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The Nine Faces of Death

“Su Tung-po’s” *Kuzō-shi*

JAMES H. SANFORD

“As you are,
we once were.
As we are,
you soon shall be.”

common English epitaph

“All things are without permanence.”

core Buddhist teaching

I. Prelude: Death in the Western World

In his highly influential books, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* and *The Hour of Our Death*,¹ Phillippe Ariès posits four major, discernibly different, periods in the history of Western sensibility towards the problem of death. These four great attitudinal sweeps Ariès calls: (1) “Tamed Death,” a forthright acceptance of death that was the norm from the early Christian period to the eleventh or twelfth centuries; (2) “One’s Own Death,” an attitude that emerged around the twelfth century, probably in consequence of the arrival in Europe of the Black Plague, and in which the religious motif of the Last Judgement became so intensely personalized and so closely identified with physiological corruption as to generate a

¹ Phillippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, (translated by Patricia M. Ranum), The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1974; *The Hour of Our Death*, (translated by Helen Weaver), Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1981.

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pathological fear of dying as the cultural norm; (3) "Thy Death," an attitudinal phase that lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in which focus shifted from one's own death to that of the beloved, a move that led among other things to a pronounced eroticization of death symbolism; and finally, (4) a stage starting perhaps as late as the mid-nineteenth century that Ariès calls "Forbidden Death" in which modern European and American societies have made heroic efforts to, if possible, ignore death altogether or, failing that, to domesticate it into the almost ordinary departure of an almost still-living corpse whose cosmeticized countenance might well be no more than that of someone caught napping in a Pullman coach. In this latest attitudinal stage death, decay, and terminal illness took on all the qualities of tabooed unmentionability more commonly reserved for sexuality alone.

During the second and third of these stages, "One's Own Death" and "Thy Death," Western societies manifested a persistent and—from a modern perspective at least—a decidedly unhealthy and excessive concern with death in general and with its most dubious and repulsive aspects in particular. The pivotal medieval shift from "Tamed Death" to the determined obsession with "One's Own Death" was marked by the parallel upsurge of a number of gruesome new literary and artistic motifs. Central among these were the *Vado Mori* ("I go to death") genre of poetry, the *Ars Moriendi* guidebooks to a good death, and the Dance of Death iconic motif.² The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries added new twists to these themes. First was the sentimentalization and romanticization of death that accompanied the shift of attention from one's own death to that of a beloved other. A second, somewhat different, change was the shift of focus from a body that was simply dead to the *decaying* corpse, which now became the key emblem of death. This new iconographic concern with decay—to which illness as well as death was often assimilated—reached its peak perhaps in

² As the opening words of the "Vision of Death" chapter of Johan Huizinga's classic *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1956, p. 124 put it, "No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death. An everlasting call or *memento mori* ["Remember Death."] resounds throughout life."

Even the word "macabre" is a coinage of this period, one necessitated by the pivotal quality of the shifted attitude towards dying.

works such as those of the Spanish painter Juan de Valdes Leal (1630–1691), whose depictions were so realistic that Murillo said it was impossible to view them without holding one's nose.³

One powerful motif that became central in Western views of death was the conflation of Death and Love. Though this eventually became a standard Romantic conceit, forerunners of the theme can be seen quite early. For example, while the first versions of the Dance of Death had shown only male figures, as early as 1468 the artist, Guyot Marchand, had produced a deliberate *Danse Macabre des Femmes*.⁴ More striking, and perhaps more familiar, figures are slightly later works such as *Young Woman Attacked by Death* (also commonly called *The Ravisher*) of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)⁵ or Hans Sebald Beham's (1500–1550) prints, *Death and the Lady* and *Death Seizing a Nude Woman*.⁶

Leaving aside whatever deeper psychic connections may exist archetypally between *thanatos* and *eros*,⁷ and going beyond the mere fact that women as well as men die, there are at least two other specific motifs in the linking death and the feminine in these and later Western works that seem virtually universal. One of these is the recognition that conception and birth are the first steps towards senility, death, and corruption. The second is the commonly-held special regret felt at the death of a young woman, a turn of mind that allows the "loss of a flower still in bud" to become symbolic of the whole of the brevity and vanity of life.

³ Frederic Parkes Weber, *Aspects of Death and Correlated Aspects of Life in Art, Epigram, and Poetry*, McGrath Publishing Co., College Park, Md., 1971 (reprint of the 1922 edition), p. 119.

⁴ Carl Nordenfalk, ed., *Death, Love, and the Maiden*, University Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 1975, p. 21.

⁵ Walter L. Strauss, ed. *The Intaglio Prints of Albrecht Dürer: Etchings and Dry-points*, Abaris Books, New York, 1977, pp. 24–25. Strauss suggests this undated depiction of a savage looking man (Death) attempting to rape a young woman (Life) dates from 1495 or possibly even earlier.

⁶ Clifton C. Olds and Ralph G. Williams, *Images of Life and Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, University of Michigan Museum of Arts, [Ann Arbor], 1975, plates 29 and 31.

⁷ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 369–381, notes of the darker conjunction of death and sexuality which came in Western culture to equate rape, death, and torture, that it was a sadism "unconscious in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; admitted and deliberate in the eighteenth and nineteenth."

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II. The Buddhist "Nine Aspects of Death"

The brief, introductory discussion above has confined itself to the sensibilities towards death found in Western history and culture, especially those expressions typical of the stages Ariès calls "One's Own Death" and "Thy Death." While an attempt to make point-for-point historical comparisons would surely be too exaggerated, there are, nevertheless, some surprisingly close thematic parallels in the Japanese literary and artistic traditions. An important example of such parallels is the *Kuzō* or "Nine Stages of Death" theme.⁸

The ultimate source of the *Kuzō* motif is to be found in those early Buddhist meditative practices which intend to aid the attainment of Nirvāṇa through a systematic contemplation of the vanity, impermanence, and foulness inherent in this world. Such meditations, often said to be best undertaken in a graveyard, consider the living body and find it to be not a thing of beauty but rather a sack of blood, guts, and undigested food; consider the joys of eating and see not bowls and platters of gourmet delicacies but only a mash of spit and food rolling about in the mouth, a bubbling oil-slick in the belly, and half-jelled feces in the intestines. In the same general vein, of course, is the visualization of the nine stages of the process of death and corruption. The *loci classici* for these meditations are the *Satipatthana-sutta* and the *Visuddhimagga*.⁹

The *Satipatthana* outlines the post-mortem career of our foul bodies in nine steps: (1) two days dead, swollen, bluish, and festering; (2) a corpse eaten by crows, dogs, and worms; (3) a skeleton to which some fleshy fragments yet cling; (4) a chain of blood-smearred but fleshless bones; (5) a chain of bones linked only by tendons; (6) scattered bones; (7) polished white bones; (8) the blood-smearred corpse; (9) bones rotten into dust. The *Visuddhimagga* enumerates ten stages: (1) the swollen corpse, (2) the bluish corpse, (3) the festering corpse, (4) the

⁸ Most commonly written 九想, "nine thoughts," but also 九相 "nine aspects." Since 相 also means "face," the more vernacular rendering "the nine faces of death" is also appropriate.

⁹ A succinct outline of these and other Buddhist meditations on death is found in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation*, Harper and Row, New York and Evanston, 1956, pp. 86-107; a deeper examination in George D. Bond, "Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death," *History of Religions*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Feb 1980), pp. 237-258.

fissured corpse, (5) the animal-gnawed corpse, (6) the scattered corpse, (7) the torn and scattered corpse, (8) the blood-smearred corpse, (9) the worm-infested corpse, and (10) the skeletal corpse. As can be seen, neither of the lists—whose loving fixation on gruesome detail cannot but remind us of Ariès' "One's Own Death"—progresses in a fully believable empirical order. But either tells quite clearly the intended message of impermanence and the inevitable decay of all things. The *Visuddhimagga* goes beyond this, however, when it prescribes its set of ten visualizations as remedy for the various aspects of carnal lust—meditation on the swollen corpse as a specific against lusting after the beauties of comely shape, meditation on the gnawed corpse as a specific against lusting after breasts and other fleshly protrusions, and so on. Even in its earliest formulations in India, the Nine Stages motif seems to have betrayed a strong undercurrent of eroticism that is quite resonant with the parallel eroticism of death seen in the European "Thy Death" stage.

III. The "Su Tung-po" Poem Cycle

That later Buddhist scriptures would elucidate and expound standard Buddhist themes is only natural, and to find the Nine Stages in Japanese texts is hardly a surprise. Perhaps the earliest Japanese example of a set of Kuzō poems are the ten poems in Classical Chinese of Kūkai's (744–835) *Seirei-shū* anthology.¹⁰ Though these poems survive, and, like all of Kūkai's writings, are an important part of the Japanese literary tradition, they were probably always restricted to a relatively small circle of readers and do not seem to have made any substantial impact on later generations.

A more widely-read, indeed popular, Japanese poetic treatment of the Nine Stages of Death theme was the considerably later cycle of poems attributed to the illustrious T'ang poet, Su Tung-po (1036–

¹⁰ An easily available edition is Watanabe Shōkō 渡邊照宏 and Miyasaka Yūshō 宮坂宥勝, eds., *Sangō shiki; Seirei-shū* 三教指帰; 性靈集, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1975, Vol. 71, pp. 460–468. This edition notes (p. 460) that some classical sources claim that these poems were not written by Kūkai but only copied by him from the southern wall of the K'ai Yuan ssu. Others say he copied only the ninth poem, "Ashes," the rest of the set being his. Still others attribute all ten to the Japanese master.

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1101).¹¹ This composite cycle consists of four separate, contrasting, elements: a Buddhist-toned preface; nine two-verse Classical Chinese poems (four seven-character lines per verse) describing the stages of decay; eighteen *waka*, two for each of the nine stages; and nine illustrations of these standard processes of bodily corruption. The Chinese poems are explicitly attributed to Su Tung-po, but even the Japanese must have considered the *waka*, and perhaps the visuals as well, to be materials added later. In point of actual fact, it seems virtually certain that all segments of the text were of Japanese provenance, that they developed independently of each other for a time, and were then brought together to form the extant composite version, perhaps as late as the Ashikaga period.

Though the core of this cycle was unarguably the Chinese poems, their attribution to Su Tung-po is certainly false, an attempt to legitimize a series of well-known but otherwise anonymous poems, written it is true in Classical Chinese, but in all probability by a Japanese author. They possess neither the artistic quality of Su's genuine poetry nor are they included in the Chinese editions of his collected works. To doubt the attribution is not, however, to say that these poems are unworthy of our literary attentions. Though formally below the standards of the great T'ang poet, they do possess a vital character of their own. Their imagery is, if often unpleasant in its content, also strong, direct and forceful—in its sustained fascination with the more gory aspects of the Nine Stages theme. They also show a considerable interest in the employment of erotic possibilities of the topic, though this is in part a subtle effect carried more by the concretely organic images of the decay motif than by explicit sexual imagery. Still, "perfumed body," "naked bodies," the classical "clouds and rain" allusion, and even the painful image of flies like "a shining carpet on the flesh" are phrases that betray a less than philosophic turn of mind. The gentler, even romantic, elements of the associated *waka* further emphasize an erotic reading of the composite version as a whole, even as they soften and transform its outlines.

¹¹ The literary name of Su Shih. Su was an important official under Emperors Ying Tsung, Shen Tsung, and Che Tsung, but he is best known as a poet and essayist. Tung-po, "the eastern slope," derives from the name of a hill where Su built a hut in Huang-chou during an out-of-favor period in the 1070's.

The woodblock illustrations that accompany the poems of the "Su Tung-po" text have well-known parallels (probably direct antecedents) in both the Japanese painting tradition and in earlier Japanese Buddhist writings. The emergence of the Pure Land schools of Buddhism in the mid- to late Heian period and their rise to prominence in the Kamakura was accompanied by the notable development of new (in Japan at least) genres of painting. Chief among these were illustrations of Amida's Pure Land paradise; of its opposite counterpart, the various Buddhist Hells; of the narrow white path that the dead must tread from this life to the next; and other, closely related, themes. Much attention was given to the whole range of rebirth states posited by the Buddhist tradition, the so-called *rokudō* or "six realms" of existence: *devas*, men, demonic *asuras*, hungry-ghosts, animals, and Hell-dwellers.¹² This structure itself was hardly new; indeed, the mandalic Wheel of Life arrangement of the six realms had long been a familiar icon of Indian and Chinese Buddhist art. In Japanese Pure Land contexts, however, there was a persistent tendency to stress the more negative possibilities of the *rokudō* theme, to focus in on the most painful types of rebirth in the Buddhist hells or as a hungry ghost and to emphasize the least pleasant aspects of the human and bestial states. Eventually certain aspects of *rokudō* illustration broke free to become the virtually independent sub-genres of Hell scrolls (*jigoku zōshi*), hungry ghost scrolls (*gaki zōshi*), and human-illness scrolls (*yamai no sōshi*).

Even when the full *rokudō* structure was treated, it tended to present the ugliest possible reading of all but the paradisaical state—and this last was regularly recast from the heavens of the Indian *devas* into the formulaic image of Amida's Western Paradise. The famous "Rokudō" scrolls of Raigō-ji¹³ include ten scrolls that show the lower realms: four of these depict the tortures of Hell, one the miseries of the hungry ghosts, one the demonic *asuras* realm, and four the attendant sorrows of being born human. The remaining scrolls illustrate Amida's

¹² Often, of course, the *rokudō* is extended in Japanese sources (especially in Tendai-associated contexts) to become "the ten realms" (十界; *jikkai*) which adds *śrāvakas*, *pratyeka-Buddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, and Buddhas atop the older schema.

¹³ Joji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting* (translated and adapted by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis). Kodansha International, Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco, 1977, p. 175.

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Paradise, the virtues of *nembutsu* (two paintings), and the office of Emma, the King of Hell. That this is a Pure Land rendition of the *rokudō* motif is quite clear; the scrolls are, in fact, illustrations based directly on the textual descriptions of Genshin's (942–1017) seminal *Ōjō yōshū*¹⁴. Further, they originally belonged to Ryōsen-ji, a sub-temple founded on Mt. Hiei by Genshin. The *Ōjō yōshū* is also the most probable immediate source of a *Kuzō* segment of the Raigō-ji scrolls' treatment of the realm of human beings.¹⁵ Genshin's textual elaboration on decay as an epitome of impermanence is only a brief, albeit graphic, paraphrase of the earlier scriptural discussions of the Nine Stages. The Raigō-ji painting makes this theme a bit more orderly, showing the stages of corruption from top to bottom as the corpse of a young woman swells, rots, is consumed by animals, and finally reduced to a scattered skull and bones. A truncated version of the same theme is found as a minor element of the well-known thirteenth century Pure Land painting of the "White Path Crossing the Two Rivers" owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.¹⁶ In the lower right foreground of that painting a solitary monk contemplates the rotting bodies of several persons in a cemetery. At least one of these is a young woman.

The use of a young woman as the central subject became an established feature of the Nine Stages motif in Japan. A striking example of this is the late Kamakura handscroll in the Nakamura Collection termed

¹⁴ Daizōkyō Kankōkai, ed. *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*. Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, Tokyo, 1924–1932, Item 2682, Vol. 84, pp. 33–90. At the end of Genshin's disquisition on death some colloquial Japanese versions of the *Ōjō yōshū* insert a reference to a line of Po Chū-yi (772–846): "Where now is the rosy face of Hsi Shih? She has become whitened bones rotted on the heath." (A. K. Reischauer, "Genshin's Ōjō Yōshū: Collected Essays on Birth into Paradise, Vol. 3 [Dec. 1930], pp. 53–54; translation slightly modified). This comes just before Genshin's words, "Thus we know that our bodies are first to last unclean. And all those we love, men or women, are just the same." The insertion (of uncertain date) of a Chinese literary allusion into an otherwise homiletic discourse would seem to parallel the emergence process of the entire "Su Tung-po" *Kuzō* cycle.

¹⁵ Ienaga Saburo, *Painting in the Yamato Style*, Weatherhill, Tokyo and New York, 1973, p. 140; Joji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Paintings*, plates 182–183.

¹⁶ Sherman E. Lee, *Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, 1983, plate 19. John M. Rosenfield and Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Journey of the Three Jewels*, The Asia Society, New York, 1979, plate 37;

the *Kuzō zukan e-maki*¹⁷ which presents the theme in a fashion that is at once both minimalist and highly realistic. The scroll shows ten bare scenes through which a woman's body passes from fresh death and deshabelle through consumption by dogs, crows, and worms to end up a dismembered skeleton. The marginally erotic theme of partial nakedness in the first stage is echoed by the sequence's alternate title, "Ono no Komachi," which identifies the corpse with the lovely and passionate, but also heartless, ninth century poetess. This identification, like the use of a female subject and like the casual nakedness of her first step into death, eventually becomes a standard cliché—though Sherman Lee, following Alexander Soper, notes that literary evidence suggests it is a connection whose roots may go all the way back to the ninth century court painter, Kawanari (trad. 783–851).¹⁸ At any rate, the Nakamura *Kuzō zukan e-maki* is very close to the "Su Tung-po" woodblock renditions in every respect save medium.

The "Su Tung-po" illustrations are, though moderately gruesome, really almost artlessly naive. They begin with a newly-dead court lady surrounded by weeping servants, move on to the motif of exposed nakedness, then quickly pass through the more graphic stages of decay to that of a pile of bones. Then, in the very last scene, even the bones are gone and only a memorial *stūpa* survives—presumably until with time it too will erode into nothingness.¹⁹

¹⁷ 九想圖觀畫卷 Lee, *ibid.*, plate 14.

¹⁸ Though no such painting survives, literary records claim that Kawanari startled viewers with a realistic depiction of a "black and bloated" corpse. (Lee, *ibid.*, p. 41, quoting Alexander Soper). All of this would certainly suggest if not the Nine Faces perse, at least something very like them.

An interesting conjunction of the Nine Stages, Ono no Komachi, and nineteenth century Western romanticism of death is Baron Textor de Ravisi, "Les Femmes Célèbres du Japon," *Congrès Provincial des Orientalistes Français*, Paris, 1875, pp. 114–126 whose art nouveau illustrations of La Belle Ko-mati are clearly derived from Japanese *Kuzō* prototypes.

¹⁹ The utilization of the *stūpa* as symbol of the dead woman is not accidental and probably derives not only from the funerary use of *stūpas* as grave markers, but also from the Shingon tradition which considers the human body to be homologous to the five-layered *stūpa* or *gorin no tō*. That this motif may also connect the Komachi of the Nine Stages and the Komachi of Kan'ami's Nō play *Sotoba no komachi* seems an intriguing likelihood, but not one for which any positive proof can be adduced. For *Sotoba no Komachi* see Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1955, pp. 264–270, (translation by Sam Houston Brock).

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The *waka* of the cycle are much more restrained than either the illustrations or the Chinese poems. Like not a few other pieces of classical Japanese literature, they manage to intermix equal amounts of proper Buddhist sorrow for things passing in general and a more romantic and courtly sorrow for a particular, recently lost loved one. The viewpoint of the *waka* seems to be that of a man contemplating a dead woman certainly, but he is rather her lover or husband than some unrelated pious monk pondering the nature of transiency.

IV. Translation²⁰

POEMS OF THE NINE STAGES

by Tung Po

Preface

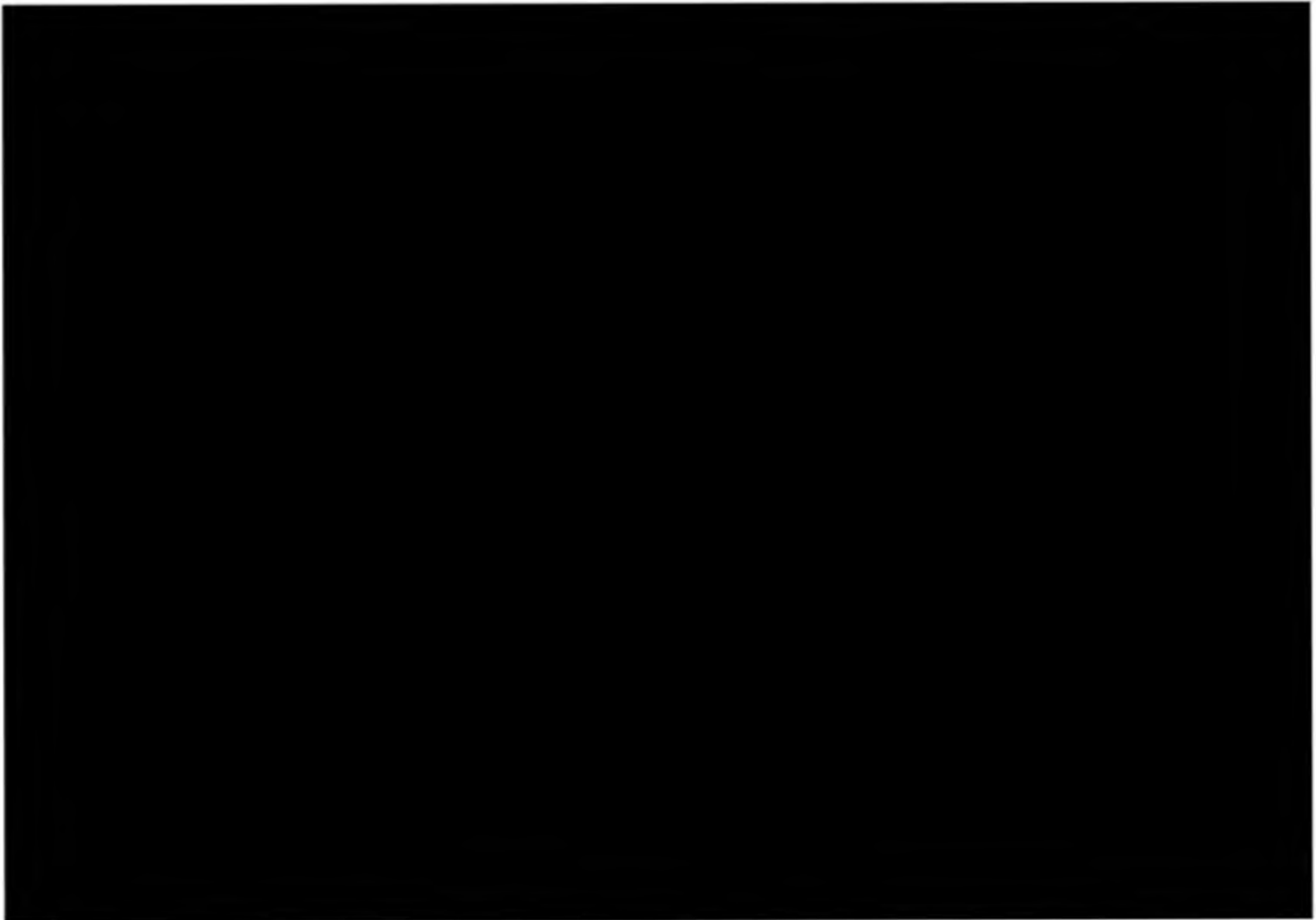
Crimson powder and emerald brows are but adornments laid over bare white skin. All that a man and a woman hold together in a lustful embrace are two stinking bodies. And when these bodies have grown cold, their spirits will fly. The corpses will be abandoned in the broad fields and, after a short span in the soaking rains and burning sun, will be rotted, consumed, reduced to ashes. Seeing that the persons buried of old have already become but dust, we can but wonder who any longer remembers these ancient ashes. Tempted to regret our own lack of fame, we can see that past fame has gone still and cold amidst the echoes of these valleys. Should we seek profit, we know that profit is but the vain hope of a Spring dream. Should we choose to drift with the flow of self, then love and attachment will surely follow. Yet, if one resists the self, then there are of-a-sudden two enemies, "drifting" and "resisting." This division into two can but bring further karmic recompense. Rather, we should let the self of selflessness respond, let our actions aim at the permanence of non-permanence. If the common

²⁰ For my translation I have used Kinsei Bungaku Shoshi Kenkyū-kai ed., *Kinsei bungaku shiryō ruiju: Kanazōshi hen*, [hereafter, KBSR] Benseisha, n.d., Vol. 10, pp. 507-526. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Barbara Ruch, Columbia University, and to Dr. Michael Cooper of Sophia University who separately and kindly helped me with the epigraphy of the less than wholly legible *waka*. The translations are wholly my own.

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run of bewildered human-kind can see and feel shame in the Four Great Errors, how much more scrupulous should the disciples of Śakyamuni be!²¹

ONE: Newly Dead



That familiar face lies wasted with illness
Her perfumed body seems asleep—fresh in death.
Beloved companions all left behind.
Her evening-soul has flown; but where?

Gorgeous flowers lost beneath a Spring moon,
Vibrant leaves torn loose by an Autumn gale.
Young and old, always and alike, trapped in impermanence.
Fast or slow, cause and effect remorselessly drag us down.

²¹ The Four Errors: killing, stealing, fornication, lying.

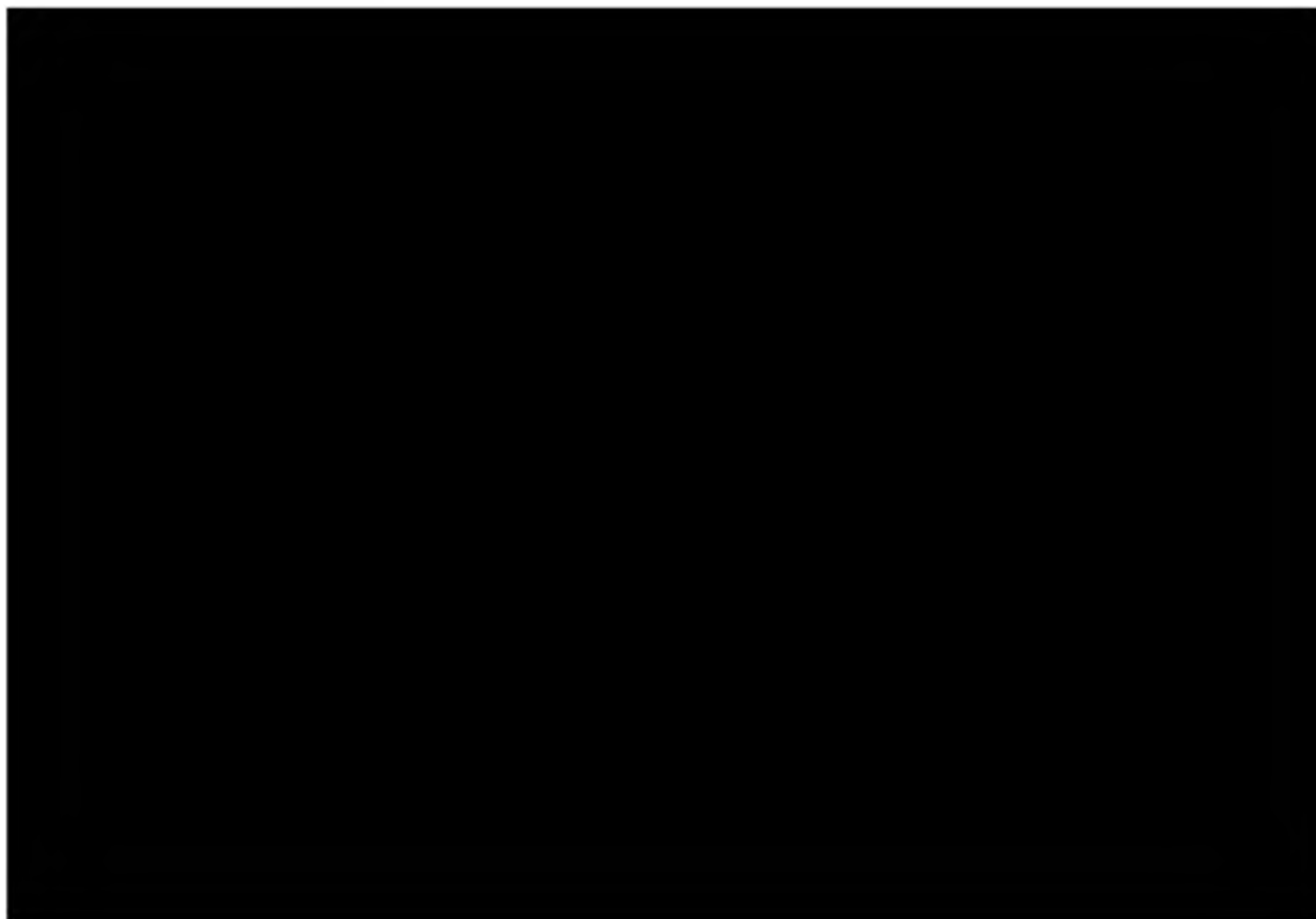
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Waka:

Just at their peak
the fresh, young blossoms go;
scattering, drifting.
How painful, how beautiful—
This evening of Spring.

Blossoms scattering,
and Spring going dark,
beneath the trees;
Life itself has slipped away:
Tolling twilight bell.

TWO: Distension



The freshly bloated corpse needs no name
As mourners gather on the Seventh-Day.

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Her rosy face has darkened, all its graces gone;
Her black tresses already tangled in fragrant weeds.

Inner organs rot, spilling into their coffins
Arms and legs jut stiffly all across this wasted field.
This wasted field; silent and empty.
Save for ghosts—scattering to the afterlife.

Waka:

“So deep,
death will not divide,”
we vowed.
It is not of our world,
this miserable, wormwood hut.

Easily scattered,
the crimson leaves of Autumn;
shrivelled with frost.
Gone; the world which knew her;
and gone too, all its passions.

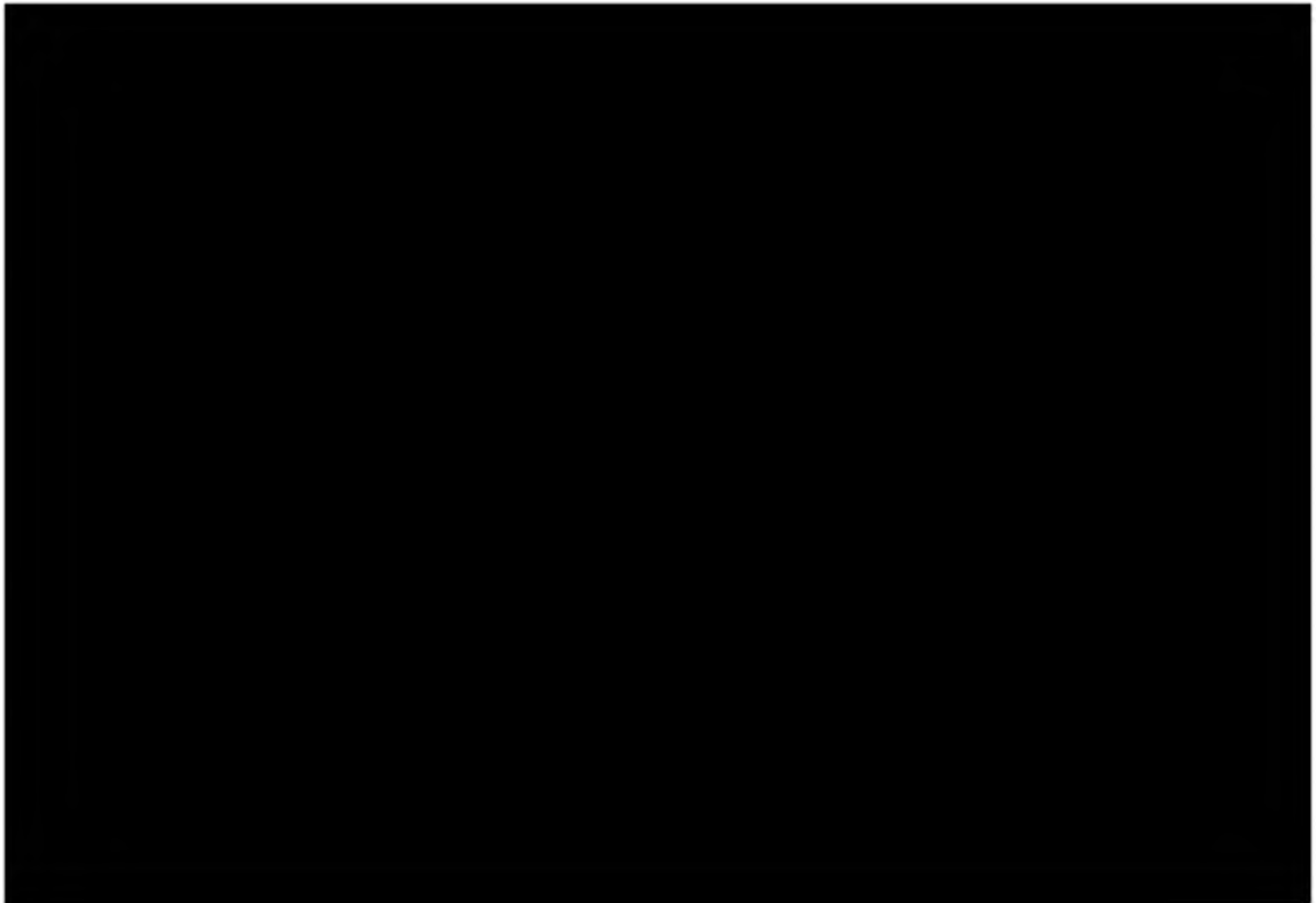
THREE: Spattered Blood

Bones crumble and sinews rot in Pei Mang;²²
Forms transform in unimaginable ways.
Spoiled skin dangles from a purpled corpse;
Pus and blood ooze from inflamed, rotting bowels.

Worldly impermanence came, timely as the sun.
Now, in its turn, the season of decay.
Friends and family have cast her body into an Empty Field.
Where that icy wind blows its tune; melancholy, as always.

²² A famous Chinese cemetery. By extension any burial ground.

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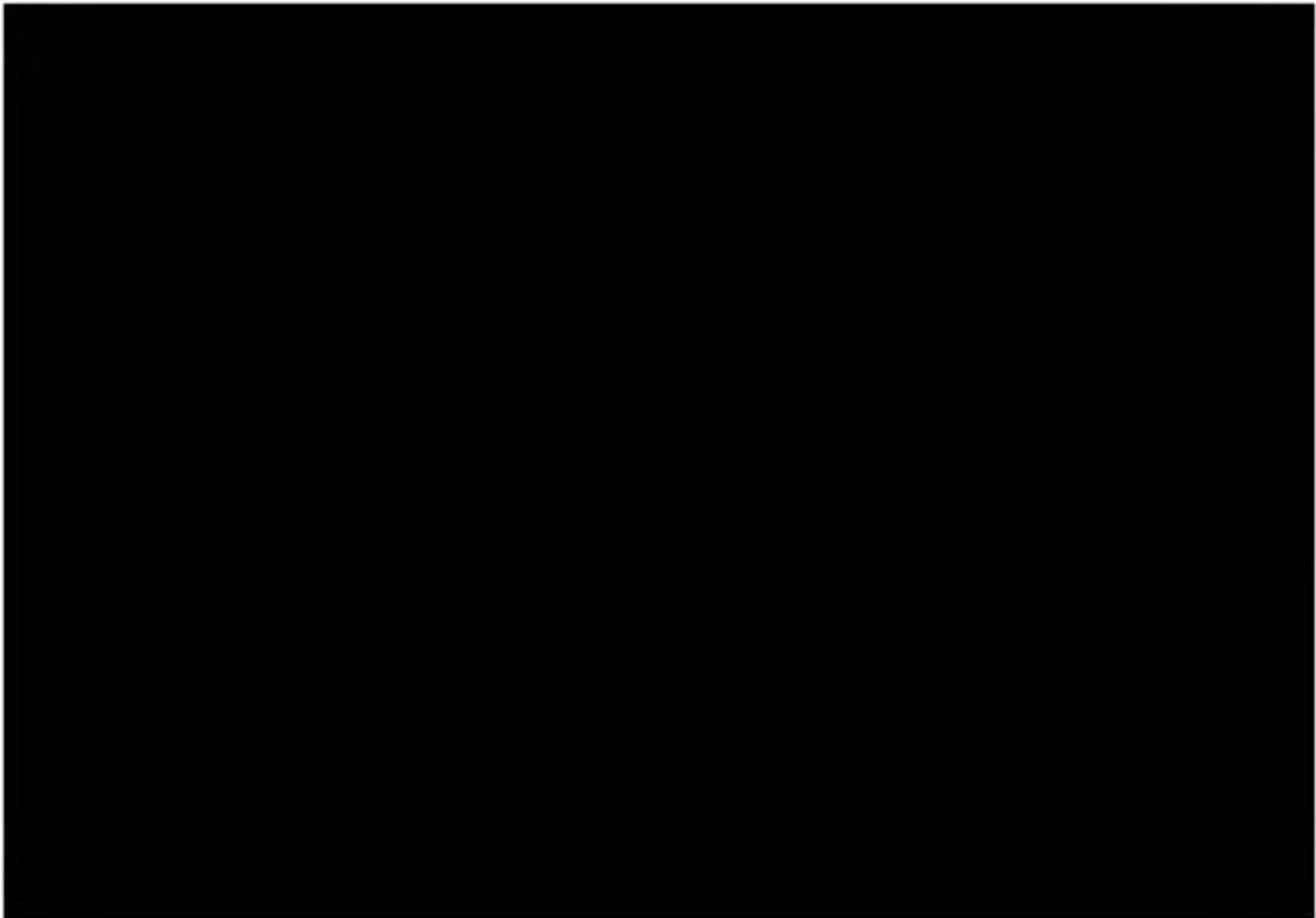
Waka:

Each one
it seemed, bore
my face.
Their lot run out,
their bodies gone to ruin.

Days passed
and her face changed.
Gently traced brows
melted into a boundless realm
of substanceless sorrow.

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FOUR: Scattered Bodies



Tip out all the water in the sea,
Will it wash these shattered bodies clean?
White worms wriggle into the bluish corpse;
Green blowflies weave a shining carpet on her flesh.

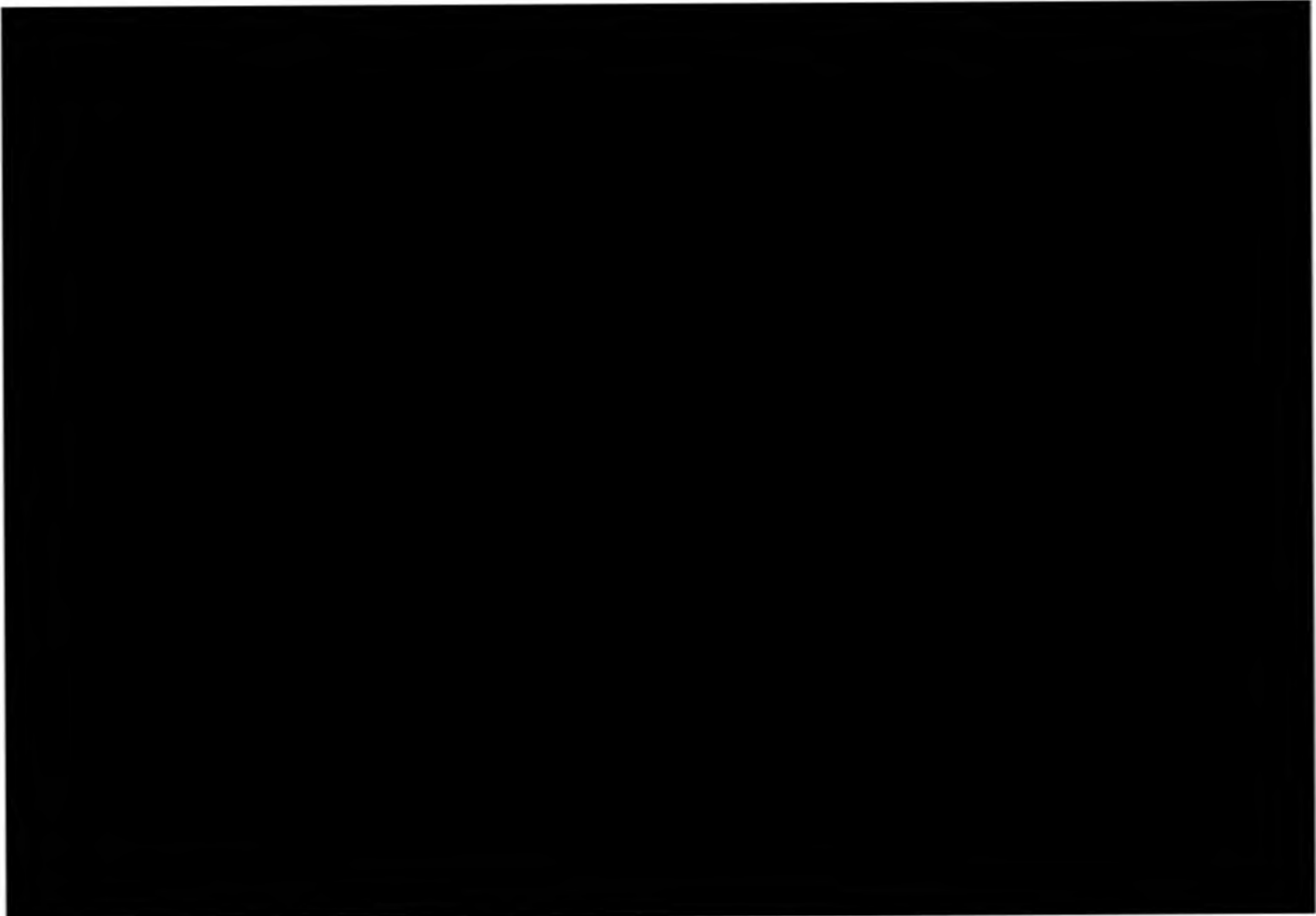
The wind-borne stench carries two *li*, perhaps three.
The moon illumines naked bodies through fourth and fifth watches.
Pitiful corpses, old and new, scattered through the underbrush.
Their names lost; as year meets year.

Waka:
What avail?
To hate the hills
of Toribe.
And yet end up
cast onto the fields of Maguzu.²³

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To what good end
are we thus embellished
with vain passions?
Yes, it is so,
but why?

FIVE: Chewed and Gnawed



No living thing in these desolate wastes
Save hungry beasts quarreling forever over the dead.
Morning sees a swollen, festering corpse;
Evening hears the crush of brutal jaws.

Gaunt dogs howl in the burial ground
Ravenous birds gather in a withered orchard.

²¹ Toribe: a famous cremation ground of ancient Kyoto. Maguzu: an ancient burial ground in Kyoto.

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Life's glory: dreams within a distant dream.
What feeling serves here—save repentance?

Waka:

See this
and know that *all* life
is a sorrow.
By what right, then,
should we regret ending up here?

Listen to
the howling dogs
of Toribe.
To whom else, better bestow
these miserable remnants of life?

SIX: Bluish Blisters

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Pitiful, the gentle mounds of ancient graves
All color drained from those linked bones.
Remnant flesh green amid verdant Spring grasses
Tattered skin and hollow blisters, rippled by evening winds.

After Autumn rains, bones slowly reemerge.
Under the morning sun, a skull pokes up.
Bodies entrusted to the care of the wild.
Painful; the ages spent in Yellow Springs.²⁴

Waka:

So fragile,
those black tresses
I daily stroked.
Now turned to dirt,
there, beside the wormwood tree.

Only a memory,
her body, now cast away
on Toribe Hill.
Its sweetness rent
in pieces; by quarrelsome dogs.

SEVEN: White Bones Linked

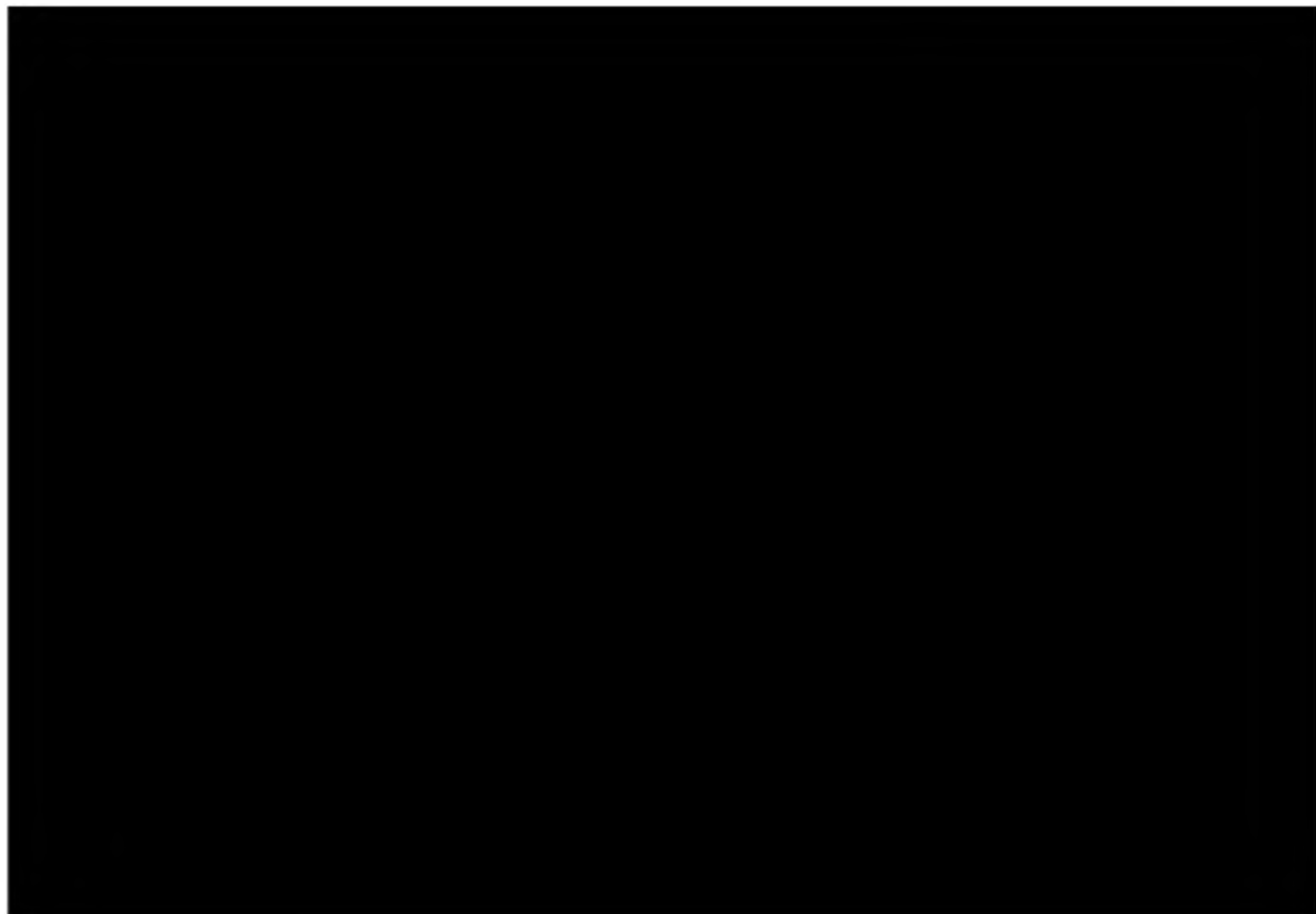
Skull left, brains rotted away.
Though the limbs yet cling to the shattered body,
The last organs have ruptured across her pillow.
Grave ropes and tattered dress now turned to dust.

Once a robust Knight in the Court of Days
Now a pallid skeleton in a field of graves.

²⁴ The Hades-like underworld of Chinese mythology.

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Amidst clouds and rain, dim moon over an evening moor.
Through darkest night the spirit, crying, lingers by its corpse.²⁵



Waka:

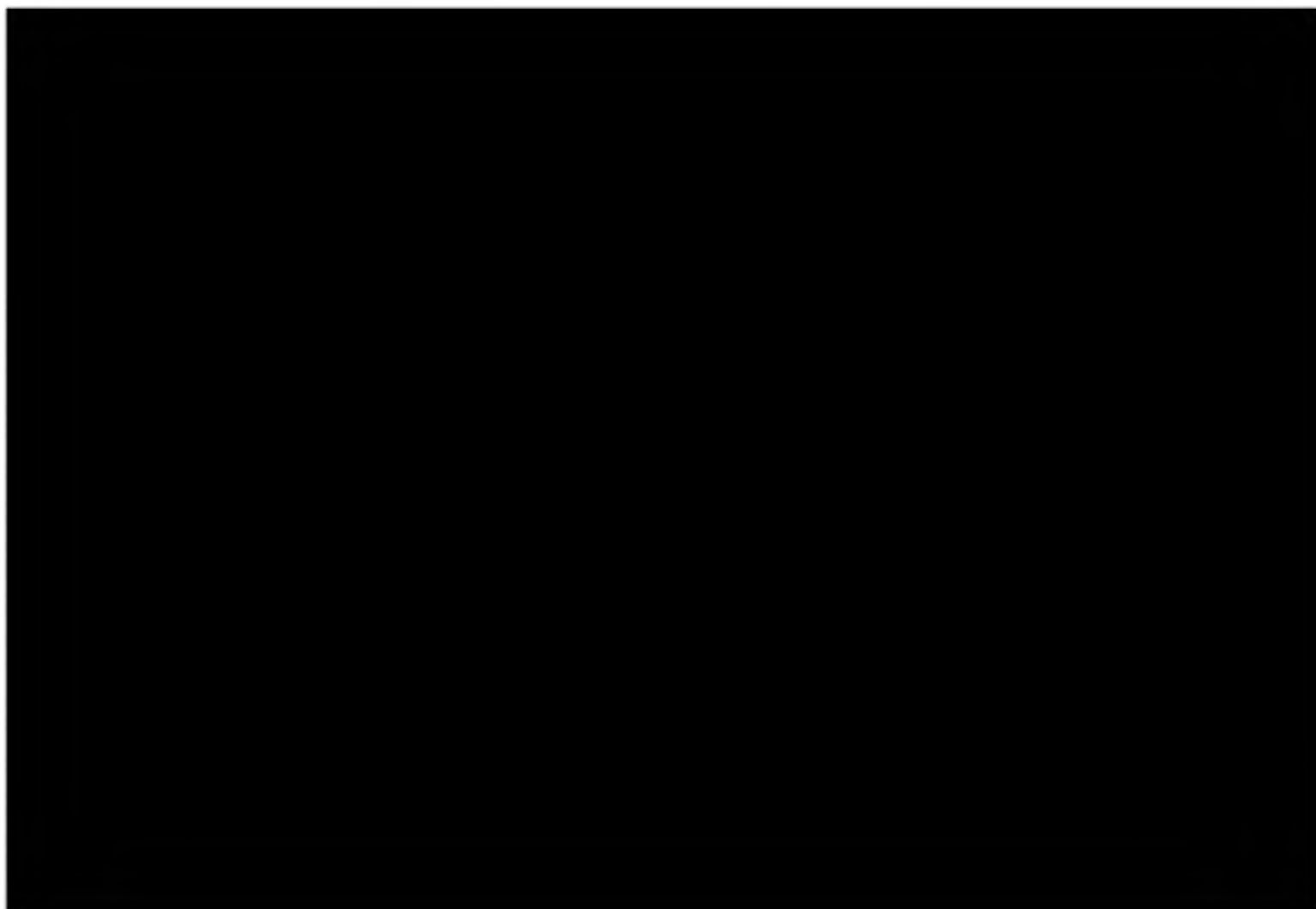
The passions
of man and woman are
but skin deep;
Decorations, hung over
stick-figure puppets.

Her elegant figure
now lies scattered
across the field.
The remnant corpse,
a vision of ruin.

²⁵ "Spirit": the *p'o* 魄 soul. A common Chinese view was that the *hun* 魂 or *yang* soul rose to heaven at one's death while the *p'o* or *yin* soul lingered on earth for a time as a ghost (*kuei*).

THE NINE FACES OF DEATH

EIGHT: Scattered Bones



Desolate weeds soon drape the bones
Scattered here and there, impossible to recall.
Torn hair strewn beyond the field's edge
Skulls crumbling along stone outcrops.

The Western Tombs collapsed, under decades of evening rain,
The Eastern Wind of Mt. T'ai carries off every soul.
Quite soon nothing but, "Dirt on Lung-men Plain;"²⁶
Glory and failure alike disappeared into a nameless grave.

²⁶ Western tombs: the tombs of the Wei emperors. Mt. T'ai: a mountain to which dead souls were supposedly carried by a great wind. "Dirt on Lung-men Plain": allusion to a poem written by Po Chü-yi for his dead friend Yüan Chen (779-831). Po's poem reads: "His legacy fills thirty scrolls;/ And every scroll rings gold and jade./ Now just dirt on Lung-men Plain./ They buried the body—but not his fame."

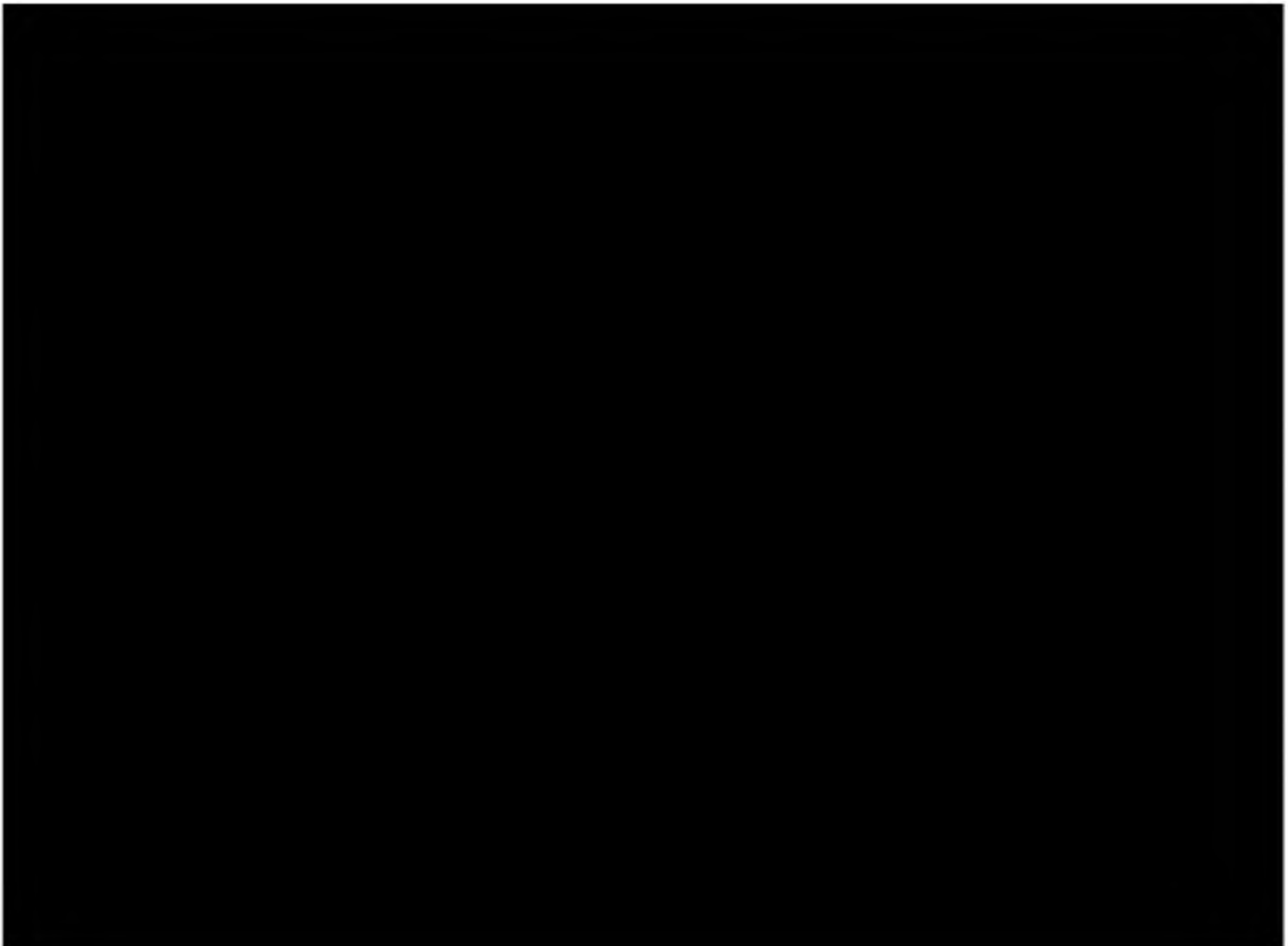
SANFORD

Waka:

Behold,
our lives like drops of dew,
vanished with the morning.
Only our bodies remain,
scattered into the tall grasses.

Bodies
they thought their own
lie broken now.
Among the slender reeds,
turning to dust.

NINE: Ancient Mound



THE NINE FACES OF DEATH

The five aggregates: Empty from the outset.
Deeds are the cause of carnal love.
The higher spirit has flown with the evening moon
While the lower soul howls yet for its lost body.

Only a formless name remains below pine-clad hills;
Bones, now ashen streaks in a weed-choked swamp;
The inscription dissolving off the gravestone.
Beside the ancient tombs, only tear-stained flowers.

Waka:

Should you ask after
the person cast aside
on Toribe Hill,
All that remains in her tomb
are the broken fragments of a vanished soul.

So quickly,
my beloved's name
has worn away.
All that survives her:
an unmarked and ageing gravestone.

IV. Concluding Remarks.

We noted at the outset Philippe Ariès' suggestion that the dark turn taken in the Western sensibility towards death around the twelfth century may have been motivated in no small part by the horrors of the Black Plague. Were we to attempt to make a similar causal connection in the case of the Japanese materials, we would have to note first of all that in spite of "ordinary" disasters, the late Heian period can, marshal no catastrophe that can match the European plague in horror or social impact. Still, it is true that the closing decades of the Heian period were marked by an autumnal sense of gloom. We can see this in the darkening mood of the *Tale of Genji*; in the growing concern with *mappō*; and perhaps in the transformation of Pure Land Buddhism from a minor meditative and textual sub-tradition into powerful

historical movement. In this latter instance we might note that the movement from the this-worldly and generally non-dualistic vision of the *mikkyō* schools to the antiworldly and dualistic metaphysics of normative Pure Land²⁷ is, in fact, somewhat paralleled by the move from the generally this-worldly and holistic vision of early Medieval Christianity to the more anti-worldly and afterlife-oriented view of the period following the Black Death. Further than these hesitant suggestions of some possible historical parallels, I would not want to go without a great deal more hard evidence. Nonetheless, neither would I want simply to write off the thematic parallels between European and Japanese attitudes towards death as mere coincidence. But it would require a synoptic treatment of the history of death—or the attitudes held about death—in Japan to begin to sort out historical causality, true coincidence, and archetypal structure.

Brief mention should also be made of the still later impact of the Kuzō theme on Japanese Zen as seen particularly in the works of Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481) and Suzuki Shōsan (1579–1625). Ikkyū's prose pieces, "Skeletons" and "Two Nuns," clearly owe a good deal to the Kuzō motif (possibly directly to its "Su Tung-po" expression) and Shōsan's "Two nuns" in turn owes a good deal to Ikkyū. All of these works were widely-known examples of popular Buddhist literature in late Ashikaga/early Tokugawa Japan, and since they are also readily available for study, the truly curious reader can make his or her own examination of their continuity with the earlier treatment of the Kuzō themes by "Su Tung-po."²⁷ I would like here to close the circle of our discussion by giving Suzuki Shōsan the last word, via a brief quotation from his "Two Nuns":

²⁷ For Ikkyū see: *Gaikotsu* 骸骨 and *Futari bikuni* 二人比丘尼 (also known as *Mizu kagami me nashi gusa* 水鏡目なし草). Both texts are reproduced in Mori Taikyō, 森大狂 *Ikkyū Oshō zenshū* 一休和尚全集, Koyukan, Tokyo, 1913. For a full translation of *Gaikotsu* and one version of its illustrations, see James H. Sanford, *Zen-man Ikkyū*, Scholars Press, Chico, California, 1981, pp. 201–216.

For Shōsan see: 二人比丘尼 (usually read *Ninin bikuni*, also known as *Nembutsu anjin futari bikuni* 念仏安心二人比丘尼), translated by Royall Tyler, *Selected Writings of Suzuki Shōsan*, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1977. The original text of *Ninin bikuni* is reproduced in KBSR, Vol. 10, pp. 353–431. Between pages 394 and 407 there are seven illustrations derived from Kuzō iconography.

THE NINE FACES OF DEATH

A flower did she seem,
She who now so soon,
Alas, lies a corpse,
In the open field.²⁸

²⁸ *Futari bikuni*, Tyler, p. 19.