

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1890-1930, Culture/Art/Literature)]

Document 45: “The urge to yawn.” Poems from *Sad Toys*, Ishikawa Takuboku, 1912.

When I breathe,	<i>Iki sureba,</i>
This sound in my chest	<i>Mune no uchi nite naru oto ari.</i>
Lonelier than the winter wind.	<i>Kogarashi yorimo sabishiki sono oto!</i>
Husband’s mind on travel!	<i>Tabi o omou otto no kokoro!</i>
The wife scolding, the child in tears!	<i>Shikara, naku, tsumako no kokoro!</i>
O this table in the morning!	<i>Asa no shokutaku!</i>
Somehow, this morning,	<i>Nan to naku,</i>
Things don’t seem so bad—	<i>Kesa wa sukoshiku waga kokoro akaruki gotoshi</i>
I trim my nails.	<i>Te no tsume o kiru.</i>
From deep in my guts the urge to yawn,	<i>Hara no soko yori akubi moyshi</i>
And so it came—a long long roar	<i>Naganaga to akubi shite minu,</i>
This New Year day!	<i>Kotoshi no ganjitsu.</i>
All these people	<i>Hito ga mina</i>
Going in the same direction—	<i>Onaji hōgaku ni muite yuku.</i>
And <i>me</i> , watching them from the side	<i>Sore o yoko yori mite iru kokoro.</i>

Somehow, *Nani to naku,*
Feel more people than I expected *Angai ni ōki ki mo seraru,*
Think as I do . . . *Jibun to onaji koto omou hito.*

Leaning against this hospital window, *Byōin no mado ni yorisutsu.*
I watch *Iroiro no hito no*
The vigorous walk of other kinds of men *Genki ni aruku o nagamu.*

How joyful after so long a time *Kusuri nomu koto o wasurete,*
To be scolded by my mother *Hisashiburi ni,*
For failing to take this pill! *Haha ni shikaraeshi o ureshi to omoeru.*

Source: Ishikawa Takuboku, *Romaji Diary and Sad Toys*. Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda, trans. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1985, 135, 137, 138, 147, 149, 156, 169, 190.

Context.

After the single-minded, sacrifice-for-the country drive toward modernity of the late 19th century, many Japanese, particularly those in the cities, felt exhausted spiritually. And as modern goods and ideas circulated ever broadly, people with means began seeking more leisure, more pleasure, greater self-fulfillment. For that reason, a pleasure-oriented café culture had risen in cities like Tokyo and Osaka by the 1910s and 1920s, and one of the heroes of that culture was



Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912), a poet and novelist who expressed the pessimism and disillusionment of so many in the younger generation. As these poems from his collection, *Sad Toys* (*Kanakashiki gangu*) show, he used the traditional short-poem form (without adhering to its strict rules about the number of syllables) to express highly modern ideas. He died of tuberculosis at the young age of 26, as did his wife just a year later.

Questions.

1. What universal feelings or ideas do you find in Ishikawa's poetry?
2. What about the spread of modernity and the rapid rise of cities might have caused Ishikawa's dark view of life? And why did that resonate with so many people?
3. What do you find that is positive in these poems? Is there any sense of human connectedness?

Terms.

Café culture. This phrase is used to describe the rise of an urban entertainment world, especially in the 1920s, that centered in streetside cafes and encouraged modern, Western-style fashions, dancing, movies, dating, and the reading of youth-oriented magazines.

New Year Day. January 1 is the holiday of holidays in Japan, a time when everyone rejoices in the hope represented by the new year. Stores and businesses close, and people call on relatives, eat special foods, visit shrines, and read the greetings and good will messages sent by friends and relatives.