

# The Gateless Gate

—*New Koan Poems*—



## Polishing The Moon Sword

Twenty Prose Poems

—Japanese & Chinese Folk Tales—

**Dane Cervine**

**The Gateless Gate:  
New Koan Poems**

**&**

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**Twenty Prose Poems  
Japanese & Chinese Folk Tales**

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## Preface

The Gateless Gate, or Mumonkan, is one of the great classics in the literature of Zen Buddhism. It is a collection of 48 *koans*, ancient stories and sayings of Chinese Zen masters used to embody the paradoxical spirit of Zen. The Gateless Gate was composed in 1228 by the monk Mumon Ekai. He gathered this set of essential koans that had been taught for centuries, added to each a commentary and a poem. Often terse, enigmatic, surreal, these koans have been used to jostle open many a Zen monk's mind to, well, a deeper experience of life than mere words can muster. Hence, the purposeful difficulty of arranging words in such a way as to open something beyond words. Much like a poem.

There is a long tradition of composing poems as a spontaneous, personal response to koans. Meant to turn one's contemplation deeper, they illustrate the innumerable threads of any single koan. Zen history is littered, some would say, with the "vice" of poems (in a tradition that values no-words). Wang Wei and Su T'ung-po were Zen men and poets alike. Po Chu-i "inked a lot of rice paper", with over three thousand of his poems surviving. In "Madly Singing in the Mountains", he calls poetry his "special failing".

Perhaps this can be our special failing too, as koans make their way again to a new land, a new century. There is a very formal koan-study tradition in the Rinzai school of Zen, while the Soto school tends to use koans in a more informal teaching manner. While Zen masters are famous for rejecting the answers that most students bring them, for years on end, it is not because they have brought the "wrong answer". It may be their answer lies only in the brain, is not embodied. Imprisoned in intellect. There is no "right" answer to a koan, despite the existence of, yes, a catalogue of acceptable responses to koans historically concocted to act as a basic guide. Perhaps much like the attempts to educate students in the "correct" way to read a poem. Remember Robin Williams' role as a poetry professor in *Dead Poets Society*, where he instructs his startled students to take their rulers, place them firmly on the spine of the book about "how to read poetry", and rip the introduction out. There is something more afoot in a koan, in a poem, than simple understanding.

John Tarrant, who heads the Pacific Zen Institute (PZI) in Santa Rosa, California, utilizes a more contemporary approach to koan work, saying there is no wrong way to encounter a koan, akin to the notion that there is no wrong way to interpret a dream, or dive into a poem. Born in Tasmania, a student and dharma heir of Robert Aitken, student of the Sanbo Kyodan Japanese school that was influential in establishing koan Zen in the west, John brings his own sensibilities as a poet and Jungian therapist to koan work. Koans are friends. There is no way to do them wrong, or fail them. Koans are meant to live inside you for years, or slap you in the face in a single instant. A koan, like a poem, may demand that you change your life—as in Rilke’s encounter with the archaic torso of Apollo in his famous poem. Or it may quietly nag in the back of your mind, like a place you can’t quite remember the name of, but know.

I woke from a dream after a weekend Zen retreat with the strange notion that I should compose my own poem-responses to the koans of the Gateless Gate. Forty eight of them. As a poet, this is, frankly, my response to most things in life, so it should come as no surprise. Still, I was a bit intimidated until I remembered the long history of such endeavors. Each poet, each Zen student, contributing their own voice. To add a verse.

These poems vary in voice and humor, often embodying some of the irascible irreverence of the koan tradition itself. Mixing contemporary with ancient images, each is a response to some kernel in the koan, an edge of something, an opening. Often humorous, or surreal, like the koans themselves. Not a single poem here is the right answer to anything. Each is one thread of a vast tangle that is a koan. All and none of it is Zen.

Koans and poems shouldn’t just be an “in-crowd” kind of thing—like a group of tech guys, or a gang, or Wall Streeters, or a sewing bee—speaking a slang or jargon that keeps others “outside”. Demystifying some of the culture-specific references of a koan can actually help more of its innate evocativeness to arise, rather than simply being impenetrable to the lay-person’s ear.

Dr. A.V. Grimstone, in his introduction to Katsuki Sekida’s translation of *The Gateless Gate*, says:



*Indeed, translated into English...(koans) are in some ways easier to understand than they are in the original, because by its very nature the English language imposes a degree of clarity that is avoidable in Chinese. (The price of such a gain in clarity is some loss of richness and depth.)*

This may give us hope that we can respond to these ancient koans in our own way, without being at an essential disadvantage. It is the way of both Zen and Poetry—like water, to find new shape in whatever context it finds itself.

In a letter from Nakagawa Soen to Senzaki Nyogen in 1938, as the teachings of the Gateless Gate began to make their way across the Pacific, the old master says, *I feel emancipated just seeing the teaching conveyed in Roman letters rather than Japanese ideograms. Zen, which is fundamentally about the emancipation of all beings, is unfortunately sealed in some square box called Zen. In this enclosure the ancient dog in the koan..."Mu" has been suffocating. In English this dog is so joyfully alive!*

Perhaps the one prohibition when encountering a koan, or a poem, can be found in Mumon's "Zen Warnings" in the appendix to *The Gateless Gate*. To not be a "dead man breathing". He goes on to say, "Now tell me, what will you do?" This book of poems is a way for me to live inside of this question.

∞

*Polishing The Moon Sword*, which follows this collection of 48 new koan poems, represents a different tact: 20 prose poems based on ancient Japanese and Chinese folk tales. As with the koan poems, they focus on a moment unique to the tales told, but also the age old sentiments we all face: love, aging, death, loss, and beauty. *Kado*—the way of poetry.

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*Note: Chinese names are generally given in their Japanese form in these koans. Every translator handles this differently. Since much of the Zen tradition received by the West has come through Japanese teachers, a number of the initial koan books have utilized this method. In addition, I have often integrated several translations of individual koans according to my own poetic ear, and have relied heavily on the following books:*

Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, "The Gateless Gate", in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, ed. Paul Reps (Rutland, Vermont, and Tokyo: Tuttle 1957).

Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and The Blue Cliff Records*, (Shambala, Boston & London, 2005).

*Also, this poetry collection includes only the core koans of the Gateless Gate; the additional commentary, verse, and appendix by Mumon Ekai, and translators, can be found in the Shibayama and Sekida books just noted.*

# **The Gateless Gate:**

*New Koan Poems*



## Koan 1

## Joshu's "Mu"

A monk asked Joshu, "Has a dog Buddha Nature or not?" Joshu answered, "Mu"!

### Joshu's Dog Speaks

*No*, is all I hear, all day long  
because the poor monk won't shut up.  
Some Zen master too. He knows  
I'm more Buddha than this ornery student  
will ever be: smells too clean, never looks at me directly.  
But my master keeps trying, gotta love him for that...  
*Mu, Mu, Mu*, to every question the asshole asks.  
Don't get me wrong, I love assholes—they are  
my main way of finding out what's going on  
in the world, around the corner, on the next  
block. But isn't it obvious, I mean my master's  
answer? It's just his way of barking, like  
*Shut the fuck up, it's not even a question, man!*  
There's only one nature, it's not hard to follow.  
Just stick your nose to the ground, follow the scent,  
spray your own to accent the fragrance  
of the other's spot, keep going.  
Lick your privates now and then.  
It's called *The Way*, man.

## Koan 2

## Hyakujo's Fox

"Who are you standing here before me?" Hyakujo said to the old man in the meditation hall that no one else could see. "I am not a human being. I used to be a head monk, living here on this mountain eons ago. One day a student asked me, *Is a man of enlightenment subject to the law of causation or not?* I answered, *No he is not.* Since then I have endured five hundred rebirths as a fox. Tell me, does a man of enlightenment fall under this yoke of causation or not?" Hyakujo answered, *He is one with causation.* At that, the old fox was enlightened, and said "Please bury my body as that of a dead monk". Later, Hyakujo led all the monks from the meditation hall to the foot of a rock on the far side of the mountain and with his staff poked at the dead body of a fox, then performed the ceremony of cremation for a monk who has passed over.

### The Fox

*Déjà vu*, dying again. After  
so much beauty beneath these White Pines,  
one life after another,  
haunting the chicken coops in the village,  
nose-deep in blood and feather,  
ten thousand scents flooding my nostrils.  
More drunk with it all than half the monks  
snoring in the Zendo, who seem oblivious  
to the obvious: there is no escape.  
Who would want to?  
Five hundred precious births,  
four hundred ninety-nine deaths.  
Such good fortune. And now,  
an old man in black robes pokes my body  
with his sharp stick as the mist  
enshronds the mountain. Here  
I go again, though this time  
my gnarled bones and sinew  
are not sinking into the hillside.

For some reason, the old man  
has thrown me on the fire.  
I am smoke, and crackle.  
I could be anything.

### Koan 3

### Gutei's Finger

Gutei raised his finger whenever he was asked a question about Zen. A boy attendant began to imitate him. Gutei heard about the boy's mischief, seized him, cut off his finger. The boy cried and ran away. Gutei called and stopped him. When the boy turned his head, Gutei again raised up his own finger. In that instant, the boy was enlightened.

Before dying, Gutei gathered the monks around him, said "I attained my finger-Zen from my teacher, and in my whole life could not exhaust it." Then he passed away.

### Uncle Gus and the Boy

It's the oldest trick in the book,  
but one they'll remember: grasp  
the left thumb with the right hand,  
fold it under the knuckle  
just as the knife slices a piece  
of you away. The opposing  
thumb, deftly lifted in place,  
quickly detached then re-attached  
like a magician up close, plain  
for all to see. Zen masters

are like uncles, or magicians,  
not to be trusted except with  
the things that matter. Like  
the one thing the boy must  
know, that can never be  
exhausted. This slight of hand.

There is only one finger.  
It is all that matters.



## Koan 4

## A Beardless Foreigner

Wakuan complained when he saw a picture of bearded Bodhidharma, the tattooed Indian with big eyes who brought Zen to China from India: “Why hasn’t that fellow a beard?”

### Five O’Clock Shadow

The mirror never lies. He runs  
his smooth palm over the late  
afternoon stubble. No,  
it would never be more than  
his own brand of shadow,  
though he longs to be like  
this guru with the red fire beard  
tumbling down his chest.  
To feel enlightened in every muscle  
of his odd body just like the Zen heroes  
with their superhuman powers and cool confidence—  
this is the thing he can never master.  
Still, he is getting used to being himself.  
The mirror a better reflection than the tattered scroll  
with the wild man from India’s bug eyes,  
enigmatic tattoos. It would be fun  
to be enlightened—but not like this,  
with a big red flame of beard  
when you really love the razor,  
the hair in the sink, the way  
your original face feels.

## Koan 5

## Man Up in a Tree

Kyogen said: "Zen is like a man hanging in a tree by his teeth over a precipice. His hands grasp no branch, his feet rest on no limb, and under the tree another person asks him, *Why did Bodhidharma come to China from India?* If the man in the tree does not answer, he fails; and if he does answer, he falls and loses his life. Now what shall he do?"

### Another Houdini's Last Trick

You're hanging by your teeth,  
the spotlight glaring,  
the stage tree surprisingly real,  
the leather harness tethering you  
to the branch invisible to the audience  
gasping as you sway back and forth,  
arms swimming the emptiness like a fish  
as your lovely assistant stands beneath you  
in her Las Vegas jeweled bodice shouting  
*Why, why, why...*  
Nobody really expects you to answer.  
They barely understand the question—  
but good money is riding on whether  
true magic will happen.  
Can you unhinge your jaw  
from that last safety,  
twist in the air and shout the one thing  
you've been wanting to say your entire staged life,  
fall into the darkness beneath,  
land where no one else can see,  
angle toward the backstage door into the alley,  
walk away into your one true life?

## Koan 6

## Buddha Twirls a Flower

When Buddha was on the mountain, he turned a flower in his fingers and held it before his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Kasho broke out into a broad smile. The Buddha said, *I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate. It is beyond words, beyond teaching. This I have given to Kasho.*

### Flower Power

The battered Volkswagen van with the psychedelic flowers  
is still humming along, the old engine in the back  
sounding more like a mantra each year.  
I couldn't bear to part with it, though no longer a hippie—  
Haight-Ashbury just another San Francisco intersection  
for the lost, the nostalgic, the newly enlightened.  
There are so many Buddhas now,  
though most don't realize their own  
secret identity. That's why this Dharma Bus  
is so important, sporting an incandescent  
Eye large enough to cover the rear door,  
a glimmering Gate matching the sliding doors  
on the passenger side. Drive slow enough  
down the street and people stop to stare.  
I don't need to say a word. I smile, they smile.  
It's as though a little bit of Nirvana  
bursts into petal in the furthest reaches  
of their hearts, that oft forgotten muscle.  
The red rose, luminous on the flat hood  
is worth ten thousand *sutras*, ten world religions,  
one awakening. Feel it vibrate down the pot-hole road,  
rumble in your chest, flower.

## Koan 7

## Wash Your Bowl

A monk told Joshu, "I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me." Joshu asked, "Have you eaten your rice porridge?" The monk replied, "I have eaten". Joshu said, "Then you had better wash your bowl." At that moment the monk was enlightened.

## Scam

The Kamasutra Tantric Sexuality workshop was my favorite,  
followed by the Kundalini Jade Serpent-Up-The-Spine seminar,  
though there's been scores of others along the way.  
Gets expensive, but I'll do anything to get enlightened.  
The ancient Chinese monks would wander rocky paths,  
down treacherous gorges, through snow and storm  
from one monastery to another desperate  
to find a teacher who would share the secret.  
At least I get to fly first class to the next week-long retreat—  
Though no one knows what they're talking about,  
or are scamming for more money, a higher certification.  
Perhaps I'm just a failure. Too tough a nut to crack.  
But this new teacher made me throw in the towel.  
Didn't charge much, but all week wouldn't answer  
one damn question directly, and I had big questions.  
Important ones. He just kept asking if I'd washed my bowl  
after dinner, made my bed, helped weed the garden,  
remembered to breath, like, all the time.  
If I loved myself as though I were the last human  
on the face of the Earth. Of course, I failed  
that last one. Just looked in his big ole'  
moon eyes, surrendered. No more scams.  
That's when it hit me, you know?  
How much I loved the blanket on my bed,  
the wildflowers in the garden, my old bowl,  
this moon in our eyes.

## Koan 8

## Keichu's Wheel

Keichu, the first wheel-maker of China, made two wheels of fifty spokes each. Now, suppose you removed the nave uniting the spokes. What would become of the wheel? And had Keichu done this, could he be called the master wheel-maker?

## Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

The orange paperback book still fits in the back pocket of my jeans. I glance at the well-thumbed pages when remembering the art and science of no-self, but by now it's second-nature. This dismantling of the entire machine— every piston, gear, bolt, the leather seat, the chrome handlebars, the immense road-hugging rubber tires with the immaculate silver spokes radiating from the center hub like lightning. All of it, laid across the cement floor of the monastery of my mind—to be cleaned, polished, re-oiled, then put back together as the comfortable cruiser this old speed demon body has become. Gone the glory days, *mano a mano* drag races, careening towards the black & white flag, the woman with the jade eyes at the finish line. There's nothing there—after the flag, behind the iris, at the center of anything. But oh, this ride. There's nothing like it. Wind, trees, the road in the rearview mirror, the road ahead, the road right under my feet like thunder.

## Koan 9

## A Buddha Before History

A monk asked Seijo: "I understand that a Buddha who lived before recorded history sat in meditation for ten *kalpas* and did not attain Buddhahood. How could this be?" Seijo replied: "Your question is self-explanatory." The monk asked: "He meditated so long; why could he not attain Buddhahood?" Seijo said, "Because he did not become a Buddha."

### Waiting for Everyman

*I'm just sitting here waiting for Everyman.*  
—Jackson Browne

After the concert, I saved the ticket stub  
as though it were a Tibetan prayer flag  
or rosary to rub my thumb over. To always  
remember how the entire audience  
flicked our cigarette lighters and single matches  
to flame, swayed in the blackness,  
a dark ocean of folk-rock intoxicated *bodhisattvas*  
vowing over every bridge, with each swelling chorus,  
to help each other along—to carry the whole  
damn world on our young shoulders  
even if it took ten *kalpas*, even if we  
never made it alone. But

even a few years made the journey seem  
impossible. No matter how long I sat,  
no matter how long I waited, becoming  
a Buddha seemed to recede into some  
unreachable future. A whole generation,  
this entire species of *Homo Sapiens*  
still waiting. I looked

for that ticket stub in my memorabilia box  
the other day, but it was gone. Perhaps  
worn thin by longing till it disappeared.  
Yet I no longer seem to care. About arriving, that is.  
It is enough to assume the position—whether  
poised on zapphu, the far bleachers of Jackson's  
nostalgia tour, walking amid the homeless,  
the war zone of the television screen,  
the mind. It is enough  
to be a failed *bodhisattva*  
waiting for the Buddha  
already here in  
Everyman.

*\*Everywoman, EverySentientBeing, EveryPoet*

## Koan 10      Seizei Alone and Poor

A monk named Seizei asked master Sozan: "Seizei is alone and poor. Will you give him support?" Sozan asked: "Seizei?". Seizei responded: "Yes, Sir?" Sozan said: "You have Zen, the best wine in China, and already have finished three cups. Still you are saying that they did not even wet your lips."

### Comedy Routine

Two old rascals, like Laurel & Hardy,  
or Groucho Marx and his brothers,  
Zen masters sparring like corner Hip-Hop  
dharma combatants throwing down  
their spoken words just to provoke  
a bit of light in the dark auditorium  
of this world. Don't believe a word  
they say: *I am alone. I am poor. I need.*  
Cantankerous old men are only interested  
in one thing, at least these rascals.  
After three cups of this world,  
are your lips wet? Does Napa Valley  
fill your nostrils with purple,  
the French Bordeaux and Alsace  
with red grape and pink muscat?  
Or Harlem's taverns, Sam's corner bar,  
the priest's blood of Christ in a shot glass,  
Rumi intoxicated by the love of Shams,  
or Sozan's plum wine, a samurai's sake?  
If you're not drunk with this world yet  
after all these years, what are you waiting for?  
Hey you, the one with the wet lips,  
can you say, *Thank you Master Sozan!*



## Koan 11      Joshu Sees the Hermits

Joshu went to a hermit's cottage and asked, "Is the master in? Is the master in?" The hermit raised his fist. Joshu said, "The water is too shallow to anchor here," and he went away. Coming to another hermit's cottage, he asked again, "Is the master in? Is the master in?" This hermit, too, raised his fist. Joshu said, "Free to give, free to take, free to kill, free to save," and he made a deep bow.

### Who's Your Daddy?

The hermits don't mind the old man.  
He's always joking, always testing,  
showing up at their tiny shacks in the forest  
at all hours, banging on the front mantle,  
peeking through holes in the boards,  
throwing back the tacked cloth curtains  
yelling, *Anybody home? Anyone here?*  
They'd learned not to say much, you  
never knew what crazy thing he might throw back.  
Calling you shallow one moment, free the next.  
The hermits grew to love the questions,  
*What does it mean to be home?*  
*Where am I right now?*  
*Awake, asleep, entangled?*  
Even in the dead of winter he'd stand  
right in front of their cross-legged equanimity,  
towering, bug-eyed, spitting,  
*Who's your daddy?* But now,  
they just raise a single fist in the air.  
The old man kind of likes this.  
Smiles at their supple hands.  
Breath filling the cold air  
like dragon smoke.

## Koan 12      Zuigan Calls “Master”

Every day Master Zuigan used to call out to himself, “Oh, Master!” and would answer himself, “Yes?” “Are you awake?” he would ask, and would answer, “Yes, I am.” “Never be deceived, any day, any time.” “No, I will not!”

### Knock-Knock Joke

When young, Zuigan stayed up all night preparing to meet the Master. Still as a stone, eyelids half open, Gyokuro tea to stay awake. Finally, facing Master Ganto, he summoned all his sincerity, his yearning, and asked *What is the Eternal Truth?* He’d wanted to go straight to the center, but Master simply replied, *You have missed it!* Stunned, he stuttered and mumbled *How did I miss it?* He’d been sure the venerable Master would elucidate this eternal truth; what good were Masters otherwise? Slaving away in the monastery kitchen, cleaning the toilets, sitting still as a rock for days on end — didn’t he deserve eternal truth? It took years till he began to glimpse it: the calling Master and the answering Master are not two. He’d been knocking from the inside!

## Koan 13      Tokusan Carries His Bowls

One day, Master Tokusan came down to the dining room as usual, carrying his bowls. Monk Seppo said, "Old Master, the bell has not rung and the drum has not yet been struck. Where are you going with your bowls?" Tokusan at once turned back to his room. Seppo told this incident to Master Ganto, who remarked, "Great Master though he is, Tokusan has not yet grasped the last word of Zen." Hearing of it, Tokusan sent his attendant to call Master Ganto in, and asked, "Do you not approve of me?" Ganto whispered his reply to him. Tokusan was satisfied and silent. The next day Master Tokusan appeared on the rostrum. Sure enough, his talk was different from the usual ones. Master Ganto came in front of the monastery, laughed heartily, clapping his hands, and said, "What a great joy it is! The old Master has now grasped the last word of Zen. From now on, nobody in the world can ever make light of him."

### The Sting

Nobody loves gossip more than a spiritual seeker,  
and no one is a better mark. Seppo was no different,  
thinking he'd caught the demented old Tokusan  
tottering from his cell, empty bowls in hand,  
when it wasn't even dinner yet. Some master.  
Tokusan, eyeing his patsy like Paul Newman,  
serenely turned back to his room. Of course,  
Ganto, the spitting image of Robert Redford,  
was ready when Seppo waddled his sitting duck Zen  
into the grand set-up. Hubris thick as incense  
wafted between them gossiping about how  
the old man had been losing it, was no longer  
a sharp stick. The scam laid, Paul Tokusan Newman  
and Robert Ganto Redford whispered secrets  
only true con men know—but they liked the poor kid,  
thought he might be a true Zen man. How  
to sting him awake was the question, Seppo  
so full of himself. The next morning,  
the two masters ambled on stage with

their mark sitting in perfect posture right up front.  
Watching the old men throw down a spoken-word  
Zen rap that shriveled his poor monk balls  
and curled his smart tongue left no doubt  
it was the old-school guys who laughed best.  
At themselves, with each other, and finally,  
he was laughing too.

## Koan 14      Nansen Cuts the Cat in Two

Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks: "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat." No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces. That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out. Nansen said: "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat."

### Problems With The Moon

There are limits to metaphor.  
This is what troubled Master Nansen,  
his monks split in two factions over how to run the monastery,  
the right way to meditate, and what to do about  
the wild cat that haunted the Zendo at night  
crying to waxing and waning moon alike, and  
who was leaving milk for it in the kitchen?  
Monks are impenetrable. He knew  
they might just kill the poor cat he'd secretly  
invited into their midst, fed milk, sat beside  
on the hillside under moons dark and crescent,  
gibbous and full—to contemplate desire's  
feral nature. Teachers and magicians  
use the same bag of tricks—a little slight  
of hand, and *Voilà!*, the cat or the woman  
and hopefully the monk's mind is cut in two,  
and they awaken! But not these black-robed  
lacquer buckets. When Master Joshu returned  
from his rounds, heard the story, all he could do  
was roll his eyes, put his sandals on his head,  
walk away. Nansen laughed:  
*Well, if you'd been there, maybe you could have  
saved these monks from themselves!*  
That night, the two old men sat together  
on the hill, the cat curled in their laps, purring.

## Koan 15      Tozan's Sixty Blows

Tozan came to study with Ummon, who asked: "Where are you from?" "From Sato," Tozan replied. "Where were you during the summer?" "Well, I was at the monastery of Hozu, south of the lake." "When did you leave there?" Ummon asked. "On August 25" was Tozan's reply. "I spare you sixty blows," Ummon said. The next day Tozan came to Ummon and said, "Yesterday you said you spared me sixty blows. I beg to ask you, where was I at fault?" "Oh, you rice bag!" shouted Ummon. "What makes you wander about, now west of the river, now south of the lake?" At this Tozan was enlightened.

### The Horse Whisperer

The mind is a horse, and there is  
never any fault in a horse. Oh sure,  
there is wildness, much wandering,  
skittish at broken branches, falling shadows,  
or lazing aimless on open ground.  
The Master knows this, loves her horse,  
all horses, really. But the nameless  
wilderness is not where Master  
and mammal meet. She knows  
it is here, where bridle and saddle  
wait, that a horse and a woman  
or man may whisper each other's  
secret names, together become  
more than each alone. A bag  
of oats to calm, a strong rope  
at first, soft blows from riding crop,  
horsehair fly whisk to spur—  
till horse and rider are one. Alone,  
neither would know the other. But  
in this monastery of a barn, where  
breath meets body, there is home.  
And the wild, open fields.

## Koan 16      Bells and Robes

Ummon asked: "The world is such a wide world, why do you answer a bell and don ceremonial robes?"

### The Dry Cleaners

The Master loved America. You could become anyone. Do anything; well, within the confines of the usual: race, gender, class wars. Nothing new about history. But a Buddhist dry cleaners on the urban corner, this had to be one of the innumerable bliss realms. Every day, someone forgot something: faded blue jeans with holes, Armani suit, red low-cut satin dress, Mickey-Mouse silk tie, a Catholic priest's black garb with pearly white collar. His favorite was baseball uniforms, or the peach colored polo shirts. Before laundering or dry cleaning he'd sometimes try them on, knot Mickey's tie round the priestly robes, even stick his thick neck and arms through the satin dress, zip himself in. Then sneak into the back, pull out his folding metal chair, the meditation bell, sit for awhile. It was good to be a Buddhist in America. You could be anyone.

## Koan 17      The Three Calls of the Emperor's Teacher

The Emperor's teacher, Chu, called his successor, Oshin, three times — and three times Oshin responded. Chu said, "I long feared that I was betraying you, but really it was you who were betraying me."

### Betrayal

Oshin knew Chu loved him, wanted him to become his successor. He was happy to come whenever called, wide awake like a ragged puppy to his master. But he knew the tradition of *betrayal*, surpassing your teacher's Zen so as not to destroy half his merit. Nights, he'd grind the inkstone made of pine soot, animal glue, mix with water to make black ink — then dip the sumi-brush, practice his calligraphy: *Ko*, meaning *to sin*; *fu*, meaning to rebel. *Kofu*, to act against his teacher's instructions, to find his own way, to be worthy.



## Koan 18      Tozan's Three Pounds of Flax

A monk asked Master Tozan, "What is the Buddha?" Tozan said, "Three pounds of flax."

### Shit Happens

*What a mouth he has*, thought the monk.  
It's the same every time I ask:  
*What is the Buddha?* I really, really  
want to know. If I can't determine  
the Buddha's sublime nature, touch  
his luminous mind, what hope is there  
for a poor monk? For anyone? At least  
this time it was "three pounds of flax",  
not very original since I happened to be  
carrying the bag, but better than his usual  
baffling irreverence comparing the Buddha  
to shit, or fallen blossoms, or someone to kill.  
Is he that cynical, or lazy? He smirks,  
all the masters smirk, when I come round  
with my sincere, studied, artful questions.  
Like there's some big joke I just don't get!  
As though enlightenment were just whatever  
was happening in the moment. It's always  
changing, how can I count on that!  
I want a Golden Buddha! Not a bag of flax,  
a pile of cow manure, or even peach blossoms.  
Certainly not a god you have to kill!

## Koan 19      Ordinary Mind is the Way

Joshu asked Nansen, “What is the Way?” “Ordinary mind, everyday life, is the Way,” Nansen replied. “Shall I try to seek after it?” Joshu asked. “If you try for it, you will become separated from it,” responded Nansen. “How can I know the Way unless I try for it?” persisted Joshu. Nansen said, “The Way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is confusion. When you have really reached the true Way beyond doubt, you will find it vast and boundless. How can it be talked about on the level of right and wrong?” With these words, Joshu came to sudden realization.”

### These Boots Were Made for Walking

No one, in his right mind, would trek  
from North China to South as young Joshu did  
to find Master Nansen. I surmise this  
studying the narratives at the Asian Art Museum  
in San Francisco, standing amid stunning statues  
of Buddhas—bronzed, wooden, clay.  
China is mountainous, rivers running east  
to west the main means of travel. To walk  
from north to south, over treacherous gorges,  
through snow, mired in mud, drenched in rain,  
is to travel because you must: fleeing a bandit’s sword,  
an Emperor’s whim, or seeking enlightenment.  
The need to flee ordinary mind must have been extraordinary,  
for Joshu. Certainly I am committed enough to fight  
San Francisco traffic, pay through the nose for parking,  
find my way here, at the feet of these gorgeous,  
serene, luminous Buddhas. But like Joshu,  
I find their subtle Mona Lisa smiles maddening:  
*move towards it, you go away from it;*  
*seeking, it escapes you; do nothing,*  
*nothing happens.* But I don’t mind  
the journey. Perhaps my oh so ordinary mind  
will find itself trekking south to north,

Santa Cruz to San Francisco, and back again.  
Every mud slide, broken bridge, traffic jam  
a way of finding what is always,  
already, *Here*.

## Koan 20      A Man of Great Strength

Master Shogen said, "Why is it that a man of great strength cannot lift his leg?"  
Again he said, "It is not with his tongue that he speaks."

### When The Carnival Comes To Town

It's an odd circus hailing from old Asia,  
trailers parked on the edge of this town called Mind,  
the carny calling one and all to enter  
the immense multi-colored big-top tent  
of Mount Sumeru and the Scented Ocean.  
Ticket in hand, you enter through the Zen curtains,  
see Master Shogen in the center ring with his bull-horn shouting,  
*See the strongest man alive who can't lift a finger!*  
*Listen to the woman with no tongue speak!*  
With your popcorn and lemonade,  
you take a seat in the wooden folding chairs,  
gaze at the immense mountain surrounded by a blue-green sea,  
and overhead at the top of the big tent  
a canopy of a beautiful woman's face  
looking down from the heavens. But then,  
the grandmaster disappears. The bull-horn  
lies absent on the dirt floor of the empty center ring—  
but you sit awhile longer, waiting for anything.  
Silence. Not one show in the big tent. Finally,  
you notice a ladder spiraling up near the exit,  
catch Master Shogen ascending the metal steps—  
so you follow. One dizzying step after another  
till finally you land on the scaffold at the top,  
see Shogen gesturing towards a harness of  
leather straps and metal buckles that dangle  
you, weightless, over a canvas painted  
front and back like heaven, with peep-holes

that are the eyes of the beautiful woman  
in the tent ceiling. You surrender. Strap each leg  
and arm in, useless in the open air, pull  
yourself towards the peep holes till you  
peer down, speechless, as the most beautiful  
woman in the world. The tent filled now,  
everyone clapping, especially you, still seated  
in that same wooden folding chair, riveted,  
unable to move one leg, utter a single word.

## Koan 21      Ummon's Shit-Stick

A monk asked Ummon, "What is Buddha?" Ummon said, "A shit-stick!"

### In Case You Think This Is Metaphor

Until he had the flying dream,  
as in, *being a fly*, the monk thought the koan  
an exaggeration. Or simply a Master's trick.  
But traveling in the wilderness,  
using a stick to dig a hole  
for the most pleasurable dump  
he'd ever taken on a stony hillside,  
he knew the Buddha must have had  
many such moments. And the buzzing fly—  
sensing only perfumed beauty  
in the mysterious pile before its burial.  
Ummon knew, too, the monk realized—  
with every trip to the outhouse.  
It is the literal body of the world,  
this Buddha.

## Koan 22      Kasho and The Flagpole

Ananda once said to Kasho, "The World-Honored One gave you the golden robe; did he not give you anything else?" Kasho called out, "Ananda!" Ananda answered, "Yes, sir." Kasho said, "Knock down the flagpole at the gate."

### Half-Mast Is Not Enough

Master Kasho was now old as the Buddha  
would have been, if not for the bad mushrooms.

Ananda was the Buddha's nephew,  
his constant attendant while he lived.

Could recite from memory every wisdom  
so that listeners thought this brilliant,  
luminous man was the Buddha returned.

A flag was hoisted on the pole of the  
temple gate whenever a master spoke,  
but Ananda always deferred to his uncle  
or Master Kasho in his own mind,  
still paced the turning halls of memory,  
fussed over the scrolls of Buddha's sayings  
with a mind sharp as a tiger hunting  
for prey that still eluded him. Aging, desperate,  
Ananda finally called to Master Kasho,  
*He gave it to you, the golden robe,  
isn't there something else!*

With one penetrating call of his own Buddha name,  
*Ananda!*, Master Kasho shouted to him:  
*Knock down the whole god-damn flag pole!*  
And he became at once the flag, the pole,  
the tiger, and the uncle.

## Koan 23      Think Neither Good Nor Evil

Master Eno was once pursued by the Monk Myo as far as Taiyu Mountain. Seeing Myo coming, Master Eno laid the robe and bowl on a rock and said, "This robe represents the faith; it should not be fought over. If you want to take it away, take it now". Myo tried to move it, but it was as heavy as a mountain and would not budge. Faltering and trembling, he cried out, "I came for the Dharma, not for the robe. I beg you, please give me your instruction." Master Eno said, "Think neither good nor evil. At this very moment, what is the original self of the monk Myo?" At these words, Myo was illuminated. His whole body was covered with sweat. He wept and bowed, saying, "Besides the secret words and the secret meaning you have just now revealed to me, is there anything else, deeper still?" Master Eno said, "What I have told you is no secret at all. When you look into your own true self, whatever is deeper is found right there." Myo said, "I was with the monks under Obai for many years but could not realize my true self. But now, receiving your instruction, I know it is like a man drinking water and knowing whether it is cold or warm. My lay brother, you are now my teacher." Master Eno said, "If you are so awakened, both you and I have Obai as our teacher. Be mindful to treasure what you have attained."

### Hide & Seek

Myo had been a general before becoming a monk at Mt. Obai. He knew how to get things done. And this young, illiterate layman, this Eno, must have stolen the Master's robe, filched his bowl—proofs of dharma transmission. Thinking only a thief would run, Myo finally cornered Eno on a mountain ridge after weeks of tracking, demanded the return of bowl and robe. Eno knew his old master had called him in secret on that dark night after composing the only poem in the Dharma contest reflecting the Buddha's mind—given him his treasures, told him to run, to hide, till the senior, cultured monks could receive



such a master as he. When Myo saw Eno  
place robe and bowl on the ground, say,  
*Please, take them...* the former general was undone.  
Everyone fights—especially at the monastery,  
currying favor, defending doctrines, hoping to become  
the next master. Eno was just himself, open,  
transparent. Myo sweated. Wept. Bowed.  
Asked for the secret, for something deeper  
still. Eno said, *There is no secret, and it is  
in you. There is no way to hide it!*

Myo awoke—but being an old general,  
knew the world, and monks.  
Decided to live on the mountain away  
from such intrigues for a time,  
bid the young master goodbye.  
Eno continued on his way, lived  
in hiding for ten years as his master bid.  
Till appearing right on time  
as we might, in koan twenty-nine.

## Koan 24      Without Words, Without Silence

A monk once asked Master Fuketsu, "Without speaking, without silence, how can you express the truth?" Fuketsu observed, "I always remember the spring in southern China. The partridges are calling, and the flowers are fragrant."

### Non-Sequitur

*for John Tarrant*

*The only thing worse than speaking, John says,  
is not saying anything.* Poetry is a way  
of not answering the world as though it were  
a question, spring its own kind of awakening,  
as is Texas, or Wall Street, even dead flowers,  
fragrance floating among the folded blankets  
of the brain, falling into the empty spaces  
between letters.

Tasmania is a way of saying I come from a place  
that is everywhere, John looking like that devil  
in the skull, the Looney Tunes of the mind,  
with our short tempers, little patience, appetites  
that know no bounds. Like *Taz* in the cartoon,  
he spins like a vortex, biting through any-thing.  
Like Fuketsu, a partridge in his heart.  
Words that smell of Sonoma.  
A flower in his teeth.

## Koan 25      Talk by the Monk of the Third Seat

Master Gyozan had a dream: He went to Maitreya's place and was given the third seat. A venerable monk there struck the table with a gavel and announced, "Today the talk will be given by the monk of the third seat." Gyozan struck the table with the gavel and said, "The Dharma of Mahayana goes beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the One Hundred Negations. Listen carefully!"

### Naked and Dreaming

Here it is again, the dream:  
I'm in the third grade, sitting  
in the third seat near the teacher,  
naked as a blue jay, terrified she'll  
call on me. Mrs. Maitreya looks  
like an ancient Chinese Buddha  
with her pearl hat, her kindly  
hint of a smile, the way she stares  
right through me as though I were,  
well, naked. As though all of me,  
the entire wrecked and embarrassing  
world that I am, is the perfect answer  
to the question she is about to ask.  
She hits her desk with that big ruler  
to garner the attention of the unruly  
classroom, and sure enough calls on me  
to stand next to her, recite the poem  
I've just written. The blank sheet of paper  
in my hand is no help, but she just winks,  
takes me by the shoulders, turns me to look  
at thirty three students in their wooden desks,  
just as naked, just as terrified. Commands me  
to speak. Then I wake up.

## Koan 26      Two Monks Roll Up the Bamboo Blinds

The monks gathered in the hall to hear the Great Hogen of Seiryō give teishō before the midday meal. Hogen pointed to the bamboo blinds. At this two monks went to the blinds and rolled them up alike. Hogen said, “One has it; the other has not.”

### Twins

*the One and the Many,  
the Absolute and the Relative*

Born of the same mother, they loved each other,  
did everything together. Even twins, though,

have their own ways: the first-born preferring  
games that have no end, in which he could lose

himself; the second-born loving games he could  
solve quickly, with a clear winner. Uncle Hogen

razed them mercilessly when he visited.  
His favorite game was called, *Roll up the blinds.*

He'd sit in the big easy chair with his feet up,  
one twin under each arm, then shout, *Go!*

They'd race to the bay windows, grab a cord,  
see who could roll the bamboo blinds up first

without jamming the twine or the slats. They  
had to do this blindfolded. Uncle Hogen would

declare a winner, though half the time he'd  
simply laugh, choose one of them randomly.

They couldn't tell the difference, nor did they seem  
to mind. As long as the elder got to play with his brother.

And the younger, obsessed with winning,  
was happy to beat his older brother half the time.

Uncle Hogan? He was the luckiest man in the world,  
no matter who won.

## Koan 27      Neither Mind Nor Buddha

A monk once asked Master Nansen, "Is there any Dharma that has not yet been taught to the people?" Nansen said, "Yes, there is." The monk asked, "What is the Dharma that has not been taught to the people?" Nansen said, "It is neither mind, nor Buddha, nor beings."

### Monopoly

The Master loved playing Monopoly.  
It reminded him of teaching Zen students.  
There was no way they'd play unless  
there was something to win. So he'd  
lead them on, let them acquire properties,  
monopolies, little green houses like meditation huts,  
the big hotels red as the royal monasteries of old.  
Throw in a railroad or two to get somewhere fast,  
or utilities to control the water and lights.  
Of course, the point of the game  
is that there's always another property  
to acquire, hut to build, monastery to erect.  
Enlightenment to get. The students  
have to figure the secret out for themselves.  
They wouldn't believe the old guy  
if he told them there's no monopoly  
to be had, only this wandering around the board,  
visiting each other, drinking tea at Park Place,  
paying through the nose for dinner  
and a clean bed at the Boardwalk.  
Laughing about it the whole time.

## Koan 28 Ryutan Blows Out the Candle

Tokusan asked Ryutan about Zen far into the night. At last Ryutan said, "The night is late. Why don't you retire?" Tokusan made his bows and lifted the blinds to withdraw, but he was met by darkness. Turning back to Ryutan, he said, "It is dark outside." Ryutan lit a paper candle and handed it to him. Tokusan was about to take it when Ryutan blew it out. At this, all of a sudden, Tokusan went through a deep experience and made bows. Ryutan said, "What sort of realization do you have?" "From now on," said Tokusan, "I will not doubt the words of an old osho who is renowned everywhere under the sun." The next day Ryutan ascended the rostrum and said, "I see a fellow among you. His fangs are like the sword tree. His mouth is like a blood bowl. Strike him with a stick, and he won't turn his head to look at you. Someday or other, he will climb the highest of the peaks and establish the Way there." Tokusan brought his notes on the *Diamond Sutra* to the front of the hall, pointed to them with a torch, and said, "Even though you have exhausted the abstruse doctrines, it is like placing a hair in a vast space. Even though you have learned all the secrets of the world, it is like a drop of water dripped on the great ocean." He burned all his notes. Then, making bows, took his leave of his teacher.

### Waking to the Dark

*It is dark outside*, he said. *Then blow out the candle*, she replied.

It was the same each anniversary, their banter  
a way of loving. His words, like fangs or swords,  
long since quieted. Her words, like a sharp stick  
to the head, no longer drawing blood. They'd climb  
the peak each year with their tortured journals,  
burn them page by page in a Tibetan prayer bowl.  
Take one silver hair from the head of the other,  
let it float down over the cliff into vast space.  
Like a secret no one could trace. The world  
is like this. Someone says, *It is dark outside*,  
and another replies, *Then blow out the candle*.

## Koan 29      Neither the Wind Nor the Flag

The wind was flapping a temple flag. Two monks were arguing about it. One said the flag was moving; the other said the wind was moving. Arguing back and forth they could come to no agreement. The Sixth Ancestor Enō approached and said, "It is neither the wind nor the flag that is moving. It is your mind that is moving." The two monks were struck with awe.

### Beyond The Eye

Enō whispers...a fish swims in water, never knowing *ocean*.  
Burrowing through ground, the worm is blind to earth.  
Each bird assumes the air. For me, there are hints:  
driving down the road, everyone in front is too slow,  
everyone behind too fast. The good that happens  
seems meant to be; everything bad someone else's failure.  
Secretly, I prefer the old cosmology, the universe  
revolving round the earth, me at the center.  
Or reading Darwin, I begin to believe:  
all is survival, nothing is play. Others  
are always better, always worse.

But then I notice flying squirrels that soar  
between trees; how whales swim in one world,  
breath in another; and in Australia, how aborigines  
move from *dreaming* to here and back again.  
I once asked a man who died, just for a moment,  
what it was like—he'd felt himself floating  
above the emergency room table  
as his body completed its heart attack,  
watched as he slipped back inside  
the body's glove, opened his eyes.  
Felt the *I* behind the eye—  
this mind we move through  
without even seeing.



## Koan 30      This Very Mind is the Buddha

Daibai asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?" Baso answered, "This very mind is the Buddha."

### Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Like Dorothy after the tornado, I crave  
to leave this dusty farm of the mind behind,  
the cows that moo unmercifully till milked,  
these chicken-thoughts always clucking,  
the pigs, well, just being pigs. If it took  
a tornado, a whack on the head, I wouldn't  
mind—if it brought bluebirds, clouds,  
a yellow brick road, an Emerald City ruled  
by the great bodhisattva Oz who could grant  
what I most lacked: intelligence, courage,  
a heart. But sometimes it takes a long journey  
to discover: I am the witch, the tin man, the lion,  
even the smart scarecrow with no brain,  
arms pointing in all directions at once.  
I might even be the Buddha behind the curtain,  
handing me red shoes, a shovel, saying,  
*There's no place like home.*

## Koan 31      Joshu Sees Through the Old Woman

A monk asked an old woman, "Which way should I take to Mount Gotai?" The old woman said, "Go straight on!" When the monk had taken a few steps, she remarked, "He may look like a fine monk, but he too goes off like that!" Later, the monk told Joshu about it. Joshu said, "Wait a while. I will go and see through that old woman for you." The next day he went, and asked her the same question. The old woman, too, gave him the same reply. When he returned, Joshu announced to the monks, "I have seen through the old woman of Mount Gotai for you."

### City Slicker

I love the scene between Billy Crystal and Jack Palance,  
the city boy in midlife crisis terrified of the grizzled cowboy  
who sees right through him, might just as easily  
shoot him as lead him down the right path.  
Billy drones on about his various neuroses,  
oblivious to old Jack's impatience  
with the younger man's nervous tics and flailings.  
Cigarette dangling from his sun-wizened lips,  
cowboy hat tilted back by leather-gloved hand,  
Jack asks, *Do you know what the secret of life is?*  
And Billy says, *No, what?* Jack lifts his finger  
just like Gutei, and Billy of course mocks,  
*Your finger?* Jack leans in, growls,  
*One thing, just one thing.*  
*You stick to that and everything else*  
*don't mean shit*, which is sort of  
a Buddha thing to say. Like us,  
Billy wants to know what the *One Thing*  
is, eyes open, longing. Like Jack,  
these old weathered sages with  
their red cowboy scarves just  
crack a wry smile, point you ahead

down the one and only path  
you can ever walk.

\*

*Note: Master Gutei's "one finger Zen" in Koan Number Three*

## Koan 32      Questioning the Buddha

A non-Buddhist philosopher once asked the Buddha, "I do not ask for words, nor do I ask for no-words." The Buddha remained seated. The philosopher said admiringly, "The Buddha, with his great mercy, has blown away the clouds of my illusion and enabled me to enter the Way." After making bows, he took his leave. Then Ananda asked the Buddha, "What did he realize, to admire you so much?" The Buddha replied, "A fine horse runs even at the shadow of the whip."

### Be Careful What You Ask For

The Brahmin sage was tired of debate. *Always,*  
he thought, the mind fails—mired  
time and again in opposing points of view.  
Philosophy is a tough business—materialism,  
idealism, one hundred positions between.  
The difference between a lawyer and a sage  
increasingly blurry. But this Buddha  
doesn't bow to the bridle of my question.  
And those eyes—like a thousand answers  
to a question I've never asked.  
A kind of horse-sense—inviting me to run  
in the shadows where nothing is known  
except hoof-fall and cloud,  
oat and apple,  
hint of the wind's whip.

## Koan 33      No Mind, No Buddha

A monk asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?" Baso answered, "No mind, no Buddha."

### Bargaining

Master Baso is like a tough vendor in the marketplace,  
haggling over the price of mushrooms, knives,  
meat. You know you both want a sale,  
that's not the question. The aroma  
of Blue-fish, ginger and red pepper,  
a silky blade to prepare them with—  
all are too seductive to resist. But  
one thing Baso never budes on:  
*No mind, no Buddha.* No meal  
without the body, no feast  
without hunger,  
no enlightenment  
without the knife  
to slice it open.

## Koan 34      Mind Is Not the Way

Nansen said, "Mind is not the Buddha; reason is not the Way."

### Treasure Map

The pirate Nansen pointed to the blood-red "X"  
on the map, where the treasure lay. Buried  
ten thousand nautical leagues from here,  
many fathoms deep, I squinted my eyelids  
at the weathered parchment, sighed. It  
seemed a catastrophic distance for my  
greedy sailor heart, but I desperately  
craved the minted gold, the rubies,  
a king's chalice, a jade Buddha  
from the Orient. But pirate Nansen  
chuckled, *Move over boy, you're looking  
at it all wrong.* With one wave of his  
black and burgundy ruffled sleeve,  
he grasped the old map  
in both grizzled hands,  
swiveled it sideways,  
gleamed a wry smile  
with his golden tooth,  
whispered, *X marks  
the spot you're on,  
lad. Your treasure  
is straight down  
at the bottom  
of your sea.*

## Koan 35      Seijo's Soul Separated

Goso said to his monks, "Seijo's soul separated from her being. Which was the real Seijo?"

### The One Seijo

She'd been promised to Osho as a child,  
though her father had forgotten,  
planned to wed her to another.  
Heartbroken, Seijo fell sick  
as Osho fled the village, though  
he found her running in the dark  
along the shore just as he set sail  
in his small boat at midnight. They fled  
together, bore children, loved deeply.  
But the world was not aligned, each  
missed their families intensely.  
One day, they knew it was time,  
and sailed home. Osho found  
her father, told him their story,  
that Seijo awaited his blessing  
at the harbor to return home.  
But the father, astonished, said  
she had been bed-ridden for years,  
was still inside his home.

When Osho fetched Seijo from the harbor,  
and her father fetched Seijo from her bed,  
the two women met and became one.  
*I myself am not sure which is the real me,*  
the one Seijo whispered.

*Note: From "Rikon-ki" – The Story of the Separated Soul*

## Koan 36      When You Meet a Man of the Way

Goso said, “When you meet a man of the Way on the path, do not meet him with words or with silence. Tell me, how then will you meet him?”

### Best Friends

The back porch at night is alight  
with falling meteors, radiance  
a million years deep—that’s  
how long it takes for some light  
to reach here, for some words  
to come. After awhile, cigars lit,  
whisky poured, there’s not even  
much to say. You whistle that  
old tune of Dharma, *She’ll be  
coming round the mountain  
when she comes...* You peer  
wistfully into the ambient abyss.  
A sip to keep you warm.  
Smoke to make things clear.



## Koan 37      Joshu's Oak Tree

A monk asked Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming to China?" Joshu said, "The oak tree in the garden."

### Straight Talk

Joshu thought these monks so earnest,  
mustering the courage to ask, again,  
the one question considered the essence  
of Zen. They often looked crestfallen  
when he looked about for whatever  
was handy, said, *The oak tree in the garden;*  
or, *The moon in the pond;* or dirt,  
a grasshopper, a broken axe. They  
wanted an answer so unimaginable,  
so subtle, it would release their miserable  
minds from prison, their befuddled hearts  
from the outhouse. But Joshu knew  
that Bodhidharma had not sailed all the way  
from India with his tattoos, bug eyes,  
bushy beard to just bring a new religion.  
That was easy, and dull. Icons, beliefs,  
scriptures. A true Zen master would  
never handle a philosophical question  
directly — the answer would be like  
giving birth to a still-born ox. Better  
to rip the outhouse door off its hinges,  
pummel the prison-stone with a hammer,  
peer into the pupils of each earnest monk.  
Then look with them, hope they see the oak,  
feel the Buddha's feet in their own,  
this sun on arm and branch,  
the partridge singing in the ear.

## Koan 38      An Ox Passes the Window

Goso said, "An ox passes by the window. His head, horns, and four legs all go past. But why can't the tail pass too?"

### Ox-Tail Mind

*This tail is a monster, said one master, a world.*  
The universe with its horny head, matted hair, massive legs  
ambles by—but this flicking tail is impossible  
to grasp. Try to grab hold, come away with  
busted knuckles, black eye, bleeding lip.  
Better to sit, peer into this ocular  
mirror, feel the tail  
wag your body whole.

## Koan 39      You Have Missed It

A monk wanted to ask Ummon a question and started to say, "The light serenely shines over the whole universe..." Before he had even finished the first line, Ummon suddenly interrupted, "Isn't that the poem of Chosetsu Shusai?" The monk answered, "Yes, it is." Ummon said, "You have missed it!" Later, Master Shishin took up this koan and said, "Now tell me, why has this monk missed it?"

### The Impersonator

He'd spent years practicing  
in front of a mirror, arching eyebrows  
like Jack Nicholson, the frozen upper lip  
of Humphrey Bogart, the strong cadence  
of John Wayne. Even Mae West's husky  
voice, Dolly Parton's verve, Hilary's  
presidential resolve. Now, he could be  
anyone, given enough time—recite  
entire scripts, famous speeches,  
hilarious jokes. But the one person  
that escaped him still was himself.  
So he took up Zen, became a poet.  
Donned a black robe, or a black  
turtle-neck sweater, or both.  
Memorized koans, poems,  
the way his teachers sat:  
folded legs in full lotus,  
blossoming. The more  
he disciplined his body,  
his tongue, his mind  
to perfectly reflect  
the light, the darker  
he felt. Till finally,  
broken and empty,  
he gave up being

someone else. Then  
John's bravado,  
Jack's eyebrow,  
Mae's smile and  
the Zen Master's too  
became him—the real deal,  
the genuine article,  
his original face before  
trying so damned hard.

## Koan 40      Tipping Over a Water Pitcher

When Master Isan was studying under Hyakujo, he worked as the cook at the monastery. Hyakujo wanted to choose an abbot for Daii Monastery. He told the head monk and all the rest of his disciples to make their Zen presentations, and the ablest one would be sent to found the monastery. Then Hyakujo took a pitcher, placed it on the floor, and asked the question: "This must not be called a pitcher. What do you call it?" The head monk said, "It cannot be called a wooden sandal." Hyakujo then asked Isan. Isan walked up, kicked over the pitcher, and left. Hyakujo said, "The head monk has been defeated by Isan." So Isan was ordered to start the new monastery.

### Charades

Isan liked the charades his master played,  
but years ago learned not to guess  
what he was aiming at. No matter  
what answer the other monks gave,  
it was usually wrong, even if  
it seemed true. The master  
was after something truer,  
so Isan kept watching, kept playing.  
The years passed, and finally the master  
needed to choose another master,  
decided to play one more charade.  
He set a pitcher of water squarely on the floor  
in front of all the monks, said,  
*Without using its name, what is it?!*  
The head monk had planned his answer  
all morning, to say what it is not:  
*Well, it's not a sandal!*  
The master smiled, thought, *Clever...*  
then looked over at Isan and shrugged.  
By now, Isan'd had enough, smiled back,  
kicked the bottle over with his foot

as he walked out—clear water pooling  
in the middle of the monastery floor  
truer than any word, sweeter than any name.

## Koan 41      Bodhidharma and Peace of Mind

Bodhidharma sat in zazen facing the wall. The Second Patriarch, who had been standing in the snow, cut off his arm and said, "Your disciple's mind is not yet at peace. I beg you, my teacher, please give it peace." Bodhidharma said, "Bring the mind to me, and I will set it at rest." The Second Patriarch said, "I have searched for the mind, and it is unattainable." Bodhidharma said, "I have thoroughly set it at rest for you."

### Zen Boot Camp

The snow was falling again, waist deep.  
Had he really cut off his arm to impress the master?  
His mind was blurry as the winter storm  
blowing snowflakes in flurries,  
blinding his eyes, icing his thoughts  
till all was frozen. Still, the master sat  
facing the wall. Unmoving. As the hours  
froze into days, he felt himself offer  
first his toes, then his feet, his big ankles,  
each shin, kneecap, thick thighs,  
his shrinking genitals, sinking belly,  
stubborn heart, now his arms  
to the storm, to the master—unable,  
to tell them apart. Even his mind  
was gone. Everything offered,  
even his lips, his skull.  
The master finally opened  
his eyes, led him inside to sit  
by the fire. Now they could begin—  
mind ungraspable as the storm  
still blowing outside. His toes again  
wriggling, his arm back in its socket,  
lifting the iron kettle for tea.

## Koan 42      A Woman Comes Out of Meditation

Once long ago, the Buddha came to a place where many Buddhas were assembled. When Manjusri arrived, the Buddhas all returned to their original places. Only a woman remained, close to the Buddha seat in deep meditation. Manjusri spoke to the Buddha, "Why can a woman be close to the Buddha seat, and I cannot?" The Buddha told Manjusri, "You awaken this woman from her meditation and ask her yourself." Manjusri walked around the woman three times, snapped his fingers once, then took her up to the Brahma Heaven and tried all his supernatural powers, but he was unable to bring her out of meditation. The Buddha said, "Even hundreds of thousands of Manjusris would be unable to bring her out of meditation. Down below, past countries innumerable as the sands of the Ganges, there is a Bodhisattva called Momyo. He will be able to awaken her from meditation." In an instant Momyo emerged from the earth and worshiped the Buddha. The Buddha gave him the order. Momyo then walked to the woman and snapped his fingers only once. At this the woman came out of her meditation.

### All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

The young woman went on a road trip  
after graduating with a doctorate  
to visit her old kindergarten teacher,  
Mz. Momyo, with whom her long journey  
had begun eons ago. Oh sure, it had been  
grand, receiving her diploma from the hand  
of Professor Manjusri, that wise and worldly  
mentor to so many students. The president  
himself had been the commencement speaker,  
flanked by brilliant scientists, lawyers, poets,  
economists, historians from the prestigious university  
she'd attended. But she knew, in her gut, what  
the latest research had shown: that more people  
remember their kindergarten teacher



than who discovered the atom, found Pluto,  
invented the wheel, toasters, mathematics.  
Mz. Momyo had been the first to peer into  
her eyes, light her lamp of curiosity, let her  
color outside or inside the lines, turn books  
upside down and make up different stories.  
So when the young woman parked at the old  
cement building that afternoon, walked into  
the empty classroom after school, saw  
Mz. Momyo look up from the stack  
of brilliant chalk etchings that her latest  
brood had produced, they both laughed —  
snapped their fingers, just like old times, saying,  
*Are you awake today, my fine genius, are you awake?*

## Koan 43      Shuzan and a Staff

Master Shuzan held up his staff, and showing it to the assembled disciples said, "You monks, if you call this a staff, you are committed to the name. If you call it not-a-staff, you negate the fact. Tell me, you monks, what do you call it?"

### A Rose by Any Other Name

The *shippei* is made from a split piece of bamboo, half a meter long, bound with wisteria vine then lacquered. The symbol of a Zen master's authority, it may be decorated with a silk cord, elaborate carvings—is sometimes used to rouse sleeping monks awake. It is also a rose—yellow, pink, blood red, sometimes orange or peach. A thorn is also its name, dagger to open your calloused thumb, your impenetrable heart. The sound it makes winging towards slouching shoulder is like the wind of dragons, its touch soft as the lover who has waited several moons for your return. Such a staff is the spine rooting tailbone to skull, the Milky Way whirling through the dark enigma of the void. Call it by name, or let your lips fall silent, it does not matter. Only that you grasp what cannot be held with your whole body. Whisper in its nameless ear something of love—your original name, when the womb was a temple, and you rushed through its doors shouting.

## Koan 44 Basho and a Stick

Master Basho said to the monks, "If you have a stick, I shall give one to you. If you do not have a stick, I shall take it away from you."

### Shtick

Whatever my gimmick,  
Master Basho wants to take it away.  
Even my *poor me* emptiness.  
Especially this.  
The universe hands itself over  
each moment—though half the time  
I turn away, let it fall to the floor.  
Or like a kid playing *Pick Up Sticks*,  
I pry and prod to take just the right ones,  
ignore the rest. Occasionally I manage  
to pick up the fluorescent enlightenment  
stick, phosphorescent pink or purple—  
but when I start waving it about dangerously,  
he takes it away and everyone is safe again.  
Master Basho is like a mischievous ghost  
peering through the eyes and reaching through the hands  
of those I meet. Giving me things, taking them away.  
Ennui, hubris, center stage, wallflower status.  
Whatever my shtick, he bellows, *Hand it over!*  
Till I laugh with him empty handed,  
arms like tree branches before the carpenter  
makes them useful.

## Koan 45      Who is He?

Hoen of Tozan said, "Even Shakyamuni and Maitreya are servants of another. I want to ask you, who is he?"

### Missing Person

In the dream, I blink over my coffee cup  
at the "missing children" pictures on the side  
of the milk carton. Open the newspaper  
to the Want-Ads, scan scores of personals  
looking for the perfect mate, the hot date,  
the discrete affair, enduring commitment.  
For days on end I roam from one Post Office  
to another, scan the "most-wanted" photographs  
on the bulletin board. Uncertain who it is  
I am searching for, I hop on the Internet,  
query, *Where is he now?* Find images,  
clues—a god, bandits, saviors, thieves.  
Still dreaming, Nietzsche points his finger  
at me and yells, *Superman!* Jesus takes my hands,  
turns them palm up, stares at the holes.  
Freud calls me oceanic, Jung insists I am  
all archetypes in one. Lao Tzu that I am wind.  
Krishna that I have a little golden *atman*  
inside my heart. And Buddha, he simply  
arches one eyebrow, looks at me expectantly.  
Then I wake up. Stare into the bathroom mirror.

## Koan 46      Step Forward From the Top of a Pole

Master Sekiso said, "From the top of a pole one hundred feet high, how do you step forward?" An ancient Master also said that one sitting at the top of a pole one hundred feet high, even if he has attained 'it', has not yet been truly enlightened. He must step forward from the top of the pole one hundred feet high and manifest his whole body in the ten directions.

### Mud Zen

I love the view at the top—  
Half-Dome in Yosemite, immense granite  
towering above the tiny redwoods in the valley.  
The Empire State building's terraced roof;  
asphalt streets, the cacophony of cabs, far below.  
I've heard the upper one percent of the upper one percent  
have so much money it almost becomes meaningless,  
like the endless blue atop Mount Everest,  
the rest of the world so far away you cannot  
touch it. I like the meditation joke, about  
the seeker who finally manages, after so much,  
to attain the peak, finds the yogi sitting serenely  
amid pure snow, white clouds, unimpeded views,  
sits down and waits for it to happen—enlightenment,  
all the rest. After awhile, the yogi opens an eye,  
looks over at the eager aspirant, finally says,  
*This is it. Everything else is happening down there.*  
The top of the pole is a tiny platform from which  
to gaze at the world. Every day, my three year old  
mind calls to me from the mud with a blueberry  
stained face, wants me to make dark pies  
in the earth's body.

## Koan 47      Tototsu's Three Barriers

Master Juetsu of Tosotsu made three barriers to test monks:

**Inquiring after the Truth, groping your way through the underbrush, is for the purpose of seeing into your nature. Here, now, where is your nature?**

**If you realize your own nature, you are free from life and death. When your eyes are closed, how can you be free from life and death?**

**If you are free from life and death, you know where you will go. When the four elements are decomposed, where do you go?**

### Three Gates

The first gate creaks on its rusted hinges,  
moans shrill as the ghosts you've buried  
behind the decrepit fence where your garden  
lies. On hands and knees in the rain, you fumble  
in the damp underbrush for your life, wielding  
that silver tool. But no shovel, saw, hoe can manage  
such rawness. One day you wake in this garden  
of earthworms, creeping vines, wild flowers—  
fingernails smelling of loam, heart happy  
as the gopher tunneling freely underground.  
Nibbling at roots sweeter than any flower.

The second gate you can only find with eyes  
closed. The blind, here, have an advantage.  
Intimacy is better up close,  
hand grasping the invisible latch,  
feet feeling their way barefoot along  
the stone path, toes burrowing into mud  
near the spring where death and life  
are the same fertile ground.

The third gate is, of course, the same  
as the first two. There is only one life.  
One way out. One way in.  
*Earth* as body, *wind* to carry, *water* to nourish,  
*fire* to cook the billion seeds of innumerable Buddhas.  
It is a wide gate we pass through. No  
one can miss it.

## Koan 48      Kempo's One Road

A monk said to Kempo Osho, "It is written, 'Bhagavats in the ten directions. One road to Nirvana.' I still wonder where the road can be." Kempo lifted his staff, drew a line, and said, "Here it is." Later the monks asked the same question of Ummon, who held up his fan and said, "This fan jumps up to the thirty-third heaven and hits the nose of the deity Sakra Devanam Indra. When you strike the carp of the eastern sea, the rain comes down in torrents."

### One Road

Ummon thought, *You can tell them  
over and over, but it does no good!*  
Seekers in the ten directions,  
running about like monks  
who've lost their heads. Osho  
kept it simple, drew a line  
in the dirt right in front of them.  
How much clearer can this be?  
It's a hard road to miss, impossible  
to veer from. The path emerges  
right beneath each foot whether  
one crawls, cavorts, runs, meanders,  
walks blind or plots each turn  
on a detailed map. I've found  
most like elaborate journeys,  
someone else's treasure. That's  
why I tell these bizarre tales:  
my royal fan ascending  
to the thirty-third heaven, hitting  
Indra on the nose! Or striking  
the great carp-headed dragon lying  
in the stormy sea of the heart.  
Then drowning in rain. Eventually  
they tire of the dramatics, sit still,



stare at the ground. Finally see  
the line in the dirt impossible to miss,  
the one they've been following all along.



# **Polishing the Moon Sword**

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**Twenty Prose Poems  
Japanese & Chinese Folk Tales**



## Polishing the Moon Sword

On the eve of a decisive battle, Zhang Liang climbs Mount Ji Ming, plays songs of the enemy soldiers' distant homeland. The soldiers become so nostalgic that most of them wander off, one by one, into night. I see him still, in the Japanese print, purple robe flowing on cliff's edge, carved flute pressed to wet lips, unused sword quiet in the golden scabbard hanging from hip. His enigmatic heart, happy for one less battle under the fierce moon.

## A Good Death

Li Po had nothing to lose as he stared at the moon on the water. He was old, his body but a worn veil, though still hiding the Emperor's sword given after a drunken bout of court poetry. Doing nothing—*wu-wei*—had been much harder than it seemed: escaping fame, imperial princes after gambling, the women who loved him. It was the moon he was devoted to, shimmering as a courtesan in poem after poem; or an old woman with no teeth, perhaps his mother, long dead. Or his first love, still mysterious. Once again, here she was on the night lake, teasing...*are you drunk again? Do you have another love? Can you still get it up, old poet?* Did he fall drunk, as they say, out of his small boat and drown trying to embrace the moon—or this time, after years of banter, simply answer her, once and for all, with his whole useless body.

## Michizane Composes a Poem by Moonlight

—*Sugawara no Michizane (845-903)*

After his death, he became the god of music, literature, calligraphy — titles an emperor may confer. But tonight, he is only eleven, composing a poem by moonlight. Moon of bright snow, moon of plum blossoms, moon of the golden mirror. Perhaps every young boy is a god. Every young heart a plum. Court life, accolades, love — all come later. For now, he is a poem: the curve of his slender arm the brush, his dark eyes the ink, his body caught somewhere between moonlight and dirt.

## The Moon of the Milky Way

Shokiyo, the Weaver Maiden, fell so in love with Kengi the Herdsman, they both forgot their duties as constellations in the night sky. The Milky Way began to wander this way and that, stars like threads unraveling, stars like wild ox scattering. This is one kind of loving. But Shokiyo's father worried his daughter would let the blanket of sky tatter to nothing, that Kengi would allow every star of heaven to stray from night's fence. The dark side of loving. So the father forbade the lovers to see each other except in the seventh month of each year, though he gave them the moon. This is another way of loving. The Milky Way again spiraling through the heavens like silver thread—a thousand glimmering beasts circling their one love.



## Tsunenobu and the Demon

Watching the autumn moon rise, Tsunenobu hears the sound of cloth being pounded in the distance. He feels less alone now in the immense court where everyone else is sleeping, pulls his cold robe round him snugly. His demons, for a moment, quiet. Remembering a famous poem, he whispers, *I listen to the sound of cloth being pounded as the moon shines serenely...here is someone else who has not yet gone to sleep.* Suddenly, a gigantic demon appears in the sky, the one he most fears. It, too, recites a poem: *In the northern sky, geese fly across the Big Dipper; to the south, cold robes are pounded under the moonlight.* Tsunenobu laughs – perhaps no one likes to be alone under an autumn moon. Least of all your demon.

## Tzu Yu's Lament

The four old men look at each other and laugh, *Who can make non-being their head, life their spine, death their butt — all one body — these are true friends!* Before long, of course, one of them becomes ill. When the others visit, he says, *It's amazing! The Dark Enigma is crumpling me into such an embrace: a hunched back, chin tucked into belly, shoulders topping skull, nape pointed at sky.* Hobbling over to a well, he looks at himself in the water, sighs again, *Such an embrace.* All four friends know where they are headed. Her strong arms, silken skin, welcome them one by one. Like a mother, folding them shoulder by hip back into her body.

## Cloth-Beating Moon

Her orange kimono draped round her pale shoulders, she raises the wooden mallet, pounds robe after robe smooth on the wooden block under a pale moon. Hoping her husband will hear in the distance, wherever he may be. The steady percussion a kind of music or poem. It's melancholy drifting through the villages, echoing in the hills. Her long black hair tangled, her nails broken, the palms of her hands calloused. Her orange kimono immaculate. Each night. While her husband, the war finally over, lifts his bruised head, hears the steady, muffled sound of his wife pounding cloth. Follows the pale moon home.

## Return to Moon Palace

An old bamboo basket maker and his childless wife adopt an abandoned baby girl, name her *Kaguyahime*, radiant beauty, like the world. As she reaches the age for marrying, many suitors, including the emperor, seek her hand. It is only now, when someone seeks to keep her, that she reveals herself as daughter of Joga, Queen of the Moon. Her parents hide her away, the emperor sends emissaries to bring her to the palace. But she can never be held by anyone—returns to the night heavens. Each evening, the emperor is haunted, but the old bamboo cutter and his wife kneel in the dirt, turn their wrinkled faces toward the moon, whisper, *I see you*. Watch her gray kimono, white face, ebony hair appear and disappear.

## Mount Miyagi Moon

His brown kimono, long dark hair over broad shoulders, fine beard gracing a strong chest, are all of one piece. Bittersweet. Like the melancholy tune he plays on his lute in the forest. Marooned on this island after a failed rebellion, a man's fortunes may turn on one arrow, one captured letter, a single wrong turn. Longing for home, each string plucked quivers the moon in its slivered light through the leaves. The mountain, like his grief, immovable. Though this moon, too, will wane. This song become a boat to return him home.

## Moon of the Red Cliffs

The full moon is alight over the Red Cliffs of the Yangtze River. The poet Su Shi tires of his scholar friends, and the artists, rhapsodizing a famous battle eight centuries earlier—here, under this same moon. *One must know a sword as a sword to write of a sword*, he huffs, *know blood red on its moonlit tip*. Eyeing his friends in the long boat, Su Shi oars them silently beneath the hulking cliffs, takes the knife hidden in his sleeve, wounds the thumb of each—bids them to write a poem in their own blood. Only then does scholar and painter and poet see the dead under the cliffs.

## Blind Moon

The blind warrior, *Taira no Tomoume*, fights with the talisman of a poem on his back. Now, as in the twelfth century, the world blindsides. My mind, also. A sword can only protect so much. Taira's verse, *From darkness I have wandered, lost to even a darker path*, is my own. But there is the clouded light of this heart. His poem between my shoulder blades. A stone underfoot. A blind moon ahead.

## Lonely Moon

Li Chi, the most beautiful woman in China, walks to the pond edge, sees carp scurry into deep water. Then, lounging under the cherry blossom tree, birds escape into azure sky. She wanders into the forest, spies deer scampering away. Even men in the village are afraid, turn their faces.



## **New Moon Grief**

The poor fisherman understands. The general rummages among the reeds of the Huai River, after the war, looking for the grave of the emperor who'd taken his brother and father in battle. Thinking of his own son, the fisherman guides the general through bamboo, mist, darkness. Finds the hasty tomb. Steals the dead emperor's body, whips it three hundred times beneath the dark moon.

## **Mad Moon**

Ochiyo, the young maidservant, runs into the streets of the capital with her dead lover's rolled parchment letters. Rolling and unrolling them into tatters. He was the only one who'd recognized her heart. Whispered its name. Made love with his eyes. Kept her secret. To be seen, then abandoned — this is only the beginning of grief's long unrolling. Some say she died that day. Others, that she roams the alleys of their hearts still, her yellow kimono shining like a feral moon.

## Poem of the Body

Fujiwara falls asleep on the veranda of the Shinto shrine devoted to the patron deity of poets. It has been a long journey, here, from the palace. One sandal broken, feet muddy, heart troubled. His poems like still-born birds, unable to fly from the egg. Why are his verses filled with dead blossoms, rain that will not fall, lovers that do not kiss? Perhaps here, at the shrine, single stick of incense smoking in the rice bowl, the *kami* of poetry will find him. Make life in the palace possible again. Instead, he falls asleep—and in his dream, the ghost of the old man he'd soon enough become frowns. Dips an ink brush in the mud, writes a single *kanji* character on the sole of each foot, one for the belly, the heart, each shoulder and knee—till he becomes the poem he seeks.

## Moon of the Filial Son

His bare feet feel good on the cool earth. Hands bind sticks in a bundle for his aging parents' fire. The imperial court will need him in the morning, renowned for his calligraphy and poems. To be so esteemed for inked brush strokes—partridge, frog, peony blossoms in verse the emperor prized to keep the kingdom in harmony. But tonight, he wears the ragged kimono given by his father, mended by his mother—grateful for the waning light of each cratered moon face.

## **Wolf Moon Musician**

His imperial green kimono, black top hat, are no protection from the wolves on the moors north of Kyoto, where he wanders at night. Not even the emperor, in whose court he plays, can command the wolves. Nor the mind—a fickle beast in the dark. Grief like fangs, like yellow eyes. Lips on wooden flute, he plays the mournful tune the emperor hates, but the wolves love. It is his own tune. Under the clouded moon he becomes tooth and tongue and wild.

## Fisticuffs

After Lao Tzu dies, his friend Chi'in Shih strides into the burial grounds and shouts three times. His eyes red and wet. Chin trembling, legs like fallen stone. The other followers are stoic, like storm hiding in cloud. Lao Tzu had said, *hiding from heaven* is the only crime—so Chi'in Shih raises his arms skyward, shakes his fists. Makes sure his friend can see.

## Getting Free of the Gods

The old hunchback sighs as he settles bamboo cane against the blackened hearth. He welcomed the gods, most of his life. It was the only way to be free of them. To be so at home in this crooked world, even *T'ien – Fate* is greeted at the door. Given a stool by the fire, a table to display the jade knife, the emerald vial of perfume and poison.

## **The Moon's Four Strings**

Semimaru tunes the strings of his lute under the full moon. Blind, of noble birth, his poetry falls upon the ears of listeners like cherry blossoms floating down towards death. The melancholy of his four strings opens the chest, lets in the moon. Tonight, he plays alone in his mountain cottage near Kyoto. Yet somehow, centuries later, I hear him still. This same moon, tuning the heart as a lute.



## The Gateless Gate: New Koan Poems

There is a long Zen tradition of composing poems as a spontaneous, personal response to *koans*. Zen history is littered, some would say, with the “vice” of poems (in a tradition that values no-words). Wang Wei and Su T’ung-po were Zen men and poets alike. Po Chu-i “inked a lot of rice paper”, with over three thousand of his poems surviving. In “Madly Singing in the Mountains”, he calls poetry his “special failing”.

*Perhaps this can be our special failing too, Dane Cervine suggests in the preface to his new book of poem-responses to the 48 Zen koans of the Mumonkan, **The Gateless Gate**. A koan, like a poem, may demand that you change your life—as in Rilke’s encounter with the archaic torso of Apollo in his famous poem. Or it may quietly nag at the back of your mind, like a place you can’t quite remember the name of, but know. Dane reminds us that there is a long history of such endeavors. Each poet, each Zen student, contributing their own voice. To add a verse to the Great Koan of life.*

**Polishing The Moon Sword** is a collection of twenty prose poems based on Japanese and Chinese folk tales. As with the koan poems, they focus on a moment unique to the tales told, but also the age old sentiments we all face: love, aging, death, loss, and beauty. *Kado*—the way of poetry.

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