

Japanese Death Poem Exercise

Oh to be in a culture where poetry is recognized as an ancient art and not as a pastime of adult children wasting their time! The anthology *Japanese Death Poems: Written By Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death*¹ is a classic work of literature, wonderful introduction to the jisei and is filled with many potential tropes and/or figures of speech that could add something fresh to your own take a fate that is coming your way sooner than you think. The idea in Japan and in the Zen tradition is that, as people age, they gain wisdom and are not just old people taking up space, eating soft food and driving slowly and in our way. At the end of one's life, there is a pithy (haiku-length) summation of that wisdom for the ages.

According to Chris Kinkaid of JapanPowered.com²:

Japan has a long history of jisei, or death poems. Jisei is the "farewell poem to life." These poems were written by literate people just before their death. One of the earliest record of jisei dates to 686 CE with the death of Prince Otsu, a poet and the son of Emperor Temmu, who was forced to commit suicide on false charges of promoting a rebellion.

The anthology gives us a glimpse into some facts about Japanese culture that aid our enjoyment of the poem. For instance:



JAKURA

*Died on the fifth day of June, 1906
at the age of fifty-nine.*

This year I want
to see the lotus
on the other side.

Mitaki kana
kotoshi no hasu wa
kano kishi ni

¹ Hoffman, Yoel. *Japanese Death Poems*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1986.

² <https://japanpowered.com/japan-culture/jisei-the-japanese-death-poem>

On the evening of Jakura's death, members of his family asked him to recite a death poem. He said the poem above and then tried to grasp a brush and write the words, but his strength did not hold out. He died, leaving a blank sheet of paper beside his bed.

In Buddhist literature, this world of life and death is called "this side" or "this shore," and nirvana, or enlightenment, is called "the other side" or "yonder shore." The passage from the world of illusion to the world of truth is likened to a boat trip from one side of the river to the other...

It may have been during my time lost in the wilderness while awaiting a rescue helicopter that I may have written my current placeholder death poem:

Please take my ashes
hike til you see Olympus
let me be the wind.

I know, I can do better, but it's good practice to whip one of these out every 2 or three years. (More if you are over 60 and less if you are under 50.) Pondering death makes us appreciate life more and anything that does THAT can't be all bad. Other Japanese Death Poems:

Shiyo

Surely there's a teahouse
with a view of plum trees
on Death Mountain, too.



Hakuen

I wonder where
the winds of winter
drive the rainclouds

If you are not a haiku writer, don't start now. Write something short, maybe alluding to your personal mythology, that states something you'd like people to remember after you are gone. In my case, my experiences in Olympic National Park: first discovering Michael McClure's work (Dolphin Skull;) being lost; taking my daughters during their childhoods; and having many backpacking and camping trips is key, as is the rare view of the signature mountain of the chain and its remarkable glaciers.

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