

This Week's Montage

—*Bashô's Journey*

Comparative Haiku

selected by

Allan Burns

On May 16th, 1689 Bashô departed from Edo (present-day Tokyo) with his traveling companion Kawai Sora to begin his famous journey to the northern interior region of Japan known as Oku. Carrying only a backpack, writing materials, and changes of clothing, he would travel for 156 days and 1,200 miles, mostly on foot. The journey became the basis for what is usually reckoned Bashô's masterwork, *Oku no Hosomichi* ("Narrow Road to the Interior"), a travel diary cast in the form of haibun (i.e., prose interspersed with haiku). Published posthumously in 1702, *Oku no Hosomichi* contains many of Bashô's most famous haiku and is widely regarded as the crown jewel of Japanese literature. "It was as if the very soul of Japan had written itself," Miyazawa Kenji marveled. This gallery juxtaposes three quite different translations of key haiku from the text, all by translators who are noted poets themselves, suggesting both the richness of the poems and the challenge of rendering their essence in English. All record resonant moments along the poet's way. "Each day," Bashô wrote, "is a journey, and the journey itself is home."

Cid Corman (1924–2004)

Robert Hass (b. 1941)

Sam Hamill (b. 1943)

*fry's**
beginning Oku's
rice-planting song

summer grass
warriors
dreams' ruins

fleas lice
horse pishing
by the pillow

quiet
into rock absorbing
cicada sounds

May rains
gathering swift
Mogamigawa

wild seas (ya
to Sado shoring up
the great star stream

clam
shell and innards parting
departing fall.

from *Back Roads to Far Towns*, translated by Cid Corman & Kamaike Susumu (The Ecco Press, 1968)

* *fry*: (lit. "wind-fluent") untranslatable term [translators' note]

The beginning of art—
a rice-planting song
in the backcountry.

Summer grass—
all that's left
of warriors' dreams.

Fleas, lice,
a horse peeing
near my pillow.

Stillness—
the cicada's cry
drills into the rocks.

Gathering
the fifth-month rains,
the swift Mogami River.

A wild sea—
and flowing out toward Sado Island,
the Milky Way.

Fall going
and we part,
clamshells on the beach.

from *The Essential Haiku*, edited by Robert Hass (The Ecco Press, 1994)

Culture's beginnings:
from the heart of the country
rice-planting songs

Summer grasses:
all that remains of great soldiers'
imperial dreams

Eaten alive by
lice and fleas—now the horse
beside my pillow pees

Lonely stillness—
a single cicada's cry
sinking into stone

All the summer rains
violently gather—
Mogami River

High over wild seas
surrounding Sado Island—
the River of Heaven

Clam ripped from its shell,
I move on to Futami Bay:
passing autumn

from *The Essential Bashô*, translated by Sam Hamill (Shambhala, 1999)

Previous Montages

May 3: Buddha-nature
May 10: Women's Experience

Next Week's Montage: Life & Death

Nick Virgilio
George Swede
Chad Lee Robinson