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Fall 2011

Two Renga Collaborative Poems

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Recommended Citation

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Two Renga Collaborative Poems

Renga or “linked poetry” is a unique form of collaborative poetry that developed in medieval Japan. Renga composition follows a very specific set of rules, so a bit of explanation may be helpful. Classical Japanese 31-syllable tanka, the most common poetic form for centuries in Japan, are composed of five groups of syllables, in the pattern of 5/7/5/7/7 syllables. Tanka became a collaborative or discursive poetry when one poet would write the first “half” of the tanka—5/7/5—and another poet would complete the tanka with the last two lines of 7 syllables each. However, true renga were born when several poets began composing long strings of poems, with each poet adding a new verse or “link” of either 5/7/5 or 7/7. (The first link (5/7/5) in a renga was called the “hokku,” and this important opening link was the origin of the haiku as an independent poetic form.)

For example, in the following two verses translated by Steven Carter, Sôchô (1448-1542) adds a link of a 5-7-5 verse to a 5-5 verse by Shôhaku (1443-1527).

行く水とほく梅にほふさと
yuku mizu tôku / ume niou sato

Flowing water, far away—
and a plum-scented village.

川風に一むら柳春見えて
kawakaze ni / hitomura yanagi / haru miete

Wind off the river
blows through a clump of willows—
and spring appears.¹

In the first line of his link, Sôchô picks up on the idea of water from the preceding verse, as well the wind carrying the scent of plum blossoms. However, to this springtime scene, he adds the element of the willow trees, whose early green foliage becomes visible

¹ Steven D. Carter, *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford University Press, 1991) 307.

for the first time when the wind blows through the branches. The next poet in the renga chain would then re-imagine Sôchô's verse, and add a new element to it. Rather than creating a single long poem with a unified narrative thread, however, each new verse would "link" only to the single verse in front of it, thereby reinterpreting or prizing the previous verse out its existing context. This created an effect of constant development, variety, and movement.

In addition to studying collaborative poems by masters such as Sôgi (1421-1502) and Bashô (1644-1694) and their disciples, our class on Japanese Poetry and Poetics undertook creating our own 36-link renga, in the spirit of "haikai" or less formal, renga. We worked in teams of two, with each team contributing a new link within a 4-minute time limit, and attempting as best as possible to preserve the structure of 5/7/5 + 7/7 in English syllables. While we were unable to follow all the conventions of classical renga, we did try to preserve the frequency of certain set topics, such as love, the four seasons, cherry blossoms, and the moon, which for the sake of both structure and variety, are stipulated to appear at certain spots in the renga sequence.²

In the first renga, each verse is written twice in order to highlight the effect of each new link reinterpreting the verse before it. In the second, each verse is given only once. The contributors to the renga were students in the course "Japanese Poetry and Poetics," Swarthmore College, spring 2011: Marion Faber (MF), Will Gardner (WG), Nick Gettino (NG), Billy Hamilton-Levi (BHL), Ben Hattem (BH), David Lucas Hinojosa (DLH), Joanie Jean (JJ), Susanna Mitro (SM), Frank Mondelli (FM), Nicholas Jackson Pietsch (NJP), James Preimesberger (JP), Alice Wong (AW), and James Wright (JW).

Will Gardner, professor of the course "Japanese Poetry and Poetics"

² Following the template provided by William J. Higginson on the website "Ideal Order of the Seasons in a Kasen Renku." <http://www.2hweb.net/haikai/renku/kasen/seasons-in-a-kasen.html> (accessed 4/14/11).



Photo by Marina Rojavin

Cracks in a dry bulb

1. Spring (hokku), AW & NG

Cracks in a dry bulb
The tulip tucks through the mulch;
After rains, buds show

2. Spring, DLH & BHL

*Cracks in a dry bulb
The tulip tucks through the mulch;
After rains, buds grow
Inspiring in me feelings,
Surely spring has finally come*

3. Spring, SM & FM

*Inspiring in me feelings,
Surely spring has finally come
I lay in the fields
Insects dance on blades of grass
Birds fly and tumble*

4. NJP & JW

*I lay in the fields
Insects dance on blades of grass
Birds fly and tumble
The alarm's shrill birdsong
Pulls me from the grassy sheets*

5. Autumn, moon's place JP & JJ

*The alarm's shrill birdsong
Pulls me from the grassy sheets
Startled awake,
Moon sitting high in the sky
No longer can I sleep*

6. WG & MF

*Startled awake,
Moon sitting high in the sky
No longer can I sleep
Autumn winds have chased storm clouds away
Deer still hiding in bare woods*

7. Autumn, AW & NG

*Autumn winds have chased storm clouds away
Deer still hiding in bare woods
A red leaf clinging
To a branch; wind knocks it down
Crunchingly deers step*

8. BHL & DLH

*A red leaf clinging
To a branch; wind knocks it down
Crunchingly deers step
Enshrouded, I rest my head,
My mind wandering the trees*

9. Love, SM & FM

*Enshrouded, I rest my head,
My mind wandering the trees
Years since I last saw
Her hair matted at noontime
Like glorious birds*

10. Love, JW & NJP

*Years since I last saw
Her hair matted at noontime
Like glorious birds
Though I yearn to hear her song
A cage would not allow flight*
.

11. (Love) JP & JJ

*Though I yearn to hear her song
A cage would not allow flight
Somber canary
Retaining her sullen silence
I open the door*

12. WG & MF

*Somber canary
Retaining her sullen silence
I open the door
Though he sings in chorus each night
Alone his heart is dark and mute*

13. Summer, moon's place, AW & NG

*Though he sings in chorus each night
Alone his heart is dark and mute
Moonlight spits curtains
And runs across the table
His sake is warmed*

14. Summer, BHL & DLH

*Moonlight spits curtains
And runs across the table
His sake is warmed
The men raise their full glasses
Drinking to the longest day*

15. SM & FM

*The men raise their full glasses
Drinking to the longest day
Weekend approaches
Yay! My spirits lift up high
My roommate's balloon!*

16. NJP & JW

*Weekend approaches
Yay! My spirits lift up high
My roommate's balloon!
Tonight, candles, we all sing
A page torn off the calendar*

17. Spring, blossom's place, JJ & JP

*Tonight, candles, we all sing
A page torn off the calendar
Soon the cherry trees
Will bloom; can the president
See them from her house?*

18. Spring, MF & WG

Soon the cherry trees
Will bloom; can the president
See them from her house?
Along the wandering path
Mist creeps to the meeting house

19. Spring, AW & NG

Along the wandering path
Mist creeps to the meeting house
Watering the trees
The dew beads grow on the leaves
Nurturing beneath

20. BHL & DLH

Watering the trees
The dew beads grow on the leaves
Nurturing beneath
Small life growing in a pot
Every day I water it.

21. Love, SM & FM

Small life growing in a pot
Every day I water it.
In vain, the ink flows
My love poems go unanswered
Awkward in Sharples

22. Love, JW & NJP

In vain, the ink flows
My love poems go unanswered
Awkward in Sharples
The tray left in fallen snow
Forgotten like my love

23. (Winter) JP & JJ

*The tray left in fallen snow
Forgotten like my love
Mountain pheasant soup
All that is remaining of
Hitomaro's love*

24. Winter, WG & MF

*Mountain pheasant soup
All that is remaining of
Hitomaro's love
Snow so deep it pulls on boots
Up the foot-dragging banks of Crum*

25. (Winter), AW & NG

*Snow so deep it pulls on boots
Up the foot-dragging banks of Crum
Brittle leaves fall in
Swift currents create strong winds
Where are all the fish?*

26. BHL & DLH

*Brittle leaves fall in
Swift currents create strong winds
Where are all the fish?
A fisherman, feet raised up
But not a thing was biting*

27. SM & FM

*A fisherman, feet raised up
But not a thing was biting
"Land of Yamato!"
Houses seen from every peak
Shinkansen runs through*

28. NJP & JW

“Land of Yamato!”
Houses seen from every peak
Shinkansen runs through
In my one-room apartment
Empty beer cans strewn around

29. Autumn, moon’s place, JP & JJ

In my one-room apartment
Empty beer cans strewn around
Light on a window pane
Beset by myriad moons
Reflected by cans

30. Autumn, MF & WG

Light on a window pane
Beset by myriad moons
Reflected by cans
Insects appear in my room
Drawn to the dancing flame

31. Autumn, JJ & BH

Insects appear in my room
Drawn to the dancing flame
But when I open
The window, air makes a breeze,
Papers go flying

32. BHL & DLH

But when I open
The window, air makes a breeze,
Papers go flying
A warm, sunny day makes this
Studying seem like dying.

33. FM & SM

*A warm, sunny day makes this
Studying seem like dying.
Heat turns green to brown
Freshman pear plant on the sill
The long stalk now droops*

34. (Spring) JJ & BH

*Heat turns green to brown
Freshman pear plant on the sill
The long stalk now droops
Outside my room, the spreading green
Among this growth, one still fades*

35. Spring, Blossom's place, NJP & MF

*Outside my room, the spreading green
Among this growth, one still fades
Cascades from the air
Scented flakes of cherry pink—
A veil for the loner*

36. Spring, Ageku. BHL & DLH

*Cascades from the air
Scented flakes of cherry pink—
A veil for the loner
In the cracks of the cement
Proudly, a tree begins life*

Drops of morning dew

1. Spring (hokku), BH & JW

Drops of morning dew
clinging to uncovered grass
echo the bell's reveille

2. Spring, JP & JJ

Butterflies balanced on an
afternoon stalk; daylight fading

3. Spring, WG & MF

Trembling parchment
Wings poised in the softening air
preparing for first flight

4. NG & AW

And reaching wet limbs outward:
security in wingspan

5. Autumn, moon's place BHL & DLH

Reaching up through tears,
the moon is just beyond me
but I long for her

6. Autumn SM & FM

The sake hot within me
Grasses wither under hooves

7. Autumn JW & NJP

The path vanishes
under leaves and twisting trees
A sip, and I go

8. JP & JJ

Leaving behind my textbook
I lay out my party clothes

9. Love, WG & MF

When I appear
decked in my finery
will absence greet me?

10. Love, NG & AW

Or will grasshoppers emerge
as I frolic in Crum creek?

11. (Love), BHL & DLH

Finding my lover
the pearls on my wet clothing
Can finally be dried

12. SM & FM

At dawn SEPTA pauses here
mist rises off the long lawns

13. Moon's place, summer, NJP & JW

No one waiting here
Carriages are empty now
Filled only with moonlight

14. Summer, JP & JJ

Lonely Philly ghost tour guide
fans himself in summer heat

15. WG & MF

Dogs sleep in the shade
of spindly locust trees, while
Bricks exhale the heat

16. NG & AW

Customers bustling their carts
in the Target parking lot

17. Blossom's place, spring, BHL & DLH

Weary, I look down
buds push up through pavement
Nature's resilience

18. Spring, SM & FM

Thunder echoes from the paths
Droplets speckle the bare stone

19. Spring, NJP and JW

Rain comes in the window
Wetting my sophomore paper
Storm of the new spring

20. JP and JJ

why must I reflect when the
future holds no jobs for me?

21. Love, MF & WG

No use for mirrors
Gazing instead at my love
In the moment now

22. Love, NG & AW

And my love gazing, tender
In the mirror's reflection

23. (Winter), BHL & DLH

Though we have now split
Like the winter's white snow drops
Again we will bloom

24. Winter, SM & FM

Islands of freshly-plowed snow
Soon dirtied by the traffic

25. (Winter), NJP & JW

Storm clouds gathering
When we see the ground again
Half a year is gone

26. JP & JJ

My coat left behind at home
I venture into the day

27. WG & MF

The cicada steps
Outside its shell, a fragile
Home left on tree bark

28. NG & AW

In a grove that dips downward
As light glitters on Cheng Hing

29. Autumn, moon's place, BHL & DLH

Downward the moon glares
Your grievance will be avenged
Oh unknown body

30. Autumn, SM & FM

When I awake, frost greets me
Outside—leaves not red, but brown

31. Autumn, JJ & BH

Already fallen
And more still drifting down—
Rainfall from the trees

32. NJP & MF

Even though the rain is stopping
Feet still stepping in puddles

33. AW & NG

My rainboots are worn
From use, water seeps inside—
My toes chill in streams

34. (Spring) BHL & DLH

I hide underneath a tree
Seeking shelter from the rain

35. Spring, Blossom's Place, FM & SM

Sakura Sunday
Clouds and petals etched in white
I rise among them

36. Spring, Ageku. NG & AW

Like grass pushing through the snow
Green shoots heavy with dew