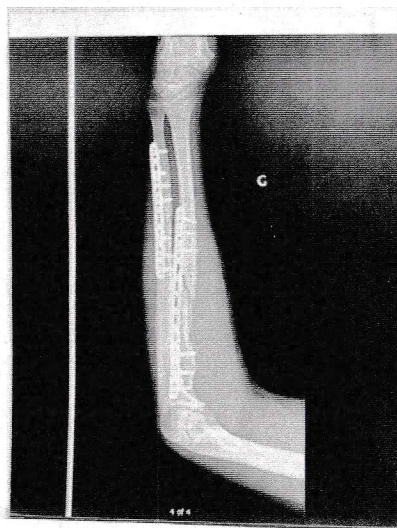


And the onions wrapped in silky paper, rolling paper, like
bombs of sugar, salt, alcohol.
And the gnome asparagus, turrets of the kingdom of gnomes.
I remember the potatoes, and the tulips we always planted
along them.
And the snakes with their long, orange wings.
And the tobacco of fireflies, who smoked without ceasing.
I remember eternity.



SEI SHŌNAGON

The Pillow Book (1002)

translated by Meredith McKinney

Elegantly intriguing things—It's delightful to hear, through a wall or partition of some sort, the sound of someone, no mere gentlewoman, softly and elegantly clap her hands for service. Then, still separated from view behind, perhaps, a sliding door, you hear a youthful voice respond, and the swish of silk as someone arrives. It must be time for a meal to be served, for now come the jumbled sounds of chopsticks and spoons, and then the ear is arrested by the sudden metallic clink of a pouring-pot's handle falling sideways and knocking against the pot.

Hair tossed back, but not roughly, over a robe that's been beaten to a fine floss, so that you can only guess at its splendid length. It's marvellous to see a beautifully appointed room, where no lamp has been lit and the place is illuminated instead by the light of a brightly burning fire in the square brazier—you can just make out the cords of the curtains around the curtain dais glimmering softly. The metal clasps that hold the raised blinds in place at the lintel cloth and trefoil cords also gleam brightly. A beautifully arranged brazier with fire burning, its rim swept clean of ash, the firelight also revealing the painting on its inner surface, is a most delightful sight. As also is a brightly gleaming pair of fire tongs propped at an angle in the brazier.

Another scene of fascinating elegance—it's very late at night, Her Majesty has retired to her chamber, everyone is asleep and outside a lady is sitting talking with a senior courtier. From within comes the frequent sound of go stones dropping into the box. Delightful to hear the soft sound of hire tongs being gently pushed into the ash of the brazier, and sense from this presence someone who isn't yet asleep.

A person who stays up late is always elegantly intriguing. You wake in the night to lie there listening through the partition, and realise from the sounds that someone is still up. You can't hear what is said, but you catch the sound of a man's soft laugh, and you long to know what they're saying to each other.



Another scene—Her Majesty has not yet retired. Her ladies are attending her, and the High Gentlewoman or perhaps some other senior gentlewoman for the Emperor's residence, someone who adds formality to the occasion, is also present. People are seated near Her Majesty, engaged in conversation. The lamp is extinguished, but fine details of the scene are illuminated by the light of the fire that burns in the long brazier.

A lady new to the court, someone not of particularly impressive background by who the young gentlemen would naturally consider an object of elegant interest, is attending Her Majesty rather late at night. There's something attractively intimate in the sound of her silk robes as she enters and approaches Her Majesty on her knees. Her majesty speaks quietly to her, and she shrinks like a child and responds in a barely audible voice. The whole feel of the scene is very quiet. It's also very elegant the way, when the gentlemen are gathered seated herein there in the room talking, you hear the silk rustle of people as they leave or enter and, though it's only a soft sound, you can guess who each one would be.

Some gentleman of intimidating rank has come visiting the rooms one evening. Your own lamp is extinguished, but light from near-by penetrates in the room. Since he's someone she would never sit so close to in day light hours, she bashfully draws over a low standing curtain and lies close beside it, head bent over, though even he would surely be able to judge her hair. His cloak and gathered trousers are draped over the standing curtain—some- thing of suitably high rank, of course, although the special

olive-green of a Chamberlain of the sixth rank would be just about acceptable. However, if it's one of those deep green cloaks of a normal sixth-ranker, you'd feel inclined to take it and roll it into a ball and consign it to the far reaches of the room, so that when it comes time for him to leave at dawn he'll be dismayed to discover he can't lay hands on it.



It's also quite delightful, in summer or winter, to take a quick peep from the corridor, where you guess someone's sleeping behind a standing curtain from the clothes draped over on end of it. The scent of incense is a most elegantly intriguing thing. I well remember the truly wonderful scent that wafted from Captain Tadanobu as he sat leaning by the blind of the Little Door of Her Majesty's room one day during the long rains of the fifth moon. The blend was so subtle there was no distinguishing its ingredients. Of course it's natural that scent is enhanced by the moisture of a rainy day, but one couldn't help remarking on it even so. It was no wonder that the younger ladies were so deeply impressed by the way it lingered until the following day in the blind he'd been leaning against.

Rather than stringing along a large crowd of retainers of varying lengths, none of whom looks particularly smart or impressive, it's far more refined for a gentlemen to go about in a beautifully gleaming carriage that he's had for only a little while, with ox drivers dressed with appropriate smartness, who can barely keep up with the spirited ox as it rushes along ahead of them. What really does catch the attention with it's elegant suggestiveness is the sight of a slender retainer dressed in graded-dye skirted trousers in lavender or some such colour, with upper robes of something appropriate—glossed Silke, kerria-yellow—and shiny shows, running along close the the axle as the carriage travels.