

Shunkyosai Ryukoku's Courtesan Reading a Letter (Japan) 450#

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Questions for a Courtesan

Should we call you *Ayameko*, “flower of the moon”
O’ Nari, “peal of thunder” or simply,
Kai “forgiveness?”
What your mother must have begged
Placing you under the arm of an oiran
Softly sharing “Marriage is a woman’s grave”¹
Her poverty rough hands holding your cheeks in *sayonara*

Was the floating world of Yoshiwara a prison?
Here you mastered the three strings of the *shamisen*²
Learned the ways of Kabuki and brushed love letters
Against scrolls that left samurai begging for appointments
As poor boys do for rice. Was the
Pleasure bowl full, your heart empty
Behind the gatekeepers deep walls?

We imagine silk and petals hovering above a
Pink umbrella, dragonflies on air,
Sent to cloud, wings applauding your triumph
Mount Fuji bold in the backdrop
A hundred hands igniting drum, lute, lotus
Did you feel like a warrior perched on teeth of *geta* ³
Standing on a show bridge, battalion of

Daggers rising from your locks as the swirl of
Brocade hid virgin breasts?
Did you hear the cuckoo mesmerized by
Your white-faced brilliance?
Did it sing of the nights to come? A samurai of
Samurai lighting your station with paper lanterns
Burning you hot as the many fires of Edo

How long did it take him to win over the mistress?
Was it two or three years placing silk wrapped
Silver in your letter box? Money yanked from peasant sweat
The kind that rolled from your *haha’s*⁴ brow
Did you resent the song when he removed your kimono with honor,
Massaged egg white on your thighs for three nights,
Supped the yolk vigor before *jus primae noctis*?

One song, one night; it flew away

you write mountains
slowly
eroding...
into the blank pages
of my silence



Illustration by Tim Callahan

¹ *Old Japanese saying*

² *Japanese banjo-like instrument with three strings*

³ *Footwear with wooden soles*

⁴ *Japanese informal for mother*