

Tale of Genji

W a k a

Waka poetry very often aimed to make the reader feel something.

Poetry of the Heian period is almost exclusively written in the tanka form, a short verse of 5–7–5–7–7 syllables. Within this pattern the middle line or phrase can stand on its own with what precedes or follows, creating the effect of two interwoven poems that flow naturally together.

Rather than reason or rational argument—so central to much Western literature—waka is shaped by deep and true feelings, which mold the world of the poem.

The Shinto view of nature as divine strongly informs this sensibility. Natural images such as mist, blossoms, autumn winds, or winter snow are not hostile forces but living presences that express the mood of human experience.

A well-crafted waka typically begins with a seasonal reference or natural image, which sets the emotional key for the rest of the poem and subtly signals the passage of time or a change of heart.

Events are not recorded to mark time, as in Western chronicle or epic, but appear as moments vivid enough to draw the mind away from the steady flow of days. In a long work such as *The Tale of Genji*, waka poems interrupt and enrich the narrative, offering lyrical pauses that crystallize a feeling or insight in a brief, luminous space of words.

Y a m a t o - E

Yamato-e, the classic Japanese painting style of the Heian period, sought not to record events literally but to make the viewer see and feel an atmosphere, much as a tanka aims to move the heart rather than to narrate.

Painted with rich mineral pigments and often flecked with gold, these works present interiors and landscapes through conventions such as *fukinuki yatai*—the “blown-off roof” that lets the eye look directly into rooms—and soft gold or misty clouds that glide across the surface to divide and at the same time connect different moments of a story.

A single composition can contain several episodes, so that space and time unfold as the viewer’s gaze travels, creating a continuous narrative that suspends the ordinary sense of chronological sequence. Instead of rational analysis or documentary precision, Yamato-e, like the waka poetry embedded in *The Tale of Genji*, is shaped by a desire to evoke deep feeling.

Nature is treated as a living, sacred presence: flowering trees, flowing water, and seasonal plants set the emotional key of the scene, never as threatening forces but as subtle mirrors of human longing and change. In this way the paintings do not simply illustrate the text; they act as visual poems, momentary illuminations that interrupt and enrich the narrative, distilling the elegance of court life and the fleeting beauty of the seasons into a single, shimmering image.

まだ夜明けぬ闇の嘆きに
鶏の声よりも絶えず鳴く我
が胸の声

“Now the breaking day /
Finds me still sighing in
the dark / Of my mise-
ry, / For those unresting
cries are torn / Not just
from the cockerel's thro-
at.”

(Cranston, pp. 28)



身のうさを嘆くに飽かで明
くる夜は取り重ねてぞ音も
なけれける

“Sleepless, grieving / For
the misery of my lot, / I
have passed night after
night / Till cries even of
the birds / Have ceased
to sound.”

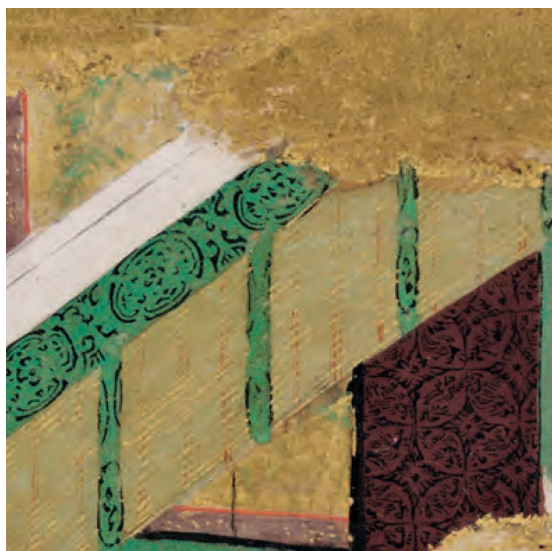
(Cranston, pp. 31)



たち花このの
うきこしま
舟のそ色は
かゆくゑ
はらしられ
しをぬ

On Tachibana's
Little island the color
Will never change,
But this boat adrift —
No one knows where it
goes.

(Cranston, pp. 956)



昼より西の御方のわたらせ
給て御うたせ給ふといふ。
さて向ひゐたらんを見ばや
と思てやをら歩み出でて簾
のはさまに入り給ぬ

“This lay devotee / Prac-
tices the Way—oh, let /
It be our guide: / Even
in the lives to come / Do
not betray our deep vow.”

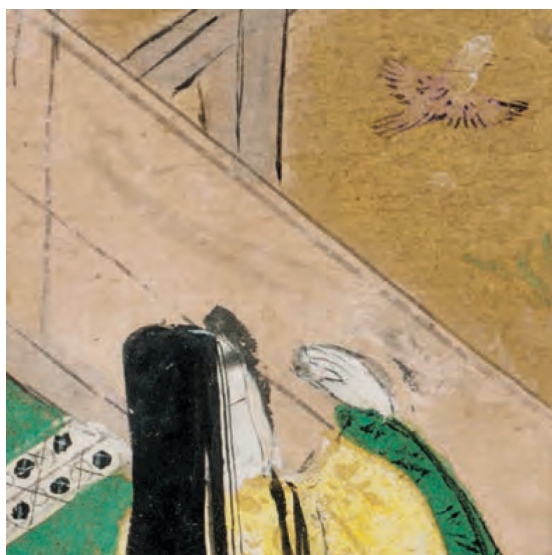
(cranston, p. 702)



おひたゝん ありかも知らぬ
若草をおくらす露ぞ消えん
空なき

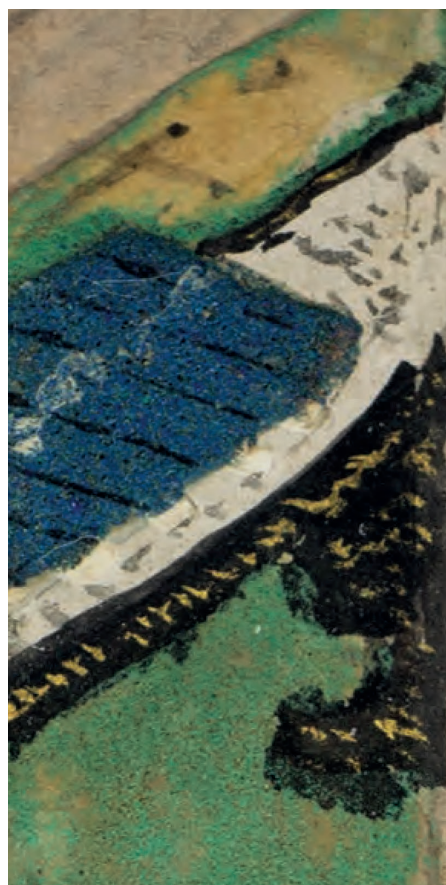
“To grow and grow— /
I, the dew, have lingered on, / Sending forth
this little plant / Though
I should vanish / Into a
sky that knows no place
for me.”

(cranston, p. 718)



たち花このの
うきこしま
舟のそ色は
かゆくゑ
はらしられ
しをぬ

On Tachibana's
Little island the color
Will never change,
But this boat adrift —
No one knows where it
goes.



橘の木のうつもれたる みず
いしんめして はらはせ給う
らやみかほに 松の木の を
のれおきかへりて さとこほ
る>雪も 名にたつ末のとみ
ゆる

“Not for this color / Do
I yearn, remembering /
Some cozy love; / Why
did I brush against my
sleeve / The pinch-bright
safflower bloom?”

(cranston, pp. 720–21)



物思ふに立ち舞ふべくもあ
らぬ身の袖うち振りし心知
りきや

“Deep in this longing, /
How I was to rise and
dance / I could not think;
/ Did you guess the he-
art that beckoned / In the
shaking sleeve I waved?”

(cranston, p. 722)



梓弓いろさの山にまどふか
なほの見し月のかげや見ゆ
ると

“Flown like an arrow /
Shot from a catalpa bow,
/ Lost on Irusa, / Lon-
ging for Moonset Moun-
tain / To betray the light I
glimpsed.”

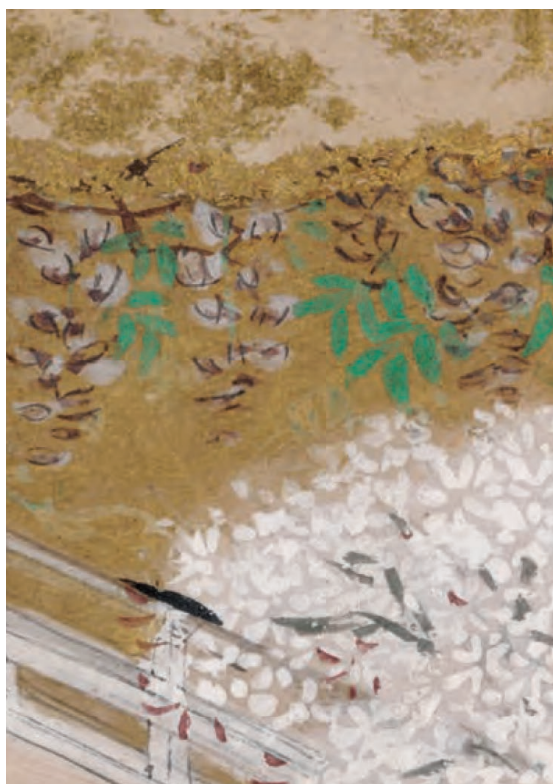
(cranston, p. 732)



暮るる山
野辺の雪間に
眺むれば
昔埋みし
物ぞ悲しき

On the darkening hills,
On the wild fields lost in snow,
I gaze today
And know again a sadness
For things buried long ago.

(Cranston, pp. 972–973)



かけをのみ
みたらし川の
つれなきに
身のうきほどぞ
いとど知るゝ

I gaze on nothing
But the shadow on the water
Of the Mitarashi stream;
More deeply do I feel
How sad and wretched is my lot.

(Cranston, pp. 972–973)



神垣は
しるしの杉も
なきものを
いかにまがへて
折れる榊ぞ

The fence of the gods
Has no signpost cedar
tree
Standing by its gate;
How then can you have
strayed here
To break this sakaki
branch?

(Cranston, pp. 723)



神垣は
しるしの杉も
なきものを
いかにまがへて
折れる榊ぞ

The fence of the gods
Has no signpost cedar
tree
Standing by its gate;
How then can you have
strayed here
To break this sakaki
branch?

(Cranston, pp. 753)



橘の
かをなつかしみ
ほとゝぎす
花散る里を
たづねてぞ問ふ

In nostalgia
For the scent of orange bloom
The cuckoo comes,
Visiting with its inquiries
The village where the flowers fall.

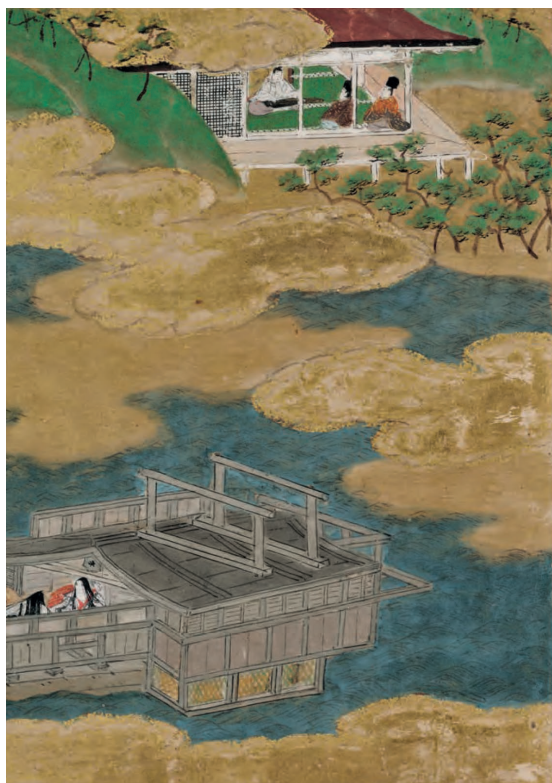
(Cranston, pp. 142–143)



秋の夜の
つきげの駒よ
わがこふる
雲井をかけれ
ときの間も見む

Moonlight sorrel,
Stallion of the autumn
night,
Take me to my love,
Course the clouds to her
dwelling—
For one hour let us meet.

(Cranston, pp. 772)



秋の夜の
つきげの駒よ
わがこふる
雲井をかけれ
ときの間も見む

Moonlight sorrel,
Stallion of the autumn
night,
Take me to my love,
Course the clouds to her
dwelling—
For one hour let us meet.

(Cranston, pp. 772)



あらかりし
浪のまよひに
すみよしの
神をばかけて
忘れやはする

Sumiyoshi pines,
How moving you are, re-
calling
The age of the gods.
Could I ever forget
How I once cast my fate
upon these waves?

(Cranston, pp. 979)



かけをのみ
みたらし川の
つれなきに
身のうきほどぞ
いとど知るゝ

I gaze on nothing
But the shadow on the
water
Of the Mitarashi stream;
More deeply do I feel
How sad and wretched is
my lot.

(Cranston, pp. 741)



しろきうすものゝ
御そき給へる人の
てにひをもちながら
かくあらそふを
すこしゑみ給へる

There — you can see them,
But not catch them in your hand,
And when you look again
They have vanished, who knows
where,
These ephemerids of dusk.

(Cranston, pp. 965)



かきくらす
野山の雪を
ながめても
ふりにしことぞ
けふもかなしき

Ever darkening
I gaze on the snow
in the fielded hills—
but my thoughts go back
to sorrows long past.

(Cranston, pp. 956)



思ひやる
心のはては
むなしきに
うきふねの名を
名にこそは得め

Where my thoughts end
There is only emptiness.
And so I must accept
That the name Ukifune—
“Floating Boat”—was truly
mine.

(Cranston, pp. 945)



思ひきや
雲井のよそに
かくしつ
夢の浮橋
跡たえてけむ

Had I foreseen it—
That beyond the clouds of
this world
I should live thus hidden,
Till even the floating
bridge of dreams
Had left behind no trace?

(Cranston, pp. 968)



思ひきや
雲井のよそに
かくしつ
夢の浮橋
跡たえてけむ

Had I foreseen it—
That beyond the clouds of
this world
I should live thus hidden,
Till even the floating
bridge of dreams
Had left behind no trace?

(Cranston, pp. 968)



年を経て
宿にひとつに
初音聞く
今日ぞたのしき
君が御声に

Year upon year
I hear the first warbler's
song
Here in our home;
But never has it been so
joyful
As when joined to your
dear voice.

(Cranston, pp. 874)



あやめ草
かをりを人に
しらすれば
くきにおふても
なびく春かな

Sweet flag in the breeze,
Your fragrance tells all the
world
It is truly spring;
Even stalk and root must
bow
Before the soft vernal
wind.

(Cranston, pp. 881)



ほたるこそ
うつるけしきは
見えねども
かげにぞ人の
心しるべき

Fireflies—
Though their moving sha-
pes
Are hardly to be seen,
By the light they shed we
know
Where their true hearts lie.

(Cranston, pp. 986)



ほたるこそ
うつるけしきは
見えねども
かげにぞ人の
心しるべき

Fireflies—
Though their moving sha-
pes
Are hardly to be seen,
By the light they shed we
know
Where their true hearts lie.

(Cranston, pp. 886)



常夏の
色はかはらぬ
ものなれど
露けき袖は
かはるべらなり

The pinks of summer
Never change their lovely
hue,
But the dew-soaked
sleeves
Of those who pluck them
surely
Change with tears of long-
ing.

(Cranston, pp. 895)



野分して
庭の木の葉の
たちゐにも
心をやりて
眺む夕べかな

As the typhoon blows
Leaves in garden paths
stand and whirl;
My heart too is set adrift
And I gaze on this eve-
ning
With helpless longing.

(Cranston, pp. 903)



春の夜の
夢の浮橋
とだえして
峰にわかるる
横雲の空

Spring night dream—
The floating bridge is
broken;
Parted from the peaks,
The clouds drift sideways
across
A sky that will not hold
them.

(Cranston, pp. 748)



春の夜の
夢ばかりなる
手枕に
かひなくたたん
名こそをしけれ

Spring nights of love—
Like nothing more than a
dream
These pillows of the arm;
Would that no idle rumor
Tarnish their fleeting
name.

(Cranston, pp. 924)



匂ひあふ
色もかをりも
梅の枝に
さきだちてこそ
春は見えけれ

Fragrance and color—
In the blossoming plum
branches
They are perfectly joined;
By their advance we know
at once
That true spring has
come.

(Cranston, pp. 918)



花の宴
かげさへ見ゆる
春の夜に
心のどけき
月をあはれむ

Cherry-blossom feast—
On this tranquil spring
night
Even their shadows de-
light the eye;
How moving is the moon
In its calm companions-
hip.

(Cranston, pp. 736)



露しげき
草の葉ごとに
おく露に
心をそへて
置くぞかなしき

Heavy with dew,
Each blade of grass is jewelled;
So too my heart
Is laden as I place it
In this fleeting world of dew.

(Cranston, pp. 713)



暮るる山
野辺の雪間に
眺むれば
昔埋みし
物ぞ悲しき

On the darkening hills,
On the wild fields lost in
snow,
I gaze today
And know again a sad-
ness
For things buried long
ago.

(Cranston, pp. 972–973)



かきくらす
野山の雪を
ながめても
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“Ever darkening
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