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Janine Beichman/Embracing the Firebird

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Introduction

In the steamy Tokyo August of 1901, Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) published her first book, *Midaregami* (Tangled hair), a volume of poetry slim enough to rest lightly on the palm of one's hand. The daughter of a confectionery shop owner in western Japan, Akiko had lived a seemingly sheltered life until a few months before, when she ran away to Tokyo to live with Yosano Tekkan (1873–1935), founder of the Shinshisha (New Poetry Society) and editor of its magazine *Myōjō* (Venus).¹ Two months after *Tangled Hair* was published, they married.²

Romanticism was in its heyday in Japan at the turn of the century, and *Tangled Hair*, its 399 tanka poems a hymn to art, love, youth, spring, and, above all, the individual, was the supreme example of it in Japanese poetry of the time. Even today, the collection is the most popular of Akiko's many poetry collections;³ the Kadokawa Shoten paperback edition is one of that publisher's longtime bestsellers, and in Shinchōsha's series "100 Books of the 20th Century," *Tangled Hair* was selected as the book to represent the year 1901.⁴ In her middle age and onward, however, the enduring enthusiasm her public retained for *Tangled Hair* ultimately became a "great annoyance" to Akiko: she felt that her early poems were imitative and immature, and also deprived her later poetry, which she preferred, of the attention it deserved. When she was asked to select the best of her own poems for one volume, she wanted to omit *Tangled Hair* entirely; it was only at the publisher's request that she included fourteen poems from it, purely out of "historical" interest.⁵

Although Akiko's later poetry has now begun to win the appreciation it deserves, in terms of literary history the impact of *Tangled Hair* overshadows everything else she wrote, for it brought individualism to traditional poetry with a tempestuous force and passion found in no other work of the period. This granted, it is still vital to remember that *Tangled Hair* was no more than the prelude to the prolific career of Japan's most famous modern woman poet. That career lasted for over forty years and bridged three historical periods: Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and Shōwa (1926–1989).

Akiko participated in the feminism of the early twentieth century through

her association with the magazine *Seitō* (Japan's first feminist literary magazine), her numerous essays on women, and her pivotal role in the establishment of Bunka Gakuin, a pioneering, arts-oriented girls' private school (still in existence, although now coed), where she developed and taught the literature curriculum. After having traveled to Europe in her early thirties, she became a respected and widely read commentator on social, political, and educational topics. She published fifteen books of essays and criticism, and devoted years of her life to translating Murasaki Shikibu's great novel *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese, producing not one but two translations, the latter of which, *Shin-shinyaku Genji Monogatari* (New new translation of *The Tale of Genji*, 1938–1939), is still widely read today. She also published her own fiction, travel accounts, and stories for children. But Akiko was, above all, a poet, publishing twenty-one collections of poetry—sometimes more than one a year⁶—for as she once said to her eldest son, “My poems are my diary.” (The collections included such titles as: *The Little Fan*, *Robe of Love*, *Dream Flowers*, *Eternal Summer*, *The Firebird*, *The Sun and Roses*, *Grass Dreams*, *The Meteor's Path*, *Lapis Light*, *Perspectives of the Heart*.)⁷ Although the most recent “definitive complete works” (*teibon zenshū*)⁸ consists of twenty closely printed volumes, it is neither truly definitive nor complete. Among the most important sources for this study, for example, are several essays and memoirs that it lacks.⁹ This is not to criticize what is a meticulously produced and superbly useful edition: Akiko's eldest son once said that she had published so much and in so many newspapers and magazines that no one could ever locate it all.¹⁰

During her long marriage Akiko gave birth to thirteen children, of whom eleven survived to adulthood; after 1908, when *Myōjō* folded, it was Akiko, through her writing, who supported the whole family. The Yosanos were a devoted couple—their youngest daughter, Mori Fujiko, said she never saw them with their backs to each other¹¹—but money was always a problem, and Akiko's difficulties were compounded by her husband's personality, for he was an eccentric and difficult man. According to “*Watakushi to shūkyō*” (*Religion and myself*, 1937), a short essay Akiko published after Tekkan died, some friends concerned about her prolonged mourning, which they feared might lead to madness or suicide, recommended Zen meditation. Grateful as she was for their concern, she replied, she felt in no emotional danger and had no need for religion; then, with startling directness and a good dose of irony, she explained why:

Almost any woman of my age has received a common training in forbearance for twenty or thirty years. When she gets to be my age, even an uneducated woman has attained a degree of enlightenment of which a

man meditating cross-legged on a chilly wooden platform can barely catch a glimpse, if that. A woman's austerities take twenty, thirty, forty years. Even facing a wall for three years is short in comparison. The enlightenment attainable in concentrated sessions of ten days or less is even more superficial. Still, it is better than nothing, so I think it is a good thing for a man to try. For women, Zen meditation is unnecessary.

"The people who say that I had a very happy marriage," she went on, "are mistaken." They seemed to think it was because "we had the same occupation," but in fact, "one of the hardships which I had to endure along with assorted others was that I held the position of competitor in terms of my husband's work." Her husband, she explained, "had an abnormal constitution, with a pulse of only 40; according to his doctor, such people are as close to insanity as a normal person can be without actually being mad." His feelings changed and he lost his temper with a speed most people could not imagine. In order to keep him relatively calm, she had constantly to mend relations between him and his disciples or between him and their children, for she did not want him to be alienated from others because of a physical constitution that was not his own fault. In addition, although he sometimes evaluated her poems fairly, at other times he purposely compared them unfavorably to those by other women poets. It would have been easy to "become a victim" and "take the path of sacrifice," but "I realized the foolishness of abandoning what I had to do solely for the sake of the mental illness (*kokoro no yamai*) of the husband who was not my true husband. I think it was for this that the greatest forbearance was necessary." Having to be the main provider in economic terms was not a great hardship, Akiko went on, and she had respected her husband's scholarly endeavors even when they did not earn money. "I believe," she concluded, "that I will not go mad from longing for the beloved person I have lost, and I believe that I can also wait patiently for death."¹²

In the many poems of lament that Akiko published after Tekkan's death, she unfolded at length the deep feelings suggested by her brief phrase "the beloved person." In one, she watches her children as they ritually place in the coffin the things the dead person used and loved in daily life, thinking to herself that, as he loved her most, they should put her in too.

The children put
in the coffin
brush, inkstone, tobacco
I wanted to say
"It was me he loved"

Fude suzuri / tabako wo kora wa / kan ni iru / Nanorigatahari / Ware wo medeki to (TYAZ, 7:153)

She remembered with sadness their intimate morning conversations:

Morning after morning
there is only myself
to listen to the stories
of the dreams
in which I saw you

Kimi wo misbi / yume no banashi mo / mizukara ni / kataru hoka naki / asa tsuzuku kana (TYAZ, 7:157)

And noted, with a generosity that could be spared only for one who was deeply loved,

Without knowing them
you ended:
This grief
these tears
this coldness

Kimi shirade / owarinu Kakaru / kanashimi mo / kakaru namida mo / kakaru samusa mo (TYAZ, 7:194)

In the 1970s, Yoshida Sei'ichi, the influential scholar of modern Japanese literature, proposed the thesis that Akiko was a romantic-style poet whose central subject matter was love and who therefore wrote all her best poetry in youth.¹³ If the poems above suggest that this image of Akiko as a romantic who burned out by her thirties is false, then her essay "Religion and Myself" tells us that the equally common image of Akiko as a kind of Tekkan's rib—that is, a woman who would never have written a line without her husband's encouragement and guidance—is a gross oversimplification. Yoshida's thesis is no longer as widely accepted as it once was; thanks to the pioneering work of such eminent poet-critics as Baba Akiko, Ōoka Makoto, and others, the riches of Akiko's later poetry collections are now recognized, though still not fully explored. What I call the Tekkan's-rib image is, however, still prevalent. Behind it lies a traditional contempt for women that Saitō Mokichi (1882–1953), conventionally esteemed as the greatest tanka poet of the twentieth century, bluntly expressed in his informal remarks to a friend shortly after Akiko's funeral: "She was extraordinary, after all is said and done, yet her poems were about whatever came into her mind. Ōgai respected her up to his last years of course. But in the end, a woman never amounts to much."¹⁴ Mokichi's brutal summation

was often in my mind as I wrote this book, which returns to *Tangled Hair* and the years that preceded it, going all the way back to the very beginning. I am not sure I have told the story of Akiko's early life with as much skill as it deserves, but I doubt that anyone who knows its outlines would agree with Mokichi's evaluation except for the word "extraordinary."

One of the mysteries of Akiko's life is how a well-brought-up young woman from a conservative merchant family could rebel against her parents' expectations and run off to Tokyo to become a poet. But if we go back and examine what went before, we see that there was a slow process of development before the seemingly sudden metamorphosis. This book attempts to describe that process, pinpointing what happened during the years of childhood and adolescence that helps to account for the later, epiphanic burst into poetry, and introducing the poetry itself. Thus, its focus is on Yosano Akiko's early years, from her birth to the age of twenty-two, and then on *Tangled Hair*.

Akiko wrote no autobiography, but she did leave, as befits a tanka poet, many fragmentary accounts of her life and her artistic development. Using these, together with memoirs by friends and family and the objective record of her earliest publications, Chapters 1 to 9 attempt to give as accurate a portrait as possible of Akiko's first twenty-two years. Chapters 1 and 2, which treat Akiko's infancy and childhood, show that she felt alienated from her parents and birthplace from an early age and speculate that her early separation from her parents, their coldness to her even when she returned home as a toddler, and her later intense ambivalence, were part of what made the rebellion possible. At the same time, it also shows a feature of Akiko's personality that appeared from very early childhood. This was the ability to balance a vivid imagination with a strong sense of reality, so that she was able to inhabit two worlds at once with almost no sense of inner conflict. Perhaps this is why she could later live comfortably with the contradiction between the idealization of her childhood in the poetry, which is explored here, and the grim reality expressed in the prose. Akiko's various memoirs are not mined for information about her alone, however; their vivid evocation of life in nineteenth-century provincial Japan is also used in order to give a sense of the social context of Akiko's own childhood.

Chapters 3 and 4 fill in another part of the puzzle, for they show that from her early teens Akiko was aware of her literary gift and vowed to nurture it. Literary ambition in the best sense, plus an intense desire for individual freedom, provided realistic motives for her flight; these, it is argued, were as important as her love for Tekkan. Chapter 3 traces the process by which the adolescent Akiko developed a strong sense of autonomy through voracious self-directed reading and her hard work in the family store. Continuing the theme of her ability to inhabit two worlds simultaneously, this chapter also

chronicles the process by which she developed a rich but troubled fantasy life, and how the desire to hide this from her parents made her strengthen her resolve to perform well in the real world. She did well in school, was perceived by others as warm, life-giving, and humorous, and used her practical acumen to bring the family business back from the brink of ruin.

Chapter 4 tells how she came to write her first poems, not out of a desire for self-expression, but simply to show that she could improve on some mediocre poems by women that she happened to read in one of the lesser classical anthologies. But a few years later, in a flash of illumination, she realized that her own poems, too, were dull, and that it was because “I was stuck in a woman’s body.” At that instant, she resolved to write “as if I were a man.” Close readings of a number of the earliest poems reveal the experiments in voice and point of view that followed, as she tried to escape the confines of the feminine. Meanwhile, she had begun epistolary relationships with several young men to whom she could write of her misery and frustration, as well as her love for literature, topics which were entangled with each other, for literature was the alterity that made real life bearable. Thus, through her earliest poems and letters, we see Akiko taking the first tentative steps from being a conventional tanka poet to one who could speak in an individual voice.

Chapters 5 through 9 concentrate on the months from the spring of 1900 until August 1901, the time span of Akiko’s first contributions to *Myōjō*, her meeting and falling in love with Tekkan, and the publication of *Tangled Hair*. In her two central works on poetry, *Uta no Tsukuriyō* (The making of poems, 1915) and *Akiko Kawa* (Akiko on poetry, 1919), both written in middle age, Akiko stated that art should be a spontaneous expression of the inner life; in this sense, her poetic ideal was the unity of life and art. This ideal, it is argued, was a theoretical expression of the most intense experience of her youth, those heady days of early love when she had experienced the unity of art and life on many levels and had seen it bring a quantum leap in the quality of her poetry. Chapters 5 through 8 document this fusion in detail, narrating the life and the poetry together, and showing how the two intertwined. Chapter 9 takes the narrative up to the publication of *Tangled Hair* and its initial reception by readers and reviewers. The last section of this chapter discusses the obscurity that, at the time, seemed the collection’s greatest fault to both Akiko’s admirers and detractors, but that, with hindsight, looks like one of the salient marks of its modernity: those poems which drew the most fire for their obscurity tend to be the very ones that possess the rich and suggestive ambiguity we like in poetry now.

A majority of the poems in *Tangled Hair* first appeared in *Myōjō* and other magazines and newspapers friendly to the New Poetry Society. In these venues, the works of several poets tended to be grouped together under one title. As

Akiko grew more prolific, however, she required her own space. Thus, in the September 1900 *Myōjō*, under the title “Ganraikō” (Amaranth; Tekkan liked flower names), Tekkan grouped together forty-seven poems by Akiko and two other women poets (Nakahama Itoko and Yamakawa Tomiko); but by March 1901 Akiko’s outpouring of seventy-nine poems was set off on its own, under the title “Ochitsubaki” (Fallen camellias). Not all the poems so published made it into *Tangled Hair*, however: only forty-nine from “Fallen Camellias,” for example, were chosen for the collection. Furthermore, the order of even those poems which were chosen was changed, often drastically: there are some exceptions, but, on the whole, the date of composition has little to do with a poem’s placement in *Tangled Hair*. In sum, in transplanting the poems from magazines and newspapers, a massive process of culling and recontextualization took place. Although there are only a few, incomplete records of that process left, I have attempted a reconstruction. The method has been twofold: first, a comparison of those poems that were omitted to those that were retained, seeking to find some common denominators in each class; second, a close reading of the collection itself, to determine what gives it an aesthetic unity that the poems did not have when they were published piecemeal.

This is not only a study of *Tangled Hair*, but of Yosano Akiko, how she became a poet and how her first collection grew. Thus, the body of poetry with which this book is concerned is not the 399 poems of *Tangled Hair* in isolation, but rather the over 700 poems that Akiko wrote from 1895 to 1901 and which, after a complex process of culling and reordering, became *Tangled Hair*. As Owen Barfield wrote in a different context, I think of what I have tried to do as “a sort of midwifery—not, of course, in the Socratic sense, but retrospectively.” I have tried, that is, “to alter the state of mind of the artist’s audience, from mere wondering contemplation of an inexplicable result, towards something more like sympathetic participation in a process.”¹⁵

In the end, of course, a lasting work of art acquires an existence separate from its creator and the circumstances of its birth; it needs to be examined on its own terms, as an independent entity. Thus, Chapters 10, 11, and 12 focus on *Tangled Hair* itself, the characteristics that make it a unified work of art, and its originality. Chapters 10 and 11 argue that, in spite of its limited number of themes, *Tangled Hair* presents a great variety of speakers and settings, and that in putting the poems together so that they would give a pleasing impression, Akiko must have learned from classical linked verse. While dependent on the magisterial complete commentaries of Satake Kazuhiko in his *Zenshaku Midaregami Kenkyū* and Itsumi Kumi in her *Shin Midaregami Zenshaku*, the two works with which any reading of *Tangled Hair* must begin, these chapters also depart from them in a number of ways.

Recognition of the variety of speakers in *Tangled Hair* is uncommon now;

most commentators are at one with Satake and Itsumi who, even when they recognize that a poem is probably based on fantasy rather than autobiography, often take the subjects as realistic women (Satake favors Tokugawa period ones; Itsumi timeless *otome*, young women or girls). But Tekkan's commentaries (see Chapters 8, 9, and 10) and the review of the pseudonymous Jibunshi, or Critic (see Chapter 9), allow for a wider range, including poems with supernatural speakers and characters in fragmented fictional narratives. I have found myself most in sympathy with these early readers, who were untouched by the modern tanka's restricted idea of the "I," and by its resultant resistance to fictionality. A few later commentators, in particular Hinatsu Kōnosuke, Satō Haruo, and Kawano Yūko, are also aware of what Kawano calls "the ambiguous I" of *Tangled Hair*, and their works have been helpful as well.

In addition to exploring the variety of *Tangled Hair's* speakers and settings, Chapter 10 also demonstrates that there is a connection, hitherto not remarked upon, between some of the poems of *Tangled Hair* and the nudes of the Renaissance Italian painter Titian, who was well known to at least some of the *Myōjō* poets. This leads to discussion of two salient aesthetic characteristics of *Tangled Hair*: the sense of mystery (*shinpi*, first introduced in Chapter 8), and what I call the palimpsestic effect, created by a mingling of traditions and associations. Thus, the semidivine female figures who appear in several of the most striking poems bear traces of Greek myth, Chinese legend and poetry, earlier Japanese literature, and Western art of the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. Through their polysemous, palimpsestic character, these elusive figures evoke millennia, span East and West, and look forward to the future. They are capacious enough to include even the realistic young women, the prostitutes, and the geisha for whom they are sometimes (mis)taken.

Chapter 11 is devoted to an extended discussion of the shape of the collection in terms of two, not necessarily connected, characteristics: its similarities to linked verse and its fundamental circularity. The possible process by which Akiko winnowed and recontextualized to construct *Tangled Hair* is discussed, contemporary linked-verse activities that she was involved in or knew of are introduced, and modes of linking are illustrated by commentary on a dozen consecutive poems. Here we experience the collection, or at least a part of it, as Akiko, I believe, meant us to read it.

Chapter 12 explores the echoes of other poets in *Tangled Hair*, especially Shimazaki Tōson and Susukida Kyūkin. The relation of *Tangled Hair* to their new-style poems is shown to be neither imitation nor influence, but rather an example of the hybridization that typically accompanies poetic revolutions, and that figures especially prominently in the history of Japanese poetry. In the Epilogue, the Tekkan's-rib thesis is examined in light of what has been learned. Of course, all that has gone before shows that it is false. The surprise is that

Akiko herself turns out to have been its creator. In spite of the now-abundant evidence of her earliest literary activity (much of it left by Akiko herself in the form of uncollected poems, magazine articles, and interviews), the accounts she later published in her collected essays blot out all that history, as if nothing she had written before the connection with Tekkan and *Myōjō* existed. She narrated her earliest poetic development in terms of an epiphanic transformation rather than as the slow, incremental process that the biographer has chronicled. The Epilogue examines this other view and argues that it, too, is an important part of the truth.

THE TRANSLATIONS

Unless otherwise stated, all the poems in this book are tanka (also called *waka*), Japan's longest-lived poetic form, which consists of thirty-one syllables arranged 5-7-5-7-7. Some tanka breach these limits by a few syllables, as is acknowledged by the terms “excess syllables” (*ji-amari*) and “insufficient syllables” (*ji-tarazu*), but Akiko's poetry of the *Tangled Hair* period has a number of such poems, particularly *ji-amari* ones. The content, too, departs from the prescribed topics, or *dai*, of the classical tanka. Tekkan, in fact, refused to define Akiko's poems (and those of the other *Myōjō* poets as well) as tanka at all. He maintained that they were “poetry in a new style,” *shintai no shi*,¹⁶ thus implying that they had more in common with *shintaishi*, the new-style poetry of the early Meiji period modeled on Western examples, than they did with traditional Japanese poetry. Tekkan's assertion highlights the nontraditional, radical nature of Akiko's tanka, a trait as striking as their difficulty.

In putting the poems into English, I tried to stay as literally faithful to the meaning of the words and the order of the images as possible, while avoiding padding, the bane of all translators of the tanka into English. In this, I am probably no different from anyone else who tangles with this minimalist yet very personal poetic form. Where I differ from most other translators is in not having used one form for all the translations; especially in the early chapters, there is a variety of lineation, spacing, punctuation, and capitalization. This evolved naturally, as my response to the many different styles and voices of such a large body of poetry: more than 270 poems, including 194 by Akiko, of which 122 are from *Tangled Hair*, are translated and discussed. The conventionality of some of Akiko's earlier poems argued for less than five lines, as did the prosiness of some poems by others; but in many cases the complexity seemed to demand five lines—a length I like—as well as variations in spacing, indents, and the overall shape of the words on the page, in other words, all the freedom that characterizes modern poetry. Only later, thanks to Eileen Katō, who had drawn my attention, in her comments on my translations, to “the great variety of forms” used in “the Japanese (brush-written) texts for

waka/tanka,” did I realize that my variety was conservative when compared to the way the Japanese have traditionally written out tanka poems by hand.

When printed in Japanese books and magazines, the tanka is generally given in one line, or the nearest approximation thereof: if the layout does not allow for one line, then the last few characters will be carried over. (It is worth noting, however, that Toki Zenmaro and Ishikawa Takuboku are famous for insisting that their thirty-one-syllable verses be printed in three segments.) There is a tradition, however, of writing out poems by hand on decorative paper or boards (*shikisbi* or *tanzaku*), screens, scrolls, and fans, and even Noh costumes. They are also frequently etched onto stone poem monuments (*kabi*). The shape a poem takes on these various surfaces—the number of lines, their relative distances from each other, the size of indents—is affected by the poet’s sense of the poem as well as by the physical characteristics of the surface being inscribed. The verticality of the long and narrow *tanzaku* encourages two long lines; the horizontality of the square or rectangular *shikisbi*—and also of most stone poem monuments, screens, and fans—encourages spreading the poem out into short segments, with much variety in the distances between lines and indentation.

Take Akiko’s own calligraphic rendering of a famous poem from *Tangled Hair* in Figure 1.¹⁷ She divides the poem into thirteen lines, seven on the bottom and six on the top. The spacing between lines is uneven and the indents are varied. The poem reads from right to left, beginning with the lower lines and then moving to the upper ones. The upper section is:

sabishi / kara / zu ya / michi wo / toku / kimi
lonely / is / n’t it? / The Way / preach / you

The lower section is:

yawa / bada no / atsuki / chishio / ni / fure mo / mide
soft / skin’s / hot / blood-tide / to / not even touch / try

Akiko in effect deconstructed the poem, not only by pulling certain words apart and moving others closer together, but also by reversing the order of the words themselves; the lower section of her calligraphy is actually the poem’s beginning. My verbal translation in the body of this book (p. 105) is tame compared to her visual one.

Discussions on what form we should translate tanka into have focused until now on tanka in its printed forms. One argument, for example, is that, because tanka are usually printed in one line, English translations should be one line too. But calligraphic versions show that a tanka poem (and the same goes for haiku) has traditionally been seen as convertible into myriad visual

shapes. In fact, if we take the calligraphic versions as our models, then there are an infinity of ways to divide our lines and an infinity of ways to indent them. Why should we invent for ourselves a consistency that Japanese poets have never felt obliged to maintain? Why not take advantage of the expressive possibilities offered by modern English poetry's variety of lineation, spacing, punctuation, and capitalization?

Of course, the decision to change form should not be made lightly or for its own sake, and many fine translators will prefer to decide on one form and stick to it. Furthermore, no matter how much the Japanese calligraphic rendering roams a surface, creating new and striking visual patterns, the original Japanese poem always stays at thirty-one syllables (or nearly so). Therefore, one could argue, the visual freedom of the calligraphic patterns is made possible by the syllabic fixity: no matter how wildly the writing runs over the page, the number of syllables remains the same, so we know it is a *tanka*. This is a good argument, especially for classical *tanka*. But for modern *tanka*, where the content strains against the limitations of the form, more weight can be given, I think, to adopting the freedom of form suggested by calligraphic examples, and there is justification for going even further than I have here.

ROMANIZATION

Romanized versions of the original poem follow each translation; these versions are given in one line, with slashes indicating the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic divisions. I have not added punctuation, but do use uppercase letters following all full stops, as well as for the first word of the poem and all proper nouns. Non-Japanese-speaking readers can thus have a sense of where the Japanese phrases begin and end syntactically, and so be able to match the syntax with the translated phrases. The original Japanese texts are gathered in the Appendix.

CITATIONS

All poems by Akiko are cited from *Teibon Yosano Akiko Zenshū* (The definitive complete works of Yosano Akiko; *TYAZ*), except for the few that are only in Satō Ryōyū, *Midaregami kō* (Nihon Toshō Sentā, 1990). In order to differentiate between poems included in *Tangled Hair* and poems omitted from it, a poem's number in the collection (which may be found in *TYAZ*, vol. 1) is cited for the former, but for the latter, the citation is to the volume and page in *TYAZ*. This information follows the poem's romanized transcription. If place and date of initial publication is not given in the textual discussion, then it too follows the romanized transcription. For poems from Akiko's later collections, the citation is to *TYAZ* only. Texts for poems by Tekkan and others are cited variously.

The title *Embracing the Firebird* is taken from a poem in Akiko's sixteenth tanka collection, *Hi no Tori* (The firebird, 1919):

When they speak
they are looked on with
loneliness
So it was, so it is—for those who embrace
the firebird

*Mono ieba / ima mo mukashi mo / sabishige ni / miraruru hito no /
idaku hi no tori* (TYAZ, 4:25)

The collection's title refers to the phoenix, the bird that is reborn from its own ashes.¹⁸ Reading the poem biographically, I take it as expressing Akiko's decision, renewed many times during her life, to embrace the immortal beauty of art.