

FAVORITE POEMS TAMUK

WRITTEN TO THE TUNE OF 'THE FISHERMAN'S HONOR'

Li Qingzhou, 1084-1155

The line, "The road is long," tells me that the traveler in this poem has grown tired of travel, and is considering putting aside his bundle. The metaphor of ceasing to wander speaks to me, really, of giving up on life and of resting by the side of life's road. That prospect, of watching it all pass by or even of failing to watch, is tempting to all of us, sometimes. These notions of tiredness, loss, and of giving up rest in the center of this poem. All around its edges are wonder. The sky and clouds gather into one vast power, along with the waves and the mist, whose edges we cannot make out, but which is nevertheless real. At the bottom of the poem, a huge inner bird, which we also cannot see, can harness the vast wind and continue its journey. The speaker here, in his fragile boat and fragile skin, is moved forward on that selfsame invisible wind.

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The sky becomes one with its clouds,
the waves with their mist.
In Heaven's starry river, a thousand sails dance.
As if dreaming, I return to the place
where the Highest lives,
and hear a voice from the heavens:
Where am I going?
I answer, "The road is long,"
and sigh; soon the sun will be setting.
Hard to find words in poems to carry amazement:
on its ninety-thousand-mile wind,
the huge inner bird is soaring.
O wind, do not stop—
My little boat of raspberry wood
has not yet reached the Immortal Islands.

from Hirshfield, Jane, ed and transl. Women in Praise of the Sacred. New York: Harper-Collins, 1994.