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*The Seasons of Time*

TANKA POETRY OF ANCIENT JAPAN

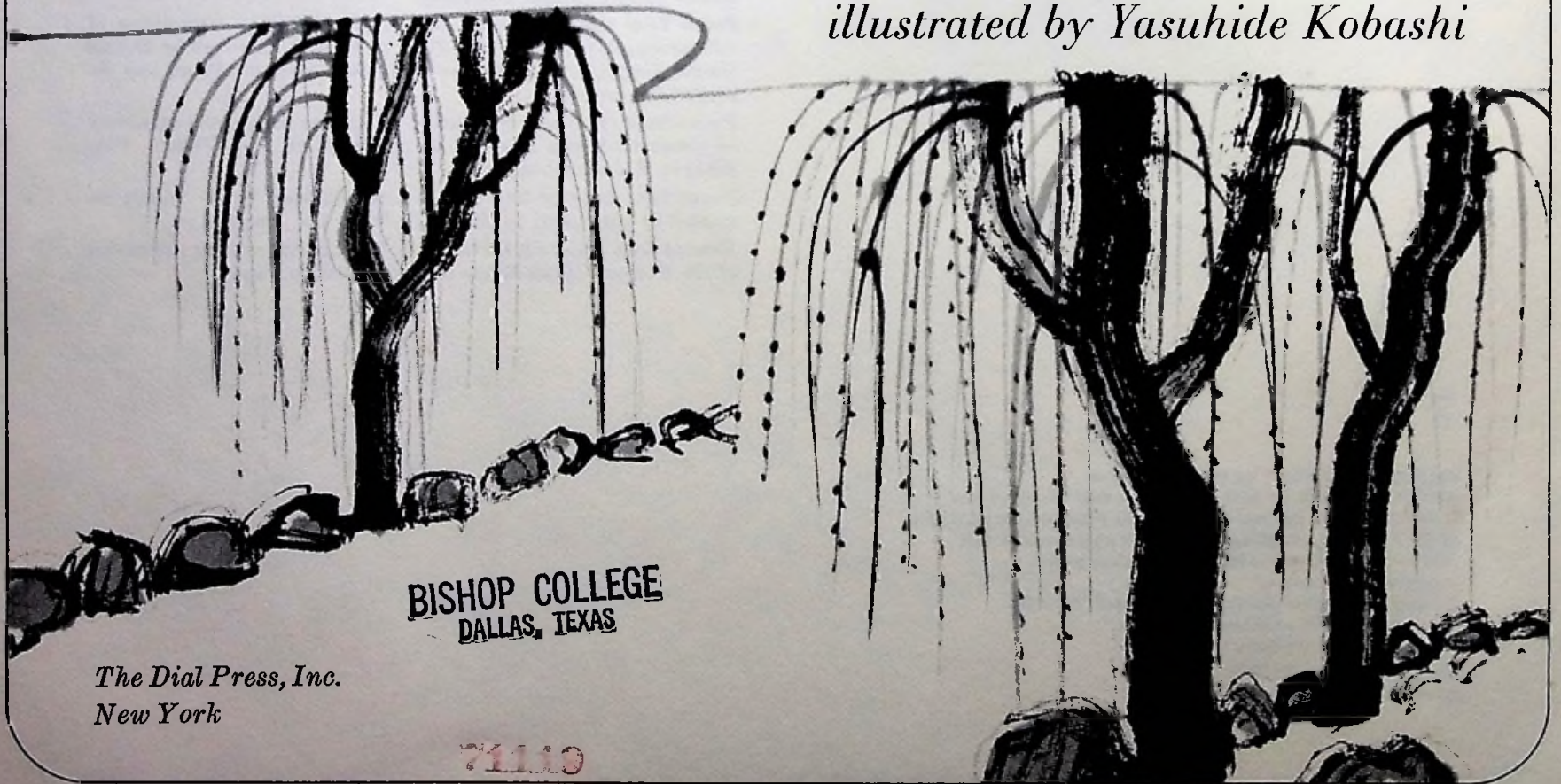




# *The Seasons of Time*

*TANKA POETRY OF ANCIENT JAPAN* edited by *Virginia Olsen Baron*

*illustrated by Yasuhide Kobashi*





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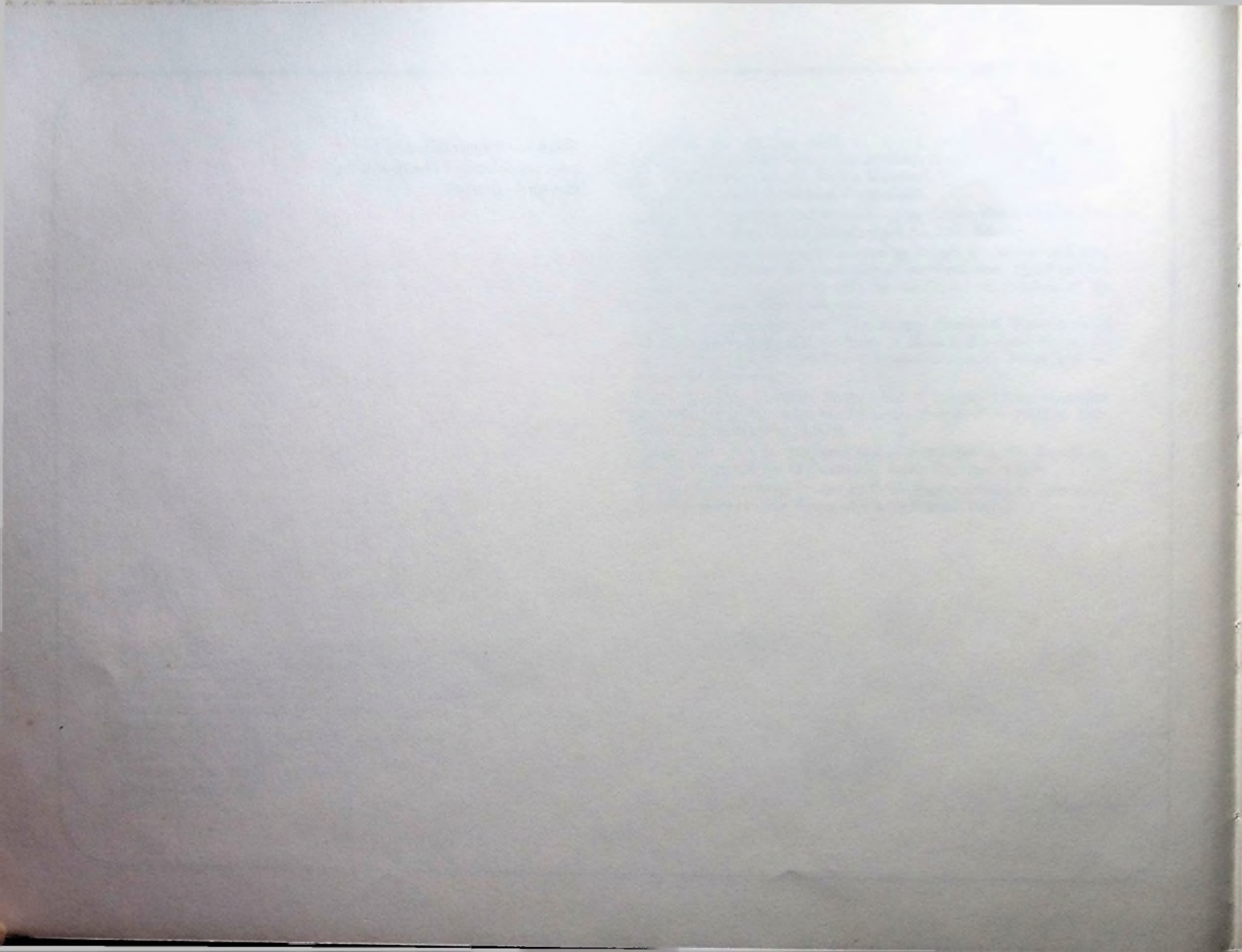
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FIRST PRINTING



*This book is dedicated to  
everyone under the moon in  
the wide heaven*







## *Introduction*

What has changed in our world since the seventh and eighth centuries? One's first answer might be "everything," followed immediately by a second answer, "nothing." Perhaps the true answer dwells somewhere in the land between.

Most of the poems in this anthology were first collected for the *Manyōshū* (*Collection of a Myriad Leaves*) compiled in or about the year 759, and for the *Kokinshū* collection compiled in about 905. Some of the poems date back to the fourth or fifth century, while others were written as late as the twelfth century. What is amazing is that this ancient Japanese poetry is as modern as e. e. cummings, as succinct as Emily Dickinson, as close to us as Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost. And all of this in spite of the imperfections necessitated by translation not only from another language very different in origin from our own but from an ancient form of that language. It is like reading *Beowulf* today except that, astonishingly, the Japanese poets who flourished at the same time in another tradition seem much less remote to us.

In the preface to the *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*), Ki no Tsurayuki (884-946), who collected the poems at the Imperial command of the Emperor Daigo, says that, "The poetry of Japan has its roots in the human heart and flourishes in the countless leaves of words." It should not be forgotten that the Japanese poets, whether courtiers or peasants, were



not writing primitive poetry even in the seventh century. They wrote from a sense of heritage which included a deep understanding of nature and their immediate world. Many of the poets were acquainted with the teachings of Confucius and Buddha, while others, not connected with court life, were familiar with the traditional symbols of Japanese poetry and song. Some of the anonymous poems fall into the realm of folk songs, handed down orally from one generation to another.

Although the seasons in Japan do not change abruptly, each is clearly delineated from the others and each is associated with its own distinct poetic sentiments and has a poetic language of its own. It is of benefit for the western reader to have a slight introduction to the meanings evoked in the Japanese mind by the mention of certain birds, beasts, insects, flowers, and other manifestations of nature which have accompanied their emotional life through the centuries. These form a key, not altogether necessary but enriching, to the enjoyment of Japanese poetry.

One ought to know that the *uguisu*, sometimes called a nightingale and sometimes called a warbler, is a harbinger of spring as are our robins; the *nué*, a night thrush, signals a plaintive note; and when the sound of singing frogs is heard, spring is almost over. The cuckoo, a symbol of true love, brings summer, while the mournful

shrilling of the cicadas warns that summer is dying. The sounds of wild geese crying, the stag calling its mate, crickets chirping in the garden tell the reader that winter draws near. Sanderlings on beaches, wild ducks among the reeds, and the crane's call are sad and sorrowful reminders of melancholy winter.

Plum blossoms (*ume*) are the earliest flower of spring and the symbol of new love beginning; they fall with the last snowflakes. Then come peach blossoms and, after that, the most beloved, cherry blossoms, the symbol both for beauty and for life itself. Spring is finally here covering the ground with violets while the willows turn green overhead. But when the chirping of autumn crickets is heard, a longing for a distant home and friends is awakened. The pine tree represents nobility and the chrysanthemum speaks for autumn and early winter. It is also the personal emblem of the emperor (named so in 797 by the Mikado, who decreed that it could only be used by royalty). Fir trees and heron signify long life or anything enduring. And above all, the moon is a mirror to reflect the face of one's beloved, however near or far away. Japanese poetry has a gentle way of reminding us of the omnipresent sense of mutual sympathy existing between man and nature. In the early nineteenth century we find Wordsworth echoing the same feelings in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."



Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The "tanka" or "short-song" was the poetic form most prevalent in early Japanese poetry collections and is still the most popular form in modern Japan. In spirit, it has been likened to our sonnet although it is only about a third as long. The tanka is a verse of five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Usually Japanese verse is composed of combinations of syllables in fives and sevens. (The hokku, or haiku, which came into use in the seventeenth century, contains seventeen syllables in lines of 5-7-5.) The number of syllables is the only principle of Japanese poetry. There is no note taken of stress, pitch, length of syllables, or rhyme. All but one of the poems in this collection are written in *tanka* form. Although there were longer poems called *naga-uta* in the early collections, they were few in proportion to tanka (the *Manyōshū* contains 4,173 tanka and 324 *naga-uta*) and the form almost disappears after the eighth century.

Translating ancient Japanese texts into modern English is, as we have already noted, difficult. Some of the earlier texts were written completely in Chinese char-

acters, others were written in a combination of Chinese and Japanese characters for this was a period of transition in the history of Japan. The Japanese grammatical constructions must be completely reversed in translation in order to make sense in English. The Japanese language is rich in homonyms and many of these double meanings must be sacrificed along with shadings of words which do not exist in English, not to mention the difficulties presented by idioms, rhetorical devices, and the like which are often stumbling blocks for the translator. In spite of all the difficulties, with only the bare and simple meanings in some cases, and with attempts to remain true to the spirit of the poem in other cases, the poetry emerges as a source of delight and beauty.

Tsurayuki ended his preface to the *Kokinshū* with these words:

Hitomaro is gone. His poetry remains. Time may pass, and seasons change; pleasure and pain may come and go. These poems, written, stand! As the long thread-like leaves of the willow, forever renewed; as the needles of the pine, eternally green; as the tendrils of creepers that cover the fields in endless profusion; as bird-tracks that multiply in the sand by the sea-



shore of time: even so Poetry shall forever last. And men who know its form and feature, and who understand its heart, will worship the poetry of old even as we do the moon in the wide heaven; but will not fail to love as well the poetry of today.<sup>1</sup>

After reading these poems written a thousand years ago, we ask ourselves again, what has changed? Not the

birds, not the trees, not the flowers, not the snow, not the rain. Nor the wind, stars, sea, sun, and moon. And not the seasons. Is it only people then, who are different? The poets talked of love and loneliness, of yearnings and sorrows, of dreams and hopes. What has changed, after all?

<sup>1</sup>Translated by C. H. Page in *Japanese Poetry*, page 43.



Each season, more lovely,  
Eight thousand kinds of bushes,  
Trees and flowers blossom,  
And the voices of the singing birds even change.  
Each time we hear it with our ears  
And see it with our eyes,  
And still sighing within, we bend down,  
Heartshaken, longing and yearning while living on.  
In the dark shade of the trees,  
When the fourth moon stands up,  
Hidden in the night,  
The crying cuckoo should be a real young of the  
    nightingale,  
As is handed down since olden times.  
The young girls will thread the sweetflag  
And the orange into chaplets.  
Radiant during the whole radiant day,  
That cuckoo flies over the many tops of the hills,  
Till he faces the moon of early morning,  
Going and turning,  
He sings resounding.  
Should I ever get enough of it?

YAKAMOCHI







*Spring*

*HARU*









If it were not for the voice  
Of the nightingale,  
How would the mountain village  
Where the snow is still unmelted  
Know the spring?

LADY NAKATSUKASA

With the spreading mists  
The treebuds swell in early spring  
And wet snow petals fall—  
So even my flowerless country village  
Already lies beneath its fallen flowers.

TSURAYUKI

Above the water  
Gliding softly down the rocks,  
The buds of bracken  
Burgeoning in tender green—  
Spring has come already!

PRINCE SHIKI

With voice unceasing  
Sing, O nightingale!  
In one year  
Even as much as twice  
Can Spring come?

FUJIWARA NO OKIKAZE



Do those girls set out  
On some excursion for young shoots,  
That they so gaily beckon,  
Waving their white linen sleeves  
Toward the green fields of ancient Kasuga?

TSURAYUKI

The wild geese returning  
Through the misty sky—  
Behold, they look like  
A letter written  
In faint ink!

TSUMORI KUNIMOTO

Now it is spring—  
And across the moors the haze  
Stretches heavily—  
And within these rays at sunset,  
A warbler fills the radiant mist with song.

YAKAMOCHI











When I went out  
In the Spring meadows  
To gather violets,  
I enjoyed myself  
So much that I stayed all night.

AKAHITO

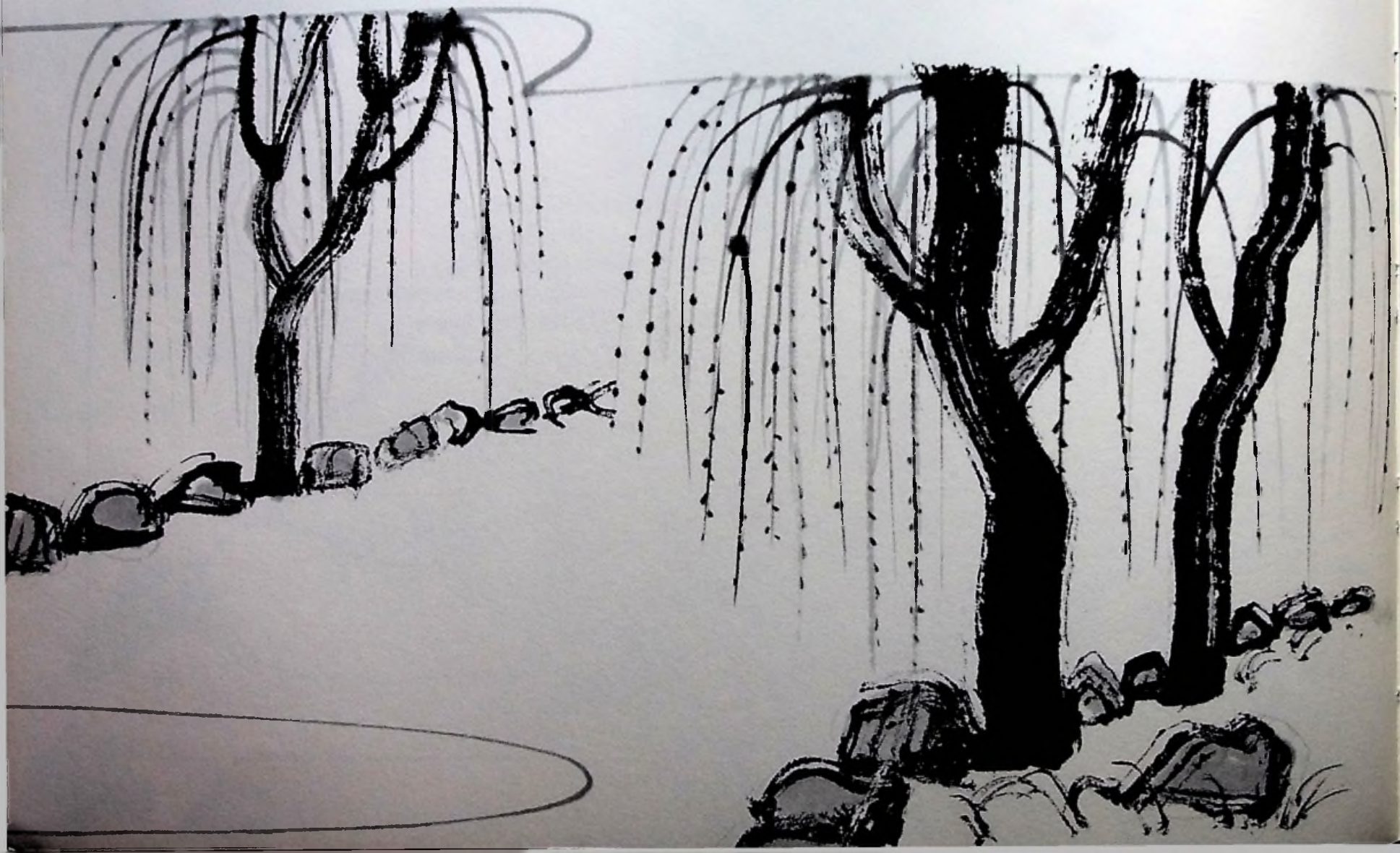
Clear is the bottom of the lake,  
That mirrors the wistaria bloom;  
And there in those sunken pebbles  
I see countless gems.

YAKAMOCHI

In the fields of spring,  
The nightingales sing.  
To gain their friendship,  
The plum blossoms have burst open  
In the garden of my house.

ANON.







The spring rain  
Which hangs to the branches  
Of the green willow  
Looks like pearls  
Threaded on a string.

LADY ISE

The rotten-wooded willow  
At the road side  
When spring comes,  
Yearns bitterly for old times.

SUGUWARA NO MICHIZANE

Can it be that there is no moon  
And that spring is not  
The spring of old,  
While I alone remain  
The same person ?

NARIHIRA



In the eternal  
Light of the spring day  
The flowers fall away  
Like the unquiet heart.

KI NO TOMONORI

In one petal of this flower,  
I have concealed  
Hundreds of words.  
Do not think foolishly of them!

HIROTSUGU

Within one petal of this flower,  
Hundreds of words  
Can surely not be held.  
Would it not be broken off?

ANSWER BY THE YOUNG WOMAN  
TO WHOM THE POET SENT THE  
FLOWER

The cherry blossoms  
Of the tenantless house  
On the reed plain  
Must with an easy heart  
Fall in the wind.

YEKEI HOSHI











The bridge of dreams  
Floating on the brief spring night  
Soon breaks off:  
Now from the mountaintop a cloud  
Takes leave into the open sky.

TEIKA

As now I come  
And see the spring day grow to dusk  
In the mountain hamlet,  
The cherry blossoms fall to earth  
At the sounding of a temple's vesper bell.

NŌIN



Mirrored in the waters of the Kamunabi River,  
Where the song-frogs call,  
Do they bloom now—those flowers of the yellow  
rose?

PRINCE ATSUMI

The flowers to the tree's root,  
The birds to their old nest  
Have returned;  
But whither spring has gone  
No man knows.

EMPEROR SUTOKU

The plum blossoms have opened,  
But what is still in bud,  
Is my hidden longing.  
Does it wait for the snow?

ANON.



*Summer*

*NATSU*









In the leafy treetops  
Of the summer mountain  
The cuckoo calls—  
Oh, how far off his echoing voice!

YAKAMOCHI

On summer nights  
When I wonder "Shall I go to bed?"  
At the single note sung  
By the cuckoo,  
Dawn suddenly breaks!

TSURAYUKI

The men of valor  
Have gone to the honorable hunt:  
The ladies  
Are trailing their red petticoats  
Over the clean sea-beach.

AKAHITO







As I row over the plain  
Of the sea and gaze  
Into the distance, the waves  
Merge with the bright sky.

FUJIWARA NO TADAMICHI

Come, companions!  
Quick to Yamato!  
The pine on the beach of Mitu  
Will wait impatiently for us.

OKURA

Standing or sitting,  
I know not what to do.  
Though I tread the earth,  
My heart is in the skies.

ANON.

Would my house were on the cliff  
Of Suminoye!  
I should be happy always watching  
The white waves drawing near  
To the shore of the open sea.

ANON.

Gossip grows like weeds  
In a summer meadow.  
My girl and I  
Sleep arm in arm.

HITOMARO



If only the world  
Would always remain this way,  
Some fishermen  
Drawing a little rowboat  
Up the river bank.

MINAMOTO NO SANETOMO

Like my cupped hands  
Spilling drops back into the mountain pool  
And clouding its pure waters  
Before the satisfaction of my thirst,  
So have I had to part from you too soon.

TSURAYUKI

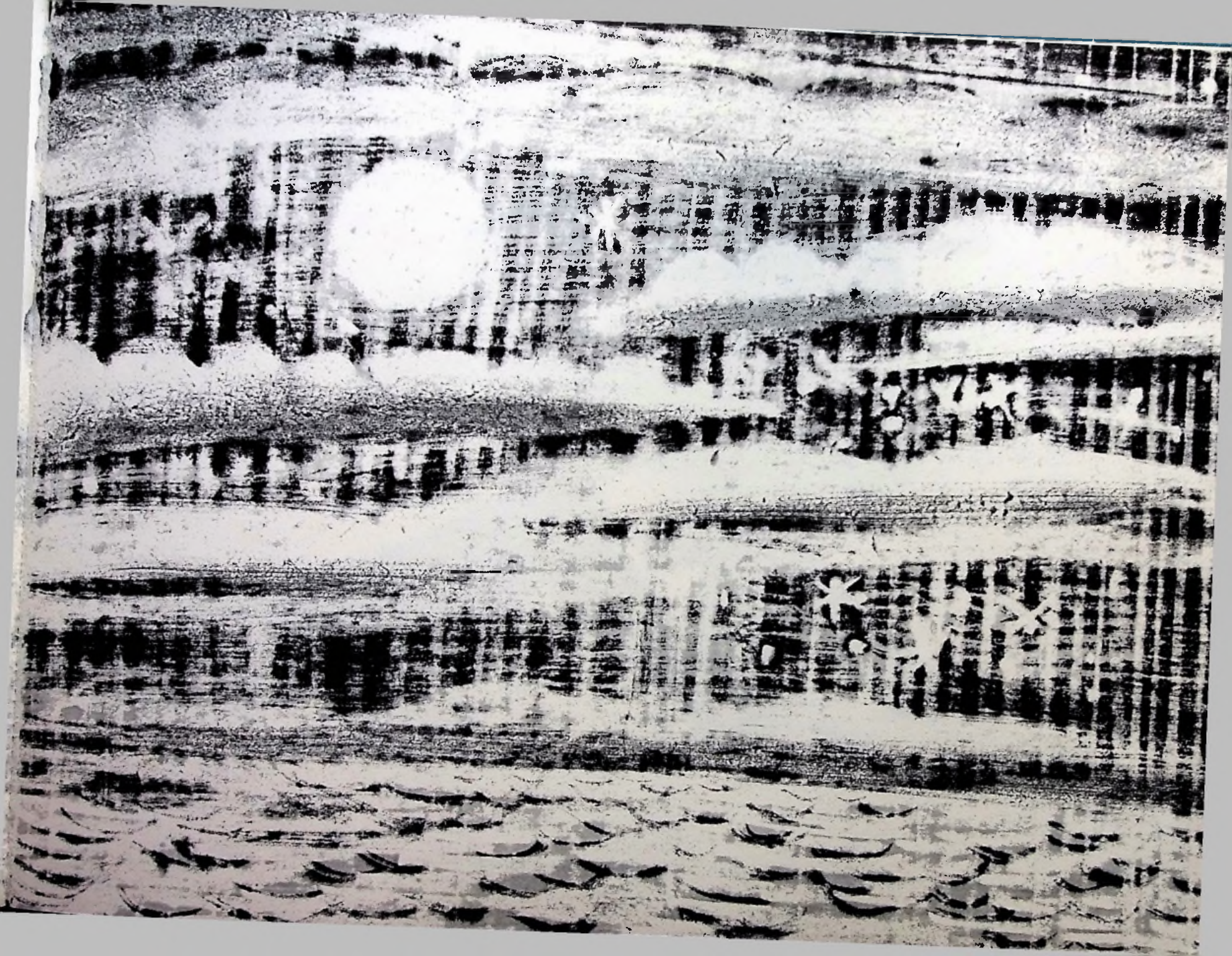
We have seen the sun  
Make colored banners of the clouds  
As it set in the sea—  
If only now that darkness falls  
The radiant moon will fill the night.

EMPEROR TENCHI

On the sea of heaven the waves of cloud arise,  
And the moon's ship is seen sailing  
To hide in a forest of stars.

HITOMARO







*Autumn*

*AKI*

秋



Here where the wild ducks  
Sport in the pond,  
The leaves fall from the trees  
And float—but no floating heart  
Have I who love you true.

TANIHA ŌME

A passing shower  
Has fallen on the garden grass;  
And I hear the voice  
Of the crickets singing—  
Autumn is here.

ANON.

Even for the space of a flash  
Of lightning  
That flashes over the corn ears  
Of an autumn field,—  
Can I forget you?

ANON.

Turned towards the moon  
In the dark night,  
The cuckoo's crying voice  
Sounds remote and faint.  
Is it because my village is so far away?

YAKAMOCHI

After the storm  
On Mount Mimuro,  
The colored leaves  
Float like brocade  
On the River Tatsuta.

NŌIN







Because the mist  
Has risen from the river to conceal  
The lower slopes,  
The autumn-colored peaks appear  
Suspended floating in the sky.

KIYOWARA FUKAYABU

Although both grasses and trees  
Change color,  
For the wave-flowers  
Of the great sea  
There is no autumn.

FUNYA NO YASUhide

I shall miss you most  
When twilight brings the rising mists  
To hang upon the reeds  
And as the evening darkens cold  
With mallards' cries across the marsh.

ANON.







Startled  
By a single scream  
Of the crane which is reposing  
On the surface of the swamp,  
All the other birds are crying.

SAIGYO HŌSHI

When I count  
The waves illuminated by the moon which shines  
On the face of the water,  
Tonight indeed must be the very middle of autumn!

MINAMOTO NO SHITAGŌ

Out in the marsh reeds  
A bird cries out in sorrow,  
As though it had recalled  
Something better forgotten.

TSURAYUKI

Will it go crying  
To Yamato?  
The Yobuko bird.  
Ah, calling it crosses over  
The Naka hills of Kisa!

FURUBITO

As evening falls,  
From along the moors the autumn wind  
Blows chill into the heart,  
And the quails raise their plaintive cry  
In the deep grass of secluded Fukakusa.

SHUNZEI



In the mountain village  
The wind rustles the leaves.  
Deep in the night, the deer  
Cry out beyond the edge of dreams.

MINAMOTO NO MOROTADA

In the empty mountains  
The leaves of the bamboo grass  
Rustle in the wind.  
I think of a girl  
Who is not here.

HITOMARO

The deer which lives  
On the evergreen mountain  
Where there are no autumn leaves  
Can know the coming of autumn  
Only by its own cry.

ONAKATOMI YOSHINOBU

In the evening calm the cranes search for prey,  
But when the tide comes in,  
The waves of the open sea rise so high  
That each calls its own mate.

ANON.







Upon the mountain edge  
Noisy as a flock of teal  
Though we are walking,  
I am lonely, ah!  
Because you are not here.

EMPEROR OKAMOTO

In the evening  
The rice leaves in the garden  
Rustle in the autumn wind  
That blows through my reed hut.

MINAMOTO NO TSUNENOBU

In my loneliness  
I step outside my hut and gaze  
In quiet reverie,  
But everywhere it is the same:  
The melancholy autumn dusk.

RYŌZEN

In a gust of wind the white dew  
On the Autumn grass  
Scatters like a broken necklace.

FUNYA NO ASAYASU







There is a fading time  
For blossoming flowers.  
But the worthless roots  
Of the reeds of the mountains,  
Exist a long time!

ANON.

How will you manage  
To cross alone  
The autumn mountain  
Which was so hard to get across  
Even when we went the two of us together?

PRINCESS DAIHAKU

While I stay alone,  
Feeling weary and forlorn,  
Longing after you,  
The autumn breeze comes blowing,  
And the moon sinks to the west.

ANON.



*Winter*

*FUYU*









The white chrysanthemum  
Is disguised by the first frost.  
If I wanted to pick one  
I could find it only by chance.

MITSUNE



Magnificent snow  
Has fallen here at my place.  
But at your tumbledown old village of Ōhara,  
If ever, later it will fall.

EMPEROR TEMMU

It was I who did command  
The Dragon God of these hills  
To send down the snow,  
Whereof a few fragments, perchance,  
Were sprinkled over your home.

ANSWER BY THE LADY FUJIWARA

Like a wave crest  
Escaped and frozen,  
One white egret  
Guards the harbor mouth.

EMPEROR UDA

Yonder in the plum tree,  
Fluttering from branch to branch,  
The warbler sings;  
And white on his wings falls  
Airy snow.

ANON.







This evening so cold and chill  
That the mallards' wings are white with frost  
As they skim the reedy shore,  
How I think of Yamato!

PRINCE SHIKI

When the frost lies white  
Upon fields where travelers  
Must find their shelter,  
O flock of heavenly cranes,  
Cover my child with your wings!

ANON.











How sad this road  
Covered over with the obscuring snow,  
Where not a person passes,  
Where not a trace remains to mark the course  
Of travel through a world of fading hopes.

MITSUNE

To be old—  
Now amid the swirling snow  
I understand:  
No one comes to visit me;  
There is no place to go.

TEIKA

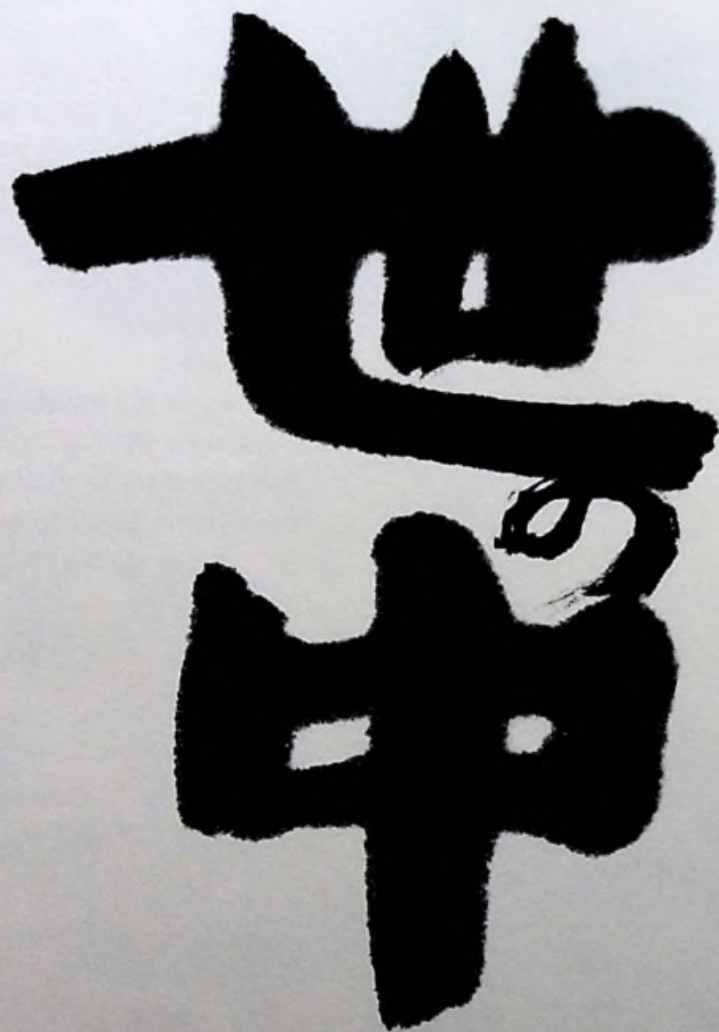
I have always known  
That at last I would  
Take this road, but yesterday  
I did not know that it would be today.

NARIHIRA



*This World*

YO NO NAKA





To what shall I compare  
This world?  
To the white wake behind  
A ship that has rowed away  
At dawn!

MANSEI







As for this world,  
That way or this way—  
It is the same thing;  
For both palace and cottage  
Come to nothing in the end.

SEMIMARU

My existence in the world has been  
As the reflection of the moon  
Which lodges in water  
Gathered in the palm of the hand,  
About which one doubts whether it is there or not!

TSURAYUKI

A thing which fades  
With no outward sign—  
Is the flower  
Of the heart of man  
In this world!

ONO NO KOMACHI



Since I am convinced  
That reality is in no way  
Real,  
How am I to admit  
That dreams are dreams?

SAIGYO HŌSHI

One of us may feel  
That life holds only pain, and another  
That our lot is shameful,  
Yet since we are not birds, but men,  
We cannot find escape in flight.

OKURA

O pine tree standing  
At the side of the stone house,  
When I look at you,  
It is like seeing face to face  
The men of old time.

HAKUTSŪ











In my delight to see  
The moon come up between the trees,  
I wish only that  
I might live west of those western hills  
And watch its rising sooner still.

BY A COURT LADY WHOSE NAME  
WE DO NOT KNOW

How I yearn to be  
Unalterably what once I was,  
Immovable as a rock,  
But because I belong to this world,  
There is no stop to time.

OKURA

When I see the pine trees,  
Standing along the road in a row,  
It is like those,  
Whom I left at home,  
Seeing me off!

ANON.







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