

# 100 Poems Imitating 100 Translations



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May 17, 2021

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## What Is This?—An Introduction

THESE poems are responses to / retellings of the translations of 100 classic Japanese poems by my good friend John Gribble, published in “100 Poets, One Song Each: The *Ogawa Hyakunin Isshu* of Fujiwara no Teika.” Each of my poems responds to one in his book, in the same order.

For each poem, I first copied it into a text editor, and then I permitted it to sit in my mind—or perhaps more accurately I allowed it to work its spell on me. Then I tried to write a poem that captured the mood and essence of the original but adapted to my life and circumstances. I tried to retain some link—either a word, phrase, or notion—from the original. I did not try to retain any of the formal structure.

Most of the landscape imagery derives from Shetland, the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts, and New England; some is from Japan; and one is from Holcomb, Kansas, where the wind never stops.

A translation of a poem is an imitation: a poem in one language imitating one in another. My poems are in the language of my experiences, my language—so my poems here are translations of translations, and perhaps they could be appropriately called *100 Imitations of 100 Imitations*.

### Background

The *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* is an anthology of one hundred *waka* or *tanka*, short poems compiled by poet-scholar Fujiwara no Teika some time in the 1230s CE. A concise collection, it includes “perfectly turned verse” on the natural world. It is an excellent introduction to Classical Japanese poetry.

Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) was a leading literary figure of his time. He was not only a significant poet, but an acknowledged expert on literature and language. He was the first editor to compile two of the twenty-one Imperial poetry collections commissioned between c. 785 and c. 1439. His influence was so great that his descendants continued to be considered authorities, based in part on their possession of his manuscripts.

The poems were written over a five-hundred-year period, from the Nara Era (710–794) into the first half of the Kamakura Era (1185–1333). The poets were mainly members of the aristocracy. The group includes several emperors and one reigning empress.

John Gribble is a poet and musician. A native of Southern California, he has lived in Tokyo since 1993. His work appears internationally and his books include *Ueno Mornings* and *Another Wrong Fedora*. John and I were classmates at Warren Wilson College, where we both earned MFA degrees in Creative Writing.

## Sheltered Harvest

Autumn / I live simply  
my hut is crude  
its thatched roof leaks  
but at least the harvest  
is sheltered in the end of the hut  
closer to the sea / a sea  
that leaks into the inlets  
that wrinkle my mind  
my sleeve<sup>1</sup> is wet from dew  
or tears / my heart

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<sup>1</sup>See Poem 90.

## Wet and White

Spring has gone by  
Summer has sprung up  
on a line as if between the two  
our clothes are draped for drying  
everything is blinding white and mysterious  
near a sacred mountain  
whose name has been forgotten

## Mountain Past

like the bird  
with a long tail feather  
dragging behind it  
at the edge of a field  
I drag my feet  
on this mountain pass  
ahead is my long night  
I wonder who will come  
no one? / sleep?



## Chocorua Mountain Highway

near Mt Chocorua  
at the sad end of  
Chocorua Lake alone  
I was taken by the white cloak  
covering the summit above  
taken by the still-falling snow

## Crimson Leaves

from this hilltop  
I watch a higher ridge  
the leaves there gold and crimson  
a coyote howls  
I hear his pain / his desire  
the sound pushes through the leaves  
makes all clear  
Autumn is the time of sadness

## Such Colors

late afternoon on a cool  
trending cold day  
the high bridge over the gorge  
reaches out  
a long-tailed magpie white and black  
trending blue drifts over the bridge  
away from me / the frost coats  
the bridge and ground  
as the evening turns old  
everything grows white

## Stone Dark

night is a dark field  
darkened before me  
I stare into it and imagine  
a decaying stone croft  
the old woman who lived there I once knew  
I imagine also  
the croft and her standing next to it  
lit by this same rising moon

**Skaw**

I write in Unst  
atop a hill in a croft  
I remade overlooking  
a part of the North Sea

*he's abandoned us*  
I hear some people have said  
*for that desolation*  
*for that hilltop*  
for those words

## Narrowing Road

along the narrow road  
these blossoms' colors  
have faded / their vanity evaporated  
their glory a past pleasure  
my worn body too  
now faces the longing  
the long long rains

## Hey

this pier is the place  
of leaving / returning  
parting from people  
some we know / some not  
how we know comes and goes  
with the tides

## Past Out Skerries

the sea beyond Bressay  
is an uncertain wavering meadow  
in my yoal I ventured out  
now I wish I had begged  
someone left behind  
to tell those I left behind  
how a boat took me away



## Sky Paths

between me and the dancing girls  
a light fog has risen above  
the dip that separates me from them  
I cannot see them mostly  
I've called on a divine wind  
to come up from the west  
and close the paths the fog takes  
that I might watch them longer  
more intently

## Forked River

I have two minds  
from a doubled peak  
ideas tumble and flow  
one is about love  
the others are about you  
my desire for you  
is trapped in a deep pool  
is it a passionate pool?

## Puzzle

she gave me her headscarf  
a printed pattern of tangled ferns  
green on bone  
a mixed feeling affair  
a love still secret

## Herbs

into the herb garden  
green in the Spring  
I go to get grandmother's herbs  
when I return to her kitchen  
her gray hair shining white  
I point to my sleeve  
the white flakes there  
I say it's the snow

## Mountainous

she came to stand beside me  
from this ridge we looked  
to another / here just  
a meadow but there  
maples and pines  
she held her place  
I must go I told her  
but if you grieve  
and this I learn  
I will hasten to return  
with this the wind freshened

## Long Red Road

one day a big wind  
came down our valley  
maples red and yellow  
leaning out over a slow  
part of the river  
dropped their reds  
the yellows hung on  
like lovers reluctant  
about the logic of love  
the river flowed crimson  
a thousand year thing

## Light Fall

we walk  
she and I  
carefully along the shore  
in yellow sunlight  
all can see but who does  
we walk  
she and I  
carefully along the shore  
in crimson dreams  
we cannot hide our love  
either place  
waves approaching the shore  
carry nightfall  
yellow turns crimson

## Impossible Gap

I said goodbye to her  
along the rock shores  
south of the bay  
Autumn turning colder  
those stones so small  
the spaces between so small  
after that and other farewells  
we cannot share  
even that much time  
together / it is too close between



**Grief!**

once upon a time  
the pieces of our love affair  
came like waves just before  
a great and furious storm  
instead now that drama has passed  
grief like a morning calm  
separates us as never before  
we can now never meet

## As If a Priest

you said you'd visit  
come in the night when the moon  
was full / come in that October  
night when the frost refused  
to yield / I waited by the tree  
and then by the pond / awake  
I watched for you / then  
the moon dipped and the sun rose

## Storm and Destruction

storm

mountain wind in late Autumn

grass knocked flat

trees whipped

a deep-seated argument

destruction

branches broken

windows shattered

a love ended

## Moon Viewing

the blue-tinged sky and moon within  
every one of those thousand things  
that make a thousand thoughts  
can bring tears  
alone I view all this

you / still

I'm not the only one  
whom Autumn affects this way

## Brocade

nothing in my pockets  
nothing in my sack  
above I fear the gods  
await my offering  
hoping for their usual pleasure  
all I have is what I see above me  
on this grave mountainside  
brocade of red and yellow leaves

## Mount Rendezvous

I texted her  
please join me  
we call the tall hill  
Mount Rendezvous  
I needed her  
I needed to be wrapped  
around her like a voracious vine  
the name is perfect  
wool blanket on the peat  
both words / Mount Rendezvous

## Past Snowfall

I asked Mt Chocorua  
to save my love  
she will arrive after the first  
snowfall / she will relent  
I know if the maples  
remain Autumn color  
even under a Winter tinge  
she is that poetic

## Meadow Near

you wouldn't think  
that rain here  
even rain that obstinate  
would froth the river so  
bright after rain  
I saw her walking on the far bank  
walk then stop  
let the river enter her memory  
then resume  
when will I see her again?



## Worst Ever

Winter desolation  
the day you left  
our high place on a mighty mountain  
you left down the mountain path  
I watched the grass wither  
as you went away

## Whiteness

tonight I want to bring  
her freshcut blossoms from the meadow  
by the quick river  
the colors to soften her

but the season's first frost  
has disguised the colored blooms  
as pure white chrysanthemums

it is now up to my heart  
to guess / yes to guess

## In The Sunrise

moon setting at dawn  
throwing its light  
somewhere else  
a cold cold parting  
moon-drop took it all  
alone I watch them both  
daybreak brought nothing  
but your absent affection

## Light or White

we woke / light of dawn  
opposite the lingering moon  
outside our pearl-lit door  
Winter cold / we looked down on a vision  
of a white town by the harbor

no / wait

it is from the snow

**Many, Strong, Narrow, Shallow, Red**

many maples  
strong wind  
narrow mountain stream  
shallow stream  
now a small dam  
between the two banks  
the water blocked  
held captive  
by red maple leaves

## Chaos Scattering

there is order  
in the eternal sky  
its light though fading  
still fills the day  
a Spring day  
are there degrees of perfect?  
still blooms scatter  
in what wind there is  
after they have added their  
distinctiveness to the perfection  
we cannot help  
fearing that chaos

## Merrimac Town

how many have I loved  
many and even more loved  
me I think  
death took them all  
Merrimac has pines  
as old as me  
but none of them  
are my friends

## Perfume

I believed she loved me  
those times in the back room  
in the Winter  
we stayed over by the shore  
her heart drifted  
since then mine has too  
still I return to find  
the old plum blooming  
the air full of its perfume



## Moon Rest

toward the red horizon  
sun arriving  
toward another red horizon  
moon departing  
a mid-Summer night  
it feels like early evening  
behind which cloud  
is the moon resting?

## Autumn Field

in the field of timothy  
the flowerheads are glittering  
with dewdrops and shining white  
in the wind whipped field  
the sun sits them down in a line  
and to the two of us at the edge  
of the field they seem like  
scattered pearls snapped from a string  
trembling with surprise and delight

## She Hate Me

after years together  
you cast me aside  
you vowed to hate and despise  
in place of love and respect  
this doesn't bother me much  
I worry after you  
sacred vows people make  
sometimes eat away and haunt

## Bamboo Hidden

my calm self  
is the tall coarse meadow grass  
my fiery love is bamboo  
I hide the one in the other  
to keep from you  
and everyone else  
my feelings / my desire  
how long can I continue  
in this mask?

## Give Away

*who are you thinking about?*  
my face a new color  
as passion rises and falls  
I try to hide my feelings  
but exposed as they are  
everyone presumes to ask

**Boxed**

I fell for the wrong woman  
that's what people tell me  
I wanted to keep it secret  
so my reputation's at risk  
what gave my feelings away?

## Tear-Soaked Sleeves

I promised her  
she promised back  
a ritual of tears wiped dry  
by sleeves / imagine it  
our love will endure  
despite this after all  
even if the last mountain  
is washed over by the sea

## Afterwards

they made me recall  
the feelings after  
the time together  
what I was like  
before we ever met



## Good Always

enough sweetness  
has passed between us  
that an unhappy end  
would have no room  
for resentment or anger  
neither from her  
nor from me  
such were our meetings

## Expectations

as I ready for death  
I plan a solitude  
I notice pity from all around  
but they say it's kindness  
I've heard I'm stupid / a fool  
you have never shown me pity

## Downstream

a small boat  
crossing an angry river  
near the straits / near the rocks  
the boatman can lose his rudder  
lose control / drift downstream

so with true love's path

## Layered Creeping Vines

staying here so long  
a small hut not far  
from a layered forest  
creeping vines cover it  
and me / lost in loneliness  
I cannot see the world  
can hardly see myself  
cannot see what love  
that may have been  
is it Autumn yet?

## Slamming A Spire

one night my grief  
hit you like a windstorm  
seething into a stony crag  
you laughed it off  
for you it dissipated  
not for me  
now it's shattered / no parts still whole  
the passion I had  
once for you

## Lively Fire and Lovely

we placed good peat  
against the burnstone  
in our hearth / the one  
we've shared around  
for all our time together  
it burns slowly burns  
through the night  
as daybreak comes  
the flames have died down  
just as it is between us

## A Deal With God

before  
if you had needed it  
I would have given up  
my pitiful existence  
for your sake  
since  
our long life together  
is what I fully desire

## **Artemisia Vulgaris or Mugwort**

even writing this  
could drive me to moxibustion  
to bring some relief  
to ward off evil spirits  
to stop my heart bleeding  
to purge my stomach of impurities  
to lure you in

but you remain unaffected  
by this fire in my feelings



## Dawn Paints

all night we did it  
every way anyone could think of  
dawn's pomegranate orange  
enshrines our love scene  
sure / sunset will return  
night will return  
I resent however  
the day's approach

## Alone Ness

nights I sleep alone  
days there are empty rooms  
always I am sighing  
the last time you stayed here  
another season  
or one before that  
but what do you care

## After Touch

sometimes we promise  
such as *I'll never leave you*  
when it's said now  
that's the moment I live in  
the future is just an idea  
prediction is just a guess  
I choose not to live beyond today

## In A Narrow Valley

up an old path  
up the side of an old mountain  
there was once a waterfall  
long long ago its source dried  
it's sound long long ago died  
but its name survives  
in stories / in stories still  
told today

## Memories Last

someone said  
*each world seeps into the next*  
a fade-out coupled with a fade-in  
in a too-short time I will so seep / so fade  
visit me once more  
one more meeting / my friend  
give me one more memory to take

## On My Street

from my stone-lined window  
on the cobbled street by the harbor  
on one of Winter's coldest evenings  
I thought I saw an old friend  
coming to visit but instead  
she disappeared into  
midnight's moonlight

## The Farm / A Field

on a farm I once loved  
in field of full-grown timothy  
a wind is blowing  
the rustle of a woman listing past  
how could I forget you

## Until

were you supposed  
to arrive / I waited up  
I should have slept  
that would have been better  
the evening collapsed around me  
sitting up / lying down  
at last the moon set



## Obscurity

from one far place  
to another far place  
the trip is long and requires  
a note from Mother  
I didn't take the trip  
I didn't even go to Heaven's Bridge<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>*Ama-no-Hashidate* ("Bridge to Heaven") is a wooded sandbar crossing Miyazu Bay in northern Kyoto Prefecture—considered one of the three finest views in Japan.

## Eight Then Nine

imagine the most fragrant  
flowers perhaps jasmine  
or cherry blossoms eightfold  
more fragrant than you can recall  
then imagine those blossoms  
blessing your marriage bed  
with their fine perfume  
imagine the woman who deserves this

## Or A Gate

sunrise is hours away  
your side of the bed is cooling  
you said you heard a rooster  
outside the window  
you got up and opened  
the back door / a ploy  
to leave me / the first  
ferry off the island  
leaves at dawn

## Card

I sent her a card  
picked out from a forlorn storefront  
telling her my passion's  
been ordered dropped  
by the other  
it was a card of grief  
sending my sympathy  
better that than  
face to face

## Fish And Mist

I woke before dawn  
dawn's light held  
over the river mist  
little by little  
I could see the tops  
of wooden stakes  
come into view  
fishing weirs

I thought of you

## Wet and Rotten

a bad idea / was  
me and you  
I cry into my sleeves  
tear-soaked sleeves  
our love is rotten too  
grief and resentment  
equals my life today  
my good name  
who cares any more

## Don't We

we shared our mourning space  
by the rock shelf by the sea  
we shared our dissolved friend  
in a pool melancholy  
not far away a lady slipper  
under a short pine  
her pink petal like a pouch  
more dear to me now  
than any person  
living or not

## Pointless

some things should not be loved  
you dear are one of those  
my reputation would be out the window  
had I realized the dream I had  
last early Spring when the nights  
were still short / to lay  
my head on your arm



## After She Left

what I want and how I feel  
don't fit well  
in our crude flawed fleeting world  
I want more / for example  
lonely moonlight at midnight

## A Brutal Gust

after a long love  
things remained unsettled  
Autumn / maples red to yellow  
a storm came running up  
blew those leaves into our river  
my river / a long beautiful brocade

## And You?

as twilight deepens  
a mist rises from the just-cut field  
in my small hut my loneliness  
likewise deepens / I rise  
to go outside / all around  
all is the same in a washed out  
gray way / bleak Autumn twilight

## In The Evening

from across the fields  
from roads radiating away from me  
tumbleweeds come calling  
knocking against my windows  
my doors / the winds of Autumn blow

## You Beach

the coast has tough waves  
capricious / they approach strangely  
without warning / I don't play  
with them / I won't play  
with you / I'll avoid wet  
salty sleeves

## Don't Dare

this Autumn the leaves  
are full colored and hanging  
on branches on mountains  
the morning draws mists  
from the fields and from hillsides  
I plead with them  
do not block my view

## A Place

there's a rise near the sea  
where lovers love and storms  
empty their careless thoughtless  
mean tempests / my long gone  
love was like that rise  
a hoarse withering blast  
after or before a still  
repose / this is not  
what I prayed for

## Your Promise

what you told me means nothing  
just sweat to keep evil away  
I swear grief has overtaken me  
this Autumn / but the season  
will soon pass



## Indistinguishable

have you noticed  
that the distant sky  
its clouds / the white-capped  
far sea-plain cannot be seen  
apart / may we travel like this

**Trust**

the river / our canoe trip  
rapids / the rock  
blocking / dividing  
steep cascades / falls  
we separated / we will  
be united

## Crow Sounds

ravens make their calls  
in many voices  
constantly / through the years  
gatekeepers and watchers  
awaken at the sound

## Autumn Night in Japan

walking behind her  
clouds abound this Autumn night  
she is invisible at the edge of the field  
but a wind pulls rifts / opens gaps  
in the clouds / moonlight seeps  
through and suddenly  
she is a bright-edged silhouette

**She**

my black hair's undone  
unraveling in disarray  
how long will it last  
my heart has no ideas  
especially not this one  
the morning is wondering  
as am I / as are my emotions

## Daybreak

a mockingbird sings  
from the firethorn bush  
I look for him / his  
song a collage / but  
the only thing left to find  
is the shining daybreak moon

## Mortal Life

what you did / such grief  
my life continues / this one at least  
I'd leave all behind  
I resist the melancholy you prescribed  
even so tears arrive

## Stags and Others

every path is wide with pain  
I've retreated to a high meadow  
far from the sea / from you  
even the beasts cry with pain  
I endure them all with my stillness



## Now As Then

troubles abound now  
as in the past  
back then mean  
hard / fear-filled days  
filled every void  
but now are recalled in nostalgia  
today's trouble will be also  
given enough time

**Anxious**

I lie in bed  
eyes open / waiting  
for night to end  
sunrise never comes  
a curtain blocks the light  
such a heartless companion

## Surrender

sometimes I listen to the moon  
it tells me to grieve  
sometimes I listen to the rest of nature  
it tells me to grieve  
sometimes it seems like an obsession

but in the end  
my grumbling troubled face  
surrenders / the tears

## With Sadness Comes

not dry yet  
drops from the rain  
receding to the east  
rest on needles  
a fog starts to rise  
up into the Autumn twilight

## Near a Cold Bay

when we traveled  
those islands and we stopped  
one night for a quick rest  
a short candle was enough for getting ready  
in the end we were together  
a quick passionate act  
how did that cement us?

## Strands

she said her necklace of jewels  
has weakened / is fragile  
dropping stones at any jiggle  
she says she's lived a long time  
kept her emotions hidden  
and I know she has  
she says she can feel  
herself grow frail  
and I know she can

## Pearls

in Japan  
tears on one's sleeves  
means hard emotions  
in Japan  
some hard women  
have difficult work  
pearl diving  
their sleeves are always wet  
when hard emotions come  
the colors don't ever change

## Past Summer

I laid out my robe  
on our sometimes bed  
outside cracked windows  
a cricket makes his clatter  
the night frosty  
as is his song  
I wonder / perhaps I should ask  
*do I sleep alone tonight?*



## Ever In Repose

in the metaphor of our love  
even when the tide is low  
my sleeves are wet  
my eyes fill with tears so full  
they seem only large eyes not wet eyes  
low tide and no sandbar to the stone island  
you are unable to grasp  
my sleeves will never dry

## How It Might End

offshore boats pass  
fishing crews have been pulling  
in their lines / their nets  
the bay is a dream / the world  
is part of the dream  
in all a lovely scene  
and sad

## Persistence

Autumn keeps on into the evening  
pulled down from the mountain back there  
by the shore people from town  
pound their clothes with rocks and sticks  
making what they wear gather full  
into a sheen

## And Then He Found Me

I visited a monk  
I once knew as a kid  
he turned away from the promise  
of shallow living  
a sensual life  
he had read all the books  
as that kid / books I could not approach  
he said he learned the life  
found there would be peaceless  
when I last saw him  
he was black robed  
I turned away

## Above a Harbor

a figure passed by  
in a garden nearby  
white flowers and all sorts  
a storm just passed  
and my thought was snow  
passing / a storm  
my life / you  
maybe / maybe not

## Near Vidlin

boiling down North Sea water  
to rescue salt / but the heat  
rises too and that suffering  
joins the wasted wait  
in the twilight calm  
for her to arrive

## One or Two

we crouch by the brook  
oak leaves rustle above  
it's the breeze that summons  
evening / the light breeze  
of Summer / we squat  
by the sacred stream and wash  
our hands / our feet / our faces  
our selves and each other  
two as like one

fall approaches

## When All Is Said / Sad

life is an emotion  
made from experiences  
here are two  
I've loved some  
I've hated some  
now life has little  
appeal for me



## That Only Road

now I'm left in this small hut  
in woods far from the sea of my days  
the day I first looked out our bedroom  
window I saw through the maples and pines  
a road / the road that came from the sea  
alone / the hut is hidden by countless  
ferns but if I could count  
them they'd number fewer  
than the memories I carry