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A profile of Tomoe Tana

Gary D. Snider
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A PROFILE OF TOMOE TANA

A Creative Project

Presented to

The Office of Graduate Studies and Research

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

In Literature and Art

by

Gary D. Snider

May 1997

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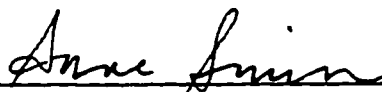
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Abstract

A Profile of Tomoe Tana

by Gary Snider

This special project thesis presents a profile of Tomoe Tana, or Tana-san. It revolves around Tana-san's many achievements and accomplishments throughout her lifetime and emphasizes in particular her unconquerable spirit. Although she received many rewards for her tanka poetry, the achievement she was the most proud of was the founding of the Foothill College Japanese Cultural Center. The Tomoe Tana Memorial Scholarship Fund was established after her death to commemorate her love of teaching.

This thesis traces those parts of Tomoe Tana's life I was exposed to, and recounts the strong influence she had on me through her enormous energy, productivity and love of learning. Most important was the maternal spirit she carried for me from my teen years on throughout my adult life.

Dedication

This graduate project is dedicated to the memory of Tomoe Tana who wished to pass on the method and spirit of Japanese tanka poetry to the American people.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express his most sincere appreciation and deepest gratitude to his Committee of Four who have painstakingly provided special guidance and encouragement and given generously of their time.

Pamela Sharp

Anne Simonson

Nils Peterson

Patrick Surgalski

"Issei"

Slight in stature
Delicate,
Like the butterfly
Children loved her.

An unquenchable thirst for knowledge!
Contagious curiosity
Unbridled enthusiasm
Endless energy
To know her was to be her friend.

In the Far East, a renowned poet and artist
In the Far West, domestic servitude.

Forever bowing
Forever grateful
America, her beloved.

Gary Snider

Introduction

When I was a young child, I could hardly wait for the arrival of the *Reader's Digest*. I would read it from cover to cover always saving "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met" until last. Then my ten-year-old relentlessly questioning mind would begin: Where and when would a meeting take place with an unforgettable character? How would someone know that this was indeed an unforgettable character and what would an unforgettable character look like? As I pondered appropriate answers, I fell into a state of intense perplexity, then into one of eager anticipation in the hope that perhaps the next issue would reveal some definite answers.

Many years later I was attending a dinner party in a private home in Copenhagen. When the men retired to the drawing room and the women to the sitting room, I slipped off by myself to stand on the outside deck. My thoughts were interrupted when I heard my name called, and turned to find one of the women who wished to speak to me. In English, and with a touch of humor, she asked, "Gary, who has been the most influential woman in your life?" I just threw up my hands and we laughed together. I thought about it for a bit and then replied, "You know, I think I have an answer to your question. Her name is Tomoe Tana, or Tana-san as we affectionately called her. In 1951, when I was nine years old, I met three of the four Tana sons. We played baseball together, and one day after practice they invited me to the Tana home. Their mother, Tana-san, was a small, strongly-built woman, rosy-faced and smiling like a Japanese good-luck doll. Her vitality was overwhelming. I was completely amazed by her energy and enthusiasm; her uplifted spirit never seemed to desert her. She spoke only in Japanese;

she taught us many wonderful games and participated in many herself. She would play the koto (the Japanese harp) as she sang songs and related stories. She would give us a lesson in calligraphy and recite tanka (Japanese poetry). It was like being with the Pied Piper.

Tana-san's unconquerable spirit was established early in life. Her father, a Buddhist priest on the island of Hokkaido, Japan, instilled a deep love of learning in his sons and daughters and provided them with good educations. In 1938, through a marriage arranged by her brother, Tana-san came to America. Her husband-to-be, a man whom she had never seen before (though she had a photograph) met her at the boat in San Francisco. After their wedding ceremony, he took her to his home across the bay. The next morning he instructed her to go to San Francisco and return home by herself to learn to "find her way" in America. She spoke no English, and it took her all day, but she did as he instructed, and was home when he returned that evening. Her self-determination was never to leave her in the years that followed.

This unconquerable spirit was a necessity during the war years (1942-1946). Separated from her husband by war decree for four years, Tana-san raised her children by herself. Daisho Tana, who suffered from an acute lung condition, required hospitalization and was sent to New Mexico while Tana-san and her sons were placed in a "family camp" in Arizona. After the war ended, and all the "enemy aliens" were released, it was another six months before Tana-san and her husband found one another and the family was reunited. They lived in Richmond, California and Hawaii until 1951, and then settled in Palo Alto, California. Daisho Tana served as minister of the

Palo Alto Buddhist church until ill health forced his early retirement in 1956. Tana-san worked as a house cleaner for 27 years to support her sons and her ill husband.

Not only did she support her sons, she educated them as well. The first son, Yasuto (Strength and Character) graduated from UC Berkeley and went on to become a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Navy. The next son, Shibun (Literature) graduated from San Jose State University and joined IBM. The third son, Chinin (Don't Give Up) received a full scholarship to Harvard and Harvard Law School and is a practicing attorney. The last son, Akira (Peace) also received a full scholarship to Harvard and Harvard Law School and from there went on to Juillard and is now an active jazz musician who plays and records internationally. All four sons read and write Japanese, play musical instruments, and all were selected Peninsula High School Athlete of the Year.

Next to her family, Tana-san's great passion in life was Japanese tanka poetry. Tanka, an ancient art form of poetry, dates back 3,000 years to the dawn of Japanese history, well before the period of Chinese cultural influence on Japan and its language. Tanka is a short poem of 31 syllables, brief, almost terse lines in an inflexible pattern of five-seven-five-seven-seven. That is, a five syllable statement or phrase is followed by one of seven syllables, another of five syllables, and two more of seven syllables each. They can and do flow together, one idea consisting of two or more of the parts, but always the parts maintain the syllabic integrity dictated by the usually inflexible five-seven-five-seven-seven line pattern.

Tana-san herself faithfully followed the ancient Japanese custom of writing a tanka each year as a new year's greeting. In 1951, she wrote this New Year's tanka for her children:

My growing children
Sing the national anthem
In America
And their mother goes
Following right along.

Japan's highest honor for tanka excellence, the Imperial Palace Poetry Award, was given to Tana-san in 1949. Her tanka was Morning Snow.

I have longed in these
Ten years in California
For the morning snow
Drifted in white purity
In my beloved homeland.

She was extended a personal invitation to read in front of the Emperor, but she did not attend. Unfortunately, she did not learn of her honor until after the event had taken place.

On the long flight home from Copenhagen, my thoughts once again returned to Tana-san. Many fond memories surfaced, two of which took place in my teens. My pride and joy at sixteen was a primed '40 Ford customized coupe that sat at a lavish rake; the front end was eight inches off the ground, while the back was thirty. Driver and passengers sat at a thirty

degree angle looking down at the hood. A pair of slicks were on the back, headers on the side and a full race V-8 engine in front, the fastest coupe in town.

Late one afternoon, as I was racing home in my speedster, I saw Tana-san walking down the street. I stopped, opened the door and offered her a ride. She bowed, said, "Thank you, Gary-san, I accept." She pulled herself up to reach the seat, shut the door, folded her hands and looked straight down the hood. I spun the tires, "threw a shift" and came to a screeching halt at the stop sign. We continued across town in this manner until we reached her home. She got out of the car very quietly, bowed, and said, "Thank you very much, Gary-san." As I drove off, I spun the tires, "threw a shift" and left a large cloud of smoke behind. During the entire ride, Tana-san had not spoken one word or altered her position one millimeter. To this day, I don't know if her great patience and humility sustained her, or if she thought she had been temporarily devoured by a primered, fire-eating dragon.

I was a college student with a respectable car heading home on the freeway one spring afternoon when I suddenly saw Tana-san walking on the frontage road. My God, I thought to myself, she is 15 miles from home. I crossed the lanes and stopped. "Tana-san," I said, "what are you doing so far from home?" She bowed and said, "Gary-san, it is such a beautiful day and the flowers are so lovely, I thought I would walk." "Where are you walking to?" I asked. "San Francisco," she replied. "Tana-san," I said, "San Francisco is 15 or 20 miles from here. Get in the car and I will take you the rest of the way." She bowed and said, "Thank you, Gary-san." She climbed into the car, folded her hands, and we were off.

Twenty years later, at age 63, Tana-san still had enough spirit and energy to walk the 35 miles from Palo Alto to San Francisco. She got the idea for such a walk when she made the journey as a participant in a young Japanese student's project. The trek took 12 hours to complete with only a 30-minute rest for lunch. When Tana-san spotted the San Francisco city limit sign, she was so overwhelmed with joy that she held onto the pole and danced wildly around it, then shed silent, grateful tears that she could do it too.

As I recalled these old times, I decided to look up Tana-san and find out what had taken place in her life over the last 20 years. So one day I drove to the Tana's residence. The address was still the same. As I turned left onto their street, I saw her. I stopped and said, "Tana-san, it is Gary-san." She stared for a moment and then said, "Ah, yes, I recognize the eyes," and bowed. I walked home with her and joined her for tea. I was delighted to see the flowers from her garden all through the house, just as it used to be. Obviously she was older, her tiny frame, tightly-bunned hair and warm smile gave her the appearance of a Japanese grandmother. She had not lost any of her vitality. At age 60, she had decided to return to Foothill College, determined to learn English. I did not presume to ask further questions, knowing she would decline to answer out of modesty and politeness, but I did make a mental note to pursue this with her sons at a later time.

The following week, I called her son Shibun; we both agreed that some things must be told about Tana-san and her many accomplishments. He informed me that the family had agreed to grant me access to all information in regards to her. At a later meeting, he gave me copies of all the available

papers and records. The Emperor's Poetry Award in 1949 was only the beginning. In 1959, a collection of one hundred tankas, written by Japanese in the Americas, was published and hers was the winning tanka in the collection. Tana-san and Lucille Nixon (the first person not of Japanese descent to win the coveted Emperor's Tanka Poetry Award) co-authored and published a book of tanka entitled *Sounds From the Unknown* (Tana-san was Nixon's tutor in tanka poetry). In 1978, Tana-san published a second book in English entitled *Tomoshihi* and dedicated it to Nixon.

During her years at San Jose State University, Tana-san published two volumes of a four-volume diary her husband had kept during his four-year stay in a New Mexico internment camp. The diaries, she said, "give insights into what happened in the camps as well as to Japanese culture." She would rise at five-thirty AM every day to work on the diaries, then commute by bus the thirty miles to San Jose, attend classes, return home and work on her lessons "until the pen would rub my fingers raw and they would bleed." She won her Bachelor's degree in 1982 and was invited to speak at the International Sequoia Toastmaster's Club in Los Altos. This is her speech:

A Glorious Father's Day Gift

I have graduated from San Jose State University. Why did I need an American education in my old age? The degree of B.A. cannot be used to make a living because of my old age. The answer to this question is trifold. One of them is that, as I said in a tanka poem just thirty-one years ago, which reads,

I must follow
My children as their mother.
They are American citizens,
As they sing the American anthem
My future must go with them.

I needed to follow their ways. The next reason in answer to that, to live my whole life happily in America, I needed a position equal to that of the rest of the people. For that, I needed an American education. The third reason in answer is the most important one. I needed my education for my own father.

My father died fifty years ago when I was 19 years old. He was a famous Buddhist minister in my home town at that time in Hokkaido from the age of twenty-two to fifty-two. However, he could not have a regular education when he was young because of his illness as a child. When he was in the fifth grade, he became ill. It took over a year to recover from his illness.

When he returned to school, he found that his younger brother was in the same class. He was not happy studying with his younger brother, so he quit his studies at the public school and entered a private school. It was a Buddhist temple. His education there took about ten years, after which he became a Buddhist minister. He moved from his hometown to Hokkaido which the Japanese government had just established as a state of her country. So there he was a pioneer in developing the new state of Nippon.

While he was traveling in his ministry, he achieved his lifetime ideal. If young people wanted to have a higher education, he would bring them to his own home for educational preparation. Then he sent them to high schools, business schools, sewing schools or colleges. He knew that such youths needed education to help them build for the nation's future. Instead of concentrating on his own education, he wanted to help others receive education. They were not related to him by blood, but over ten boys and girls were educated with his financial support besides his own children of nine. Two of them obtained Bachelor's degrees. Among their children, four are now Ph.D. recipients. Some are now professors at Japanese universities, and one is a teacher in a German university.

When I thought about my father's efforts to give an education to many unknown youths, I could understand his feelings of regret that he did not have higher education himself, although he became a famous Buddhist preacher. When I found an opportunity to study at an American college eight years ago, and then four years ago I could enter San Jose State University, I

said, "Oh, I can make my father's satisfaction with my study."
And I just received a B.A. degree. However, this degree was not
for me; it must be given to my father's feeling of regret for his
college education which he could not experience.

I believe that my father surely knows my wish even
though he has been dead for many years. The degree of B.A. is
my best Father's Day present for him this year, a glorious present
and it is also a perpetual gift for him.

Two years later she earned her Master's degree in history from San Jose
State University, with a pioneering dissertation: *The History of Japanese
Tanka Poetry in America*. In the late 1980s, 1987 through 1989, she was the
second place winner in Japan's highly acclaimed Yasukuni Shrine Tanka
Poetry contest.

Now in her seventies, Tana-san taught Chinese and Japanese, and
audited classes at the Stanford International Center. For 15 years, she taught
at Foothill College, and her workshops and others eventually led to the
founding of the Foothill College Japanese Cultural Center. Some 40 years
after her arrival from Japan, she had educated her children, learned English,
written and published two books, translated and published two others, won
four awards for her poetry (and had one poem selected for publication),
taught koto (Japanese harp), Japanese language and Chinese and Japanese
calligraphy, obtained both a Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Arts from San
Jose State University, and was known as the "Mother and Founder" of the
Foothill College Japanese Cultural Center. An amazing list of
accomplishments—what an indomitable spirit.

On April 11, 1991, Tomoe Tana (Tana-san), at age 77, passed away in her
sleep. The Tana family established the Tomoe Tana Memorial Scholarship

Fund to commemorate her love of teaching. Her self-discipline and strength of character had remained undaunted until the day of her death.

Tana-san touched many people in her life, for she had the heart and mind of a universal person. She always gave generously of her time and energy and inspired others to do the same. For me, she provided a whole new dimension of maternal spirit and of learning. I began to write poetry; some of the poems were haiku (a fragment of tanka) which I would send off to Tana-san. Within two days I would receive a hand-painted card telling me how beautiful my poetry was. Within four days, I would receive a book with another card saying, "Gary-san, I would like you to have this book on haiku; I hope you enjoy it." Throughout the years, our pattern remained the same until her death.

In mid-life, I, too, returned to school, and began to study art, influenced and encouraged by Tana-san's example. As I progressed in fine art through abstract and calligraphic study on to printmaking and eventually bookmaking, I became aware of a link between my poetry and my art. Oftentimes I think of Tana-san's enormous energy and productivity and realize how her ever-flowing creativity sustained her throughout her life. In her memory I made a plaque. I wrote two tanka poems which I printed on rice paper and mounted on a hundred-year-old redwood board (taken from my grandfather's cabin in the Santa Cruz mountains). At a formal gathering, which included a tea ceremony, I presented the plaque to the Foothill Japanese Cultural Center, where it presently hangs in her honor.

Dedicated to Tomoe Tana

1913-1991

Shimmering meadows
Subtle, fragrant foliage
Numinous blossoms
Colorful, wavering bloom
Delicate expectations.

Internment

Uprooted, confined
Violated and denied
Silent defacement
Unspoken paranoia
Bittersweet heartfelt sorrow.

Gary Snider

**METRICAL
PATTERNS**

GARY SNIDER

Dedicated to "The Feminine"

STATUARY

**If I listened closely, I can hear Mary weep.
Her sorrowful tears wash granite feet
Hammered and chiseled from stone so cold
She weeps and weeps for her long lost soul.**

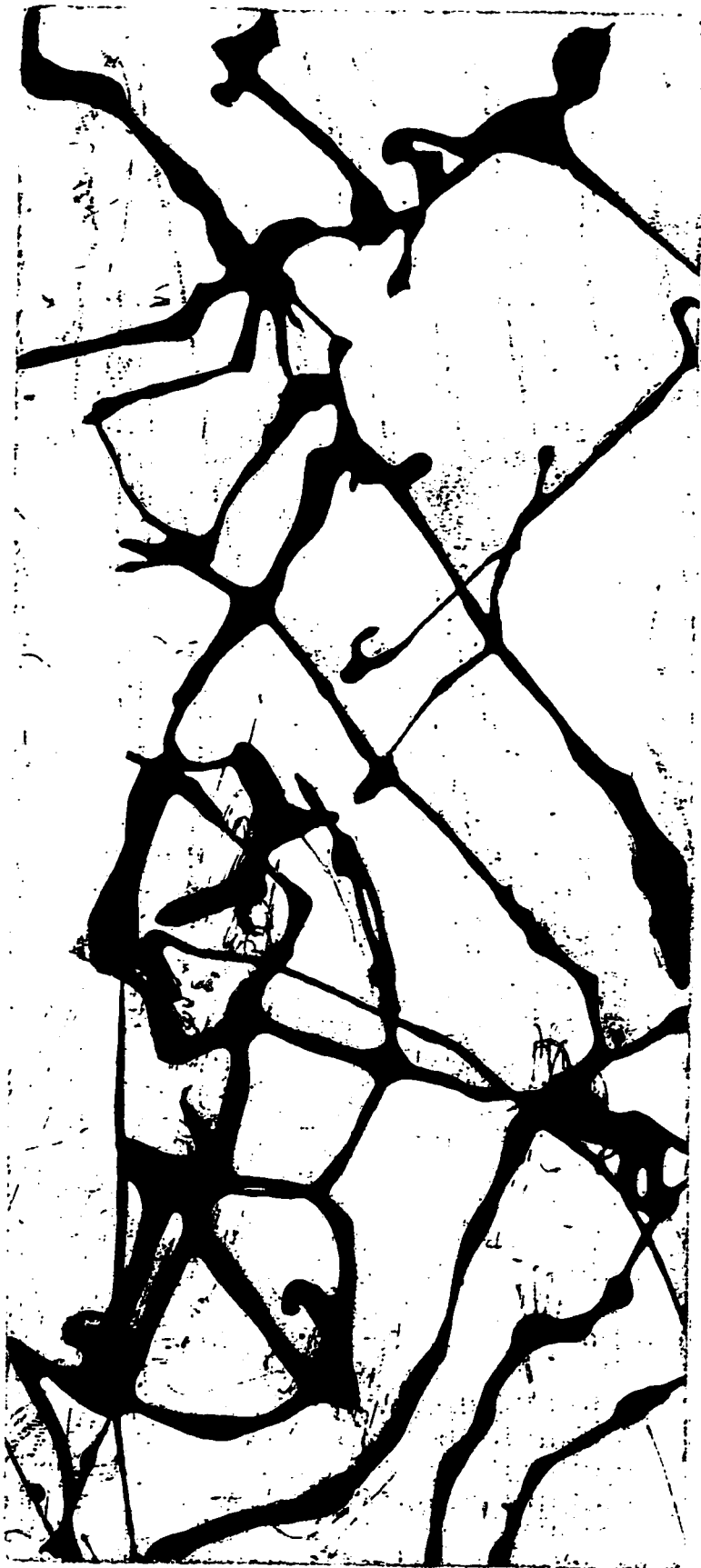
PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

**The canvas is my chessboard:
My battlefield
My secret world.**

**I spend a long time, perhaps ten minutes,
Perhaps an hour
Pushing a tiny dot of paint along the edge.
Sometimes it rushes ahead of me on its own,
Like a wave rolling onto the beach.
Other times, I have to nudge it, harry it,
Force it to the right place.**

**I become intimate with the canvas,
Feeling its individual ribs under my brush;
Moving the little dots so delicately,
It is like making love.**

**When I finish
Dazed,
I take a step back and see it all at once,
The whole picture,
The balance of it,
The rightness of it.
Then I wonder where it all came from.**



REDEMPTION

Deep, penetrating sunlight

Sublime, suggestive smells

Timeless shapes

Overwhelming greens

Dark flowers

Silence.



A STORY

**It was a summer day when they found her.
At the time, I was twelve.**

**My grandfather and one of my uncles had needed
something from the basement.
And there she was, hanging from the rafters.**

**My mother had always liked the basement,
Perhaps the darkness made her feel safe.**

**When I was eight, the white coats had to put her in a
straight jacket and carry her out of the basement.
From there, she went straight to the "Institution."**

**As her children, the "Institution" allowed us to visit her
every Sunday.
After two years of shock treatment, the "Institution"
released a remarkably changed woman.**

**When I was ten, she was found crawling, or creeping over
the city sidewalks.
She claimed that all the lines were straight, therefore she
was responsible for them.**



DAY

**As I rock on the porch:
Boards creak
Skin withers
Truths unravel.**

**Life is a day forward
Not back.
A glimpse of beauty,
Fragrant freshness,
Sweetness,
Sunlight, not sundark.**

**I will seek the flower,
For it exists for itself.**

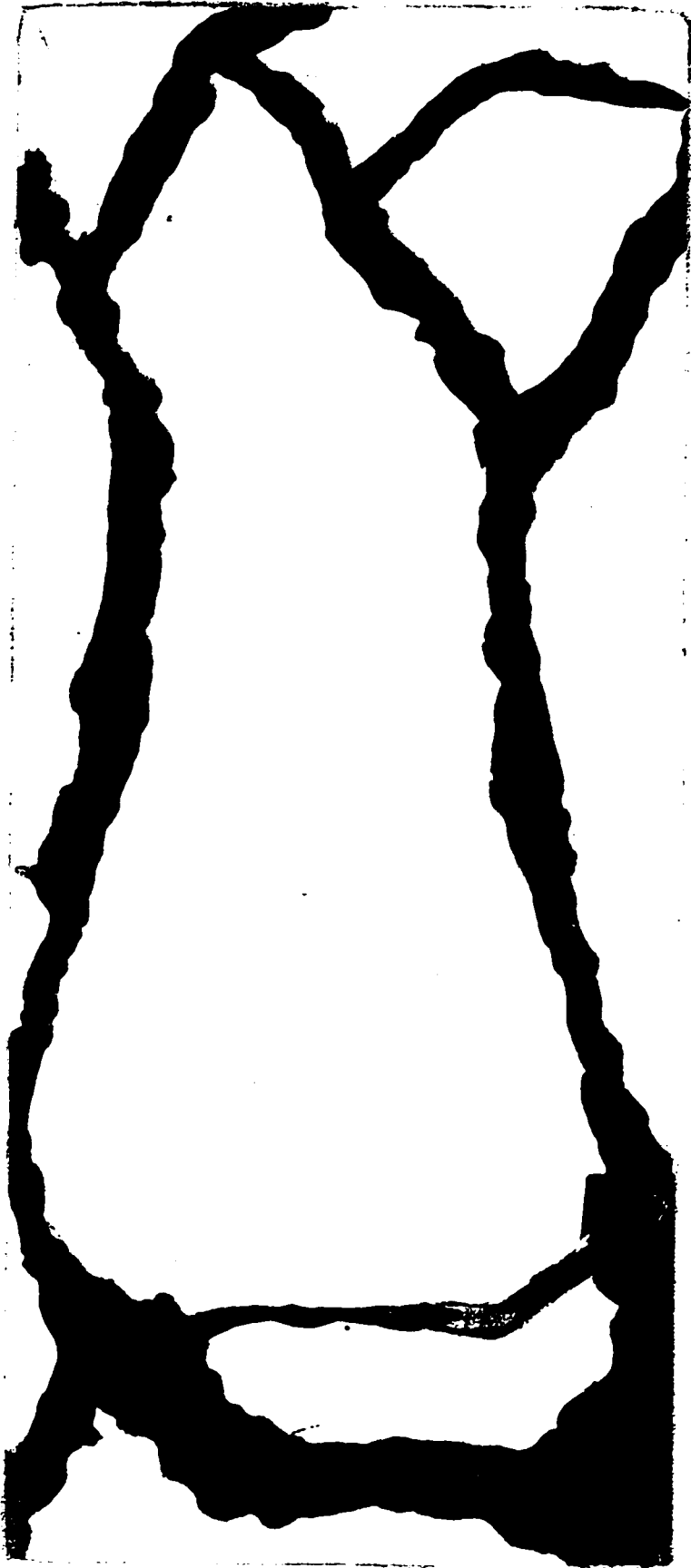


A SWEET STORY

**As I lie in my bed,
Sun slants through the five strong bars.
Faded memories surface,
Sweet memories,
Before stacked darkness and foghorns
When breezes blew from heaven
On winds remembered.**

**I recall silent meadows
Sunday stillness
Order in, not out
Bees asleep
Dream weavers full of tender.**

**Without memories,
There is no hope.**



VISITOR'S DAY

**Two handsome children
Dressed to Sunday.**

**Extensive trees
Twisted patterns
Mutated grass
Deep familiar shadows.**

**Shimmering wires:
Barbed
Vigilant
Unforgiving.**

**She stands over us,
Unsure,
Smoothing her simple cotton dress.
Tacit,
Knee-deep in shame.**

**One of God's thoughts
Mired in quiet desperation,
Her mind broken,
Our mother.**



TANKA

Psychic explosions

Visualized word salad

Endless collisions

Profuse metrical patterns

Poetic resolution.



SENSUOUS LADY

**You always return to the river
The coolness draws you,
Sustains you.**

**Trees grace her flanks.
Bushes, a succulent green, tease her edges.
Gathered pebbles look out.**

**Looking down, you see yourself.
The ripples are the lines on your face,
The water your tears.**

**Birds like the river.
Great blue herons and snowy white egrets hide in the bushes.
Fledglings dot her banks, their cries are deep like the river.**



THE LAST RIDE

**Although he had the hobble of the broken bronco rider
His walk still retained a dignity,
A lightness of step.**

**His ageless face was an etching,
The artist, life itself.**

**The night before, he had drawn number seven,
Whiskey Jack,
The outlaw of the circuit.**

**As he approached the holding pen,
A smile of warmth spread across his face,
Jack snorted recognition.
He reached down and loosened the bucking strap one
notch,
Then he sat the saddle.**

**When the chute gate banged open,
Jack hesitated momentarily,
There was a twinkle in the old rider's eye.
His dreams were of light.**



WINGLESS JOY

The silence of art speaks

Colors dance

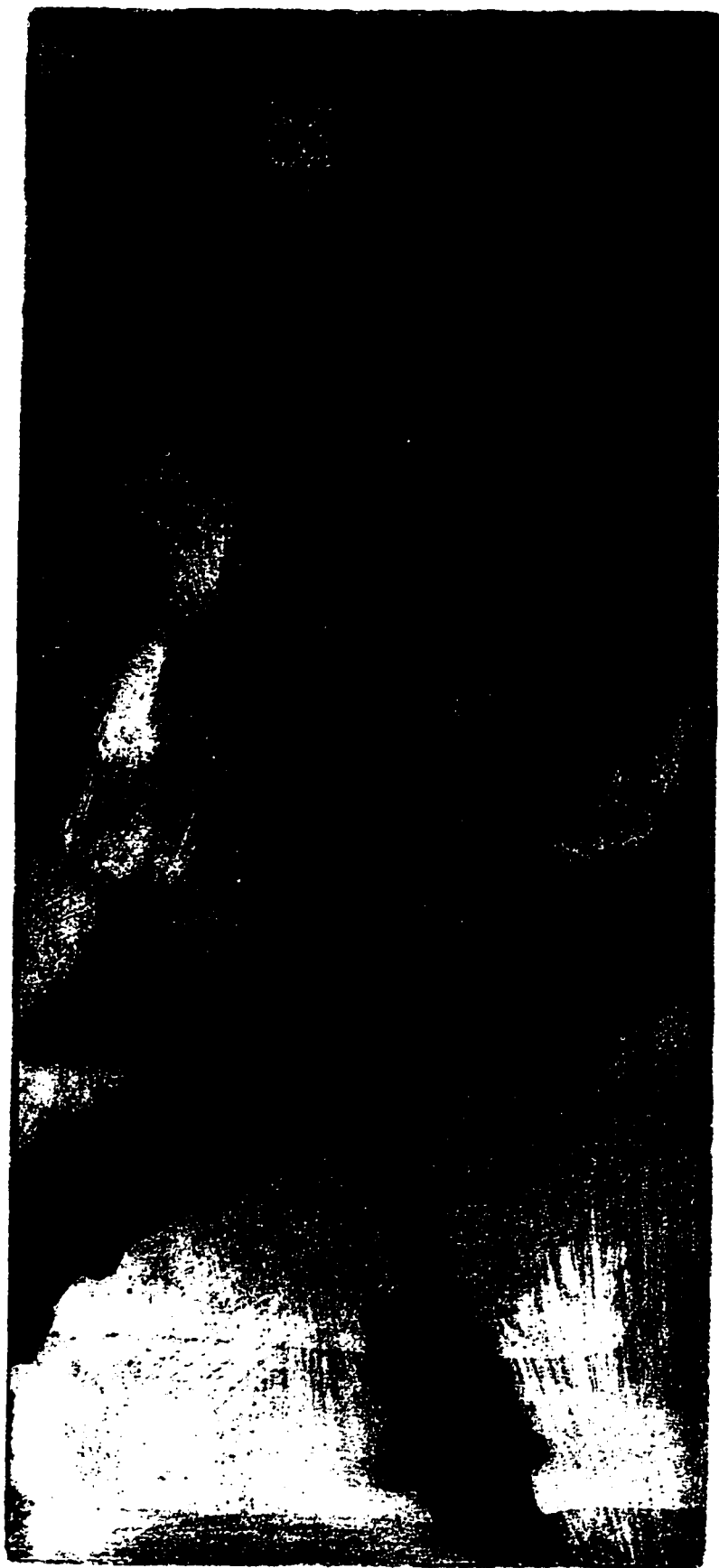
I become the space,

The depth.

It embraces, then engulfs

My primitive-self journeys to the other side

Sheer, unthinking joy.



BILL CLEANS THE ROAD

**I have just turned ninety-three.
As long as I am useful I am allowed to live.**

**I get up every morning at seven AM
Each day I remind myself,
Wake up!
Get up!
I talk to my legs.
"Let's get moving."
"Legs, you're an antelope."
It's a matter of mind over matter.**

**Every morning I'm out on the streets,
Seven-thirty AM sharp.
Regardless of the weather,
I clean the street.
It only takes about three hours,
And it's good for my health.**

**A road is like a dumping ground for garbage:
Cigarette butts
Beer cans
Empty cigarette packs
Vomit from drunks
Dead dogs and cats
Dead leaves and empty matchboxes.**

**I have plenty to clean up.
I have been doing this for years,
But I am the one who benefits
Gaining long life and deep insight.**

**Actually you may think I am cleaning the road,
but I am cleaning my mind.
My mind is in worse condition than the road.
The more I clean the garbage out of my mind,
The more that comes!
And each time,
The more I clean, the more I see the truth.**

**Summer is hot.
In winter, I often lose the sense of feeling
And I have pain,
But I never rest from the work,
Not one day!**



WEATHERED

**Beneath washed-out blues
Careful, iridescent greens
Tease whispering truths.**

NATURE

**Unsettled, whispering
Rhythms, broken off sunlight
Forest and river.**



AN ILL WIND

**As I lie awake, an ill wind passes over me.
Overhead shadows tease sycamore trees.
Crossed moonbeams cautiously turn grey,
Tired autumn leaves leaves whisper the end of the day.**

**The brook of dark leaps through the night
Its desparate blues, confused and contrite,
Soundless shapes, deep with despair
Ravage and plunder the stilted air.**

**Suddenly my sorrow is just too deep
Silent tears move down my cheeks
Surreptitious thoughts are now awry
With no uncertainty, my time to die.**



A LIVING THING

**Far from the beaten path
In the back streets and alleys
I outlive the longest night.**

**Waiting to play her part (the spinning woman)
With deep-set emerald blue eyes
Releases me from every care.**

**She speaks in a voice a thousand times
Stronger than our own; it shapes the
Language of the past and present.**

**Multi-images spring from her deepest well,
Flooding my vision. Shapes and mood and color
Are many-sided, diffused, penetrating.**

**Seized images are then exposed to the light of day
Given flesh, blood and expression, but they
Still insist on their own form and content.
Yet, they have earned the right to exist.**

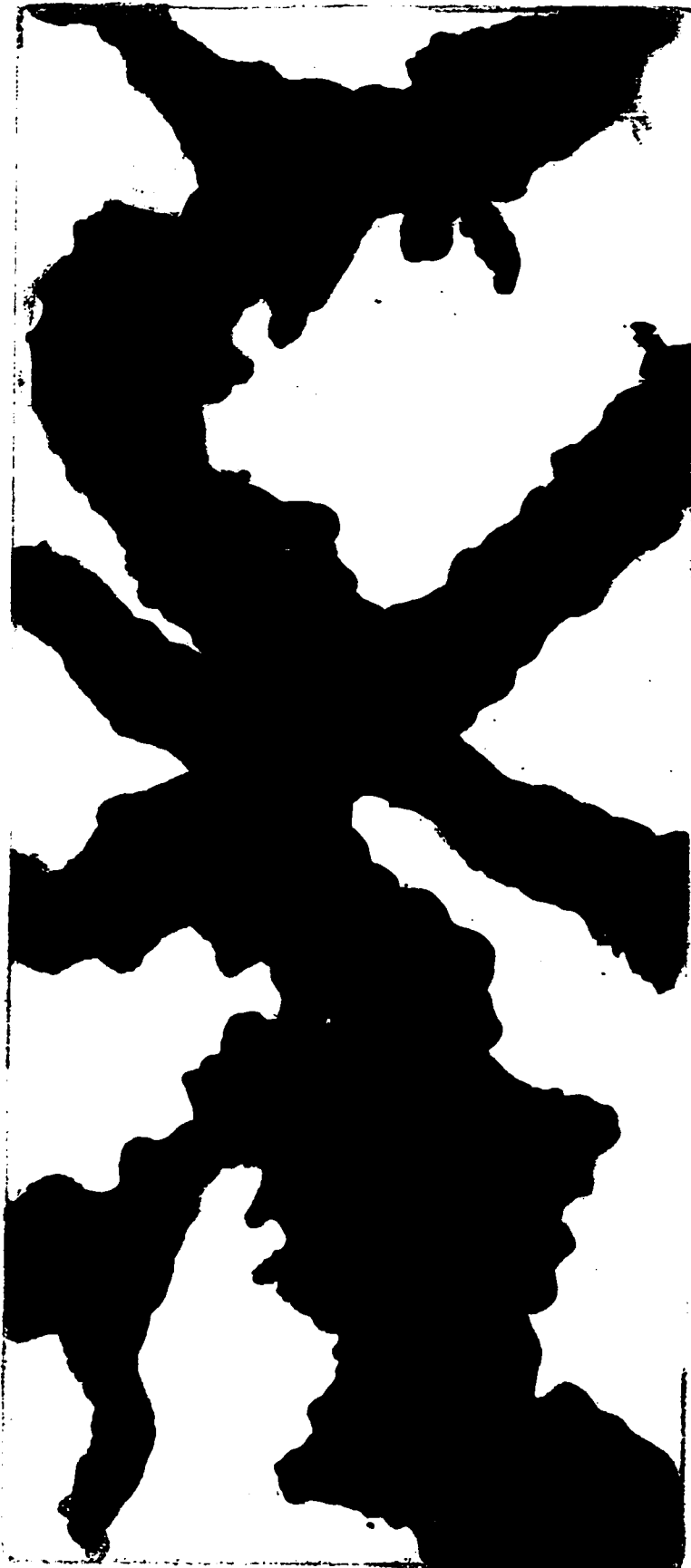


UNTITLED

**When I walk in the forest,
I enter the stillness of a graceful, ancient Chinese scroll.**

**Birds cry from the treetops
Streams flow fresh and clear
Bright leaves shimmer
Greens are cool and alive
Gentle clouds tease sapphire blues.**

The forest holds the soul of the land.



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