poem:

Late summer sun.
I hide from it by the pond,
its reflection blinds me.

October 20, 2001



EPISODE 14

Every year a certain man went to gaze at the particularly fascinating grass cultivated next to a tall cypress tree. This year, however, he found the tree felled and only a small part of the trunk protruding from the ground. He composed the poem:

There was a cypress
 next to the brush of Amur grass.²
This year only its stump remains.
I sit on it to admire the silver feathers:
 nothing to shield my head
from the midday sun.

October 20, 2001

²A type of tall decorative grass with feathery plumes: *Miscanthus sinensis*, also called “Japanese silver grass.” This particular cultivar was “Siberfeder” which translates as “silver feather” from German.



EPISODE 15

You come, you leave
traceless. My room —
like a white cloud
after a swallow's flight:
mourning its passing,
longing for its return.

October 19, 2001



EPISODE 16

After a rather exhausting day of interviewing, a certain man tried to relax at the shore of the Pacific Ocean. Since he did not yet know whether his efforts would succeed, his uncertain future intruded during his stroll along the coast. Leaving the next day for home, he composed this poem:

The beaches of La Jolla
drenched in autumn rains,
black rocks disrobe in low tide.
No pines nearby for a knot:
Does this mean
I've nothing to return for?³

November 8, 2001

³There is an allusion to a poem by Prince Arima written during the Nara period (to 794 CE) and referring to him starting on a journey:

On the beach of Iwashiro,
I pull and knot together
The branches of the pine.
If my fate turns well,
I shall return to see them again.

The knot is a talisman that is to guard the Prince on his journey. Translated by Bownas, Geoffrey, and Anthony Thwaite, 1964. *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*. London: Penguin Books.



EPISODE 17

Though your love is like the wind:
now gentle breeze,
now drenching gale,
now icy blizzard,
now painful hail,
now fierce storm,
I shall seek no shelter.

For I fear only times
when even fountain grass is still.⁴

November 17, 2001

⁴“Fountain grass” refers to *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, which has extremely gentle feather-like flowers and is thus susceptible to the slightest flow of air.



EPISODE 18

In dreams you come.
The blind stirs in the breeze.
I close my eyes:
I'm blind
and yet I see you—
coming through.⁵

November 17, 2001

⁵Yet another allusion to an old Japanese poem from the Nara period, this time a *tanka* by Princess Nukada:

I waited and I
Yearned for you.
My blind
Stirred at the touch
Of the autumn breeze.

Translated by Bownas & Thwaite, p. 10.



EPISODE 19

Upon reading a famous poem of longing and questioning the endurance of love,⁶ a certain man reflected on the course of that elusive feeling and composed this poem:

If my love vanished
like the morning mist
trailing over the moor—
then what do I make
of the rising sun?
What is its warmth?

November 17, 2001

⁶The poem in question is Japanese, from the Nara period, and written by Empress Iwa no Hime for the Emperor. The relevant portion alluded to in the following poem is as follows:

In the autumn field,
Over the rice ears,
The morning mist trails,
Vanishing somewhere. . .
Can my love fade too?

Translated by Bownas & Thwaite, p. 7.



EPISODE 20

Lighting cascades
down undulating hills:
In each drop—
its fleeting image.

November 18, 2001



EPISODE 21

On a borrowed mat
I toss endlessly.
In a foreign town
even shadows coarse and hard.

November 19, 2001



EPISODE 22

Once a woman went to a high mountain. When she was at the bottom, she looked up and noticed a dense ring of clouds hiding the top. Only the moon peered through from time to time. As she climbed upwards, the clouds only seemed to get closer and denser. Stopping for a short rest, she imagined the starry sky invisible from below and composed this poem:

Moon tearing clouds.
No stars.
Above—no eye enjoys them.

November 20, 2001



EPISODE 23

Spring rain on the pond.
Floating among lilies,
the corpse of the moon.

November 22, 2001



EPISODE 24

Walking through the pleasure quarters, a young man noticed a small tea-house huddling near the edge of the river, completely obscured by the bigger and noisier neighbors. He ventured closer only to hear that there was a small party going on there as well. One of the rooms looked empty until, upon a closer look, he saw one of the women who worked there putting on her clothes. Moved by the sight, he stood motionless on the small bridge and recited:

Tea-house peering at the river.
In the back-lit grating
she untangles her hair.

November 22, 2001



EPISODE 25

Summer dusk willow.
The wind hangs from the branches
Darkly.

November 23, 2001



EPISODE 26

The savage sky
lashes the ground.
Through the mud—
an old woman with an umbrella.

November 23, 2001



EPISODE 27

A wounding kiss,
skin seared.
Lips sever in blue sigh.

November 24, 2001



EPISODE 28

Like dead leaves
the wind compels to dance,
I react to love—
The moon in rapture,
deathly cruel.

December 12, 2001



EPISODE 29

Will you be one to forget
or will you be one to remember?
It is best to forget
for, once reborn on the lotus of memory,
you will be untouchable.

December 12, 2001



EPISODE 30

Through the door
that she walked out of
darkness rushed
and filled me.

December 13, 2001



EPISODE 31

Why should I be so upset
when she waked me
when the dream I had
was but of her?

December 13, 2001



EPISODE 32

You said
you lacked talent for poetry—
But when we parted
your tears wrote it.

December 13, 2001



EPISODE 33

When did it come to be
that the scattered cherry blossoms
are now like dust on pathways
that cleaners in a hurry sweep away?

February 8, 2002



EPISODE 34

Plum shadows floating
in the springtime stream
without substance
yet more beautiful
for I cannot touch them.⁷

February 8, 2002

⁷This is a response to a *tanka* by Ise on the topic “Plum trees blossoming near a stream,” No. 43 in the Spring section of the Imperial collection *Kokinshū*:

Shall I each springtime,
see flowery shadows floating
on the flowing stream,
and drench my sleeve in water
that refuses to be plucked?

Translated by Helen Craig McCullough, 1985. *Kokin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.



EPISODE 35

In the stilled pool—
ancient mountain peaks
unmoved, unmovable.
The tiny droplet plunges
into the mirroring surface
and alone makes them quaver.

February 8, 2002



EPISODE 36

The track the setting sun
blazes upon the waves
will vanish soon. In the dark
the rocks await boats that sailed
never to return.

February 9, 2002



EPISODE 37

Above the winter fog,
the Wasatch shelters the young moon
and though its snowy peak
towers beyond reach,
I shall not suffer it in silence.

February 9, 2002



EPISODE 38

Early snow in my hair
as I cup water from the cheering stream;
Powerless to summon wisdom
that finds beauty in aging,
I watch — further down
sharp crags rend its gossamer train.

February 9, 2002



EPISODE 39

Following Emperor Horikawa's death, one of his attendants, Nagako, viewed the irises that adorned the eaves for the Iris Festival and reflected how different they looked just last year, when her memories were not filled with sadness:

The irises decorating the eaves
are filled with color in the summer rain.
Yet their hue is distinct from last years'
when I gazed upon them
unburdened with sad memories.

February 9, 2002



EPISODE 40

Looking outside
through a window tinged with red haze—
the curtains flutter.

March 31, 2002



EPISODE 41

A heart—
sorrow out of loneliness too,
like moon without dusk.

April 2, 2002



EPISODE 42

A smiling traveler
amid a crowd of dissolving faces,
observes chillingly.

April 4, 2002



EPISODE 43

Mourning at a death-bed.
The sudden cry of a cicada
awakens me.

April 4, 2002



EPISODE 44

Is it better to live and die young or exist and die old? A certain person thought that age brought nothing but fear often masquerading as prudence. Beyond a certain point this fear had become overwhelming and this person's life was paralyzed. Too old to free himself from this fear, the person scornfully wrote this poem.

Blossoming early,
slender beauty exposed
to the long rains of spring,
ravaged by tears—
each a knife
slashing through silk—
rent asunder,
the peonies succumb.

Blossoming in summer,
amid a well-tendered garden,
decorative beauty
protected from sun—
timorous breeze
mistaken for storm
amidst plenty,
the azaleas wither alone.

August 26, 2002



EPISODE 45

Snowless
but full of melancholy rain,
this winter lingers.

The cold sun never disrobes,
fogs conceal its modesty.
Perhaps I am afraid to see it?

February 24, 2003



EPISODE 46

Why do you,
autumn rain,
hasten me home
when no one is there
to dry my clothes?

February 24, 2003



EPISODE 47

IN THE HIGH UINTAS

Red Castle Mountain glowers
at the pine grove below—
grey on green,
patches of snow.
I sit sheltered.
Once in a while
irregular wind brings
the sound of the waterfall;
the water drains the lake.
I melt with the snow.

July 1, 2003