100 Poems Imitating 100 Translations

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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[^1] is wet from dew
or tears / my heart

[^1]: 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
	his 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

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

ever 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

2 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