

Seeing Through Words: Matsuo Bashō

Jane Hirshfield

In this mortal frame of mine, which is made of a hundred bones and nine orifices, there is something, and this something is called a wind-swept spirit, for lack of a better name, for it is much like a thin drapery that is torn and swept away at the slightest stir of the wind. This something in me took to writing poetry years ago, merely to amuse itself at first, but finally making it its lifelong business. It must be admitted, however, that there were times when it sank into such dejection that it was almost ready to drop its pursuit, or again times when it was so puffed up with pride that it exulted in vain victories over others. Indeed, ever since it began to write poetry, it has never found peace with itself, always wavering between doubts of one kind and another. At one time it wanted to gain security by entering the service of a court, and at another it wished to measure the depth of its ignorance by trying to be a scholar, but it was prevented from either because of its unquenchable love of poetry. The fact is, it knows no other art than the art of writing poetry, and therefore, it hangs on to it more or less blindly.

Matsuo Bashō, *Journal of a Travel-Worn Satchel* (tr. Nobuyuki Yuasa)

Matsuo Bashō wrote these sentences in 1687. He was forty-three. By then, his restless “wind-swept spirit” had substantially remade the shape of Japanese literature, by taking a verse form of almost unfathomable brevity and transforming it into a near-weightless, durable instrument for exploring a single moment’s precise perception and resinous depths.

A few of the most well known glimpses:

furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

old pond:
frog leaps in
the sound of water

shizukasa ya iwa ni shimitsuku semi no koe

silence:
the cicada's cry
soaks into stone

yuku hara ya tori naki uo no me wa namida

spring leaving—
birds cry,
fishes' eyes fill with tears

shiodai no haguki mo samushi uo no tana

in the fishmarket
even the gums of the salted sea-bream
look cold

natsu gusa ya tsuwa mono domo ga yume no ato

summer grasses:
what's left
of strong warriors' dreams

In his poems and in his teaching of other poets, Bashō set forth a simple, deeply useful reminder: that if you see for yourself, hear for yourself, and enter deeply enough this seeing and hearing, all things will speak with and through you. “To learn about the pine tree,” he told his students, “go to the pine tree; to learn from the bamboo, study bamboo.” He found in every life and object an equal potential for insight and expansion. A good subject for haiku, he suggested, is a crow picking mud-snails from between a rice paddy's plants. Seen truly, he taught, there is nothing that does not become a flower, a moon. “But unless things are seen with fresh eyes,” he added, “nothing's worth writing down.”

A wanderer all his life both in body and spirit, Bashō concerned himself less with destination than with the quality of the traveller's attention. A poem, he comments, only exists while it's on the writing desk; by the time its ink has dried, it should be recognized as just a scrap of paper. In poetry as in

life, he saw each moment as gate-latch. Permeability mattered more in this process than product or will: “If we were to gain mastery over things, we would find their lives would vanish under us without a trace.”

The haiku form Bashō wrote in is now long familiar to Western readers: an image-based poem of seventeen *on*, written in lines of five, seven, and again five *on* each.

In Japanese, these are heard, rather than visually separate units on the page. One further detail is widely known in the West: the poem must evoke a particular season, by name or association. Haiku is a welcoming form, taught often in elementary school classes. In a testament to both the limitlessness of any subject and the suppleness of haiku mind, over 19,000 haiku about Spam—“Spamku”—have to this date been posted online. Yet to write or read with only this understanding is to go back to what haiku was before Bashō transformed it: “playful verse” is the word’s literal meaning. Bashō asked more: to make of this brief, buoyant verse-tool the kinds of emotional, psychological and spiritual discoveries that he experienced in the work of earlier poets. He wanted to renovate human vision by putting what he saw into a bare handful of mostly ordinary words, and he wanted to renovate language by what he asked it to see.

Aging announced by the sensitivity of failing teeth; a street entertainer’s monkey; natural world phenomena; subtle examinations of mind and feelings—each is conveyed in Bashō’s haiku by what seems a single motion of the ink brush:

otoroi ya ha ni kui ateshi nori no suna

growing old:
eating seaweed,
teeth hitting sand

hatsu shigure saru mo ko mino o hoshi ge nari

first winter downpour:
the street monkey, too,
seems to look for his small straw raincoat

umi kure te kamo no koe honoka ni shiroshi

seas darkening,
the wild duck's calls
grow faintly white

nani goto no mitate ni mo ni zu mika no tsuki

the crescent moon:
it also resembles
nothing

kyō nite mo kyō natsukashi ya hototogisu

even in Kyoto,
hearing a cuckoo,
I long for Kyoto

Bashō's haiku, taken as a whole, conduct an extended investigation into how much can be said and known by image. When the space between poet and object disappears, Bashō taught, the object itself can begin to be fully perceived. Through this transparent seeing, our own existence is made larger. "Plants, stones, utensils, each thing has its individual feelings, similar to those of men," Bashō wrote. The statement foreshadows by three centuries T.S. Eliot's theory of the objective correlative: that the description of particular objects will evoke in us corresponding emotions.

The imagism introduced to Western poetry near the start of the 20th century by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and Eliot is so deeply part of current poetics that few recognize its historical origins in Asia. Haiku in its strict form has continued to draw American writers as well, from the poet Richard Wilbur to the novelist Richard Wright, who wrote thousands of haiku during his final years. One magnet is the paradox of haiku's scale and speed. In the moment of haiku perception, something outer is seen, heard, tasted, felt, emplaced in a scene or context. That new perception then seeds an inner response beyond paraphrase, name, or any other form of containment.

Here is one such poem, seated in objective perception:

kane kiete hana no ka wa tsuku yūbe kana

dusk: bells quiet,
fragrance rings
night-struck from flowers

This poem lives almost entirely in the ears and the nose, in perception both outward and accurate—the scent of certain blossoming trees does strengthen at nightfall, and orange trees (strongly night-scented) surround the temple at Ueno, where the haiku was written. The words show Bashō’s characteristic synaesthesia: bell-sound and twilight, flower-scent and time, are painted together into the mind, placed into a relationship that seems neither sequential nor causative. This haiku’s emotion cannot be defined except by repeating its own words; its center of gravity lies in the phenomenal world, outside the self. Yet it carries the scent and weight of strong feeling.

Haiku perception can travel the other direction as well. A thought, emotion, or circumstance already present in the mind can be chilled, heated, or soaked through by its placement into outer landscape, object, or sound. Here is a late poem whose headnote—written by Bashō—defines its image as unequivocally subjective:

kono michi o yuku hito nashi ni aki no kure

“Describing what I feel”

this road
through autumn nightfall—
no one walks it

The haiku describes the poet’s inner state—yet without the explanatory headnote, its words appear no less external than those of the previous poem. How then should it be understood?

To read a haiku is to become its co-author, to place yourself inside its words until they reveal one of the proteus-shapes of your own life. The resulting experience may well differ widely between readers: haiku’s image-based language invites an almost limitless freedom of interpretation. Written near the end of Bashō’s life, “this road” can be read as a poem painting the landscape of loneliness or as a poem looking toward an unnavigable death. It

can also be read as direct and immediate self-portrait: the uninhabited autumn evening and empty road may themselves *be* the poet and what he feels. Understood in this last way, the haiku presents its author as a person outside any sense of the personal self. He has fallen into a world in which there is no walker, only path.

Paths mattered to Bashō, who could—like Wordsworth or John Muir—cover twenty or thirty miles a day by foot. In his youth, it seems he traveled only as circumstances required. In mid-life, he traveled by choice, following the example of earlier poet-wanderers he admired. By the end of his life, his journeying gives off the scent of an irrefusable restlessness, a simple incapacity to stay long at home. In the opening words of “Narrow Road to the Deep North,” a prose and haiku journal describing a trip of roughly 1500 miles undertaken by foot, boat, and horseback at the age of forty-five, Bashō wrote, “The moon and sun are travelers of a hundred generations. The years, coming and going, are wanderers too. Spending a lifetime adrift on boat decks, greeting old age while holding a horse by the mouth—for such a person, each day is a journey, and the journey itself becomes home.”

Bashō’s first home was Ueno, a castle town thirty miles southeast of Kyoto. Born there in 1644, and called Kinsaku as a boy, his samurai name was Matsuo Munefusa; he used at least two other pen names (Tosei, “Green Peach,” was a good choice for a not-quite-ripened poet) before taking the name by which he’s now known. His father, Matsuo Yozaemon was a low-ranking samurai who earned his living by farming. He died in 1656, when Bashō was twelve.

Accounts of Bashō’s life differ widely in their details. Probably a second son with four sisters, Bashō left home to work in the household of the local samurai lord, and grew close to the samurai’s son, Todo Yoshitada, two years his elder. When Bashō was twenty, both young men had work chosen for publication in an anthology of local poets. (Printing technology had recently arrived in Japan, and such collections were the first truly popular books.) Each also contributed to a published linked-verse *renga*—a form of poetry written by more than one person, which Bashō would practice throughout his life.

The traditional form of Japanese poetry for a thousand years had been the five-line *tanka* (also called *waka*), written in the syllable count of 5-7-5-7-7. The shorter haiku form emerged from two variations of that long-standing pattern. In one, a person would write the 5-7-5 syllable opening for a *tanka* and another then would “cap” it by writing the closing lines. (This

was both a literary game and an adaptation of the “capping verses” of Zen, written to express and demonstrate spiritual understanding.) The second, more widely practiced variation was the writing of *renga*. A *renga* consists of a series of three and two-line stanzas, continuing for 36, 50, or 100 verses, in which each stanza both completes and initiates something like a five-line *tanka*, when joined with the stanza that precedes or follows. Various themes and alterations of mood occur at specified points in the chain. Linked verse could be written by two people, but more often were composed over the course of several hours—during which a good amount of sake or rice wine might be consumed—by a larger group of three to seven poets.

The “master” poet in a *renga* gathering would often write the opening verse, known as the *hokku* or “presenting verse.” These *hokku* eventually evolved into the three-line *haiku*. Still, the distinctions between the forms and genres of Japanese poetry were fluid. Free-standing *hokku* had been written for two hundred years before Bashō’s time, and among what we think of as Bashō’s best known *haiku*, many began as the opening verses of *renga*, while others were sent in letters, written in literary travel-journals mixing poetry and prose, or set down within *haibun*, brief prose pieces ending in one or two poems.

To understand Bashō’s place in Japanese poetry, it’s useful to have some sense of the literary culture he entered. The practice of the fine arts had been central to Japanese life from at least the seventh century; virtually all educated people painted, played musical instruments, and wrote poems. In 17th century Japan, linked-verse writing was as widespread and popular as card games or Scrabble in mid-20th-century America. As a certain amount of rice wine was often involved, another useful comparison might be made to playing pool or darts at a local bar. The closest analogy, though, can be found in certain areas of online life today. As with *Dungeons and Dragons* a few years ago, or *Worlds of War* and *Second Life* today, linked verse brought its practitioners into an interactive community that was continually and rapidly evolving. Hovering somewhere between art-form and competition, *renga* writing provided both a party and a playing field in which intelligence, knowledge, and ingenuity might be put to the test. Add to this mix some of street rap’s boundary-pushing language, and, finally, the video images of You-Tube. Now imagine the possibility that a “high art” form of very brief films might emerge from You-Tube, primarily out of one extraordinarily talented young film-maker’s creations and influence. In the realm of 17th-century Japanese *haiku*, that person was Bashō.

When Bashō was twenty-two, Yoshitada, his boyhood friend, supporter, and possibly lover, died. This loss, ten years after the death of his father, resulted once again in a kind of chrysalis-expulsion. Some accounts say Bashō entered a monastery immediately after his friend's death; others report that he fathered a child. Based on the poet's own later comments, he seems to have passed through something akin to what the Amish refer to as "wilding," a period of sampling everything the sensual world has to offer. He continued to write—his poems appear in anthologies from this time—but nothing further is known of the next five or six years. When Bashō's life comes again into view, he is living in Kyoto and the editor of a published volume of haiku, *The Seashell Game*, in which thirty sets of paired haiku are compared. The assembler of such a collection acted as teacher, critic, and judge, pointing out the merits and lapses of each haiku, and selecting a winner from each pair. Bashō entered two haiku of his own in the competition. Of one—a poem mentioning a kind of Japanese jacket—Bashō, as judge, wrote of his own contribution: "Ill-tailored and badly dyed, its failures are due to lack of craftsmanship on the poet's part." The haiku lost its match to the other contestant.

At twenty-eight, Bashō moved two hundred miles to the new city of Edo (now known as Tokyo). A merchant city far from the imperial capital and its entrenched traditions, Edo attracted many young men for the greater social mobility, cultural upheaval, and freedom it offered, and with fewer master poets already in residence, Bashō's chances of finding paying students were probably higher. On leaving, he sent a haiku to a friend in Ueno, as promise that he would return:

kumo to hedatsu tomo ka ya kari no ikiwakare

Clouds come between friends

only briefly—

a wild goose's migration.

While establishing himself as a poet, Bashō worked in the offices of a city water distribution company. He also began looking after a young nephew, Toin, who came from Ueno to live with him. Many of Bashō's students were samurai or rich merchants, and Bashō's own family origins meant he could have chosen for himself a position of greater prominence and power. He remained aware all his life of the path not taken. But poverty, for Bashō, was

neither accidental nor incidental. It was a honing stone for the sharpening of awareness.

Exposed early to uncertainty, loss, and disruption, evidence suggests Bashō was susceptible to depression. Rather than distract himself from hardship, however, Bashō turned toward its investigation. In his early thirties, he began a period of intensive study of Zen at the temple of a local priest, Butchō. For a time he considered priest ordination. Instead, at 35, he took the vows of a lay monk, committing to a Buddhist practice undertaken within the context and circumstances of ordinary life. During these years he also studied Taoism and the classical-era poets of both China and Japan. He referred to and carried these works with him the remainder of his life.

Zen is less the study of doctrine than a set of tools for discovering what can be known when the world is looked at with open eyes. Poetry can be thought of in much the same way, and the recognition of impermanence, ceaseless alteration, and interdependence—the connection of each person, creature, event, and object with every other—need not be “Buddhist.” These elements permeate the poetry of every tradition, from the *carpe diem* poetry of Horace and the Nahuatl “flower” songs of 16th-century Mezoamerica to the work of current American poets informed by ecology, postmodern philosophy, and quantum physics.

Still, Bashō chose Zen as the model for his life as well as his poems, making it his path in both figurative and literal senses. Emulating both the wandering monks of his own time and the earlier Buddhist poets Saigyō and Sōgi, he began traveling for months at a time in tonsure and monk’s robes, depending for his sustenance on what might be offered him along the way. “I look like a priest,” he wrote in his first travel journal, “but I am a layman. I am a layman, but my head is still shaved.” A sharp Zen spirit glints from the insights, compassion, and humor of his poems, and in their quietly Buddhist stance of poet and object as “not one, not two.” In one recorded dialogue with a student, Bashō instructed, “The problem with most poems is that they are either subjective or objective.” “Don’t you mean too subjective or too objective?” his student asked. Bashō answered, simply, “No.”

The fidelity of Zen is to this world, and to how we see and taste it in our lives and our lives in it. Bashō’s haiku—there are over a thousand—have a similar allegiance. They find the gate to Zen’s experience of *thusness* in the face of a man with mumps-swollen cheeks walking in bitter winter wind or in the sight of a woman tearing salted cods into strips, shaded by a bucket holding branches of flowering azalea. A rare haiku explicitly using the

vocabulary of Zen appears in a letter Bashō sent to one of his students. In it he also quotes a Zen master's warning: superficial understanding of the teachings can cause great harm. The poem reads:

inasuma ni satoranu hito no tattosa yo

how admirable—
a man seeing lightning
and not satori*

Shinto, Japan's other major spiritual tradition, saturates Bashō's poems as well, most noticeably in the importance given to place and the way that particular places come to embody certain feelings and themes. Shinto's *kami* spirits live not in generality, abstraction, or paradise but embedded in the earthly, visitable, and local—shrines, mountains, islands, fields, and trees. Bashō's lifelong practice of poetry pilgrimage joined Zen non-attachment with Shinto's deep-seated spirits of place.

Of the haiku Bashō wrote during his late twenties and early thirties, the earliest were often clever or charming, though even these poems often reflect the poet's seemingly innate compassion and deep sympathy for all beings. Some clearly respond to the circumstances of his personal life. Many show an increasing involvement with Chinese poetry, Zen, and the growing desire to find in a single moment, fully perceived, the multifaceted depths we feel also in Cezanne's painted apples or Durer's hare etched amid grass.

Here are a few of these early poems. The first was written at age twenty-two, when Bashō was attempting the cleverness then popular among cutting-edge poets:

kakitsubata nitari ya nitari mizu no kage

looking exactly like
blue flag iris: blue flag iris
inside the water's shadow

The main point in the original Japanese is the poem's mirroring construction: two identical words at the haiku's center replicate both visually and in sound what is being described. In the Japanese, written vertically, the visual onomatopoeia is even more clear; a small "cutting-word," *ya*, creates

the slim line of water dividing the flower stem's two apparently equal selves. Yet even in this poem of displayed wit, we find also the echo of a Buddhist question addressed throughout Japanese poetry: what in life is real, what is illusion?

In other early poems, Bashō's distinctive perception, empathy, humor, and friendship with all existence begin to emerge:

shiore fusu ya yo wa sakasama no yuki no take

“Written at the house of a person whose child has died”

a withered, leaning, out-of-joint world—
bamboo
upside down under snow

hototogisu ima wa haikaishi naki no kana

a cuckoo!
masters of haiku
vanish

hana no kao ni hareute shite ya oborozuki

shy
above flowers' faces,
a hazy moon.

futsukayoi mono kawa hana no aru aida

a hangover?
who cares,
while there are blossoms

ki o kirite motokuchi miru ya kyō no tsuki

cutting a tree,
seeing the sawn trunk it grew from:
tonight's moon

This tree-cutting haiku presents fertile ground for looking more deeply at poetic image in haiku, and in general.

In Japanese poetry, allusion to the moon is always, first, the moon itself, actual in the night sky. But the image holds almost always some additional meaning—often a Buddhist reference to awakened understanding. With this in mind, various readings of “cutting a tree” begin to emerge. It can be understood as a glimpse of enlightenment, an opening of consciousness fallen suddenly into inside the ordinary moment of felling a tree. It can be read as bitter: the moon is as opaque to the mind as a tree stump. It can be read as comic: the poet, having had no time to look up, finds the moon right under his eyes. It can be read as luminously descriptive: the yellow color of a rising moon recognized as exactly the color of fresh-cut pine. It can be taken as describing the experience that came from sawing down a tree, as describing the moon, or as offering a small Buddhist parable about long effort leading to sudden awakening. It may be that Bashō intended all these meanings. Equally, it could be that he had no intention in mind, and the juxtaposition of moon and tree trunk simply arose, amid the scent of fresh sawdust.

Haiku’s suggestiveness is penumbra, not umbrella. Still, human vision is subjective, and there is a further complication for Western readers: the haiku read alone on a page, blurred by lack of shared cultural reference and by translation, was often originally written in circumstances both specific and knowable by its original readers. As mentioned earlier, many of Bashō’s haiku were composed as part of linked verse gatherings. Others were written for poetry competitions with assigned subjects. Many were personal communications—messages sent between friends, between guest and host or teacher and student—or placed within travel journals or the prose settings of haibun which gave them added meaning. Some were written about paintings, places, objects, or played on well-known phrases opaque to uninformed readers. Art can be defined as beauty able to transcend the circumstances of its making. Still, if a person finds a particular haiku baffling or lifeless, that may be because some essential piece of information is missing. A hangover is universally comprehensible. That the specialized lumbering word that means “sawn tree trunk” also means “source,” in an ontological and metaphysical sense, is not—though once this is pointed out, the implication is clearly there, resident in the originating image.

When he began to take poetry writing seriously, Bashō was influenced by the rapidly changing aesthetics and schools of poetry of the time. It was a period as volatile as that in American poetry between the 1950s, when most poets were working in formal meter and rhyme, and the late 1970s, when some poets turned to using language in the way the abstract expressionists had used paint. Between these aesthetic periods come both the revolution made by the Beat poets and the “deep image” poetry of Robert Bly, James Wright, and others.

The aesthetic transformations proposed in turn by the Beats and the deep-image school parallel oddly closely those of Bashō’s own lifetime: in each case a radical loosening of language, taste, and subject matter breaks open arthritic conventions of poetic decorum, then is followed by the turn toward a poetry quieter of surface and more inwardly centered. Bashō’s first haiku were written under the influence of a school that advocated word-play and transgressive turns on well-known earlier works. He next wrote poems of everyday language and imagery using humor and earthiness as a way to break poetry’s diction free from old ruts. (One haiku from this time parodies a classical scene of courtly love by showing a female cat in heat scrambling over a broken-down cookstove to reach her tomcat lover.) These taboo-breaking intentions were not Bashō’s invention; they were the fashion of the day—and, it must be added, in no way as lastingly significant as the work of the Beats. But these early foundations instilled in Bashō the experience of a poetry in which almost anything could be said. “Madman’s poetry,” one such style was called. Bashō kept this grant of liberation throughout his life, turning it toward continually deepening ends until its final appearance in his late-life advocacy of the haiku of “lightness.”

The practice of Zen also works to free the mind from its habits of conventional perception. By 1678, Bashō was no longer studying with other teachers, but had taken students of his own, and was developing his own sense of haiku’s possibilities, intentions, and role. For inspiration, he turned less to contemporary poets than to ancient Japanese and Chinese poems reflecting Buddhist and Taoist themes, especially the works of Sōgi, Saigyō, Tu Fu, and Li Po—poetic tunings that three centuries later would come to influence the deep image poets of America as well. In 1680, two events, one inward, the other outer, can be taken as markers for the first fruition of Bashō’s efforts. The inner boundary-marker can be found in a haiku often referred to as Bashō’s first mature work:

kareeda ni karasu no tomarikeri aki no kure

On a leafless branch,
a crow's settling:
autumn nightfall

When autumn's diminishments and an ordinary crow can be felt to be beauty as much as loss, loss is unpinned. In Japanese, the alloy of beauty and sadness found in this poem is described as *sabi*—a quality at the heart of much of Bashō's mature writing. The noun *sabishi* is generally translated as “loneliness,” or sometimes “solitude,” but the word originates in associations very close to those found in this haiku: it holds the feeling of whatever is chill, withered, and pared down to the leanness of essence. “The works of other schools of poetry are like colored paintings; my disciples paint with black ink,” Bashō later said. To feel *sabi* is to feel keenly one's own sharp and particular existence amid its own impermanence, and to value the singular moment as William Blake did “infinity in the palm of your hand”—to feel it precise and almost-weightless as a sand grain, yet also vast. In making the expression of *sabi* one of haiku's goals, Bashō turned his own and his students' writing toward a new spirit. The gravitational pull of that renewed seriousness shifted haiku-writing from the construction of entertainment to the making of art.

Haiku's imagery is not confined to the lyrical, as we've already seen. “Eat vegetable soup, not duck stew,” Bashō famously told his students, calling plainness and oddity the bones of haiku. Another poem from this time begins with a headnote:

“The rich enjoy the finest meats and ambitious young men save money by eating root vegetables. I myself am simply poor.”

yuki no ashita hitori karazake wo kami etari

snowy morning—
alone,
still able to chew dried salmon

In 17th-century Japan, *karazake* was commoner's food. For Bashō, to speak of eating dried salmon on a cold morning was neither complaint nor

self-pity—it was an evocation of *wabi*. An idea often linked to *sabi*, and equally important to Bashō's work, *wabi* conveys the beauty of the most ordinary circumstances and objects. A hemp farmer's jacket, a plain fired-clay cup, the steam rising from a boiling teapot are *wabi*'s essence; a gold-and-cloisonné bowl or ornate silk clothes are its opposite. In the spirit of *wabi*, then, this poem mulls the deep satisfaction of a life stripped almost bare.

Of the two transition-markers that signal Bashō's maturation as person and poet, the inward change was his embodiment of a Zen spirit, *wabi-sabi*, and plainness. The outer change was the alteration of circumstance that led to the name by which he's now known. In feudal-era Japan, "town teachers," as they were called, lived by the support of students and wealthy patrons. Such gifts might be monetary, but as often took the form of rice, books, sandals, and clothes. For nine years in Edo, Bashō had lived in rented housing, on a combination of salary from his water-company work, fees for correcting poems, and teaching donations. In the winter of 1680, shortly after Bashō wrote his haiku on the autumn crow, one of his followers built him a simple thatch-roofed hut on the bank of the Sumida River in Fukugawa, a quiet outskirts of the city. That spring, another student planted a kind of Japanese plantain or banana tree in its front garden—a plant known in Japanese as a *bashō*. The house came to be called the Bashō Hut; its inhabitant soon took the name as well.

Many years later, when living in a different hut near the site of his first one, Bashō wrote two different versions of a haibun on the occasion of transplanting some shoots from his old *Bashō* tree to a new location in his garden. Here is an excerpt, ending with its haiku:

What year did I come to nest in this area, planting a single *Bashō* tree? The climate here must be good for it—many new trunks have grown up around the first one, their leaves so thick that they crowd my garden and shade my house-eaves. People named my hut after this plant. Every year, old friends and students who've grown to like my tree take cuttings or divide the roots and carry them off to replant far and wide.

One year my heart set itself on a trip to the northern interior, and I abandoned this Bashō Hut. [...] My sadness at leaving the tree was surprisingly strong. After five springs and autumns away, I've now returned, and my sleeves are wet with tears. The scent of blossoming

oranges is near; my friends' warmth has not changed. There's no way I'll leave it behind again.

My new thatch-roofed cottage, near the site of the earlier one, fits me well, with its three small rooms. [...] I've transplanted five *Bashō* saplings so that the moon, seen through their branches, will be even more beautiful and moving. The *Bashō*'s leaves are over seven feet long. When they rip almost to their center ribs in the wind, it's as painful as seeing a phoenix whose tail has been broken, as pitiful as the sight of a torn green fan.

Sometimes the *Bashō* tree blossoms, but its flowers are small. Its thick stalk remains untouched by any axe. Like the famous ancient tree of the mountains, the *Bashō*'s useless nature is itself the reason to admire it. A monk caressed that mountain tree with his brush to learn its ways; a scholar watched its leaves unfold to inspire his studies. But I'm not like either of them. I just rest in the shade of the leaves I love because they are so easily torn.

bashōba o hashira ni kaken io no tsuki

Bashō leaves
will cover its post-beams—
hut of the moon

By the time he wrote this, the poet had long been called by the *Bashō* tree's name, and each of the major themes of his life appears in this dense meditation on the plant whose identity merged with the poet's own—his restless wanderings and sensual awareness; his transplanter's impulse toward revision and renewal; his empathic identification with the tree's fragile leaves; the importance of friendship; the desire for unusual beauty; and the continuing examination of both inner and outer worlds undertaken by seeing through words, both those of earlier writers and his own.

The aesthetics of spareness and poverty should not disguise the genuine hardship of *Bashō*'s life. His grass hut, however scenic, had neither a well nor plumbing. In one haibun written late in 1681, *Bashō* quotes a few lines by the Chinese poet Tu Fu, then says, "I can see the *wabi* here, but I don't take any joy in it. I'm superior to Tu Fu in only one thing: the frequency with which I fall sick. Hidden away behind the *Bashō* leaves of this rickety hut, I call myself 'Useless Old Bum.'" One of several accompanying haiku reads:

kōri nigaku enso ga nodo wo uruoseri

Bitter ice-shards
moisten
the mud-rat's throat.

The haiku carries a headnote: “I buy water at this grass-roofed hut,” and it alludes to a thought from the Chinese Taoist, Chuang-Tzu: A sewer rat drinks only enough from the river to quench its thirst. Bashō's container of purchased water, which regularly froze during the night, may have reminded him of that image. Still, this haiku seems as much a portrait of genuine bitterness as any depiction of Taoist austerity.

Another haibun from this time, titled “Sleeping Alone in a Grass Hut,” includes this poem:

bashō nowaki shite tarai ni ame wo kiku yo

the *bashō* thrashing in wind,
rain drips into an iron tub—
a listening night

The haiku is a study in sounds, textures, and scale, and in exposure, both exterior and interior. The banana tree's leaves are torn by the typhoon winds—the storm was the fiercest in many years—whose huge sound passes over the poem. The sound of rain against a wash-tub (possibly outside, but more likely catching water from a roof leak) is near, precise, and intimate; yet its purchase on the attention is as large as the storm's. *Bashō* tree leaves tearing in wind were a long-standing image in classical Chinese and Japanese poems; dripping roofs and ordinary metal basins, less so. The balance of the minute and the vast, of the personal and forces that care nothing about the personal, of idealized and “poetic” experience and the actual living through of a major storm, is registered in each drop of water striking iron.

In January 1683, a year after Bashō moved into his Fukugawa hut, a fire swept through much of Edo. Bashō survived only by jumping into the river, using a soaked reed mat to shield his head from the heat and smoke. Afterwards he moved into a patron's house, far from the city. That summer, his mother died. In the fall, his students found him new lodgings in a run-down house not far from his burned one, and supplied him with household

items, a few clothes, and a large hollow gourd to hold rice, which they regularly filled. When the New Year (early spring, in the traditional Japanese calendar) arrived, Bashō marked it with this haiku:

ware tomeri shinnen furuki kome goshō

I'm wealthy—
going into the new year
with 20 lbs of old rice

Bashō later replaced the self-description of the haiku's opening line with something plainer. Bashō revised his haiku, haibun, and journals throughout his life; not infrequently the direction was toward a diminishment of self, but there are also poems in which he experimented with various alternative verbs or subject lines to feel their effects. Should a poem be about "loneliness" or "stillness"? Should a sound "soak," "pierce" or "stain"? These alterations show that even his most seemingly unstudied and artless works were often produced by a method quite unlike what is sometimes described as a "Zen" "first thought, best thought."

haru tatsu ya shinnen furuki kome goshō

spring begins—
going into the new year
with 20 lbs of old rice

A few years later, another haiku seems to recall that rice-storing kitchen gourd, though here it appears to be empty:

mono hitotsu waga yo wa karoki hisago kana

My one-possession
world,
a lightweight gourd

The poem does not reveal the poet's attitude about the situation. I myself lean towards the interpretation of a liberating portability of existence: the

poem was written during the time of Bashō's travels, by a man used, by then, to many losses.

Not long after the fire, Bashō published the first collection holding the work of his followers. Its title, *Shrivelled Chestnuts*, points towards Bashō's aesthetic of valuing the valueless; he said of the book's "shrivelled chestnuts," "they may be small, but their taste is sweet." Yet despite growing success as a poetry master, Bashō grew, it seems, increasingly unsettled and when he received an invitation to visit some former students, he began preparing for a lengthy trip. He shaved his head, put on the robes of a mendicant monk, and in the fall of 1684 set out with a friend on a seven-month-long journey by foot, horseback, and ferry. The trip would include a visit to his mother's grave before going on to places made famous by earlier Japanese writers. It was the first of five such trips, each recorded in a published journal mixing poems written during his travels with prose descriptions of places, people, and events.

Bashō named his account of this trip *The Journal of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton*, and its first sentences and opening haiku set the tone:

I set out on a trip of a thousand miles without any supplies, my walking-stick the staff of an ancient said to have vanished one night under a midnight moon. [...] As I left my run-down hut, the wind's sound over the river was odd and cold.

nozarishi o kokoro ni kaze no shimu mi kana

roadside-skeleton-thoughts:
wind penetrates
through to the heart

One Zen saying proposes, "Live as if you were already dead." Bashō's journal's title seems to carry that spirit. But the effect of the haiku itself is quite different. Chilled from the first moment of his departure, the poet felt cold winds going through him as if through a skeleton's exposed ribs. Travel was perilous, Bashō's health not strong, and the image of himself as that skeleton, its bones left out to weather by the road, would haunt him throughout the trip.

Another reminder of death's omnipresence appeared soon after, when Bashō saw a small child, perhaps two years old, abandoned by the road. The

early 1680s were years of famine, flood, fire, social turmoil, and desperate poverty, and the sight was not uncommon. Still, for a modern reader, this incident is the most difficult to accept of any in Bashō's life: he tossed some food to the child and rode on, thinking about fate, finally deciding that, however sorrowful, the child's abandonment was "heaven's will." The haiku he wrote afterward, though, is a rebuke to society, to poetry, and to the writer himself:

saru wo kiku hito sutego ni aki no kaze ikani

The cries of monkeys
are hard for a person to bear—
what of this child, given to autumn winds?

Shortly afterward in the journal, the theme of impermanence appears yet again, though in a different mood:

michinobe no mukuge wa uma ni kuwarekeri

the roadside blooming
mallow:
eaten by my horse.

These three haiku, placed near one another at the start of Bashō's journey, have the effect of reminding the reader, and perhaps the poet himself, that all things vanish, whether tragically or ridiculously. When he reached Ueno, his brother showed him a lock of their late mother's white hair. The haiku he wrote in response:

te ni toraba kien namida zo atsuki oki no shimo

if I took it into my hand,
would hot tears make it vanish?
autumn frost

Leaving Edo required crossing a high mountain pass. Famous for its view of Fuji, it was the vantage point of many earlier poems. Here is Bashō's contribution:

kirishigure Fuji wo minu hi zo omoshiroki

Mist, rain,
not seeing Fuji—
an interesting day!

The haiku's response reflects the spirit of Bashō's early teachers, who suggested that haiku's essence was to find, in the face of the long-familiar, something not said before. The poem might almost be translated, "Mist, rain, not seeing Fuji—what luck!"

During the ten years of journeys that filled his forties, Bashō stopped to record his responses to temples and shrines, the sites of historical battles, ruined huts where earlier Buddhist poets had lived. He met and separated from friends, shared his sleeping quarters with fleas, prostitutes, and pissing horses, participated in linked-verse gatherings, returned home and repeatedly set out again, published haiku, renga, and the five major journals describing his travels. Various haibun describe briefer trips to places famous for moon-viewing and retreats undertaken in two borrowed houses, "The Unreal Hut," on Lake Biwa and "The Villa of Fallen Persimmons," near Kyoto. The best known of his journeys is the 1500 mile expedition recorded in the journal *Narrow Road to the Far North*. The title is sometimes rendered as "Narrow Roads to the Deep Interior"—the word *oku* carries both geographical and metaphorical meanings (as it does in English, when we refer, for instance, to the "interior" of both Alaska and the self).

Bashō's traveling was an exercise in response and immersion. Each day in a new place brought changed circumstance and the possibility of a new subject, particularly for a poet seeking to bring into Japanese poetry ordinary objects and activities previously ignored. While visiting a temple—and perhaps assisting in the kitchen, since kitchen practice marks both good Zen and good guests—Bashō wrote:

nebuka shiroku araiagetaru samusa kana

coldness—
deep-rooted leeks
washed white

Any cook knows that cleaning the soil from leeks requires much time, and the coldness here is in the leeks, in the icy winter stream water they were washed in, and in the reader's own hands, all at once. Even the leeks' whiteness enters the reader's body: chilled hands grow pale.

This transparency of boundary is one of haiku's most basic devices and instructions, and the permeability of self to non-self is made explicit in another poem from this period. At a river crossing, Bashō's host treated the traveler with kindness, then asked for a written memento of the now-famous poet's visit. Bashō wrote:

yado karite na o nanora suru shigure kana

in rented rooms
signing my name:
"cold winter rains"

Renown came to Bashō as a teacher as well as poet during the final ten years of his life. The increasing support for his ideas and poems must have gratified; yet the ensuing demands also distracted and, at times it seems, clearly annoyed. To one aspiring student, he sent some sharp words counseling independence, along with this haiku:

ware ni niru na futatsu ni wareshi makuwauri

don't copy me,
like the second half
of a cut melon!

At other times, Bashō reminded his disciples of the 9th-century poet Kukai's words: "Do not follow the ancient masters, seek what they sought." However strong his opinions and theories, Bashō's primary allegiance was to the living moment and its accurate, full-hearted presentation. Of the formal requirements of haiku, he said, "If you have three or four, even five or seven extra syllables but the poem still sounds good, don't worry about it. But if one syllable stops the tongue, look at it hard."

As he turned 50, Bashō, living in what was now his third Bashō Hut, famously closed his brushwood gate. At the year's start, he wrote in a letter, "Crushed by other people and their needs, I can find no calmness of mind."

He was caring for his ill nephew Toin, who now had a family, having married a former nun, Jutei, and fathered three children. Students and fellow poets dropped by to ask advice, exchange poems, and talk; invitations to poetry gatherings were ceaseless. In April, Toin died. In mid-August, Bashō shut himself off from all visitors, resolving to find a way to free himself from outward obligation and its accompanying exhaustion and resentment. Two months later, he cut through the morning glory vine overgrowing his hut's entrance, and emerged with a new philosophy, in life and in haiku. He called it *karumi*: "lightness."

Bashō's transformation of spirit can be seen by comparing two haiku. The first—preceding Bashō's retreat into seclusion—was written on New Year's Day, 1693:

toshidoshi ya saru ni kisetaru saru no men

Year after year,
the monkey's face
wears a monkey's mask

The second was written the last day of that year:

nusubito no ōa yo mo ari toshi no kure

year-end-thought:
one night,
even a thief came to visit

The earlier, New Year's Day haiku is a portrait of entrapment within the social. Beneath persona, it says, there is only more persona—a street entertainer's monkey doing the same tricks over and over, or a man (as Bashō commented to a student about this poem) making the same mistakes in an unchanging life. The second, haiku written a year later, surely refers as well to the overly social life Bashō had been leading, but here, bitterness has vanished, and the poet seems less rueful than amused. It reminds of the story of a Zen master who, finding his hut has been robbed, goes running after the thief with a last pot in his hand: "Thief, stop! You forgot this!"

A few more poems from this time:

susu haki wa ono ga tana tsuru daiku kana

New Year's Eve cleaning—
the carpenter hangs a shelf
in his own house.

harusame ya hachi no su tsutao yane no mori

spring rain—
roof leak drizzling
through a hanging wasps' nest

hiya hiya to kabe wo fumaete hirune kana

cool, cool:
feet up on a wall,
noon-napping

asagao ya hiru wa jō orosu mon no kaki

morning glory:
a day-flowering lock
bolts my gate

asatsuyu ni yogore te suzushi uri no tsuchi

in morning dew
smudged, cool,
a muddy melon

inazuma ya yami no kata yuku goi no koe

lightning—
a night heron's cry
flies into darkness

In February, 1694 Bashō wrote a friend that he felt his end was near, but he nonetheless made plans for another journey. Illness prevented his leaving

until June, and even then he was able to travel only because accompanied by one of Jutei's sons and Sora, an old road-companion and friend. Carried by litter, he arrived at Ueno too weak to see visitors or to teach. While he was there, Jutei died, and he sent her son home. He and Sora continued on to both The Unreal Hut and The Villa of Fallen Persimmons, places of refuge familiar from earlier trips. In late August, Bashō returned to his family home, where his students built him a small grass hut behind his brother's. This visit he was stronger. He continued attempting to communicate his new ideas to students, whom he worried were not comprehending well his encouragement to see and write "the way a clear, shallow river runs over a sandy bed." In October he went on to Osaka, continuing to teach and participate in renga gatherings despite headaches, fever, and chills.

The haiku from the time of these travels show Bashō fully aware of the seriousness of his condition. Yet they maintain his renewed aesthetic of transparency and lightness:

kono aki wa nande toshi yoru kumo ni tore

this autumn,
why do I grow old?
a bird entering clouds

shiragiku no me ni tatate miru chiri mo nashi

white chrysanthemum:
not one speck of dust
meets the eye

tsuki sumu ya kitsune kowagaru chigo no tomo

clear moon,
a boy afraid of foxes
walked home by his lover

aki fukaki to nari wa nani wo suru hito zo

deep autumn—
my neighbor,
what is he doing?

Bashō spoke of the need to turn his thoughts from the life of this world to Buddhist teachings, but said he could not—poems continued to come. His final haiku was written November 25th, a few days before his death:

tabi ni yande yume wa kareno wo kake meguru

on a journey, ill,
dreams scouring on
through exhausted fields

Having written it, he immediately composed another poem describing the wanderings of his dreaming mind, and called in Shiko [long o], one of his students, asking which he preferred. Shiko failed to catch the first line and, too embarrassed to ask, simply said he thought the earlier one unsurpassable. Bashō answered, “I know I shouldn’t be writing haiku now, so close to my death. But poetry is all I’ve thought of for over fifty years. When I sleep, I dream about hurrying down a road under morning clouds or evening mist. When I awaken I’m captivated by the mountain stream’s interesting sounds or the calls of wild birds. Buddha called such attachment wrong, and of this I am guilty. But I cannot forget the haiku that have filled my life.”

On November 26th, Bashō wrote letters, including one in which he apologized to his older brother for dying first. The next day, he asked the students who had gathered around him to compose poems, but added that he wouldn’t comment on them: “You must understand, your teacher no longer exists.” He mostly slept after that, but on the 28th, woke up during a warm mid-day to find his students quietly trying to catch the many flies that had gathered on the room’s shoji-paper walls. He laughed, and said of the flies, “They seem happy about this unexpected gift.” The comment is characteristic. A few hours later, he died in his sleep.

His poetry, Bashō once told a student, was like a fan in winter, a stove in summer. As with so many of his images, the statement can be taken in more

than one way. It can be read as a praise of uselessness, saying that poetry, like the *Bashō* tree, is a thing to be loved precisely because it has no utilitarian purpose—by Bashō's own account, that is what he meant. But the description can also be read as an advocacy of intensification: whatever a person's experience, bringing it into a poem will strengthen it more. In some subtle way, these two ideas are not so disconnected as they at first may seem.

What does knowledge of Bashō offer a contemporary Western reader? Foremost, the poems themselves. Bashō's haiku, once read, stay in the mind and return there at odd times, bringing their unexpected expansions to moments of heat or thirst, of aging teeth, of a sudden experience of coolness in mid-August or the first wintry rains. Next, perhaps, there is the proof they offer that even the briefest form of poetry can have a wing-span of immeasurable breadth. Bashō's seventeen-syllable haiku, looked at closely, are much like Emily Dickinson's poems: they are small but many (both poets left behind over a thousand poems), and the work of each of these poets crosses implausibly variable and precise terrains of mind and world. Bashō's haiku describe and feel, think and debate. They test ideas against the realities of observation; they renovate, expand, and intensify both experience and the range of language.

Bashō's poems also instruct in an alternative possibility of being. One useful way to approach a haiku is to understand each of its parts as pointing toward both world and self. Read this way, haiku remind that a person should not become too fixed in a singular sense of what the self might consist of or know, or where it might reside.

fuyu no hi ya bajō ni kōru

winter day:
on horseback,
a frozen shadow

araumi ya Sado ni yokotau amanogawa

wild seas—
sweeping over the island of exiles,
heaven's river of stars

uo tori no kokoro wa shirazu toshiwasure

New Year's Eve year-forgetting party—
wondering what fish feel,
what birds feel?

yagate shinu keshiki wa miezu semi no koe

the cicada's singing
does not show its body
is already dying

wazuare ba mochi o mo kuwazu momo no hara

too ill to eat
even a rice cake—
peach trees in flower.

uki ware wo sabishi garase yo kankadori

mountain cuckoo,
sing my grief-notes
into *sabi*

Ikinagara hitotsu ni kōru namako kana

sea slugs,
frozen alive:
one body

These haiku bow to what lies on both sides of the skin's millimeter-thick boundary. The reader who enters Bashō's perceptions fully can't help but find in them a kind of liberation. They unshackle the mind from any single or absolute story, unshackle us from the clumsy dividing of world into subjective and objective, self and other, illness and blossom. Some haiku seem reports of internal awareness, some seem to point at the external, but Bashō's work as a whole awakens us to the necessary permeability of all to all. Awareness of the mind's movements makes clear that it is the mind's

nature to move. Feeling within ourselves the lives of others (people, creatures, plants, and things) who share this world is what allows us to feel as we do at all. First comes the sight of a block of sea slugs frozen while still alive, then the sharp, kinesthetic comprehension of the inseparability of the suffering of one from the suffering of all. First comes hearing the sound of one bird singing, then the recognition that solitude can carry its own form of beauty, able to turn pain into depth.

Bashō began by writing haiku as pastime, amusing himself as a young man by trying to make something new, unexpected, and of the moment. One of the more unexpected things he did was to turn that idle search to serious use. In his life, as in his poems, he continually took the unconventional turn, abandoning his place in the traditional structures of class, leaving the cultural center for its periphery in both geographical and intellectual realms, choosing to live as wanderer, outsider, provincial. He consistently chose the open over the known, chose to grow old sleeping in fields on grass pillows or in lice-ridden inns. He preferred a traveler's straw hat with a few words inked inside its rim to a roof. At the end, his model for haiku was the artless expression of a child at play.

“The invincible power of poetry,” Bashō wrote, “has reduced me to the condition of a tattered beggar.” The statement was literal: one haiku expresses gratitude for the gift of a new pair of straw sandals, with straps the color of blue iris, at the start of a trip, and Bashō noted that he was always quite safe from robbers, as he carried nothing of value to anyone else. Yet the statement points to another level of meaning as well: a poet's existence is necessarily open to dependence, to interdependence. Bashō's haiku are the record of what the world placed in the open begging bowl of his life and his perceptions.

The words he wrote on the rim his home-made traveling hat can be translated, loosely, as these:

yo ni furu mo sarani sōgi no yadori kana

Under this world's long rains,
here passes
poetry's makeshift shelter.

All haiku translated by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani.

Satori: the Zen term for the experience of a sudden awakening into enlightenment; the image of lightning conventionally is used to convey this idea.