

Living Landscape

Brooks Jensen

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*“Carefree, singing a timeless song
Gone – on a journey without end.”*



Living Landscape

As a teenager, I was introduced to the poetry of the wandering Taoist monks, lost in the mountains, “cloud-hidden, whereabouts unknown.” For me, this has been an image that I can almost feel in my bones. I spent my youth trudging the wilderness with backpack and camera, chasing the image of the Taoist hermitage. Perhaps the life of a landscape photographer is as close as one can come to that romantic figure in our modern world.

For years now, I’ve hoped for a project in which I could combine my photography with Chinese poetry. With an invitation to exhibit my landscape work in China, I at last had an ideal opportunity to do so. In preparation for this exhibition, I threw myself into the poets of the Tang and Sung Dynasties, scouring every book I could find. What a delight to immerse oneself into hundreds of poems from recluse monks, wandering itinerants, and even high court officials with the wandering spirit. Their words still speak to us, across the centuries, across the oceans, across the differences of culture. Human emotions are exactly

that — *human* emotions, and as such they transcend time and space. Photography needs no translation, but it, too, has the potential to transcend its limitations.

The fan shapes prints were inspired from the work of Japanese woodblock artist Hiroshige. An obvious oversight, it never occurred to me that all those wonderful *ukiyo-e* artists known for their prints of nature, Kabuki artists, and landscapes would also make prints for use as fans. A book about them, *Hiroshige Fan Prints* by Rupert Faulkner (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2001) provided the needed inspiration to adopt that quintessential oriental shape to my photographs.

My hope for this work is that it is worth lingering over. So much of today’s entertainment is created for quick consumption, for gulps and dashes rather than sips and pauses. One should not gulp poetry, or for that matter, photography either. If we pause and listen with a still heart, it is possible to catch a glimpse of those old hermits in the woods, but only if we still our racing thoughts and allow their poems to emerge from the distant mists. Their words, and hopefully my images, point to the living landscape through which they wandered and in which we can still follow.

BROOKS JENSEN

Born in 1954, Laramie, Wyoming



About the project

In the fall of 2010, I received an invitation to exhibit in China some of my landscape work. As part of a large photo event to take place in inner-Mongolia, China, I thought it only fitting to use this opportunity to do what I had long dreamt of — and, no, by that I do not mean traveling to the edge of Mongolia in the dead of winter. I did so, along with a dozen other hearty and adventurous American photographers and thereby hangs another tale!

About the exhibition

The exhibit in China opened on New Year’s Day, 2011 in the Xiang Sha Wan Art Palace. Such an exotic name! I’d never exhibited in an Art Palace before and had little idea what to expect. Xiang Sha Wan translates literally as “Singing Sands Bay.” It is a resort complex on the edge of the Gobi Desert where the sands meet the famous Yellow River just south of the Mongolian border, near the city of Baotou.

The Art Palace is, well, a giant yurt located three miles out in the middle of the dunes. It is large enough to enclose a soccer field; the floor is desert sand; there is no heat — a decided disadvantage in the dead of winter; the exhibition was hung on juniper poles with the help of the camel jockeys; the only light was the diffused winter sun through the roof. I am not kidding. You cannot make this stuff up. It may be the most fun I have ever had exhibiting my photographs. It certainly was the most memorable.



Prints

Prints from this exhibition are available at www.brooksensenarts.com

To your hermitage here on top of the mountain
I have climbed, without stopping, these ten miles.
I have knocked at your door, but no one answered.
I have peeped into your room at your seat beside the table.
Perhaps you are out riding in your canopied chair,
Or fishing, more likely, by some autumn pool.
Sorry though I am to be missing you,
You have become my meditation.
The beauty of your grasses, fresh with rain,
And close beside your window, the music of your pines.
I take into my being all that I see and hear,
Soothing my senses, quieting my heart.
And though there be neither host nor guest,
Have I not reasoned a visit complete?

After enough, I have gone down the mountain.
Why should I wait for you any longer?

Ch'iu Wèi
(8th Century)



*There's a harp in the midnight playing clear,
While the west wind rustles a green vine;
There's a low cloud touching the jade-white dew
And an early wildgoose in the River of Stars...*

*Night in the tall trees cling to dawn;
Light makes folds in the distant hills;
And here on the Huai, by one falling leaf,
I can feel a storm on Lake Tung-t'ing.*

Hsü Hun
(9th Century)



walking along a little path,
I find a footprint on the moss,
A white cloud low on the quiet lake,
Grasses that sweeten an idle door,
A pine grows greener with the rain,
A brook that comes from a mountain source —
And, mingling with truth among the flowers,
I have forgotten what to say.

Liu Chang-Ch'ing
(8th Century)



Thousands of miles off,
behind countless mountain passes,
You make me grieve.
Do you even know that?
Since you left
I've counted the leftover days of winter,
waited out spring.
Still not one word.
All the flowers have bloomed
And still you are gone.

Su Xiaoxiao
(c. 550)



*I asked the boy beneath the pines.
He said, "The Master's gone herb gathering
Somewhere on the mount
Cloud hidden
Whereabouts unknown."*

Chia Tao
(788-843)

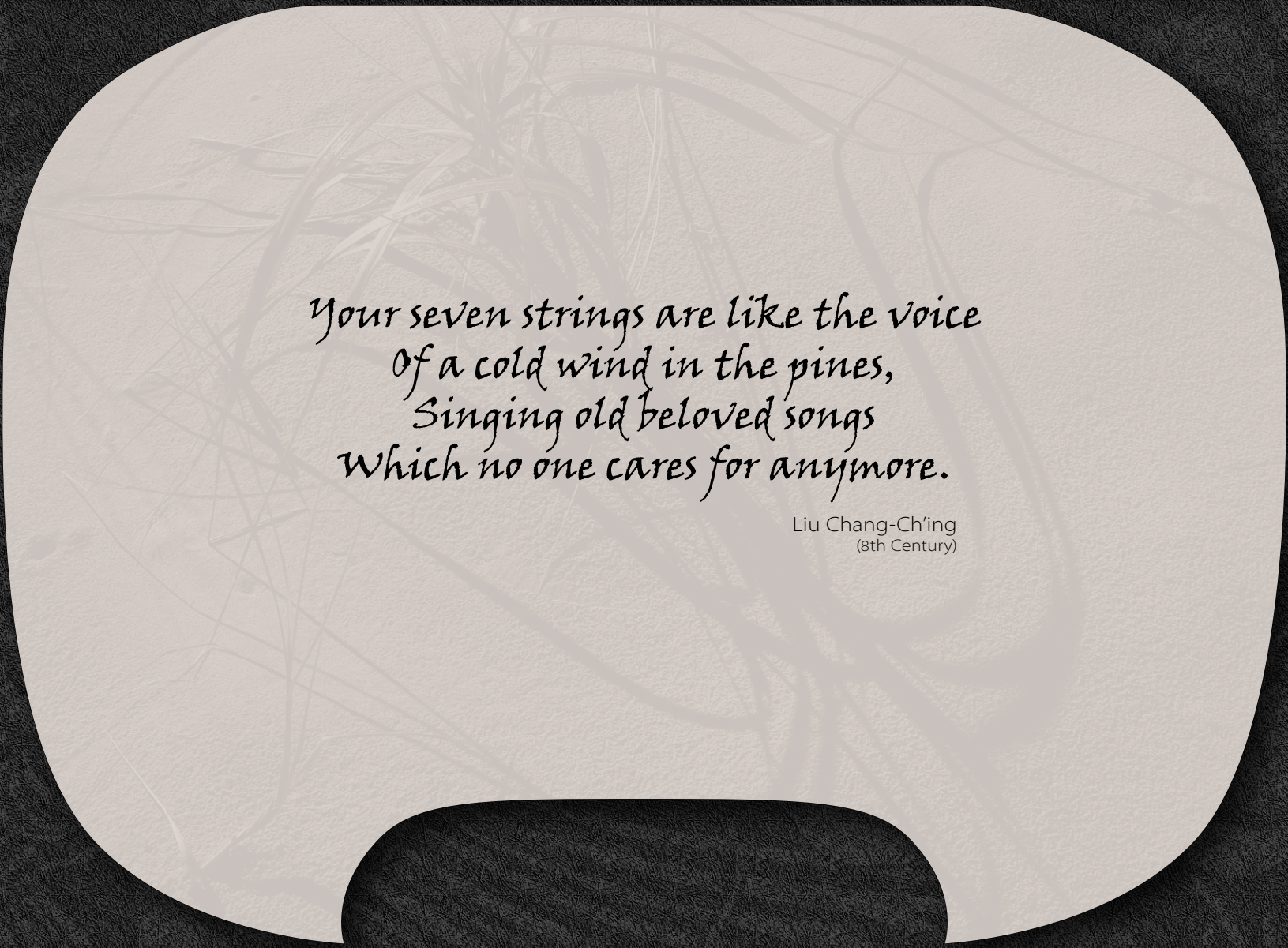


*A hundred thousand worlds
Are flowers in the sky.
A single mind and body
Is moonlight on the water.*

*Once the cunning ends and information stops,
At that moment there is no place for thought.*

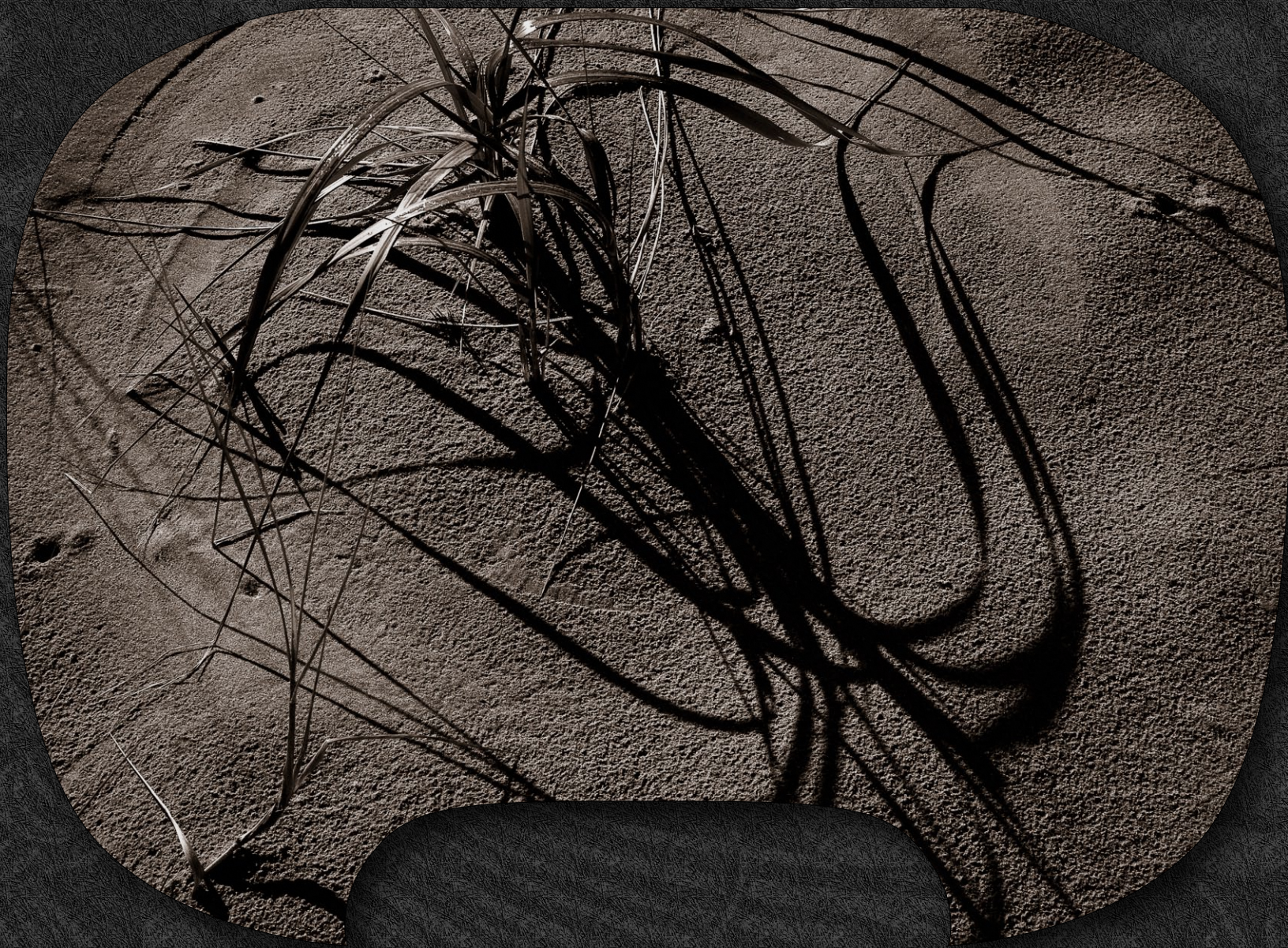
Han Shan
(b. 1546)





*Your seven strings are like the voice
of a cold wind in the pines,
Singing old beloved songs
which no one cares for anymore.*

Liu Chang-Ch'ing
(8th Century)



Writing is joy
So saints and scholars all pursue it.
A writer makes a new life in the void,
Knocks on silence to make a sound,
Binds space and time on a sheet of silk
And pours out a river from an inch-sized heart.
As words give birth to words
And thoughts arouse deeper thoughts,
The smell like flowers giving off scent,
Spread like green leaves in spring,
A long wind comes, whirls into a tornado of ideas,
And clouds rise from the writing-brush forest.

Lu Ji
(261-303)



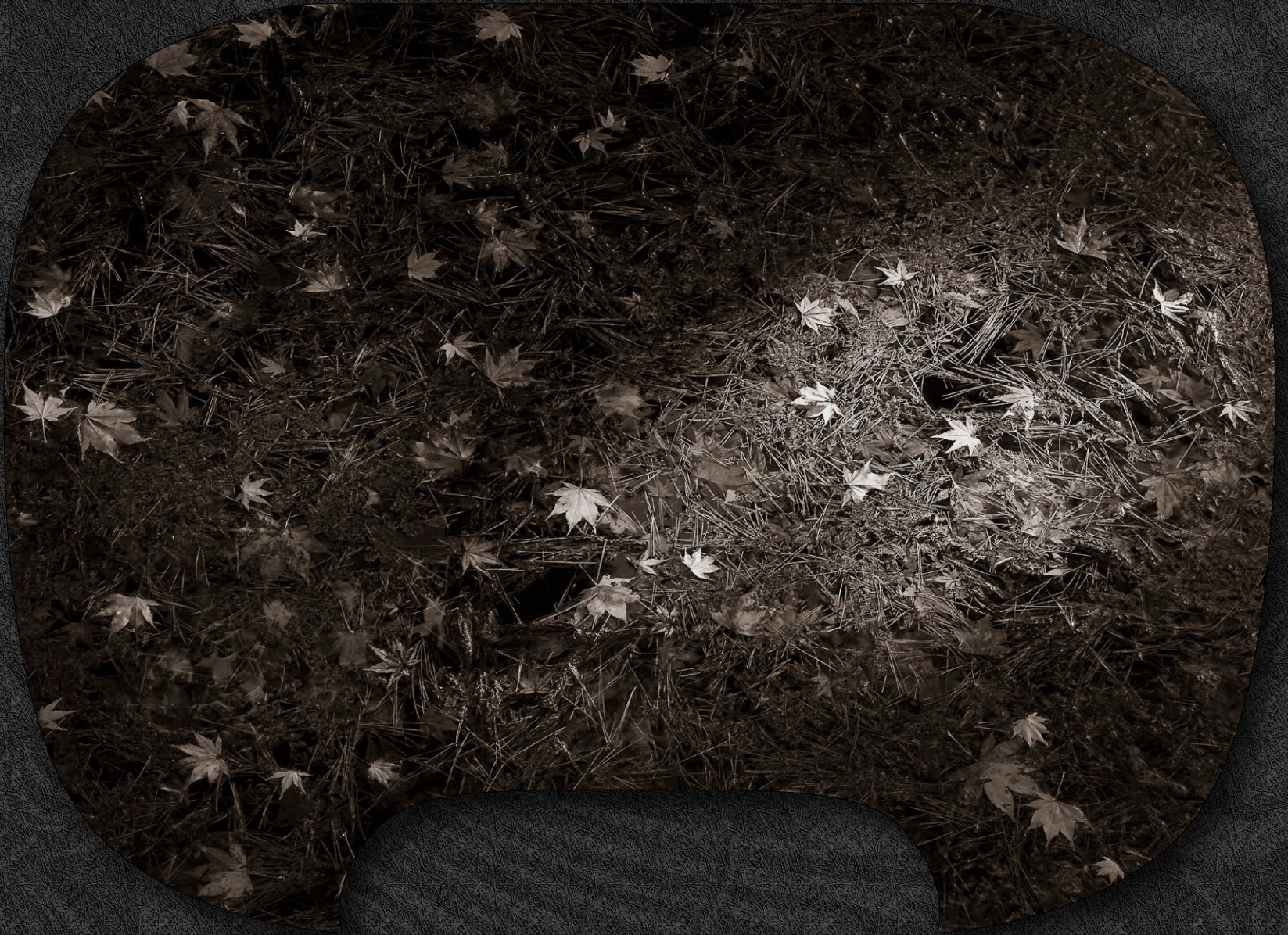
One hundred years of light and dark
Is like a butterfly dream.
Looking back at the past,
I can't help sighing.
Today spring comes,
Tomorrow blossoms fade.
Hurry up and drink — the night is old,
The lamp is going out.

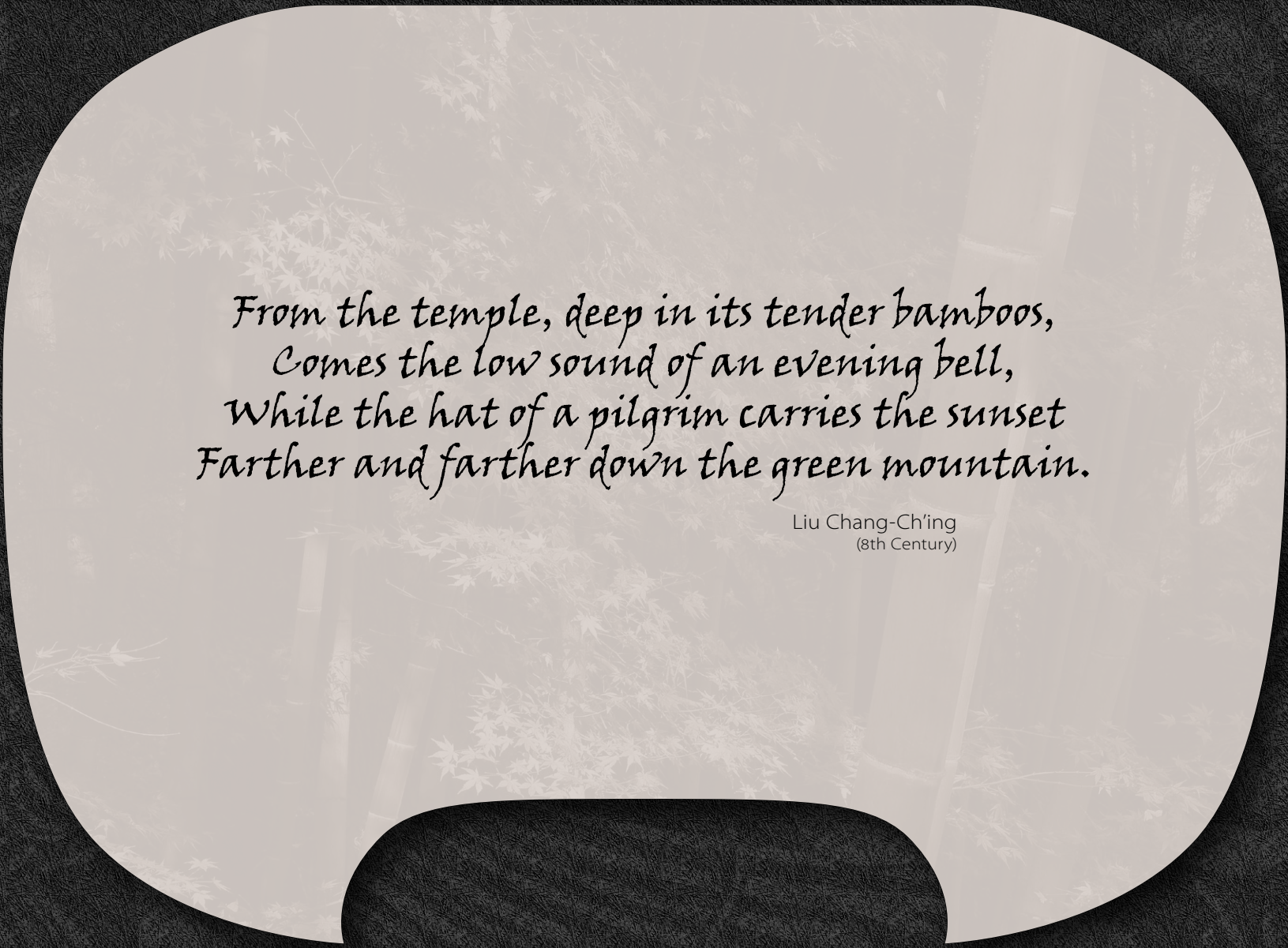
Ma Zhiyuan
(1260-1334)



*Sitting alone in the dark bamboo,
I play my lute and whistle song.
Deep in the woods no one knows
The bright moon shines on me.*

Wang Wei
(701-761)





*From the temple, deep in its tender bamboos,
Comes the low sound of an evening bell,
While the hat of a pilgrim carries the sunset
Farther and farther down the green mountain.*

Liu Chang-Ch'ing
(8th Century)



*Where, before me, are the ages that have gone?
And where, behind me, are the coming generations?
I think of heaven and earth, without limit, without end,
All alone, my tears fall down.*

Ch'ên Tzŭ-ang
(656-698)



*There seems to be no one on the empty mountain ...
And yet I think I hear a voice,
Where sunlight, entering the trees,
Whines back to me from the snow-covered hills.*

Wang Wèi
(699-759)



*My heart in middle age found the Tao,
And I came to dwell at the foot of this mountain.
When the spirit moves, I wander alone
Amid beauty that is all for me ...
I will walk till the water checks my path,
Then sit and watch the rising clouds —
And some day meet an old woodcutter
And talk and laugh and never return.*

Wang Wèi
(699-759)



Snow besieges my plank door.
I crowd the stove at night.
Although this form exists it seems as if it doesn't.
I have no idea where the months have gone
Every time I turn around
Another year on earth is over.

A tiny hut in a world of plants
A bed of stone, a thatched-roof shrine,
A closed doorway like Vimalakirti's
Don't ask about the bunch in front or back.

Han Shan
(b. 1546)

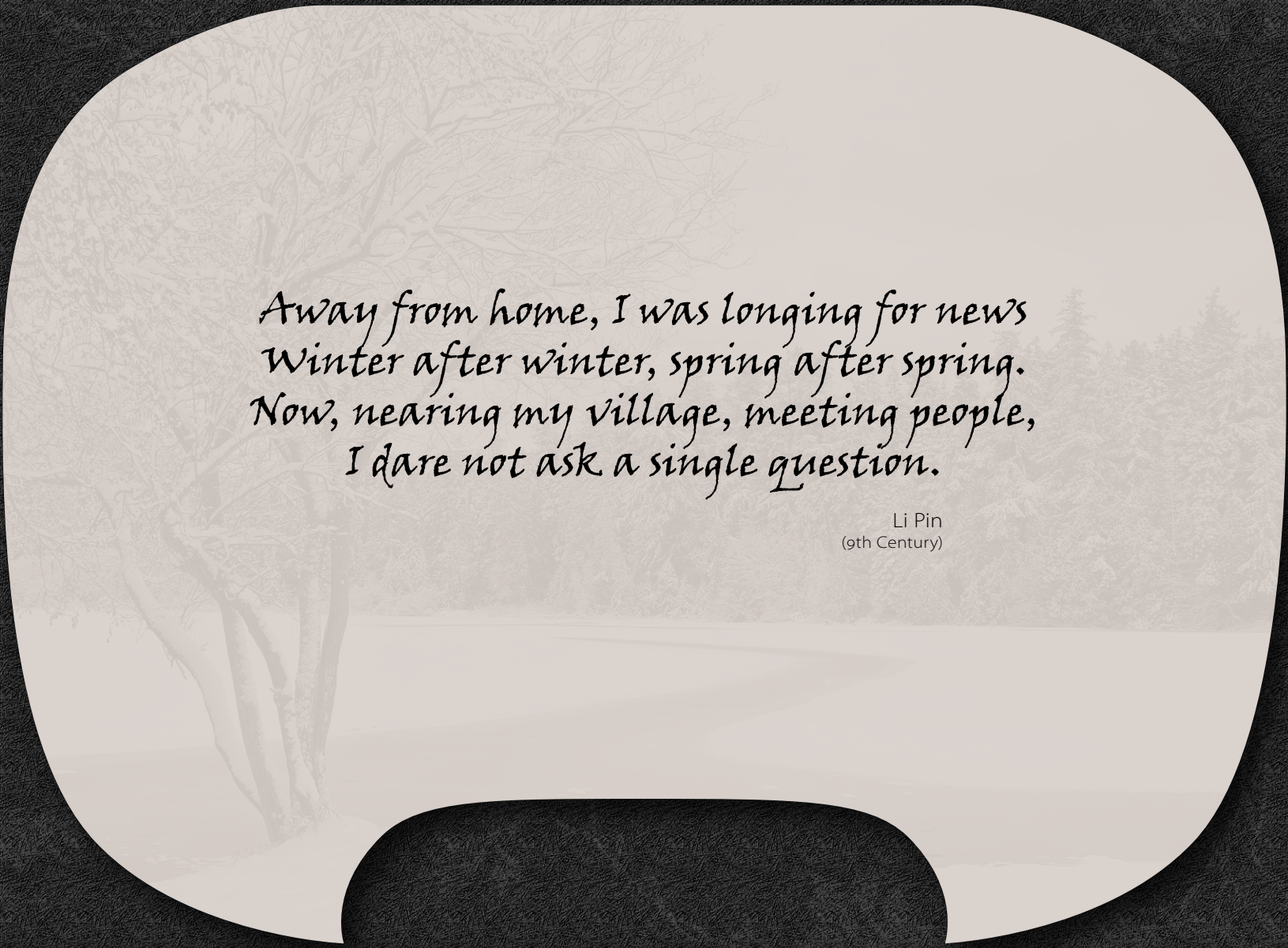


*Snow collects on East Mountain Monastery.
Deep in the mountains, few people go.
Without daydreams about red dust,
In the pale sun I'm peacefully at ease,
Or among moss and flowers with staff and clogs,
Or in the wooded shadow near an incense lamp.*

*What's the need to fly away
On your walking stick again?
Come back as a recluse to Mount Wo-chou.*

Huai Ku
(Unknown)





*Away from home, I was longing for news
Winter after winter, spring after spring.
Now, nearing my village, meeting people,
I dare not ask a single question.*

Li Pin
(9th Century)



*So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed —
Could there have been a frost already?
Lifting myself to look, I found that it was moonlight
Sinking back again, I thought suddenly of home.*

Li Po
(1867-1902)



Now that the sun has set beyond the western range,
Valley after valley is shadowy and dim ...
And now through pine trees come the moon
and the chill of the evening,
And my ears feel pure with the sound of wind and water ...
Nearly all the woodsmen have reached home,
Birds have settled on their perches in the quiet mist ...
And still — because you promised —
I am waiting for you, waiting,
Playing my lonely lute under a wayside vine.

Mêng Hao-Jan
(699-740)



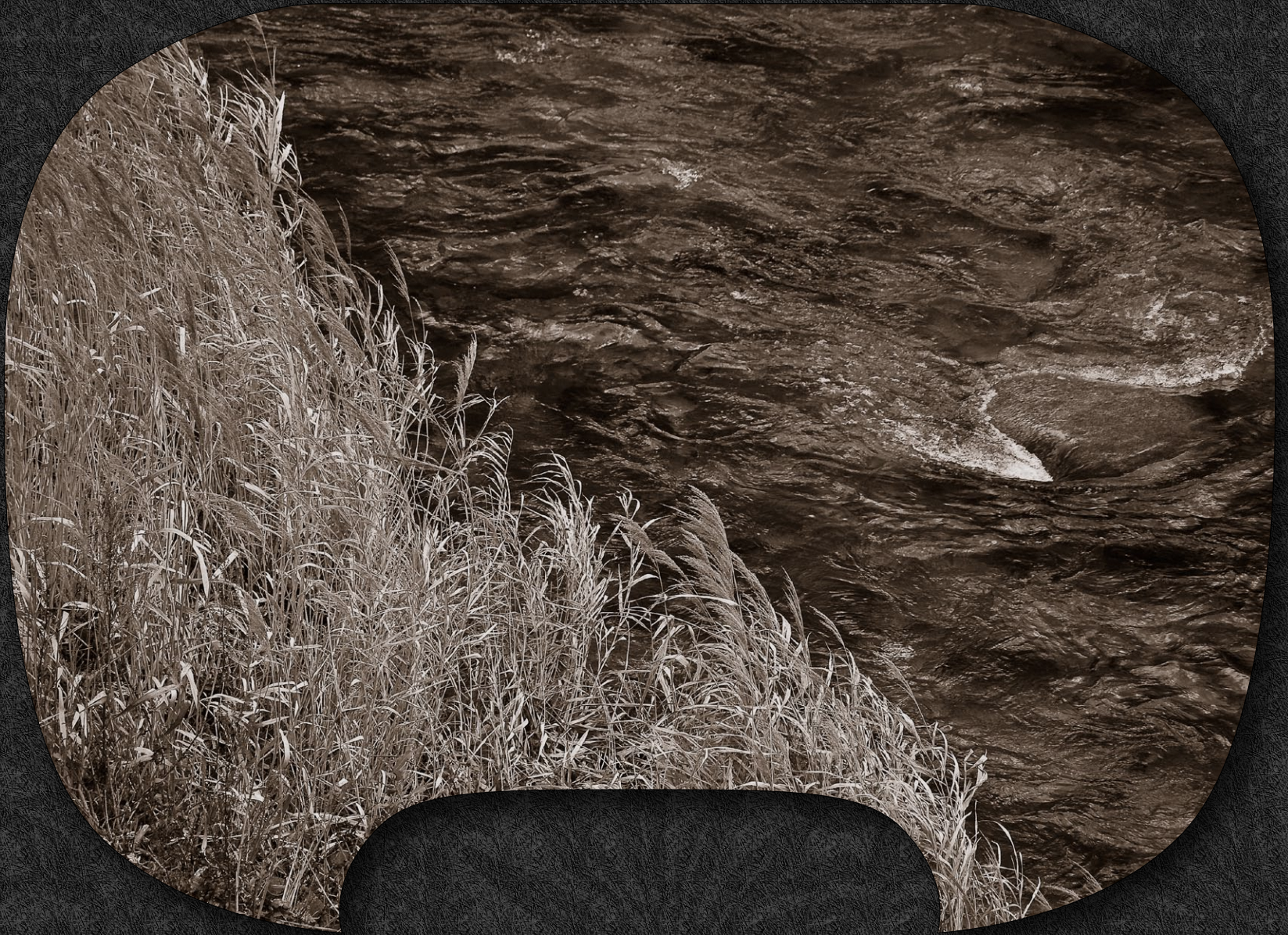
Autumn is crisp and the firmament far,
Especially far from where people live.
I look at cranes on the sand
And am immersed in joy
When I see mountains beyond the clouds.
Dusk inks the crystal ripples.
Leisurely the white moon comes out.
Tonight I am with my oar,
Alone,
And can do everything,
Yet waver, not willing to return.

Wang Wei
(701-761)



*As I walk in the cool of the autumn night,
Thinking of you, singing my poem,
I hear a mountain pine cone fall ...
You also seem to be awake.*

Wéi Ying-wu
(733-828)



*You ask me when I am coming. I do not know.
I dream of your mountains and autumn pools
 Brimming all night with the rain.
Oh, when shall we be trimming wicks again,
 together in your western window?
When shall I be hearing your voice again,
 All night in the rain?*

Li Shang-yin
(813-858)



The good rain knows when to fall.
It comes when spring blossoms.
It steals in on the wind, submerged in night,
Moistening all things gently without sound.
Black wilderness, black paths, black clouds;
Only a torch on a riverboat sparks.
At dawn I see all things red and wet,
And flowers drown the paths I walk.

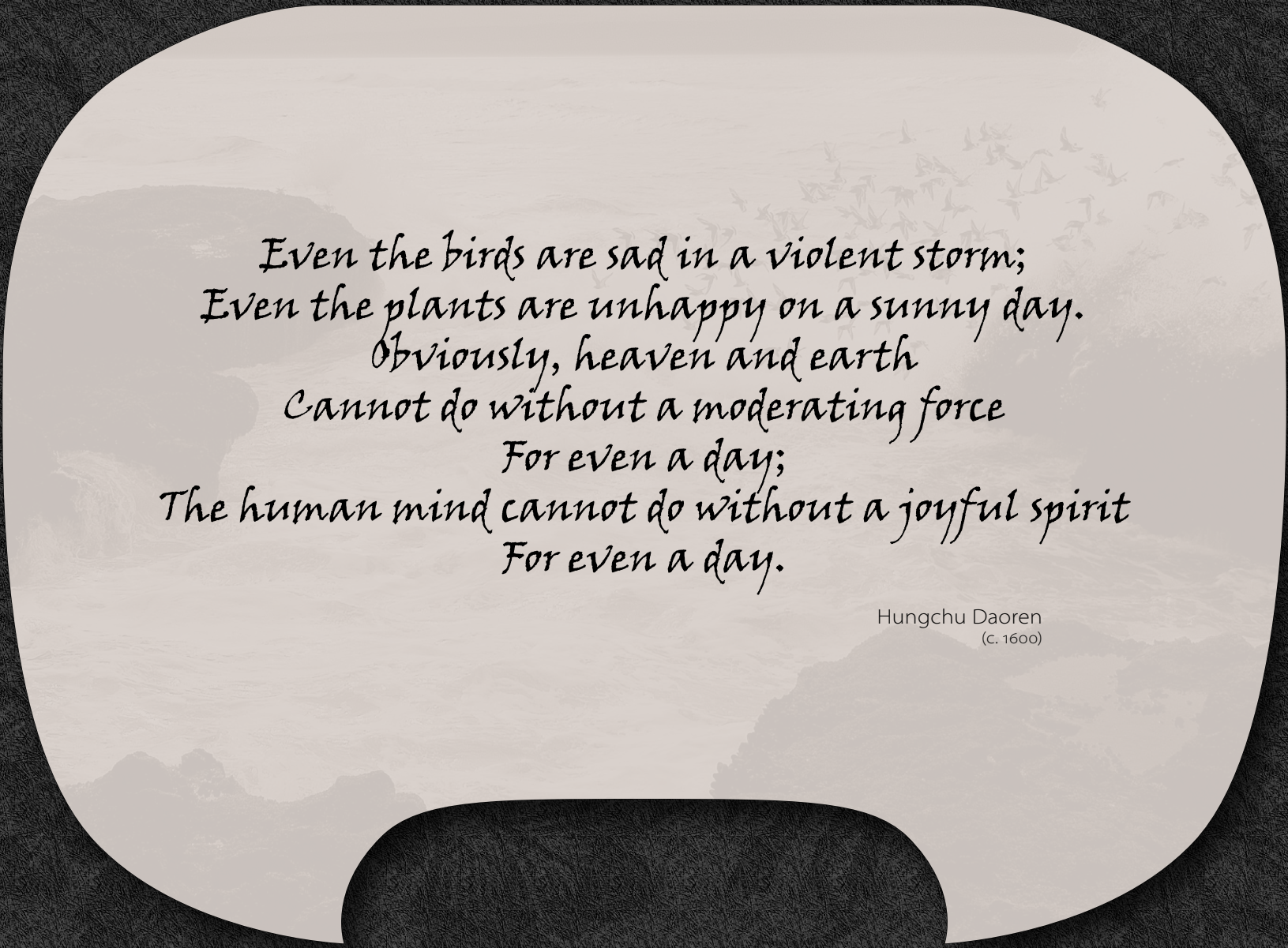
Du Fu
(712-770)



*Deep among ten thousand peaks I sit alone cross-legged.
A solitary thought fills my empty mind.
My body is the moon that lights the winter sky.
In rivers and in lakes are only its reflections.*

Han Shan
(b. 1546)

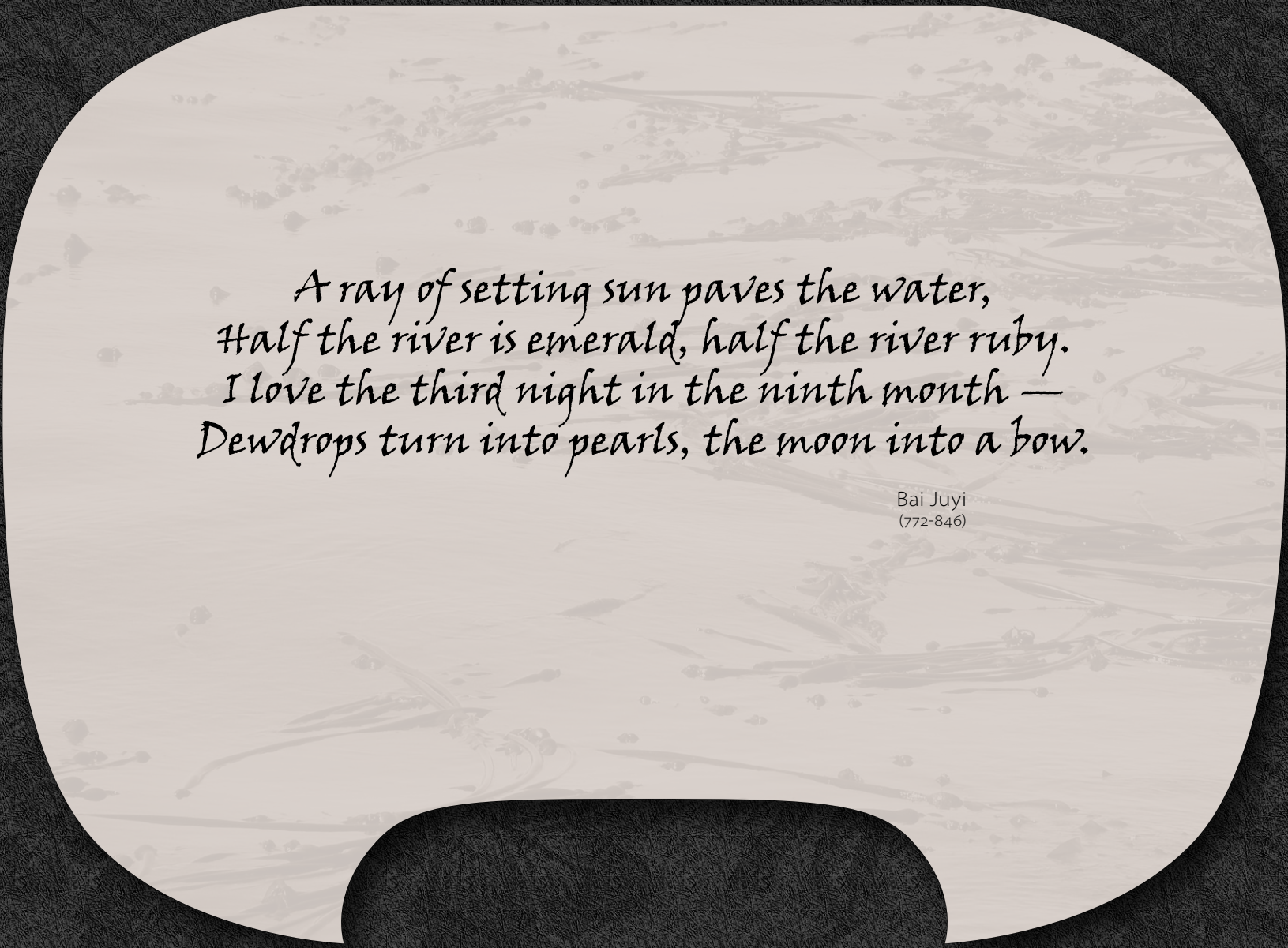




*Even the birds are sad in a violent storm;
Even the plants are unhappy on a sunny day.
Obviously, heaven and earth
Cannot do without a moderating force
For even a day;
The human mind cannot do without a joyful spirit
For even a day.*

Hungchu Daoren
(c. 1600)





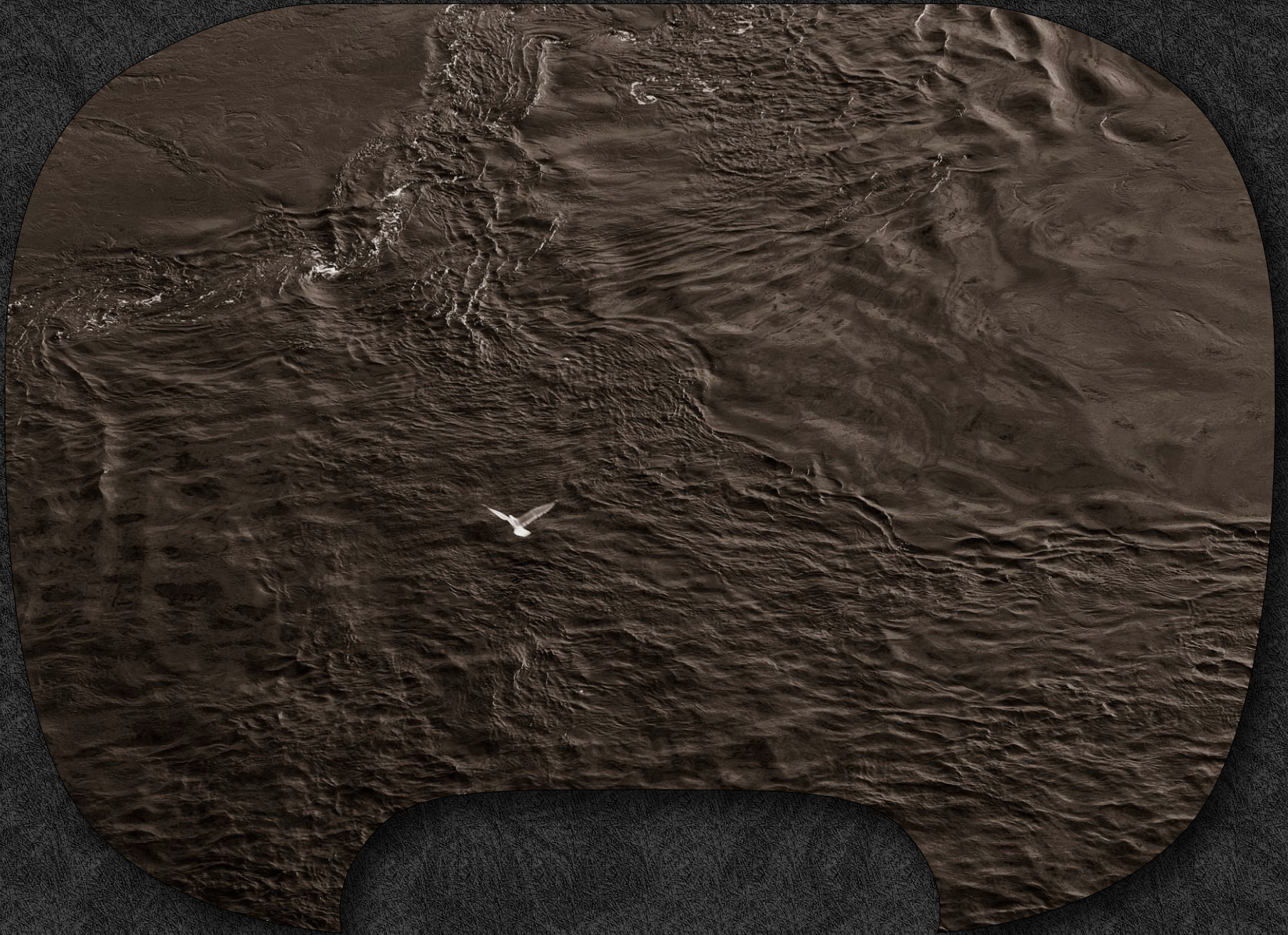
*A ray of setting sun paves the water,
Half the river is emerald, half the river ruby.
I love the third night in the ninth month —
Dewdrops turn into pearls, the moon into a bow.*

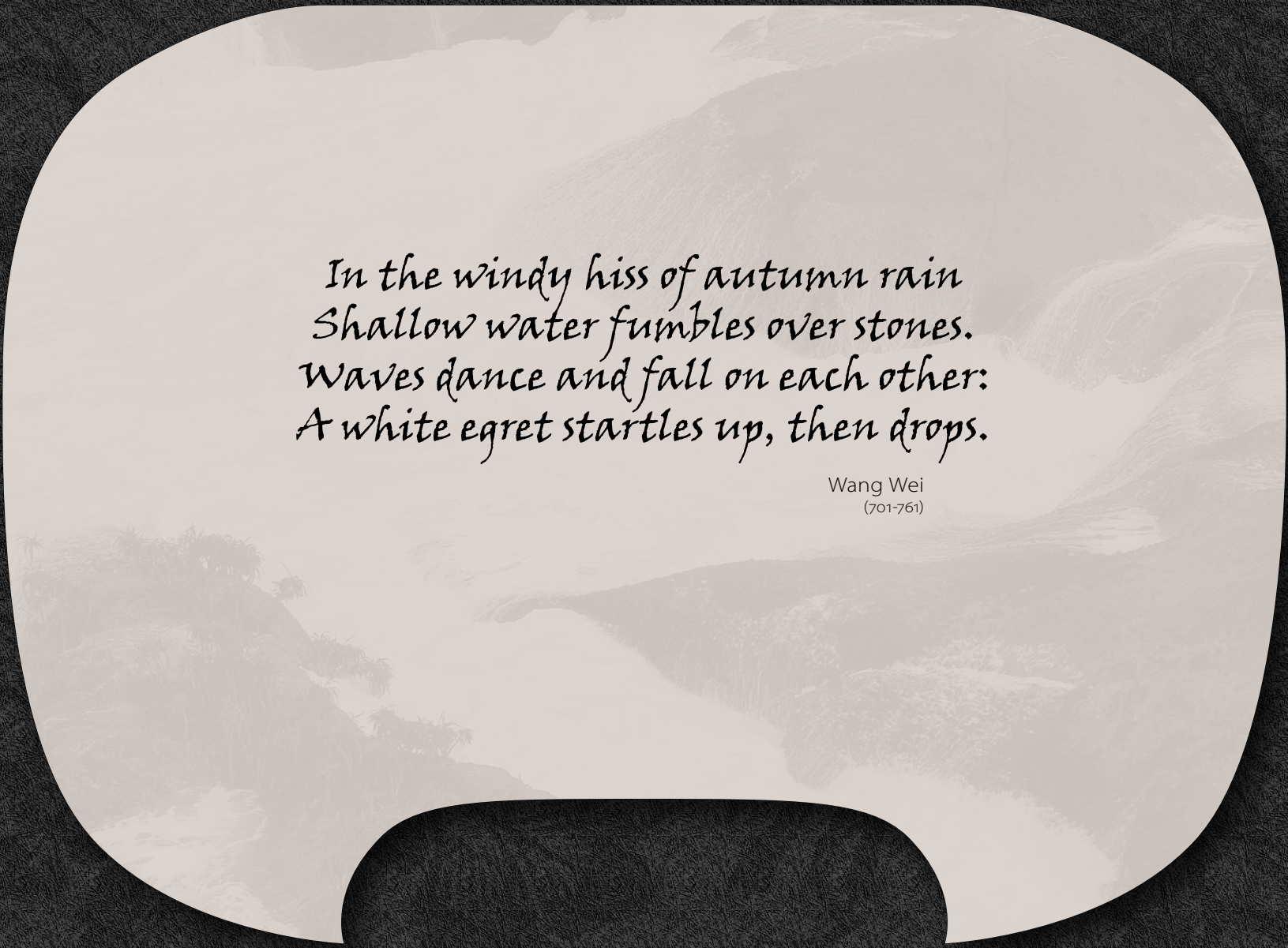
Bai Juyi
(772-846)



*A lone bird soars the azure depths
Far distant springs reflected in its eye
Carefree, singing a timeless song
Gone — on a journey without end.*

Shih-shu
(c. 1700)





*In the windy hiss of autumn rain
Shallow water fumbles over stones.
Waves dance and fall on each other:
A white egret startles up, then drops.*

Wang Wei
(701-761)



*Long divided by a river and sea,
For years we two have failed to meet —
And suddenly to find you seems like a dream ...
With a catch in the throat, we ask how old we are.
... Our single lamp shines, though cold and wet,
On a bamboo thicket sheathed in rain;
But forgetting the sadness that will come with tomorrow,
Let us share the comfort of this farewell wine.*

*Ssü-k'ung Shu
(d. 779)*



*I go to the east coast cliff
To watch the blue ocean.*

*How vast the water's waves and waves
While widespread the cliffs and isles jut up.*

*How lucky I am to be standing here.
Feeling such passion, I must chant this poem!*

Cao Cao
(155-200)



Living Landscape ~ The Fan Prints

by Brooks Jensen

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