



## **the poetry of death**

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Mostly unheard of in Western culture, where the document most commonly associated with death is a will—that binding legal document descriptive of property but possessing little poetry—*jisei*, or death poetry, is completed near the time of death; a profound, personal epitaph for a once-in-a-lifetime event—a suitably fitting farewell to one's life.

While death as a theme in poetry is not uncommon—witness death as one of Emily Dickinson's main themes (here, in "More Than the Grave is Closed to Me"):

More than the Grave is closed to me  
The Grave and that Eternity  
To which the Grave adheres  
I cling to nowhere till I fall  
The Crash of nothing, yet of all  
How similar appears

or as sublime meditation on the nature of reality ("I and Death" by Sri Chinmoy)

My body saw death  
Without fear.  
My heart conquered death  
With love.  
My soul embraced death  
With compassion.  
I employ death  
With no hesitation.

a poem written to mark one's own death or, more accurately, to uniquely commemorate a life lived, is a practice that reached its eventual refinement in Japan—particularly within Zen Buddhism. It was also common in China until the twentieth century.

*Jisei*, by convention, are written in a graceful, natural manner, and never mention death explicitly, using, instead, metaphoric references to nature, often in the form of sunsets, autumn, or falling cherry blossoms.

When autumn winds blow  
not one leaf remains  
the way it was.

-Togyu

As elsewhere in Japanese art, feelings of bitter-sweetness and impermanence dominate, a feature of the Zen Buddhist-informed aesthetic *mono no aware* (a sensitivity to things), a conception of beauty virtually part of the national character.

While the popular image of *jisei* is as a part of ceremonial *seppuku* (Japanese ritual suicide), death poems were also written by Zen monks, haiku poets, and from ancient times literate people on their deathbeds.

Poems were not always composed the moment before death; respected poets would sometimes be consulted well in advance for their assistance and, even after death, one's poem could be polished or even rewritten by others—a deed never mentioned lest the deceased's legacy be tarnished.

Had I not known  
that I was dead  
already  
I would have mourned the loss of my life.

-Ota Dokan

Normally highly poetic and somewhat oblique, *Jisei* could also contain elements of a traditional will; not the mundane affairs of an estate to be settled but, for example, reconciling differences between estranged relatives.

Prominent exponents of *jisei* include the famous haiku poet Basho; Asano Naganori, the *daimyo* (feudal leader) whose forced suicide was avenged by the forty-seven *ronin*—now almost a national myth; and Yukio Mishima, a prominent Japanese writer of the twentieth century who, in 1970, bizarrely committed *seppuku* in the traditional manner.

Sick on my journey, only my dreams will wander the withered fields.

-Basho