

Poetry by Committee? Try Renga!

by Shelley Krause

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I love poetry, and while I was thinking about creativity and Meeting Weekend last month, I suddenly had a brainstorm. I could teach people about renga!

The renga is an unusual, collaborative type of poem (with multiple authorship), especially popular in Japan in the late 1600s. It normally consists of 36, 50, or 100 verses (or stanzas) contributed by a “team” of poets. Each successive poet uses the immediately preceding verse as a kind of cue, and then adds his or her own verse in accordance with traditional renga rules. The syllable pattern is predetermined: a triplet with the 5-7-5 pattern is usually alternated with a couplet with 7-7, a renga always starting with a triplet and ending with a couplet. (For simplicity’s sake, English-language renga writers can decide to have all verses follow the 5-7-5 pattern.)

Like haiku, renga poetry is contemplative poetry that focuses on nature, color, season, small contrasts, and surprises. Each verse usually registers or indicates a moment, sensation, impression, or drama of a specific facet of nature. People are typically somewhat rare in these poems, and when they do appear they are likely to be “part of the picture” rather than playing a starring role.

The Central Philadelphia Meeting Weekend Renga

Looking up to see
the top of an old spruce
tree—
is that fog or cloud?

Grey squirrel adds
another layer to
the cloud cover.

Sprawled under branches
beside the picnic
basket—
slumber comes easy.

Dream of a blue lake
a pocket full of pine
cones
sugary sand grains.

Cool morning rain in
winter
the ducks on the lake
seem happy to be alive.

The sun is hidden;
life stirs in the breath of
wind.
birds—no bees as yet.

Beginning their search
birds sing their territory
before construction.

Scallions march forward
memory of winter past
the ocean’s wind sighs.

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The fun of writing renga is in seeing how one person's ideas play out when taken on by someone else. The links between one verse and the next may be surprising or subtle, funny or serious, and in a good renga—as in a good Meeting—one often feels that the whole has a kind of grand design unanticipated by the individual contributors. Read ours and see what you think!

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Salt taste of shoreline—
I can hear the tide
coming,
then drawing away.

After the run
salt taste along my lip
the ocean in her eyes.

Of memories we gave
and surrendered to sand
tripping over the
horseshoe crabs.

The snow's receding
the sun is brightening
life begins to quicken.

Flowers awaken
I leave footprints in the
mud
I forget my coat.