

Look at That Dog  
All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms

ALSO BY GAIL SHER

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Look at That Dog  
All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms

*Gail Sher*



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*For Brendan*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### BOOK ONE

#### *Eating Little Fishes*

Part One 1

Part Two 115

### BOOK TWO

*Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms* 271





BOOK ONE

*Eating Little Fishes*

Part One



*Snail breeze on a shaft of moon*

A dawn moon awakens me, softly softly, its waning light.

Dew sparkles on the cobweb-veiled grass.

Still in my nightgown, I carry my dream to the blue porch rail.

Neither dew nor dewy cobwebs dull the song of birds.

*Larks, blackbirds, kingbirds. The sheer spectacle of the meadow!*

On wheels in snow – a spring sheen on the snow!

Flowers flash out (do not wait to perfect their leaves).

Nubby peach branches. Just beginning to open buds.

Yet, unlike the sated hawk, the flock of crows laugh.

*Spring shouts, then strangles itself in foliage*

“The flower opens, and lo! another year.”

I roll up the curtain, drag my mat to the porch.

An early cricket chirps, then stops. I wait. Will it sound again?

In the eastern pond, water lilies, duckweed, a confusion of lovely greens.

*I saw in the east just over the woods*

It's March. Creatures and plants awaken.

Worms, beetles, jaunty shoots emerge from snow-sodden banks.

Rain blows in layer after layer. (Flies relax in pools of sun.)

The raucous jay, its bossy call above spring sparrows.

*Bursting forth early, sap runs down the maple's snowy trunk*

The air is clear and fresh after last night's storm.

Everyone is out. Snow melts, gushing down the hill

Meadow-water high. Billowy sails toss in the distance.

I've been sick. The lovely sight raises my spirits, though I still can't eat.

*A clock ticks, or is it a dripping faucet?*

Butterfly, did I dream you nectaring on your favorite flower?

The March wind that wakens me is too cold for *your* limbs.

I hear the rain and silent birds that probably scared you away.

Long ago you hunted the gully between my home and hill.



*Breeze and good weather make my body slothful*

Sewing near the stove, I listen to the howling wind.

I planted some seedlings hoping the weather would hold out.

Foolish me. But I wanted to do something practical.

Everyone's talking about it behind my back.

*Mother and I chat*

Out in spring clothes, my shadow, the lake's immaculate skin.

“Feeling the south wind, young grain ripples like wings.”

Blue, the blue sky unmarred by mist. Peaks in easy view.

From a bird's nest, plundered, one spotted egg rolls into the water.

*And ginseng roots which were really little girls*

The valley floor gives way. Ice, too, is letting go, though it is still winter.

Water parcels out the sky as it backs onto distant cliffs.

It's quiet here. Snow fleas are about.

The fan-shaped leaves of a rare ginkgo through the windblown scattering dark.

*Peach flower spring*<sup>1</sup>

A creek, a bridge, a country store beside a slope.

Swatting a fly, the matron huddles over her tub of roots.

“A drop of water, if you please,” I feel I am disturbing her.

A butterfly, too, soon flits off toward the distant pasture.

*My father's wine is sweet*

“Warbling softly, flowing beneath the snow, the rivulet already knows that spring is coming.”

A Monarch, weeks prior, senses the autumn's cold.

Lying in the shade of an exuberant elm, a cow chews its cud all the more calmly.

A door, an altar, make sense for an instant.

*The clear blue sky absorbs its mother-o-pearl cloudlets*

I love spring in the mountain's spring-scaped valley.

Tightly-curved poppies lap up the warming sun.

They say that boar and wild pigs roam the thickets at night.

But it could be wind in the young-leaved trees, rushing down the cliff.

*Tadpoles of high antiquity*

Of seasons, spring is the saddest.

Petals underfoot a day after they arrive.

Baby birds shriek, then suddenly are silent.

Quiet penetrates the whole valley.

*Yet its nakedness is agreeable*

Nothing awakens old memories like the moon.

As I lay on my cot, it rolls out during a reprieve in the long rains.

Outside my cabin a patch of moss collects rainwater in its furry tendrils.

Flicking drops off one of the tiny shoots – woe! – spikes of whiskered grass!



*Sharing a single lamp*

Angry with you, I sit silently near a window.

I don't even want to hear your excuse.

Listening to the rain rustling down a pine,

why bother behaving in ways I'll regret?

*What-does-it-matter pavilion*

The air is glorious, unbidden rain passed. I open the window and gaze out on the garden.

Snaky roots of fluffy pines, sodden, mud-stained, gored.

Turtles, hearing the noise of people, flock around, stick up their necks.

“Why don’t you come out?” someone calls to me, soundlessly moving her lips.

*Black snow-wings, like a fairy tale, other-worldly*

Pot-bellied sail. Fat wind feeds you all too much.

You bob along the river, proud.

I long for home and you could take me if you'd notice me wave.

But swiftly with the current you rush on with the next gust.

*Then a short, squatty leap over the spatterdock*

Veins of sun streak the air, still wet from heavy rain.

Flats of seedlings toppled by wind, mud and roots splattered.

A small dog sniffs the tiny leaves that yesterday looked so promising.

I kick them aside, tiptoe my way over the mess.

*The sound of a spade is also musical*

Warm rain from the night continues this morning.

The thousand peaks look squeamish (gorge, a maze of soggy leaves).

“Close by, spring water whistles crowding its stone channel.”

Copying poetry as the fine rain falls, the same note from the wind-chime again  
and again and again.

*“Let’s go, babe!” says my dad a snapshot later*

Pale rain – daisies drink you sumptuously.

Sun peaks out behind your silky curtain of beads.

I wander through my garden, crocus and trillium asleep.

Have you stopped? No. Yes. For a moment I thought so.

*Not for the fish I go fishing*

This morning's rain sounds different. What is it like?

Soft, throbbing, as if each drop were dressed with little pads.

Musk, or is it sandalwood rising from the old ash-filled bowl?

The waving rivers and serene hills produce a sense of eternity in me.

*My shadow, the cliff's, disappear altogether*

Seals and gulls nestled on bare rock.

Settled in, sprawled out, their postures ridiculous.

What am I doing in this cove of salt sky?

Red clouds, waiting to pry grass-sprouts from the earth.



*Swaying tops, staked out by the returning birds*

Rain everywhere, continuously, monotonously.

Crows too, silenced by the deluge.

While I love the sound, the notion of the earth being fed,  
a part of me is scared.

*Wispy, slender, too young even to attract a sparrow*

My *dosha*,<sup>2</sup> like the wind, is made of air and ether.

Layers of snow, sheaths of haze<sup>3</sup> are beautiful in their prime.

Carried by a breeze, I watch a monarch float past trees.

I think, "I'm like that."

*Toeing the door, platter of cakes and a light step*

South River bank: hairbreadth of green hill or treetops at bridge's arc:

I pick the treetops. Rapids perky, chortling like a brook.

Stone fox, you watch, but I'm not your prey. Is it turtle eggs?

Cows graze, the meadow reeking yellow flowers.

*Tadpoles squirm in crusty little puddles*

Up and down, up and down, the granite steps craggy.

Wild cries through the forest. Branches crack. One breaks and hangs limply.

Turtles bask and fish rise lazily to my hand. A water lily floats.

Is that snoring or praying that I hear at the pond's edge?

*Three days by palanquin*

White-blossomed waves drift through the exotic city.

Roasted fish, freshly caught, plucked from their embers and sold.

A little boat featuring cakes, bobs nearby, its vender stooped.

Fishmonger and cake lady gossip like old friends.

*A monk's tender welcome*

Bang bang bang bang! The sound grows louder, more insistent.

“What’s that noise?” I think, awakened rudely from a dream.

My gaze rests on some flowers, huge and skinny in their silky emerald corsets.

My vine’s young tendrils grasp the air passionately.

*Brushing his teeth at the edge of a flowerbed*

Shooting star, your silent plunk on the star-covered lake.

Feathery pine, your fresh young scent.

Outside my window, a pair of love-birds chatter, peck each other's beaks.

The two of them, absorbed, seductive, constantly rubbing wings.

*Spring arouses the King of Wu-Yüeh's desires*

“Roadside flowers are in bloom – no hurry, but come on home!” writes the King to his  
consort, away, visiting her family.

What will she do? (His desire is explicit.)

Wild birds insistent. (In my dreams I say, “Yes, your honor.”)

The evening is chilly, or seems chilly, after a hot spring afternoon.



*Single-fold flower*

Rascally cats *do* have their way with us.

Have you ever watched one, for example, hunt?

One bony shoulder taut with silence, noticing brocaded blinds,  
will follow the breeze, of course.

*I feed myself just enough water*

Thin. Some are startled. “Why are you so thin?” they stupidly ask.

The day is hot, the air thick, sooty almost.

I sit by my window, nightgown white, hair a maze of just-washed snarls.

I gingerly raise the awning exposing the sweet smell of grass and wet earth.

*Asleep but easily startled*

Fishing along the quiet, unfrequented banks of the river.

Cryptomeria grove dark, even as late as noon.

A sudden rain, a breeze. A butterfly investigates my lunch. "Hello!"

Like the poet I wonder, "How long will lovely days like these last?"

*Cows, dogs, day-laborers, slogging home in the last ray of sun*

The sea, day blue, yields to a warm west wind.

Look at that shearwater, wings outstretched over the ebb-tide.

Slender clouds, swift, showy, race through a crack in the tall trees.

Without rain, hungry branches lunge at their departing tips.

*At dusk, in your red-plaid shirt, you climb the road out of the valley*

The tributary widens, parts the waves in gentle moonlight.

Stars crowd around its slim, sheer, glaze.

I step into the garden, smell the flowers newly blossomed.

A puppy jumps ahead of me, skittish, pleading for something.

*In my weakened state, it's hard to make the best of my resources*

Weather dry, soil lean. Several tens-of-mou<sup>4</sup> nothing but rubble and stone.

“Who’d waste strength on land like this?” I mutter to myself.

My friend, Ma Chen-ch’ing, requested the plot. (He saw me shriveling away.)

A few birds, a crow, forage at a puddle’s edge.

*A poet (of “idiotic talent”) attaches (she says) to the tail of her teacher*

Wild birds, their screech, tossed by wild wind.

“It hurts to see yellow stalks flattened in the mud,” laments Wu’s wife.

Daily, the local people float lanterns downstream, they say to drive calamity off.

A single blackbird, soars, disappears, devoured by clouds.

*“Cool and easy on city walls”*

Warm rain and me napping by the window.

Blissful drops. Peace itself.

I look out on my hill, a maze of tender greens

For a moment I think I have no further requirements.



*“Why would I long to be the great p’eng bird, flailing in the wind,  
plotting his southward journey?”*

Rain has beaten down the blossoms.

Morning sunlight – a vague reminder.

That moment, so elusive, poignant, familiar,

it must be death.

*So different from your clepsydra, your spluttering lamp, your thrice-cawing crow*

Gathering chestnuts in the still-misty rain.

A blue jay caws, high-pitched, sweet. "It must be a young bird," I think, recalling last night's strident one.

Suppliant leaves in helter-skelter piles. Gentle flowers, two or three.

A bushy squirrel (its gorgeous tail) absorbs me for hours.

*In withered grass, the falcon's eye*

A workman left his hat on the far side of the painted fence.

It's been days since the group of them finished (disappeared).

Each morning I check. "Is it still there?" I wonder.

Funny. I worry about its brim.

*The nattering sound of a waterfall*

Green grows (the rushes grow) their greenness stark.

Fat slugs munch the likes out of every kind of leaflet.

Come dawn, I'm combing them off, carting them down to the river.

Raindrops spangle the swaying leaves along the canal by the bridge.

*Half a husk*

Fish shop, tavern, brothel. Ikkyū's days are notorious.

"Saucers and daffodils broken in the moon."

"How quaint," I think till my eye falls on a hill, its flabby jaundiced grasses.

Hear me. I'm telling you about . . . But you're drunk. I'll come back.

*In Nam Yi's memory<sup>s</sup>*

Neighing in the wind, a white horse tied to a willow.

The old general dreams he treads the front in mountainous snow.

O Nam Yi. Your gleam in the dark, so seminal.

Only this minute do I lay it aside!

*Mountains line up*

A bell tolls and the day breaks over the creek.

I close my text but remain in my chair, listless.

Birds flit about. The world is definitely awake.

I want to be awake. What is this resistance that strangely creeps in?

*Gentle rosebuds, a whole cluster at varying degrees of openness*

I hear the rain through the spring's deepening night.

In the garden, threadlike, it greens the amethyst's silk.

Beneath the leaves I wander (breathe the robin's wily song).

Here and there I pet a soaking flower.



*“With their inquisitive necks and long tails”*

It’s quieter, I think, in town. Or can be, these days of scorching heat.

Seething insects ravage the forest hills.

Down here at sea level, a breeze picks up.

I watch my greed. Even one flutter excites it.

*“The sudden moon alarms mountain birds”*

After diving into red lotuses, a cormorant soars over clear water.

Feathers sleek, fish in beak, it stands erect on an old drifting log.

Poet, you describe the water bird with such accuracy and passion,

yet isn't it the log you have come to feel is yourself?

*Cheerful tulips, after a week, tight as a nut*

I have a lovely view of the garden when my blinds are open.

A slender snake, suspended from a twig, arches in the air.

A bee is sniffing a gathered bunch of flowers. (A striped tree snail waves its delicate horns.)

Water from the well is milky, sweet, and so cold it sets your teeth on edge.

*A great bittern flies sluggishly away (digs its way through the air)*

Here is the place where hayers cross the river.

A flowerless meadow, ragged like the people.

Creatures give in. "I'd rather sleep," the world seems to say.

"North of the river, south of the river, so many hills!"

*Buckets of cockles, buckets of clams*

Drifting off to sleep, lulled by the boat's gentle motion.

I feel it along with the moon's melting warmth.

The body stores memories, hums them like lullabies.

O mountain, your ten-thousand stories!

*The sweet-toned kalavinka, even while a chick, surpasses in voice all other birds*

I like you, Gensei. (I too have been a silverfish.)

I appreciate the thief who only covets brocade.

The bustle of nine great avenues quiets me like a baby.

Vast and empty. I look out. See myself.

*A good hard tree, while still below ground, puts up shoots over a hundred spans*

Nakano's two sons, Zenkyu and Jōkan, died of smallpox early one spring.

Nakano wailed, cursing Heaven (longing for his sons).

Suddenly he changed: "Since their birth I've never rested.

Their death has released me from this affliction."

People rap on rock, beg for rain, invariably get a response.

"Your bamboo has grown so fast," remarks a visitor of my little plot.

*The lamp doesn't go away*

Black and white shells. The beach unpalatable.

The surf's neck is a little ruffled this morning.

People walk by. A robin's egg nests in the crotch of a maple.

All day, under it, I lie with a book. Doze.



*Look at them, by the fence, multiplying like rabbits*

The rains stop and suddenly it's summer. The scent of jasper fills me.

My neighbor's melons topple into life.

Beads of dew form on taut, squeaky cabbages. Chickens and dogs wander leisurely about.

I am certain that the constant scratching of chickens stimulates the land like some giant massage.

*Such a charming scene. I'm surprised when you say, "Hand me a bottle first."*

The grass is gold, outcroppings black, on the path leading to my cabin.

Fissures in the raw-edged hill sprout queer (maniacal) roots.

Rowing idly in my boat, hanging laundry in the sun — tonight for the first time, I sit without a fire.

The noisy meandering of young people on their way to and from the riverbank.

*Sprouts and sweet ferns nibbled thoughtfully*

Luscious morning. The rain has stopped and sun, finally, crackles in the sky.

Locust blossoms perfume the street (they're not only beautiful, they rightfully command attention).

Young blue birds try out their wings. Frogs squat on leap-full precipices.

They peep at intervals. One begins, then the whole pond sounds.

*Violets everywhere – some purple, some lilac*

My little pond is spiky with thinly-growing greens.

At its edge I've set up poles for melons, beans, and squash.

It's taken time to clear the land. (Small stones are still a nuisance.)

While the weather is hot and evening's beautiful, I bathe in the company of wild ducks.

*Tattered by years of playing dress-up*

A bent arm – my pillow – gazing at the sky.

It's summer. After-rain dyes the organdy clouds.

Calling cranes play on the lake. Spotted turtles sleep.

As the sun sets, five recently-hatched birds disappear into the reeds.

*Horses' hooves fragrant, on returning from trampling flowers*

I thought I heard a blue jay, then a whole slew of them pecking at my young persimmons.

“What gives them the right!” I think rising to shoo them away.

Clear day, yard silent. A soft breeze cuddles the summer daisies.

“How are you, dear?” whispers my tired mother’s voice.

*Pale loquats above the western hill*

The evening air is wholesome. (From my window, a white-jade sun.)

Every bit of color has been buried in its whiteness, innumerable shades beneath  
glistening ghostlike pools.

Water purls down a winding creek. (You can count the little fishes swimming along the shore.)

Yesterday trout. Today shiners.

*No dew, no dewy cobwebs.*

Indigo sky. White clouds drift your depth.

I, between you and my patch of jasmine.

Great white boulders lounge beside the stream (from afar the meadow seems snowcapped!)

Wintry peaks, clouds, meadow, and me in my soft summer dress.



*Never lowing, but looking as I pass*

Freshly bathed I walk to sea. Behold the silky dunes.

Crimson ice plants in an angled sun glow violet, deep violet.

Tiny wooden planks coil through the maze; leafy succulents grow fat.

One small bird twitters on a rock.

*“Which send out large, knee-like limbs, near the ground”*

Tight and bright, summer stars tinkle in blackness.

Toads, birds, the swampy pull of night on the shrub oak’s soul.

Imminent rain. The air filled with expectation.

Stepping lightly in my cotton shift, a surge of energy wells up.

*But it is still warm enough to wear summer clothes*

Evening winds bring rain, and me, walking, filled with so many thoughts.

Under the bridge a boatman relaxes, his day about over.

The twisting path to a viaduct is rife with grass and flowering weeds.

Their beauty leaves me speechless.

*“He’ll never stick with it,” I assure myself*

A flowery crown. Gift of a summer breeze.

Peach blossoms flatter an old head too.

The problem is – their fragrance lingers.

Years go by and I’m still under their influence.

*When I write, I find the color blue helps focus my mind while yellow gives me inspiration*

I wake. The room is clean. The sound of ocean and birds.

Moon-season roses, their luxurious velvet entwine the wrought-iron rail.

As I crouch to smell a pistil, on my face a sweet cool breeze.

After a spell of smoldering heat, I can't get enough of it.

*In numinous light the river raptly tranquil*

My small room has an eastern exposure. Cool in summer. Warm at dawn.

A pair of lovebirds purrs iridescence throughout the long quiet night.

Creamy roses, richly fragrant, merge their scent with the throbbing mist.

A friend cut some and presented them to me in a vase.

*From amidst the all-producing dark-bottomed water*

Wood tortoises are numerous in the fields today.

Young rice plants fully come to flower.

Next to a hedge, untended for some time, black-winged dragonflies dart above the paddies.

Their motion, just now, is unspeakably soothing and promising.

*An owl has pecked the forgotten kimono to shreds*

“Chise’s hair is done in the ‘poppy seed’ style customary for young girls,” my book on China says.

Most of her head is shaved except for a tuft tied with red cloth.

What a sweet sight, little Chise, politely greeting her teacher, on an early summer morning.

It is a part of me I can barely recall.



*Back from fishing*

Acrid yet fresh. Life fresh. (That certain not-yet putrid.)

Boat, body, bay, all dressed in it.

Can I wash it off? Herons can't.

The sea's insignia, in blood till death.

*Wild rose, wilder with the glow worm*

At a suq, was it you I thought I recognized?

Not the meat, the fruit, nor fattened greens.

Your fleeting face, or was it mine, behind a gauzy curtain,

the bazaar deserted, it being after dark and about to close.

*Lamp low on the altar*

Leaning on the sill. Me and the moon.

Off and on the firefly's light, reminding me, and again reminding me.

Turquoise sky, reflected in the lake, shivers in patches through dark dewy foliage.

The lustre of night, then suddenly, its failing charge.

*A tired bird, a worn out fish, these are my friends now that I'm a hermit*

Lunging from its cage, a crane, free now, soars beyond the hill.

“My hives are at risk for there are no more flowers,” someone complains.

I stare at the clumps of shivering grass battered by dismal rain.

Flowers at dusk, shadows on their petals' hair. Their blood, their roots, dark and rich.

*Her mouth, the mollusk about finished*

Clouds collect, but the sun, suddenly lively after torrents of rain.

A day of doing nothing. I take a bath. Sleep.

In the garden a pair of rare Chinese aspens have grown toward each other and intertwined their limbs.

If you scratch one of the trunks, both trees tremble and their leaves start to flutter.

*I carry my futon to the west window*

A thousand crickets harangue the heat.

The solitary duck. Its doleful cry.

My gaze falls on your scarlet tulips, bright and crisp before you left.

“Its flowers remain, retain some scent.”

*Listening to the threadlike rain, to San'yō's BIWA,  
of course your heart is disturbed*

Stars glance off my perspiring body.

I whisk it in a draft of thick dry night.

Awakened by a dream, I study the far-off lights.

Far, far, far. So far, yes, the way seems impossible.

*That deep place, water-blue*

Tall, spidery blooms trail lazily from pond plants.

White, wild carnations are stuffed into pots. (So many!)

I wander about the garden in the cavernous summer heat.

I *hear* the dust drift through the sun's departing rays.



*Burying jars to the depth of a lily bulb*

Shrilling toads, lethargic heat, the grunting croaks of bull frogs.

Ringed by mountains, the city holds steam like a bowl.

Crashing with thunder, a cloudbed blows over. (Its breeze-scattered wisps.)

I climb a peak, watch the moon sashay across the valley.

*That place on the creek where cliff meets water*

Early evening. Boats coming and going.

Wind cleaves the grassy sea.

Birds stalk shoals, and me, like a crane, peering into the water.

Deep between a tumult of peaks, a “cloud of old age collapses into twilight.”

*No one sees the wild rose reddening in the forest*

Gulls bask as you in your summer clothing sleep.

Look! Your fishing rock is swarming.

Purged by the dune, all-at-once vomited, every tributary bloated with flesh.

Birds go home, their drifting notes deadened by the fog bank.

*And now with a lowering sky, but still I hear the crickets*

Boat homes sit in gritty lotus fields.

Flowers smell sour (the water is dense and reeks of algae).

Today rain. Unseasonal, heady. Drops shatter in the sand.

I stir the duckweed with my long poky stick.

*Yearning for incense*

Wearily the bay, its surface steamy.

I find a bench. Stare into the nubile haze.

Undulations quiver. “This water is young water,” I muse inwardly.

A boat, a crane streak across.

*Evaluating a hundred flowers*

This still night the water lies whitely.

A wind stirs, carrying the scent of rye.

A gigantic moon stalks the sea, throbs above the watchtower.

The low sound of its horn, mud-carved, tall.

*Crabbily, bypassing the effulgent oxeyes*

Asleep this roasting morning, wallowing long and deep in a pleasant dream.

The buzzing I hear, too comfortable to slap.

Too lazy to dress, I languish in my gown,

nest of hatchlings in the scrawny pine, eerily silent.

*A sudden rise of wind loosens my loose kimono*

A bolt of sun startles me from a dream.

In the late silent morning, I hear the heat.

As a result, though last night we parted in anger,

I can blame my pillow for the crazed look on my face.



*The snapdragon, a slight blue flower in dry places*

The heat, an illness, hovers over the city.

When will it break (release the cold sheathed in its underbelly):

Just yesterday I looked up at the sky. Tonight I walk by the sea.

Clomp clomp clomp bang my clogs on the wooden planks.

*Where precisely is the racket?*

Two pines near the porch contain the breeze that sweeps the summer heat.

The confusion evening closets, unlike that in my room.

Birds whistle through the waning light. (Darkness settles softly.)

I nap. Into my dream comes the sharp sound of *go* stones.

*Lashing their tails, grazing the mud, combing the ditch-side for coolness*

“Quick!” someone calls. “Put out the fire!” (A boy comes running with a sloshy bucket of water.)

Through a layered canopy of hemlock, I spot the drifting dark debris.

A horse breaks loose. Birds flutter off. Their boisterous noise as they block the afternoon sun.

The banktops all have a pathetic look.

*Old lady deaf, her sons snore like pigs*

Sun and flies condemn the valley. Salad wilts. Milk rots.

How many trees has the fire gobbled today?

Choked with fumes, the cold bright sky. Blue smoke curls (lingering) above them.

I wake up to the sound of ripe fruit dropping.

*Twigs of a young tree, scorched and blackened*

Streams double back, fire doubles back. Bleak across the sky, black wings, in the sober dusk.

Homing swallows are also forced to double back across the hill.

Mangy dogs, their cadaverous bodies, plunge through shrunken, crackling leaves.

Father's "hundred stalks of bamboo" are dead. He has completely lost interest in gardening.

*Picking a slug off a tender leaf, tearing the leaf, its dappled rib*

Black roots, black branches, black flowers, black bones.

The fire takes all, leaving its footprints on a parched carpet.

An unstoppable flame singes like a torch, blind, revolting, eating crassly like an idiot.

Stuffed, its belly doesn't swell.

*The flame emperor's<sup>6</sup> influence wiped off the earth, gone*

Ebullient creek packed with sand bags.

Frogs, snakes, butterflies, like flowers ploughed at the meadow's edge.

The forest fire, a cannibal, its lonely meal complete.

Yet in my heart, everything remains as it was.

*But orchids, their color so fresh on the hillside!*

Tinkling water, full-flowing water – at dusk birds frolic in the spray-filled mountain air.

Next to the goatfold whole fields are black, bare of bushes and grass.

Fire's over. Prepare for floods. (We line the creek with futile-seeming sand bags.)

Everyone is out trying to adjust, trying to breathe. (It's awkward.)



*Waking from an illness, I part the curtains*

Fire-charred stubs point up as if saluting.

A mountainside of charcoal fingers scolding god (“You bad boy!”).

We nestled our temple in your thief-laden valley (jays steal everything).

Now what!

*Shoot 'em (some say)*

Birds perk up. A dusky sky is it:

Strong sun will stop all but a jay.

Cheeky birds with steel nerves (though their caw ironically soothes).

They'd eat milk if they could.

*A dove's white fleece christens an ewe, beady with sweat*

Needles prick the water. Baby shoots come up.

Come up tall, please. Tall and slender like your mother.

Nevermind the drought. The Lord of Heaven will take care.

He'll order A-hsiang to haul our her cart. She'll sing for the last time.<sup>7</sup>

*Gulping the wind, inflating himself*

Dusty sun, dusty sky (columns of dirt rise).

I stand absolutely still, savor a momentary flurry.

Everyone hugs the river. (People just want cool air.)

All the breezy spots are packed.

*I stuff myself with river mussels*

“A sparrow may live alone unable to nest in a parasol tree,” observes Yu Xuanji  
referring to herself.

“I heard one chirping at sunset circling the woods in vain,” she adds.

Incense trails by my hilltop door. Night frogs are extreme.

Ancient pines, twisted, gnarled, tower over the lake.

*The bay seems crass as I swerve along its limb*

Heady, the air, thick and wet with pent-up rain.

Kruck-e-rarrh . . . kruck-e-rarrh . . . cackles over the sea.

Shorebirds stalk the shallows (their jaundiced caws through the cool red sun).

O wild goose. Please don't fly away. Your stiffening body fills me with remorse.

*God's tired body*

Poor sparrow. A dot of red plus ashes.

Immaculate rock, scored black as if whipped.

“Was this punishment called for?” (A useless, perhaps vain, question.)

The shape of the mountain changes, yet doesn't.

*Eating little fishes*

Solitary traveler (your unwieldy sorrowful laugh).

Timber line, moody, spindly, unnourishing.

Yet I who draw you, satisfied, fulfilled.

The right brush stroke, what a feast!



*I fall to the rear where my only view is the swaying tails of horses*

At sunrise the river's bridge frames departing boats.

Are they glad to be off? I wonder.

Like a spent moth circling a lamp (my "dear one" suddenly gone).

I'm back to yearning, my most constant companion.

*I didn't realize it was raining*

I ashore, you adrift. What are we doing?

My gaze follows you, placidly.

We've parted before. The stages of sorrow I've memorized.

The expanse of blue waves is impossible to fathom, lifetimes later.

*No shadow nor sound of river*

“Let’s go,” grumbles the servant. “It’s cold. I’m hungry. I can just make out the eagle  
who cruises Lone Hill endlessly.”

Bulbous roots pop from flats, dank, mildew-smelling.

The valley hurts. The warped sky bleeds. Sweaty rocks are slippery.

But with you gone, I only hear the rain.

*“The stuttering blur of crickets quickens”*

A good night’s rain and the meadow expands.

Sparrows riot in the silky, long-eared grass.

The rivulet, tightened by unruly wind, trickles toward its mountain home.

My tears do nothing to help it.

*The dumping sound of frogs on the river meadow*

Soft rain on a lovely breeze waters my gate's four willows.

Sumacs pale red, chrysanthemums gold, a wedge of wild geese shrill in the autumn sky.

Beyond the lake, beyond the bridge, a network of streams flows haltingly.

An occasional peasant walks on mud ridges, half asleep under her wispy broad-brimmed hat.

*The “long NGIM” (a dove announcing rain) should make the listener think of whispering*

Jumbles of willow flowers choke the babbling brook.

Weary bees swarm beyond the clay-built fence.

Young boys sell succulent little river fish right off their boat at the water’s edge.

A west wind blows the damp smoke from their cooking fires back over the hill.

*Whirling catkins, flying petals*

Dusk. Waffled sea on barmy rocks.

Treetops break, knock about in a crazy wind.

While mowers have ravaged the once sweet-smelling grass,

the sedge (like our love) withers tortuously.

*Green hills again like windswept fields of* SUSUKI

My *hoya*'s flowers are all over the floor.

Little reddish balls, hard like beads.

I sip tea, watch them roll around the porch,

dreading the day I must lug it inside for the winter.



*Softly, softly, fresh wind, or is it my oar ruffling the lake?*

Drip drop drip. Last night's rain, except for a crow, the only sound.

The hill, with approaching winter, is emptied of all life.

Butterflies, hummingbirds, squirrels – your absence so present.

While flowers wilt, the temple gate remains closed.

*Golden puddles of ghee butter*

Sheer extreme color, so deeply deeply itself.

I had intended to make a flower painting with these lavender-blue blossoms.

Autumn foliage, now past peak, showcases an ivy creeper trailing from the pines.

Its fallen leaves all have black markings.

*What happened to the moon in the enamored monk's moonlit waters?*

Red fish in the ice-cold lake (crystal clear yet crinkled like a shoe).

A sand bar gleams beneath threatening clouds.

I lie on my back watching them unravel the northern hill.

Your voice, when you courted me, comes to mind.

*Wine and cream*

My wife and children laugh and shout (your gifts tear down my household).

Household-in-exile. Like monks, we're never "home."

Twilight snow. Twilight mist. Saying goodbye was awful.

When your package arrived, even the cats and dogs celebrated.

BOOK ONE

*Eating Little Fishes*

Part Two



*Unfolding , swelling, in the warm spring air*

Tulips! Tulips! Perky and white, yes.

White life. Yes. Not the black life of my past.

Flowers break this legacy. One flower perfectly fresh  
is my mother.

*It undoubtedly was Jōzō who imprisoned the roiling thunder*

Up the mountain, over the pass, between mud walls to the ravine (finally).

Maples survive but the stream has long dried and there is no waterfall.

Through the dawn's stark air, one jay caws.

Could it be the spirit of the monk who used to live on Cell Cliff?



*Frogs, the birds of night*

Snuggling in (“for the long haul” it feels) or at least the thought is delightful.

I tug the sheet around my ears, sink my body into its shroud.

Wind sweeps through the garden, a relief, will the heat break?

I am still. Absolutely and entirely one-pointed in stillness.

*Chirping with great depth*

Everyday the workers in the village boisterously lunch.

“*Bago, bago! Chalo!*” midst mud, stone, fruit, laughter.

I listen to a brook, a sweetly-calling bird.

Half the time I’m swatting flies.

*Mallard hen with her nine . . . suddenly eight . . . ducklings*

Little dog. You're going to die here in the mountain.

Passers-by have pity but what can they do?

When we head out . . . but that won't be for a week.

Our pock-marked hands, washed and washed and washed.

*The flags all have their stars in the wrong place*

Touching the untouchable in the silent night,

my sleep stuporous, drunk with abandon.

The puddle of water in which I wake, leftover from a fight.

Day and night, battles consume all my energy.

*Fishermen and wild birds go home*

A grove of eucalyptus shields my room from sun.

I'm glad. I welcome dark, rain-drenched days with their drip, drip, drip.

Pungent tea, roasted rice, plunging-silence, heavenly.

From across the lake a lone loon laughs.

*A few sprigs of pink brighten the north shore*

You pole your boat carefully, afraid of splashing the flowers' red blouses,  
oblivious of the greedy jays who scour the valley like thieves.

My devotion too seems vain (vanishes with the wind).

One day I'm all vows. The next, plucking and lacing dandelion necklaces.

*Before the altar, the lamp*

Seals flabby on their burnished rock, slopped together in one debauched pile.

White dragon-edged waves, whoosh . . . cease . . . whoosh . . .

Each displays its hot curly tongue, lashing, fizzling, vanishing.

I pity myself, this brutal mirror-image, reflected so unfeelingly back to me.

*Holding mountain heather, the young girl's eyes at the meadow's divide*

Strange, Gensei, that you, a monk, should visit the deity of business activities.

Probably it's more that Inari Hill has such unusual beauty.

Once maple trees, now smokey wisps at the meadow's edge.

The road ends – not at a place.



*Sunny room, thick carpet, the silence of midday birds*

Slow day, slow to start, slow to shape itself.

I panic (an old feeling).

“Don’t move,” I sternly say to myself. (A lizard scoots across the floorboards.)

I watch the larvae of butterflies eating cabbage leaves anyway.

*“The dark moss already bears my print”*

One jay caws.

The forest and my heart resound with memory.

Not of jays, but of myself, not yet ready.

Not yet not.

*By what luck is it, your child*

Distilled in dew, the wood's fragrance through my window.

Water drips; cool blue clusters droop from wisteria high above my head.

Hauled up in my room, I perform my practices diligently.

In the rosy light, my haggard face.

*White lily in her devil's needle cloak*

Young shoots through an old fence.

That's me, the fence, trying to keep people away.

I tell them I'm celibate. I say I'm a monk.

Raindrops, dewdrops, the sodden leaves outside my gate.

*The sky, deaf to blood-choked supplication*

Deposed, exiled, death's next, right?

No wonder you're so fascinated with the "nightingale/king."

Born in the north, seeking the south, endlessly seeking the light of the south.

Hey Sam-mum. What do you know about netherworlds?

*“A coarse but filling meal that has lingering flavor”*

In the valley men sit in forgetfulness.

Dallying for awhile, flowers shake and fall.

“I’m old,” I think. “In an old woman’s body.

But beneath the flavin skin . . .”

*“That’s little White’s voice. What a pathetic whine!”*

I’ve decided to be a hermit. Right where I am.

Why not? Who said a hermit needs a forest?

My two rooms, one free of clutter, one small and filled with all sorts of little objects.

These “four walls” will serve quite well.

*Red and luscious hill*

Chestnuts, persimmons, taro over a foot long.

Chickens fresh, plucked by Mr. Wang.

Lamb and beef dirt cheap. Books easy to borrow.

With all this, Su, why do I see you twirling your whiskers?



*The hill's dead grass, why do I care its precise shade of yellow?*

The true shape of Lu-shan is known and heard by you, Su.

The structure of sound and water is fixed.

You yourself don't even have the question.

“How will I explain it to the others?” an affectation Lu-shan will correct.

*Cloud-covered trees to the eye look like clouds*

You, Su, and the field mice nibble at the clay man.

Dried-up like a turtle, you don't need a well's wisdom.

Large Seal characters. The song "Wild Geese." Doesn't a mountain home mean you're free?

When was the last time you thought to pay for your own greens?

*Blue butterfly, you've left your twig empty*

White smoke rises. But that's a mirage, a dream stemming from desire.

The truth is, I'm lost. Cold and hungry, I find no evidence of life.

Wind cracks into silence. Mountains evolve into clouds.

I trudge through the pass, relying solely on luck.

*Turtle boat, are you really iron clad?*

The moon will dye anything with its light.

A celadon blossom fades along with the rest in an evening's glow.

Its shadow may hold fragrance, but color, light, no way.

“Do not pull my sleeve, drunken man.”

*"What's on top of Mount Zhepai?" they ask, knowing it's a poet's grave*

A desolate breeze stuffed with summer. (I write idly. A line here, a line there.)

Down the gutted hill, melting snow in splintered sun.

A flushed gray sky withers into dusk. Willow fluff scatters.

I envy the brook rushing southward toward the horseman.

*Please take care of your skinny horse*

Up the slope, black hat bobbing.

Your threadbare robe couldn't possibly protect you from the chilly night.

Old man, scabbard (like a babe in arms).

Watch out. The demands of the hour can easily make you forgetful.

*Low wind and no mosquitoes make for a very pleasant afternoon*

Summer rain. Fields darken, trees lighten.

A neighbor's spade, its steady beat, as I doze off.

I touch my ferns, blow on them softly. In the soft night air they bob back.

A wind chime tinkles – after the storm, truly delightful!

*The galaxy too is present for it*

Did the breeze wake them up or did their chatter (finally) . . .

Jealous, the wind comes around, if only to eavesdrop.

Frogs holler. The creek trips over itself. Turtles reach out their necks.

It's autumn they're wanting.



*While the brook, raised by the late white rain*

Today a group of swallows made a loop above my beans.

Circling, and again circling, they swerved off to a tree.

My checkerboard plots are tidy, but as a whole, the land does not feel “laid out.”

I’ve purposely kept it brambly, unkempt.

*In evening, magpies*

White herons tip. A pair in the evening sky.

I gasp. Their flesh, their wings, their purity, their sheer size.

Phantom clouds on an eastward breeze carry my teacher's ashes.

As summer trees wither, I struggle to pray, to keep my mind focused.

*The path is steep, but my hilltop cabin, what a joy!*

My garden reeks. Flower after flower pulls for communion like a priest.

A flute from an open window induces stillness after a gentle rain.

Scents, distinct, yet one fathomless fragrance in the darkening night.

Savor me, savor me, each with its lingering promise.

*A mountain breeze poofs my summer kimono*

In a certain century (when could it have been?) . . .

I too yearn to live as a recluse.

It rains. I sew. I sip some bowls of tea.

Green pigeons coo long after swallows sleep.

*My room faces an eroded mud bank*

I live silently (I almost said “alone”).

I don't need a dog to keep me rooted to the earth.

I have clothes, assorted gear, various pencils and pens.

I love rain, but human-generated noise irritates me no end.

*I pick a flower, only THEN, see my folly*

When I became a monk, you bet I sought escape.

As it is, I turn my eyes to the sky's edge twelve times a day.

A wave of longing subsides, only to be followed by another.

I came on a whim. I should have known better.

*Edge warped upwards, each great gill holds half a gill of water*

My thin body, gaunt cheeks, so familiar, finally recognizable,  
sere and brown along the riverbed's flashing summer air.

“Here he comes, Master Ryōkan, skinny as the season's first sardine!”<sup>8</sup>

I wonder if this is how people talk behind my back.

*Peach-size in a peach field*

With ordinary monks I have nothing in common.

Spines straight, legs crossed, sitting-robles fraying at the knees.

Drowsy in the morning, I watch for awhile, yawn.

Chores finished for the night, I brush my teeth and go to bed.



*The fine-toothed hills tonight*

Dirty clouds, pugnacious, slack, camel-back the green horizon.

Polka-dot slopes darken beneath their termagant swollen cheeks.

I'm late. I'm tired. Too disgusted to blame.

Who cares? I'm going home. Tea and a bath are better than talk.

*“Life, Life, Life!” cries the bird as if he had heard*

A hawk sails low over the raw-smelling shore.

An eerie moon rides the white tips of a boyish surf.

I envy you Saikō, your musk ink and duck-shaped censer.

When the wind plays with dragon whiskers,<sup>9</sup> you make and keep an exact copy.

*Once the sun has set, nothing remains to trace its passage*

Fat birds at the windy corner.

My oil lamp sputters low.

Long stilled, the night in stark moonlight . . .

Out of light into still deeper light.

*Hen's-egg size, the ground nut I roast tonight*

A bell tolls.

Another, smaller bell, bing-bongs pleasantly.

As (utter) quiet pulls me toward night,

a third bell opens my sleeping heart to the full moon.

*Waving little blue flags with five stars*

Autumn begins with the sound of wind, a coolness in the breeze.

A few red leaves flutter along the road.

I sit by my window, reading, dozing, soaking up the delicious smell.

Calf-like fish romp the river, diving and playing, making lots of noise.

*“Try this!” the vendor touts, handing me a WHITE watermelon*

Like ice suddenly, sky blue-black (it was spring this morning)!

A stand of pine shivers in its coat of brown.

I stay indoors, light a fire with last year’s tinder.

My dog growls. He feels the quake long before I am aroused.

*Marmots vanish in the slimy rocks*

The water stirs. Slinky waves inch up the beach.

A magpie caws. I rush to my mirror.

But the mooring lines hold only a boatman.

The tide recedes. Its comforting swish is harder and harder to hear.

*Gnats on the blue-flag, its sun-fried indigo tip*

Glistening sun soaks into my futon.

Airing it on the blue rail comforts me strangely.

I stand behind the blinds wondering why I feel so pleased.

Already a moth has spread itself out on one of the lumpy corners.



*The tinsel rain, will it turn to snow before morning?*

I know that autumn is here now, or close. (Each minute it changes.)

But that's how I know. Summer is steady. Heat cauterizes the personality.

Hills bare, forest gone (whiter than ever with its small white flowers).

The meadow recedes. No scurf on it. Only a browner color in barren places.

*At town's end, the creaking flight of a grasshopper*

I stretch my ears.

Perk up, listen hard to make sure.

There it is. Nothing. No-sound. (I can relax.)

Release with the thud of it.

*Near my door, the fragrant buds of sassafras root*

There goes a bittern over the meadow at evening.

Robins chatter above the dandelions' closed heads.

A monarch, having basked, eking energy from a skimpy sun,  
flits upwards, only to flop in a pool of pine needles.

*Back to Ōtsu by boat*

A purple-flowered brook gurgles by the cornfield,  
signs of fish, signs of frost, willows sadly ravaged.

San'yō died as per your premonition. How must you have felt,  
the same waters still murmuring as in the past.

*Girls pick hops amidst the bees*

While you describe the seedlings, short green shoots,  
the vegetables and wheat everywhere not yet picked.

Alone, on the bank, his boat dissolves in the lake-haze landscape.

More likely, you see nothing but your heart's unbidden torture.

*Far off, “no bigger than a bean” (as the old poet said of a great ship, tall-towered)*

One jay, five, raucous squawks across the gully.

I understand they speak to *me*, a self-acknowledged “jay person.”

Scratchier at dusk, as if rejecting the balm silence offers.

I pity you, little bird, your forthrightness just a bluff.

*O, I remember your eyes*

The leaf on my window, mottled, vibrant.

Is it brittle? Seems not except for its cracked and crooked tip.

As I stand in the sun, a gust of wind. (A shred of color clings.)

I cannot bear it.

*Noticing the ants my emaciated willow has attracted*

Violet mountains, fine-grained air, the day breaks over the coastline.

Sun warms the yellow butterflies straddling yellow flowers.

Aggrieved, lost, your way (you say) ended with San'yō's death,  
its grace, beauty, light, long committed to memory.



*“How much he knows of the wind – its strength and direction whose steed it is”*

Just before daybreak the river is pitch black.

Waves, blown by headwinds, slap the boat’s big belly.

The cliffs are covered with thick vegetation and so high they almost obscure the sky.

Moored under a trellis, I lie back, listen to the lapping of the water.

*No chairs, no news, why bother visiting me?*

Lucky and alone. Yes. Soothing dark. Cold, clear candlelight.

I pity the poor soul who chases after friends.

Flowers, birds, the tired sun reluctant to say goodbye.

Cows in pools of shadow listen to their flutter.

*White dew settles over the river*

The sun rises early in my mountain home.

Slightly before it sets, the valley freezes over.

A nightingale's song from the woodland's scrub, shyly, in broad daylight,  
reminds me of the depth of my isolation.

*The refugees of Ch'in are also called hermits*

Crying, a seagull flies away, carrying my cry to the earth's edge.

You are my servant little bird (like trees are instruments of wind).

Old now, I've got nothing to do. My route, who knows where.

It occurs to me to just stay in my room, but I lose my nerve.

*No one inquires whether or not they scatter*

One sparkling, one bleak, the days can't make up their minds.

I too, unfree from regret, at the monarch's late departure.

Saffron wings fluttering so gracefully, not anxious lest it snow.

It grazes the hill as if it had all the time in the world.

*“Still the deer, searching for its mate, hesitates”*

My clogs are no competitor for last night’s storm.

Rain mixed with sleet, or was it hail that knocked so crassly?

Footprints on the beach (departing geese): Sober wind flushes their drunken cheeks.

Creeks gobble haze, passionately.

*Autumn grows old unnoticed year after year*

“A forest of white powder spreading jade-green heights.”

And you, a monk, tracing their shadows adrift on your mat and bed.

Of course you are content. Who wouldn't lavish in the darkly moonlit colors,  
a single leaf tumbling through the courtyard?

*The bayou of her*

September's coast, wild, surly, though tender (in spots calm).

I don't feel jilted (I tell myself) inhaling its familiar rawness.

Tide out, sand mangy but combed in little ridges.

I am alone. I feel intensely alone, listening to the shrieks of village children.



*“Two gray hairs appear in the lit mirror”*

The wind howls and becomes old wind, the wind of another city.

Yester-wind that once I faced, knees to forehead, in my tattered chair.

That was a dark time. I felt close to the snow, its unprovocable stillness.

With snow, even in a flurry, there was me, consoled, unbending.

*My land, flat and dry, same as before*

A rock, a duck, and I, alone at the landing.

A child kneels at the water's edge, its little body absorbed.

Transfixed I watch the sea-graped waves splatter the beach with refuse.

It's hard to walk barefoot over this mess.

*Rabbits dart from rapacious hawks, naturally*

The sea hollers, slaps its prey with curly-tipped claws.

Sprouting from the shore-cliff ridge, tufts of moss salt-bleached.

I pole through the muck of overgrown creek, enjoying an hour of peace.

The long low moon cradles a cow, cud on paw, dozing.

*When they cease, the winnowing sound of their wings*

In the deep lanes of quiet night, autumn hushed and still.

Moonlight tracks the overgrown path.

As wind bends the reeds and dew collects on the arching sprays of bush clover,  
the garden's moss (its rippling waves of green).

*The “playful NGIM” is a swinging sort of vibrato evoking the image  
of fallen blossoms floating downstream*

Yellow plums. Green damsons. A stray narcissus, paper white!

Cows (spotted) nibble the bluff, masticate the sea.

Back from pleasant dreams, sunlight in the window fading. The sound of gentle sculling  
from the narrow shoal’s odd little boats.

What gives me pause is the memory of my family. Though I never think about them,  
now, as it begins to rain . . .

*Next spring I'll get a side-room ready*

Lustful branches stalk the windows made for summer wind.

Lofty eaves greet winter sun.

The birds are quiet, I've slept enough, but I'm too lazy to get up.

Propped on a pillow I listen to the trees.

*“Old and settled,” I think, thinking I am thinking of the tilted floor,  
cracking paint*

Lemons ripen in her absence. Their leaves are silky green.

Not rubbery. Not hard and knobby like the ones touted in the market.

I gaze over the meadow. Herd sheep into the low-grassed highlands.

Of course I want my childhood back.

*The “thread NGIM” is a thin vibrato*

Waves crash. It pours but is not cold.

Shawl over knees, I sew near my window.

Smokes rise through the elm tops. Butterflies toss in the wind.

They probably expected flowers.



*“My feet are so cold. Won’t you please buy me some sandals!”*

A single leaf, drifting, falling.

I watch it float, right, left, landing on dead grass.

O leaf. What will happen to you now that you have no tree?

Already I see you crumbling, edges fraying, holes.

*Dyed in baths of crimdigo flower*

Look at that tree, *solo*, crowning the fire-tarred hill.

Glistening all bitter-dew, the flaring tips of grass!

My grandmother sobs, “Oh heaven, let me die! Let me die!”

I stand at my door (like a far-away wind).

*“He cannot be a hawk there, but only perch gloomily”*

I lean on my desk, listen to rain.

Lightly, lightly the frail drops sink into the earth.

The crow that howled this morning has its wings all folded and tucked away.

Bolting the door I turn toward my bed, regretting the early autumn.

*Alfresco*

Autumn rain. Its tiny patter wakes me.

Drip drip drip. So soft.

Fragrant shade, hours later, still contains the sound.

One drop splashes on my book.

*Late and hot I wake, tangled in my soaking sheets*

Water wild, greedy for its bath in the just-now pink.

Deer – a hundred heads, swish like foam over the sand.

One house, vacant, a manger suddenly. (Ants can't swarm a corpse more ravenously.)

O night hawk! Your dry, shrill, angry call!

*Pheasants call. What is my answer?*

Willows have frostbite.

Rushes, broken, make the bank look stiff.

I am fifty-nine today. (A ridge parts in the late-autumn hills.)

Cows to the east, hay to the west.

*Your tender bottom, little leaf, bared by the breeze this October day*

A west wind scatters my *hoya*'s decaying blossoms.

They disappear like dust littering the grass.

I see them fall as I look up from my book,

sun just lowering into late afternoon.

*“Frost a knifeblade killing back grasses”*

No breeze, no sweet scent from the bony sapling.

A rooster crows; red wings flap across my grubby yard.

This old body, I’m tired of heaving it up, flopping it down.

It seems so clumsy, full of complaints, not much fight left.



*Not ill but growing thin*

Blue saplings laugh at so much rain.

Their perky leaves flip into place, *nada*.

Older limbs sag. A stubby branch rolls down the crag.

The outcrop of water gushing below, nudges it.

*High geese over Long Huai River*

The debilitated sky. Why? (Useless question.)

Sickly waves wash over my shore, quilted in dirty grey.

I look out. See wild weeds and mud.

The path to the white clouds worn beyond repair.

*Drizzle-filled trough – a heifer slobbers the filthy water*

Rain then. Go ahead.

Pelt the stairs. Clink like jade. Hiss and hiss and hiss.

Noon and shadow wrestle at my window. High winds rock my bed.

I'm sick. Crimson maples could be crimson clouds (or even God) for all I care.

*Pardon me, my irreverence*

Sheets of rain hang from the sky, as if God forgot to fetch them.

“Move that bed. Lift this chair. Put the cabinet here, for now.”

Brother, don't go scavenging. Please! (I know the dragons cough up fish.)

Me and my rabbit can't bear to be alone.

*Faceless rain*

Sea spray pounds. Not lightly, but like a hungry prowler.

I would lodge it if I could, if I had the room.

“How much would I ask,” I ask my heart as the window creaks.

One red leaf sticks to the pane, chiding me.

*No pork left*

Alone I watch, while worries fill my heart.

A single sparrow flits from branch to branch.

I see it trying to get comfortable, its little body pitifully nondescript.

In the leafy boughs, motionless (finally), it disappears.

*My cat lays down beside me and yawns delicately*

Fowl and a lone pine. (Tucking their heads under black-fan wings.)

Light fades slowly. I stay and watch.

Clouds drift westward, leaving the sky empty.

No stars. No moon.

*The stream now in scented profusion*

Fickle sun. A minute ago . . . Drab colors emerge from the clothes of stumpy fishers.

A magpie flutters and sails among the dark Mongolian oaks.

I spread out my lunch, give thanks for the moment – (the blessed river's flow).

The water-level has dropped. The current is swift and fills me with terror.



*Me and Priest Shinkei*

Fog swallows the temple. Through the mist, arrogant grass.

A low flying hawk, its shadow, in the shadow of the cove's great rock.

I watch the mountain envelop some clouds, tuck them in for the night.

Slowly, slowly, evening permeates the meadow.

*Drowsily, but with a sweet feeling*

Autumn's gone yet the oak leaves are thick and shiny.

I lay awake at night. The moon has clouded over, increasing the shadows' blackness.

Rain brings cold. A scrawny swan skims across the lake.

Autumn's gone yet no foliage withers and falls.

*The long bank darkening*

Gulls dip. Like planes among cameo clouds.

Night descends slowly, loathe to erase the sun.

Wending through marshland, charcoal water, fiery, sleek.

Here and there it just stops (which is odd for water).

*A blackbird flock opening above it, whitens the “robin snow”<sup>10</sup>*

Wind sweeps through the garden, a little chilly.

Branches carouse, billowy drunk in the rushing air.

I watch their tips sway, all topsy-turvy,

as I lift my face to the delicate flakes, so driven and purposeful.

*The old man's hair is thinning, I notice, by the shadow-licked  
light of his oil lamp*

Dozen of porpoises diving and surfacing, some black, some umber.

River banks look sloppy with their snow-like, reed blossomed, flecks.

Old monks, they say, use the fluff from these blossoms to pad their winter sitting robes.

But a youth is scolded: "If at your age you're already so concerned about keeping warm,  
how can you study the dharma?"

*A single bird's continual call, shrill from its unseen perch*

At dawn the ground is white with snow . . . and it still snows.

From the road I see an elk, woolly brown in its thick new coat.

A little after four, peeping lights in the village windows.

In their sparkle – cold, clear, without redness – winter is palpable.

*I don't need pigs*

“The peacock flies southwest” observes a woman-scholar poet.

Others (of us) live close to the land.

Land. Heart. To me they are the same.

I can't help it. I'm a city person.

*By the bluebird messenger*

Spring or once. I wasn't there.

I arrive in fall, as the trees leave.

Some stay. The even-keeled, middle-wayers.

That's never worked for me.



*Blowing on my fingers only makes them colder*

Thunder, rain, the black bay quiet. Neither birds nor stars nor kites.

Sirens and a few howls. Are they dogs?

Afternoons are short. Without sun the air grows chilly.

I'm fine until about three.

*I can't explain it, even to myself*

Pink lights waddle like turkeys above the evening water.

Twinkling in depth. Is it fall's earlier coming of night?

I walk along the bayside, surf suddenly foreign.

You are in a boat.

*Listen to the leaves, unprepared and chilly*

Chrysanthemums, dahlias, roses, russet in her birth-month.

I pick mums, their ochre evocative.

O mother, so fathomless is my eternal love.

Only a gesture . . . somewhat free, broad in spirit . . .

*“Wick cold, lampflame dark.” The poet bemoans her  
impoverished situation*

The air is freezing. (It is definitely winter.) Chunks of hill are bitter and brown.

Exhausted grass slops over mounds of motley rain-exposed roots.

My mother’s tired voice flickers at a memory. Retelling it cheers her up.

Later she appears with a chicken, some roots of membranous milk vetch and Chinese  
angelica, which are considered very bu.<sup>11</sup>

*Anywhere tranquil is my home now*

A thousand up-and-down miles, eyes haggard from dust.

My Chinese jacket has finally shed its half-torn, odd-colored sleeve.

The moon hangs low. Is it full? Almost.

At night, birds, descending from clouds, roost comfortably in the trees.

*Flowers fade, or is it one's memory*

Stretch a wire over water, you'll get small white-bellied swallows.

Young rock maples, their crosses against the sky.

A pine seedling juts into the mist, spindly, provident, a pariah on the brackish earth.

It's low steady hum, unlike myself, constant, intent.

*Gently rainman*

Tide in. Breakers crash, inky black at second watch.

Penitent, scalded by cold, my wrinkled body, doused.

But the open sea, its ragged surface, is green the color of mice,  
scurrying, scurrying, trying to get settled before the bad weather.

*Swallows low over the barren field*

The distant mountains' distance. Yes. Warblers' chirps so near.

“White snow makes a high, thin music writing its poems on old temples.”

Don't be sad, my darling. Though silent, I'm here.

A weak, slow-to-rise sun casts a pewter glaze on the rigid river.



*Birds and I have opposite schedules*

Low hills gray with drizzle . . . again. (Petals slobbered with mud.)

An eclipse is due on the eleventh (some say) early, before dawn.

Chimes clatter. “They need rope to shut them up,” I think,

wide-eyed, under my covers, dreading to have to get up.

*The bittern too from his pine perch flies slowly away*

Today I watched the sky fill with puffy white clouds.

How many months before the wildflowers reappear?

Oceans of grass next to acres of water.

Neither duck nor dandelion alters its carriage in the high tide.

*For now I work in pencil, softly, softly – mimicking the strokes  
of soft brush-hairs*

A winging swan on snow-soaked mud, bruises the print of its web.

Remember the cranes jumping and laughing, corn tossed their way?

Exuberance is short-lived, though like pain, its flavor fluctuates,

the bray of a lame donkey worse than my own exhaustion.

*O' the white wild spruce!*

“Sky blue” where I live refers to a child’s myth.

The surf is never “forest” green.

The emperor respects youth, so your age (you say) is shameful.

What will you do when the water-clock drums yet another hour this winter night?

*Not ferocious like most guardians, but on the contrary, a friendly,  
naïve creature, easily fooled by magpies*

The sun sinks on my level fields. I shut my wood gate tight.

Willow buds expand their silk these barren “finger cold” days.

The willow doesn’t flower, exactly. It launches the first green into winter’s fully-brown landscape.

“What harm if in the midst of loneliness . . .”

*O green winged ant*

You say you'll die. I say "I know." Your voice perks up.

It's not bitter cold yet. But it's December. (It could happen.)

Churning whitewater among waves, the sun boils seething red.

New sun, spared by the sated birds.

*Morning sounds dawn*

At a fork I take the highroad. (I live alone, above the trees.)

A waterfall sprinkling my old thatch hut dissolves in waves of mist.

Winter crickets sing. Crows and blue jays caw.

All this and my stopped little body.

*Season of thin snow*

Who paints this cold mountain lilac?

Who washes the clouds red-gold?

I have lived here forty years.

Browned by light, crisped by heat, a single leaf floating down the river-bed.



*“Are you personally closing the street?” a man asks*

Funny how life goes along and one allows it to flow without questioning.

I’m appalled by my assumptions.

Wind twirls across the plains; ice freezes on the inside of my window.

Preparing *lisen* in my fish-shaped censer . . .

*Defly, with your dark-purple, rabbit-hair brush*

Plum-white petals, tough green stalks sweeten the fuliginous dawn with their quick presence.

I watch them, aware of my heart, fallow as the drab, cold day.

Cropped waves slap the shore, slowly, methodically. A gull swoops off.

At dusk, shadows of vetch. Long, long shadows.

*The osprey licks an apple's eye*

Tired and cranky, the brassy sky, what?

I just want to be alone with my book.

The dappled terrace with its snowy beds, reddened, ever-so-soft.

Yes, I say to the blackened moon behind the mountain peak.

*Old pout, your thousand fry cloud the water*

The older I get, the less I like people.

I don't blame the mothers of cooped-up kids for wanting to let them out.

I can tune into a star, yes, me and the star, us two.

For a second we . . . but it rarely lasts.

*Twigs and plumes, their twisted wind-blown postures*

Months fly by like shuttles, yes, in the main, in maturity.

Add sadness, prayer (I'm sorry to admit) and "fly" turns to "creep."

So it's one's state of mind.

"My fortieth year will pass as the morning comes," merely a matter of calculation.

*I hear the peepers in the rain tonight*

I hear the creek, not the sutra.

My fingers guzzle the warmth of my coffee cup.

I unwrap the silk protecting the words of the Masters,

but gaze long and hard at the fire.

*No rain on the hill, yet brownness seeps all the way to my heart*

The year is about dead. Aren't you glad? Another year of indecisiveness.

On the emperor's command, you dedicate a poem to your forest friend.

All at once, a signal, replete with how many refinements of meaning?

Funny you stress the squawking of returning swan geese.

*Su says, "Hard to refuse three cups to a dried-up belly"*

Voices from other cabins occasionally drift my way.

"These monks like to enjoy themselves," I think, pleased I don't have to join them.

For food and drink I leave the hill, the lapping of the lake.

Sunlight glints from muddy rows of lettuce.



*Stagnant sleet, laminated, pointed (like rice seedlings)*

Air thin, sky a galaxy unto itself.

Stars (like snowflakes) romp and fall.

The vast emptiness of the valley floor, so vast, mind-bogglingly vast.

A storm brews. Nothing happens.

*Wintering at sea, a flock of flightless birds*

In my dream it is dawn, the year new.

Bright shoots pierce the darkened earth.

Sunk in the mountain, the scooped lake, silent.

Plumes of pine, being frozen, remain as the wind holds them.

*Is it midnight yet?*

Quiet deepens. I walk in the moon.

Hushed rays sadden. Their soft half-circle light.

The thought of you emerges. Your woolen scarf. Your slender hands.

A northerly wind swirls from the winter wood.

*The relief of clear blue sky*

Abyss of dark water, its hollowness devouring.

Cold-stricken geese cry out in the frost.

Riding a lean horse, scuffling fog, but for the moon, blinded by wind.

Ahead of dawn, first to cross the ochre bridge, I rush to view the snow in South Valley.

*By a low lamp I trace the lama's drawings*

Early evening. Snow falls softly. Thick snow sticks to my old fur coat.

It sticks too to the bushy pine needles just like the Chinese masters depict.

I pull my quilt around me, brace my book against my knees.

Underneath the house, babbling quietly despite the cold . . .

*“The bleat of a babe,” my mother once told me*

Cedarwood fumes linger.

A single bell. So many animals curious.

I pack up your things, nail hinges snug.

Sweep the floor, the entryway, the little stone path, free of dust.

*“Sheep’s intestine trails” likewise disappear as they treacherously  
wind around precipice and gully*

Engrossed in the tide. Washing me, washing me.

Clean of sorrow. Clean of missing the future.

A narrow fog hurries, overtakes some low-flying kites.

“The Year of the Horse” twirls bravely like a trapeze artist.

*In another section of the scroll is a scene of an oxcart*

Wind moans through the branches of weed-ridden waste. Poplars moan in the wind.

A deep reverberating pulse vies with the hush that echoes through the house.

Looking over the shore, a white butterfly darts about, though there are no flowers.

A spider broods, lost among bleak, frost-nipped reeds.



*Where is the walrus?*

In my dream, birds grow hair, silken plaits parading mountain wind.

Sherpas' feet face north across the bridge.

Will they wake me? (This question on a flag.)

I pity the monk who makes the last round, tinkling his little bell.

*Tiny glass horses*

Alone tonight, rain and wind wrack the bushes by my door.

Their leaves, easily torn, provide me precious shade and privacy.

I'm glad to shut the window, curl up in my sealed room.

In the morning, black clouds roll overhead ominously.

*Alone, in the parlor, I play "lantern riddles," a stupid Chinese game*

As the sun sets, wind whips the corners of my jacket.

Flecks of snow sting my face, then melt and dribble down my cheek.

Yibin stands on a hill overlooking a promontory at the confluence of two rivers.

The rays of the moon scatter upon them masses of silver rings.

*Dunning black clouds, the sunset-coated river*

I love the quiet winter days.

Rustling oaks the only sound.

Sewing by a window, too languid to look up,

tea and book on a little stand next to my housecoat.

*Dead oak leaf, fawn-colored ice prolongs your glistening*

From my hut, I hear the evening rain.

Beside my door a tall pine drips.

Friends in heart, but with the passing of years, what is there to say?

When I force a response . . .

*Hodge-podge rain*

Silly gossips. Have they nothing better to do than watch an old man?

I'm *going* to stick a flower in my hair if I feel like it.

I hear you rattling around the kitchen. I hear the fledglings squawk.

You bet I'll make a nuisance of myself.

*“Stones are lean, mahogany and NANMU trees are strong”*

Bashō, as he lay dying, took his poems for worthless.

This was not just posturing. Words, he felt, who cares?

Yet each day I sweep my room, arrange my pencils carefully.

Seeing them all lined up so simply . . .

*Asleep in a thistle, crammed deep in its dense florets*

Dreams fit-full, the morning bitter cold. Rain pours down in axle-sized shafts.

In the distance, pine tips, chimney-like through clumps of red-eyed clouds.

I picture Yen Tzu-ling alone on his rock, the gibbons, their moonlit howls.

Such a feeling of coming back!



*Cockle-shell so far from sea, how you roar*

Harsh winds lurch, judder, collide with everything.

Pellets of sleet, like moths against my cabin door.

The manzanita's limbs, look how they twist in hair-brained directions.

Incessantly inscribed, incessantly erased, on the glassy lake.

*Dead birch tree, your fungus shelves the snow*

My mind grows freer with the passing years.

No patience for the Three Obediences.<sup>12</sup>

But like a giant floating heart, adrift between empty banks,

a bowl of wild plants eaten, discarded . . .

*Little twig, ice varnishes your yellow insides*

White winter sun leaves me hungry.

Or is it longing I feel, alone in my wild yard.

Ten years of drought, then torrents all month.

Koi snap at the stones I toss.

*We step on mud, two pair of clogs*

Rain about to let up is rain at its best.

No rain isn't. Hard rain isn't.

But rain, having spent itself,

beckoning sun, bird, a shrouded mountain suddenly bald.

*Plowing thin land*

Rain pelts the wall-wide glass. (I sit here staring at my bleak garden.)

Patches of snow lay on the ground. Trees are wrapped in straw.

Ten thousand peaks (prayer altars dismantled) – demons of pestilence lurk in their muggy vapors.

Each day, departing flocks, amid unseasonally cerulean skies.

*“Knowing that friends are coming, I use my foot to clean around  
the wicker gate”*

Why complain of loneliness and seclusion when a hermit’s life is what you seek?

Sparrows frolic, roosters crow, so what?

To be one of a tribe of mountain birds floating by a cliff,

you needn’t be a mountain bird.

*The helmsman's face, ashen*

Rising sun displays a vibrant morning clarity.

Songbirds chirp around my tree.

The ceaseless rains, at the year's end, end.

For a while it helps.

*Pien Luan's sparrows*

O my son. Do you really care about the wind of which you write with such passion?

The river gulls, the south pond lotus, the north hill that sends up purple shoots?

Why should I doubt you? (That would be your answer, of course.)

I, who managed to lose the river's poem.



*Wind and moon*<sup>13</sup>

Why fear the acts of lazy, careless women,  
even ones who rub musk ink in light shades, aslant-aslant?  
A goose might poop on your freshly swished plantain,  
but the ink that smears, nothing is lost.

*“Roofed not with crossing boughs but drooping ice-covered twigs”*

And idleness, what's *its* sound? (I was about to say “noise.”)

Sitting in these empty woods peacefully, so peacefully.

I carve my spoon (sand its bowl), select some branches for my altar.

Falling snow. A late goose calls.

*No birds, no moon, my cold hand reaches for the flashlight*

Cocoon-paper clothes. Mountain-grown rice.

Your hut in the clouds at the top of Hsiawushan peak.

But what hut? What clouds? Nothing is so neat and tidy.

A toothache today, headache tomorrow. "Where did that gust come from?"

*You, Su, for not daring to free the prisoners*

“Ending my days,” the state of mind of which Su speaks.

I doubt he really believes it.

He who knows more about rivers than the ferryboat man.

Parched earth clings to his shadow.

*The toppled cart had how many apples?*

“Why?” someone asks and I list all my possessions.

My crowfoot spoon, coyote mat (I know it died for me).

These things are obstacles. Like river-stones, fallow.

After I’m dead, I’ll call for them in my sleep.

*The sky's five moods*

Little salmon-colored petal, drenched (almost drowned).

Perhaps this is your final spin, your last hapless bout.

I too am close to the end, floundering, tossing (like a frightened mother bird).

Alone in my cabin, full of light, white with frost.

*I wait as winter deepens*

The rain stops, the long bank looks greener.

Stone rain. (Gutter, a drum.) I catch its beat like a cold old lady.

Curtains reek tiredly, little life left.

Spray from the wall smells like frogs.

*A river frog snores from deep in the blue earth*

A blank sky (a belligerent sky) sits stubbornly above the surf.

Chimney swallows, high & slowly over the river.

Growing old in a desolate room, keeping the blinds pulled down.

Rather than consolation, I try to accept there may be none.



*Cold glitter on the village vanes*

Brutal cold impacts both the day's edges.

All I want is to hole up in my room.

I wake at dawn, put on my slippers.

Rosy lamps make me even more comfortable.

*Gelt, the effervescent folk, wildly*

The day smitten with clouds, yet the pervasive hope of sun, unbidden.

Shadows clothe the river shabbily.

Birds cry, abandon their treetop nests.

Only lashing waves reveal the winter's truth.

*“Icy-skin-stony-bone”*<sup>14</sup>

O Saikō, no one could think that your senses have turned to ash.

Your *hakubyō*<sup>15</sup> bamboo take away my breath.

A tree’s white ghost with its ostrich plumes.

“We all regret that spring is not longer.”

*The clock, the kettle, rat-a-tat-tat*

Scarlet maples, stoic pines, but mostly scrub oak fill my forest.

A cerulean sky floods the banks of my deep draw.

A monk in the wild sits quiet and relaxed.

A crow's silhouette couldn't be more still.

*Who's got food that I've got it in, His Soul*

The stillness of the body, of the mind in pain.

Who can know? It's so private.

The heart beats (which one feels acutely).

Unbidden, entirely mine.

*Am I riding a great white bird?*

She doesn't budge. No. Occasionally she peeks out the window.

Inside her fat is a silent life.

Listen. A gong sounds as she rises.

Which direction will she go?

*Moveable feast*

Heavy quiet. Obese. Unmovable like a fat woman.

One moves, but “it” doesn’t move.

“It” is still. So still, it hurts.

I want this stillness more than anything.





BOOK TWO

*Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms*



*The 1500-Round Poetry Contest*

In order to clearly see the varying greens of last year's grass,  
young Kunai-kyō nearly died.

The other participants, long excelling in poetry's ancient Way,  
how can their vitality be explained?

ISLAM, ALLAH, *I had them confused*

Winter ends. And my nap. (I'm sprawled like a drowsy hermit.)

Work, a week away, hovers over me like a toad.

"How's your sleep?" I ask my mother. "Huh," she says, "Freeze?"

"Sleep," I scream. (It began as a concern.)

*A XIN from far off*

Restless chimes from an easterly wind. (I listen from my bed.)

A cat hollers. Terror shivers up the breezeway.

A neighbor hacks, coughs, spits out phlegm. "Nurse, nurse," he cries.

But at the time the incident slipped my mind and I forgot to ask about it.

*“Incense smoldering beside monks deepens”*

Kingfisher-blue, the canopies of pine cropping the mountain’s north slope.

In mist adrift on empty wind, tiny jade-green bamboo leaves.

Dew rises, stars come out, tree-tops blacken in the night.

Sitting in a boat, rowing quietly among ripples, I’m forgetful of the crabby cars

and oceans of people at my back.

*Her hair, deeply black, like the seeds of a leopard lily*

“Earthworms come out!” The chubby girl probes their underground knot,  
all twisted up together, sleeping.

“From little green worms come black-tipped butterflies.” (I instruct the child carefully.)

A brilliantly clear day. The air is soft. (We stand near a swathe of iris.)

As the temperatures change, the smell of avocado in bloom mixes with the rich smell of recovering soil.

*Woolly blue, undulant, stark*

Our bitter fight over, I go to my room.

My philodendron, my lacquered chest – what was I thinking?

How can I pretend to have my bearings?

The pretty hill, with oncoming night, more and more blurry.



*Boat half-filled with river water*

Buckets of rain, then gradually softening drops

tap my midnight window, fingernail moon obliterated.

Alone I listen. The drips, drip-drops (luxurious), and

dropping off to sleep, spring rain sweeping a blue-green meadow.

*Forked sparrow tails poke the apple leaves at dusk*

Awake, I listen to the blustering storm crack and expel its waters.

Drops splatter, fading the peacock on my Chinese screen.

Leisurely, thimble in hand, I quilt away the afternoon.

Hearing the birds gives me loads of energy.

*Foxglove, grain, we'll farm anything*

Silver grass. Insect song tightens. Its wheeze in the temperate night.

I loosen my belt, make ready for sleep.

The lights are dim in my little room, but the fury on his face, its rapture luminous.

Thinking about it as I doze off, I blurt out something.

*Cherry-green, plum green, the hill rammed with new growth*

The rain has stopped but its after-drip, hours later, thump thump thump.

I stretch my legs, "I'll just listen to the pleasant sound," I think.

When I wake, a crescent moon peeps through the slat of my half-opened blind.

Precipices along the gorge are covered with gigantic rattan creepers which make  
the eerier atmosphere even more eerie.

*Look! You can almost grab a cattail*

Poppies wind-dance by the curly water.

Green ducks bob, expressions banjo-player bland.

Steady rain. How many hours will it last?

Ducks, a mirage on the field of floating duckweed.

*Rosary hour: your sweet cross of lilacs*

Spinnakers surf the blue-grey waters, playful, buoyant, hailing forward.

Shouldering day-lilies, a scarlet wing extends the fragrance of oncoming night.

I stare at the horizon, its mocking sheen forcibly in my eyes.

Head achy. Body numb. No taste for the book I thought I couldn't wait to finish.

*Lean-to in the clouds*

You look like an old woman, hill.

Parched, cracked. Winter storms were ruthless this year.

Johnny-jump-ups once protected your bed.

Now everyone just dumps trash on your decaying floor.

*My young mind, having trotted about in its elephant pajamas*

I choose modern colors for my spring planting. Things start to bloom. I get very excited.

New life rungs of warmth and summeriness caress the eastern ridge.

Fiddleheads swill. Fresh shoots sprout by a gushing river inlet.

One squirrel busily scrambles across.



*Feed me rice*

The pinks! Lucky household ploughman!

Whereas the dye lot of a peony arouses Shylock's greed.

Wind, grass, moonbeams, spread their tints and fragrance freely.

Peonies are pedigreed alright, but who can afford them?

*Mountain birds, O lovely, lovely*

I watched a butterfly this morning, carefree, nonchalant, poke about the eucalyptus,  
a wispy little alone thing.

What unheard sound stops him, still as a bush?

The light of a train, the light of a star, just after dark, brattles in the sky.

Mandarin clouds, several clumps, their purity through the cold.

*A beautiful home but for its silly curtains*

The fields are blued with blue-eyed grass. “Duck-egg blue,” Kawabata might say.

His flat unrhythmed lines pad their way, event to event.

A precision mind, though it’s said he couldn’t sleep.

He couldn’t rest. Isn’t that odd?

*They fly up, separate*

For fun I toss young pigeons breadcrumbs.

Some coo. Some ostentatiously flock towards the fountain's spray.

They strut. I watch (look more closely at their fat audacious paunches).

Like trees in wind, blossoms after rain, uprooted, disturbed, lost.

*Turkeys prowl the snake-filled blades*

Houseboy, I saw you kiss a maid last night.

Now, this morning, the hallways are a mess.

Though guests still sleep, their orioles sing.

The lake's green water sags with fallen flowers.

*One can hardly call it a garden*

I begged for some cuttings. Sure enough they've taken root.

Growth itself, albeit leaves, intensely satisfying.

Each day greener, larger, more shapely, self-assured.

I'm not kidding.

*Lavishly capping the rosebuds*

Alone I watch the fluffy sun unfurl over rain-washed hills.  
Its pinkness at the curved-edge bridge, pliant yet forthright.  
Feeble peeps from over-slept birds, the hardy ivy, vermillion.  
I'm dazzled by it. Want to dress up, go out, get all wet.

*“Half the dresses you brought to our wedding are still new”*

Stoic red, one rose blooms in the naked yard.

I want to steal it. I want to take it home, put it in a vase and make it last.

“No one lives here. It’s just a wild rose.” (Of course I know better than to “take what is not given.”)

I sit in my car. Spend a half hour arguing with myself.



*The call of a stag, far into the night*

Yellow birds and more yellow birds on the late-willow catkins.

At evening, not a breath of air disturbs the skaters' tracks.

Cascades of flowers cover the trees, nubby branches tremulous.

A few stars prick the blue-black sky.

*Pocking the inlet, a thousand ducks, evening wind shallow*

Twilight peepers start, stop.

Tiny cow lily. Your petals creak on the pond's still water.

Wind chimes hushed, crickets settled for the night.

With everyone asleep, the grandfather clock's tick.

*“Twiddling a brush, I write down thoughts, that’s all.”*

Shards and stones, brambles waist high.

Who is leaner, me or the soil?

Boats and trash mingle. (Winds sough through a lightless village.)

One black duck surfs the shallow tide.

*Waking from a nap I turn away*

“I hacked off my limb to avoid the draft,” an old man says, right sleeve dangling.

“I’m the only man I know who’s lived to enjoy old age.”

Armless, full of pain, but hushed with fumes of late night mist.

Proud (nay arrogant) at fifteen (let’s say), for what cause would I . . . with a big rock . . .

*Deciding to sleep one more hour*

The moon and a frail wind scan the lake.

Nosing up, a big fish quickly corrects itself.

Dark tides tap the scarlet flower whose blossoms it lures away.

I lay back, shut my eyes, enjoy the company of the canoe's shadow.

*Two, coupled, trilling in my hand*

Older even than sea-shells, knobbly kelp sloughed in with the tide.

Ancient waves shisel the sand beneath the wharf.

Crevices become pools, rivulets estuaries of beaded soil.

Beneath a girly poster, farting, pot-bellied men.

*In spring, cutting wicks*

Barnacles suck the wharf's underside, eat the moss like bread.

Gulls hover near the fly-fisherman's bucket.

At dusk, through the fog, the sloshing water swells.

A bright-orange moon keeps me from feeling alone.

*Tempered in a hundred fires*

Willows, like “dancing waists,” bow to ponds, their mirrors.

Blossoms (and voices) scatter in stillness.

“My letter arrived the day after she died,” says my mother or her former friend.

“If it hadn’t of been . . .” her voice trails off.



*So he was always owing money for books*

“One, one, one, three ones.” Gensei, I understand perfectly.

I don't exactly “pull” my short hair, but scratching it puts me at ease.

I too have a Chinese bowl which (go figure) hasn't broken.

I bet you the abbess in the privacy of her room . . .

*Tempestuous wind and warm moonlight make for a delicious evening*

Rain has washed the hill. A few drops cling to the blue porch rail.

Peach petals cram the buttery mud.

Trees are shadows, fleshy, lugubrious, tangles of grief tossed by the sky.

A sparrow sings. First one, then a miasma of song.

*Peeps, the wisps of light through the burgeoning oak*

Cheep, cheep, chirp. A robin through the meadow fog.

Near the roadside, small red butterflies.

Away from her flock, a mother bobolink straggles over the weeds.

Unseen, unheard, the old man's shadow.

*“Poor thing,” I think. “It’s young and out of its element.”*

Plums. Ripe plums. (It’s my neighbor’s tree.)

The ones on my side bruise as they land on the cement.

I pick them up anyway, watch his perfect ones rot.

He doesn’t care. He doesn’t eat them.

*The flowers of flowering plants that coevolved with insects are beautiful  
and sweet-scented for THEM*

My fuchsia died. I replaced it with a *hoya*,  
attracted by its awkward, nay unwieldy, barren stems.

Yet I pity the hummingbird who nectared on the fuchsia's blossoms.

Everyday it checks to see if they're back.

*“Snow blood” they call it. The grass bleeds*

Deep and still, the glowworm glows beeping hushed light.

A big fish dives, surfaces, dives again (on the lookout).

It’s late. Ripplets splash drowsily.

Corridors of spiders do not suffer.

*Nabokov agrees*

I *hate* music. There, I've said it.

The older I get, the more distasteful it seems.

Its rhythm, vibration, clutter, noise, aesthetic, indeed provenance.

I want my own.

*At dusk cicadas cry on and on*

Green geese have gone to bed.

Nothing stirs beside these blackwatched waters.

I linger. Search for a memory.

*Nada.* But a deft, effulgent *nada*.



*My red-lacquered brush depicts life*

A plethora of frogs, their purr through the jalousies.

I'm out in the rain (or is that too strong a word for frail pale sun-warmed mist)?

Crossing a little foot-bridge, dotted with browning petals,

the long day (its remaining light) I'm finding I dread.

*Six times, each day, I hike the path down to the valley*

Boring flowers. Predictable petals in straight little rows.

Your grammar-school colors lack depth.

No pa-zazz. No perfume. But I can't just dig you up.

I weed you, water you, wait for you to die.

*“Do no harm,” the VEDAS say*

Pounding lights, blinking, blurring. The city’s ceaseless hum.

Its churning force of exhaustion, after day, before sleep.

Alone in my room, I sit near a window, curtains gaping wide.

The deli’s neon “OPEN,” through the pane, on my cup.

*The best visitors are birds*

“If we kill them we will save our crop, our fruit, our wives” (the monk exaggerates).

“Well we eat carrots . . .” Everyone is exhausted.

An impatient monk pulls out a gun. Another puts hers away.

A solitary cow chews the chocolate grass.

*Clear green shoots of sassafras*

Fruits and vegetables are growing back now that the fire has exhausted itself.

Panicked birds have not returned. (We keep finding their dead bodies.)

Brackish stumps by tonight's full moon (its bloody vampiric drift).

“Hey!”(I call) nibbling the flesh from a loquat's plum black seeds.

*Your redbud, your sasangua, even your mums strike me as outrageous*

Brittle heat, noisy fan, cocoa air raspy.

Socks, caked with dirt, no longer fresh.

Kneeling in the stacks, transfixed by a saiin's<sup>16</sup> pain.

My bony ankles throb somewhere before Princess Shikishi.

*On this rock face I draw three buddhas*

Jelly-clouds, smug aren't you, festering over the shoreline?

Pretty soon, like a Gothic mist, you'll be too dark to see.

I race around in my Dresden car trying to find my way.

No one speaks English. I ask directions and they look blank.

*Once home, I sweep, dust, am flooded with practical thoughts*

The wheeze of sprinklers comes as a relief.

Tall grass bends (each blade, its interior palette of color).

Listless, I stay home. Slowly accomplish what I need.

The best thing is to empty my drawers, throw everything away.



*Barefoot, sweetly my nomad*

White bones. Scuttling over them, green ocean beasts.

Hurry hurry. Quickly before the terrorists' sharp tongues.

Banqueting on your children. They don't even bother to clean up after themselves.

At the water's edge, panicky steps.

*Unlike leaves, sorrows won't scatter*

Scraps of cloud teem (coalesce) at the gate of all this rubble.

Five thousand bodies gone the white cloud's way.

Standing in my yard, the stench, futility, emptiness.

I can't make a poem of it.

*Look at that dog all dressed out in plum blossoms*

Beaten down by rain, catkins prostrate on the river-bank.

Sheets of bark, jostled by wind, dangle from exhausted trees.

A frog gloats by on a dead oak leaf.

Alone with a case-knife, a jolt of fear courses through me.

*Rain drops, paddling anyway toward the perch bubbles*

Beds of clouds shimmy by the boardwalk.

Hundreds before I bat an eye.

This ship, how can I contend with its irrevocable destination.

I part with you, and again I part with the gull-dotted ocean edge.

*When petals scatter, and both pear and cherry are swaying in the evening breeze, it is quite impossible to tell them apart*

Byzantine rain, old and colorful as dusk settles waning September.

I follow the clouds, their jasmine-tinted shadows, already low in the east.

Mats of rush cool, and thanks to the rain, the day tolerable (though I fluff my shirt like a fan).

I've been sick. I'm feeling stronger this morning, but not that strong.

*Fanning your tail, beating the ground, as your brood, faintly peeping, disappear*

Half dozing on a hilltop, a thousand leaves adrift.

Wild geese, bawdy clouds, red, black, what?

Our argument, your voice, the blue jay your attorney.

Even the soul-soothing fog horn sounds preposterous.

*“Please ma’am, how are the apple trees?”*

The old riverbed, do you recall its rock-strewn slopes, overgrown and slimy?

No one but us raced up the hill beyond the chestnuts for a smoke.

Boulders for pillows, take your pick. All revel in the bottomless sky.

My lament to the birds who carry it to you on long autumn winds.

*Li-Heng's "slaves"*<sup>17</sup>

Postman, you're a doll. These rare sweets light up the whole room.

But I'm so sorry. I imagine they were heavy to carry.

My wife, though grateful, neglected the proper thanks.

I am ashamed. Life is difficult enough without inventing more trouble.



*Poet, painter – why limit yourself?*

Goat, rabbit, hen. I prop my pillow by a breezy window.

A noisy barnyard has its novelties.

Potatoes, corn, farmhands with plaid caps.

They shoot a boar. Everyone celebrates.

*Visiting the ōi mansion a year after her death*

Below the eaves, fresh ferns and day-lilies.

A kickball game underway in back.

From inside the house, tinkling bells, striking gong.

Brushwood gate, running stream, there as before.

*Clover field, though thinly clad, flushed*

The sky is blank. No color, no clouds. Just static.

Schoolgirls comb the white San Francisco fog.

In my youth I too scoured the city's seven hills.

Now, a decade's clock crawls like a turtle.

*“Two, two is for the crest of two linked petals”*

I stoke up a fire, admire my yard. How many more blossoms this year than last!

Gnarly branches, once mere twigs, thick, adult, graceful.

“People are wearing shorts,” she says. “Unseasonal heat, though they say it may change soon.”

“Huh,” she says in answer to my question. A soft “huh,” not really an interested “huh.”

*Darkness, in the elms first*

The little restaurant where we first ate noodles, boarded up, dark.

You said my dish looked nourishing. I will never forget your concern.

Wind blows a graying leaf across the fresh graffiti,

through the stormy streets under my torn umbrella – so many years!

*Like a kid, the weather, restive, pushy*

Smell of tar, detours, rubble-creviced flats,

I no longer even think of leaving you.

On a municipal park bench beneath a young, wire-trellised tree,

a yellow leaf flutters by and yes, I say shamelessly.

*Under moist chestnut leaves, white grubs stretch*

Sobered by the ceaseless rain, I inspect my chocolate ivy.

Growth, once charmingly new, now leggy, top-heavy.

I search for clippers. "I could cut it in half," I think,

before noticing, at its tip, a hairy, ever-so-fine, silken thread.

*She stands her ground, froglike*

On mornings when it's dark, what? What is it that makes me rebel?

It's wild outside. (I'm terrified. People do crazy thing in wild weather.)

My mother reports that my father is sick. He refuses to tell her more.

I balk. She says, "Well dear, you must not know me very well."



*“Sheer by my sleeve falls the cry of a wild goose”*

Haze like a skin, permanent, scarred, claims the broken atmosphere.

One bony branch pokes through a colorless breeze.

A temple bell from somewhere far off, could it be for your memory?

I feel for the children – your mangled body, suddenly, in the river’s way.

*In Java, it is said, the tiger's hearing is so acute that hunters must keep their nose hairs cut lest the tiger hear their breath whistle through their nostrils*

Autumn is arrogant, fierce, "in your face" (as young people say).

I hear the wind before feeling its chill. (Under my quilt I lie, listening.)

The pond, dark before, is now a glorious water-silk blue.

In the quiet hours before dawn, a pair of wood ducks paddle across.

*Reeds begin to bow (seem disturbed) as we float by*

Sky Paris blue, on the move blue, not deep summer blue,  
cobalt winter blue just arising on the unseen firmament.

Haloed by a ring of mud, a horsefly poised on the burgeoning oak,  
is between places, restless, not settling in for the long haul.

*Twice, thrice, the caw of a crow*

Silky swirls, the mud flats eerie.

A waterbird glides tardily through the black backlit sky.

Playing bridge in a shabby village parlor, listening closely to the clatter of the cards,  
a recluse mind appears of itself, returns of itself . . .

*Longing's raw distances*

"I'm sick of the cold," says the blond woman after one day of cold weather.

I don't know what to say. (I secretly relish the gorgeous snow on my drab, unkempt yard.)

Raising the blinds I gaze at the sky, its blossom-streamers of white.

Fine as rice, buffeted in a gusty wind, parting the shoreline reeds.

*Sitting happiness in*

A nose-ring she asks. (Really she is stating.)

Would it be a pretty thing? (She can't conceal her joy.)

"Yes," I pause, "I think, on your face . . ."

I watch the eyes of her friend.

*“Don’t rush,” he admonishes and my heart sinks with this truth*

That butterfly is cold. It flaps its wings but doesn’t go anywhere.

The snow has stopped. The roads are clearing though they’re still slick with scattered  
patches of ice.

Deep beats, solid, earthy, pulling (gripping) the water’s cottony edge.

“The river wants to be heard before it is contaminated.”

*But something about her – I can't keep my eyes off*

A frowsy day. Mist bloats the rocky swamp.

Bunkered in a hill, a few cabins, a small chalet, their fine-grained, skinlike mud.

At night, the temperature dives. Winds frenzily slash the rain.

I (too) hover in my room, after our fight, shut down, empty.



*One strand of long river*

Rounding the bend, the familiar daily bend rounding the little lake.

Today the sky is dark. Tall grass prefigures winter, blowing wildly.

Fickle rain (snow inevitable) though the ducks seem calm.

A mower climbs the hill, finishing early.

*Falling-Petals Rock*

Time in one breath stops time, a breath breathed by the three-tiered hill.

The soldiers of Shilla certainly lose out.

Ravaging the town, they'll have to take the peasant girls.

May the brats they produce one day rape their wives.

*But the little house is warm enough*

House of pebble, doll of clay, the cicada's sad, rocking drone.

The sweetness of those years as I lay listening to the wind.

A tinger's claw rips down a tree preparing for a kill. (I dream.)

Luminous flakes, like Christmas spirits, freeze the song of birds.

*Buddha's eight features*

Sloppy braids, leggings clumsy, pigtails I detest.

Pinafore grimy, uglier than a beady-eyed crocodile.

You too, Su, boyish hair knotted, forget that now it's gray.

We dream, but spirits don't bruise, despite a careless carriage driver.

*I apologize to the fox, the rabbit, even the wild weed*

“Someone past her mature years,” describes Saikō, self-derisively, no longer fit to

“await the moon in the west room.”

Opening blue book-binders is, I guess, her “old-age” speed.

Capricious, undirected, scuttling over carnage dragged by the moon from its depths.

Hey. I’ve finally arrived at the point where I can open blue book-binders!

*Winter sun, too weak to heat the chilly rock*

The “silk-socks” of the narcissus or cold of the flowering plum,

in my moon tonight, what would I want with either?

My husband is a brute. The people I tell don't understand.

Demure, forget it. Though effective, its power is too indirect.

*Watching it feed its mother*

Thin alright. But hairy and sickly.

“Who would be interested in my fuzzy cunt?” I complain.

Spring passes. Leaves turn red.

Another Christmas to shuffle around in the empty yard.

*Along with the storm, a flock of snow birds*

Bitter cold. Of course we expected it.

I rock in my rocker, listen to my child prattle to herself.

Someone has given her a set of clamshells polished and painted with scenes.

Their chinking clicks, beside those of the house as the sun warms it.



*White ice turns to dark ice – the color of water*

Snow falls in a thick, day-long shroud.

Children scoop it up, build a raft of Pinocchio-nosed men.

I straighten my daughter's kicked-off bedding. Arrange my New Year's gifts.

My child has developed an extremely sharp eye for her half-shells' subtle patterns, all so similar,  
yet precisely matched to one – and only one – other.

*I can't stop myself from reaching over and pulling the sleeve away  
from her beautiful face*

Night has fallen. The wind is strong and I walk by a brittle moon.

In the steepness of the valley, rapids pound like thunder.

I hide my hands into my huge Tibetan parka. "Their mountains are snowy," the store proprietor had said.

A desolate spot, my garden, where flurries blast the frost-laced trees.

*Lilies on the old lacquer tray*

Caw caw caw. I'm awakened from a messy sleep.

Pillow-marks deep, I look like a mean old woman.

From my window a nebulous shadow, scraping, pushing, what does it want?

Could it be my parakeet that flew away?

*“Round, round the precious blossom cliff”*

The proprietress gladly comments on the sweater she thinks prettiest.

I watch her aging face, wonder what goes through her mind.

With the howling wind, the shop is empty.

Only me, constrained, uncertain.

*Stubby grass, green alright*

Still trying to charm, though the edge is off.

From tiredness or disillusionment, not sure.

The little bit that's left, awkward in one with peppery hair.

Russian princess, not really.

*May breeze and good weather settle in soon*

No peaks tumble down to sea.

No clouds converge as I look back.

The paint chips. The carpets are dirty.

The children may be well-dressed, but they're noisy as hell.

*A vegetarian now*

Why ask about the sea-gulls? You don't actually believe they're wary of you.

You, an old man living in the wilds.

Your greens and boiled millet signify the very position you want.

Filthy old birds, what do they have to do with it?

*I see in my journal I was looking forward to snow*

Pinnacles in clusters, clefted with knobs. Stalactites hang to the ground.

In one of these cubicles an exorcist prays.

Each gorge has a peddler. (He drinks with the boatmen who work the river.)

This bitter cold night, stuffed, soused, the old man's hilarity.



*And we came home a drenched confusion of wild laughter*

Cold rain slaps the tired cypress.

Children romp, scramble up their homemade hill.

Big boulders are heaped about. Rapids collect where a jumble of them block the current.

Someone keeps calling our dog Snowball, a name that sticks – nevermind that his fur is brown.

*Frost deep, roof tiles brittle*

The pinking shears I bought seem dull or perhaps it's my hand, dull with age (or idleness).

Unlike the branch, its departing scent as the day ends.

Soft mud in the swallow's beak, crows instead of warblers in my willow.

Rain comes, then snow, elegant in the declining sun.

*A thousand wings, their shadow*

The temperate blend of creek, hot-spring waters, heat.

An internal pressure altered but unrelieved by winter cold.

Intense quiet, its affluence full.

It did snow while I was at father's, but it only depressed me.

*Sweet Moses, the bulrush*

Before dawn, long before dawn. Early early morning.

By virtue of this joy one is set apart from others.

Yesterday, in an accident, your dear sister, dead.

Late snow. Mudslides. I get goose bumps.

*A dog out to pee, shakes its fur of water, vigorously, but sheepish,  
as if forced into behavior beneath its dignity*

We clatter out at dawn. Scuff scuff. (The monks hurry.)

The *tenken* pounds, which I hear as a great drum.

An old man of seventy, sickle at his waist. When he dreams long dreams, what do you think they're about?

“Tick tick tick . . . it's my own quiet – the sleeve,” he said.

*Sunset: one in the river, one in the sky*

Young and easy, the pairing now makes sense. I'm old, not at all "easy."

I could even say I'm "difficult," more so with the passing years.

I snap at stupidity, refuse to be delayed. If you're late, too bad.

No excuse is good enough to justify inconveniencing me.

*My fichus, for example, now shrouded in crumpled leaves*

All creatures hushed. Water rockets toward earth.

I'm terrified of its shameless maw.

Forced in its path, mangled by boulders.

Dead dead dead. Feathers and foam bubble toward the river-mouth.

*Please don't sweep the autumn leaves that linger around the well*

“Wedgewood.” Yes! Finally, after hours of struggle.

Deeper, deeper, excavating associations, yet the word itself escapes.

Growing old, I marvel at the irrelevancies that flood my mind.

Su, I am charmed. Your “three delights”<sup>18</sup> move me to tears.



*Porridge done, fire out*

My home is made of bristle. Blood pumps, yes.

Already crusty, my eyes see little.

My gate creaks. My parakeet's cage rattles in the wind.

And you. Are you dead yet?

*Flower bells just after sunset*

From a snowdrift, sharp white light.

Alligators, porpoises snap and vanish.

In the dead of quiet, a blue and white current

Fizzles . . . evaporates . . .

*A long and firm sweet flag comes from yesterday's festivities*

Snow hisses down. My fire sputters.

“Jonathan died last May. He was twenty-four,” you say.

A shower of sleet bashes against the glass. A green moon slowly rises.

Caw caw caw. One black crow dominates the northern river.

## Notes

1. “. . . the paradise which the poet T’ao Yuan-ming (365–427) described in his ‘Record of the Peach Flower Spring,’ an isolated valley inhabited by happy peasants and approached through a peach forest in Wu-ling, which a fisherman stumbled upon once but could never find again.” *Su Tung-P’o*, p. 111
2. According to Ayurvedic medicine, a *dosha*, literally “fault” or “mistake,” is one of the three forces [*Vata, Pita, Kapha*] that bind the Five Great Elements to living flesh.
3. “Snow” and “haze” are metaphors for cherry blossoms.
4. One *mou* = one sixth of an acre.
5. “Nam Yi [1441–1468] was a brilliant military leader, and he became the minister of national defense when he was only twenty-six. Those who were envious of his success conspired to use this poem to accuse him of harboring treasonous thoughts, and he was executed by royal order.” *The Moonlit Pond*, p. 51.

The rocks of Mount Paektu will whet my sword;  
My horse will drink up Tuman River.  
If a man of twenty is unable to bring peace to his land.  
Who in later ages will call him a true-born man?

6. In Chinese mythology, an agricultural deity representing the virtues of fire. Also the deity of summer.
7. “According to the tale in the *Sou-shen hou-chi*, a man of Chin times was traveling along the road at nightfall when he saw a new-built grass-roofed hut by the roadside, with a woman gazing at him as he passed. He asked her for a night’s lodging, which she granted. During the night he heard a young boy outside, calling and saying, ‘A-hsiang, the Governor says to haul out your thunder cart!’ The woman excused herself and went out, and later that night there was heavy thunder and rain. Next morning when the man looked at the place where he had spent the night, he saw only a new grave. *Selected Poems of Su Tung-p’o*, p. 61.

8. Children love Ryōkan and recognized his thin, lanky frame from afar. Ryōkan's friend, the poet Yamada Tokō, noted how seeing him, all the children would yell this verse.
9. In Chinese poetry, bamboo is often compared to the dragon.
10. Shallow snow (less than one inch) that does not drive off robins.
11. Bu means "healing."
12. A Confucian dictum has it: "While not married yet a woman must obey her father; once married she must obey her husband; and, after her husband dies, she must obey her son."
13. "Wind and moon" is a metaphor for art and poetry.
14. Another name for the plum tree as well as a metaphor for a beautiful woman.
15. A painting technique Saikō occasionally used to paint bamboo.
16. "Vestal Virgin" or "High Priestess."
17. "Li-Heng of the kingdom of Wu (early third century A.D.) left his heirs an orchard of a thousand orange trees, explaining in his will that they were 'a thousand wooden slaves' that would earn for his descendants a comfortable living." *Su Tung-p'ò*, p. 85.
18. Morning hair-combing, afternoon window-dozing and bedtime feet-soaking.

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