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MATSUO BASHŌ

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BASHŌ IS THE best-known Japanese poet not only in his own country but throughout the world. About a thousand of his haiku survive, a relatively scant output for someone who spent most of his life as a haiku poet; a professional Japanese haiku poet today would not find it difficult to turn out that many poems in a single year. Haiku, at first glance, seems extremely easy to compose—all one has to do is arrange a bare seventeen syllables into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. The ease of composition attracts many Japanese today. It is estimated that a million amateurs belong to haiku groups, each headed by a recognized master. They regularly meet, and the haiku they compose are published in the group's magazine. Yet of the many tens of thousands of haiku composed by such groups each year, probably not more than a handful will be remembered the following year. It is tempting to say that composing a successful haiku, far from being easy, is unusually difficult. Not a word—not even a syllable—can be wasted, and, while obeying certain conventions, it must seem refreshingly new.

The restriction on the number of syllables tends to make a haiku difficult to understand, because words necessary for ready comprehension have been omitted. The poet, whatever he wishes to communicate, must depend on the reader to intuit and complete what he has not overtly expressed. Sometimes a haiku is prefaced by a title or by a brief statement of the circumstances of the composition that makes it easier to comprehend. For



example, the travel diary *Exposed in the Fields* (*Nozarashi Kikō*), written by Bashō in 1684, contains this haiku:

<i>te ni toraba kien</i>	Taken in my hand it would melt
<i>namida zo atsuki</i>	My tears are so hot—
<i>aki ni shimo</i>	This autumnal frost.

One notes first of all that the initial line is in eight instead of the prescribed five syllables. Bashō rarely violated the syllable count unless something in a poem was of such importance to him that he simply had to break the rules. This haiku, then, probably had a special meaning for Bashō. But why, we may wonder, should he have taken frost into his hand, and why did it make him weep? Without help from the poet, the reader is likely to be puzzled, though he may be moved even by the literal sense of the words—the poet takes in his hand a very easily perished substance, and its disappearance makes him weep. But if one knows the circumstances that inspired Bashō to write the haiku, it becomes far more affecting. Just before he wrote the haiku in his diary, Bashō related that he had returned to his home in Iga after spending ten years in Edo: “At the beginning of the ninth month I returned to my old home. The day lilies in the northern hall had been withered by the frost, and there was no trace of them now. My brother’s hair was white at the temples and his brow was wrinkled. ‘We are still alive,’ he said. ‘Pay your respects to Mother’s white hairs!’”

It is clear from this passage that the “autumnal frost” was a lock of the white hair of Bashō’s mother, who had died the previous year. That is why his tears were so hot. But why did he mention the day lilies that had withered in the northern hall? Commentators inform us that it was customary for an aged mother to live in the northern wing of a house, and that such women, relieved of household duties, frequently cultivated plants such as day lilies. Bashō’s reference to the day lilies also alluded to Chinese poems that mentioned them in the same connection. Such an allusion was not an affectation; Bashō, by linking his grief to the grief expressed by poets in China on losing their mother, deepened his own experience.

If one is unfamiliar with the Chinese and Japanese writings to which Bashō at times alluded, some haiku will seem obscure, but the use of allusions was one way of surmounting the limitations of seventeen syllables. A few key words, borrowed from a poem of the past, could expand a haiku by

reference to the content of a predecessor's work. It is possible to enjoy even such haiku without knowledge of the allusions, but if they are understood we can appreciate the additional richness that has been obtained.

Bashō's haiku may be ambiguous even when the surface presents no apparent problem of interpretation. His most famous haiku seems absolutely clear:

<i>furuike ya</i>	The old pond
<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>	A frog jumps in
<i>mizu no oto</i>	The sound of water.

Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the celebrated poet and critic of haiku, insisted that “the meaning of the haiku about the old pond is nothing more than what appears on the surface; there is no other meaning.” Shiki's preferred stance when composing haiku was to describe as objectively as possible what he observed or felt without borrowing overtones from the literature of the past. This accounts for his belief that Bashō's haiku on the frog, a poem he admired, contained no more than what appears on the surface. But this haiku lends itself to other interpretations. The first line, for example, is perfectly clear but if carefully considered is rather puzzling. Why should Bashō have felt it necessary to stipulate that the pond was old? Is not every pond old? Why should he have wasted two precious syllables on the adjective *furu* (“old”)? It may be because Bashō wanted to emphasize the unchanging nature of the pond, which gives the haiku its quiet, horizontal base. Suddenly a frog jumps into the pond, a vertical intersection of the unchanging by the momentary, marked by the splash of the water that defines both. Is that what Bashō actually had in mind? If so, did he hope that we would share with him the epiphany brought on by the sound of the water? Shiki declared that “the special feature of this haiku is that it hides nothing, does not use the slightest artifice, has not one word that is broken or twisted.” We may disagree.

Kagami Shikō, one of Bashō's disciples, related how Bashō happened to compose this haiku: “It was just the kind of day when one most regrets the passing of spring. The sound of frogs leaping into the water could frequently be heard, and the Master, moved by the remarkable beauty of the scene, wrote the second and third lines of a haiku describing it. . . . Kikaku, who was with him, suggested as a first line ‘The yellow roses,’ but the Master settled on ‘The old pond.’” If this account is to be trusted, not one but many

frogs jumped in, repeated violations of the peacefulness of the setting. We will never know Bashō's intention, but such ambiguity is part of the appeal of his poetry.

A line in a haiku by Bashō can be often be interpreted in different ways:

<i>kareeda ni</i>	On the withered branch
<i>karasu no tomarikeri</i>	A crow has alighted—
<i>aki no kure</i>	Nightfall in autumn.

Does the last line mean “nightfall in autumn” or “the last [days] of autumn”? Either or both are possible. The crow that has alighted on the withered branch is the “now” of the poem, and its dark presence is equated with the coming of night in autumn. But surely it is not a twilight in early or mid-autumn, when the bright red leaves always associated with this season in Japanese poetry were at their height. The season is the end of autumn, when the red leaves have scattered, leaving bare branches. The scene is in monochrome: a black crow has perched on a whitened branch at the time of day and in the season of year when colors disappear. The long middle line suggests that Bashō suddenly realized that the moment the crow alighted on the withered branch a day and a season had ended.

Even in translation many of Bashō's haiku can be enjoyed, but the loss of the original sounds deprives the reader of a part of the meaning. The sounds of the previous haiku, especially the *k-r* consonants in the words *kareeda*, *karasu*, and *kure*, add to the darkness of the mood.

A celebrated haiku makes use of the special, mournful sound of the vowel *o*, rather in the manner of Edgar Allen Poe:

<i>natsukusa ya</i>	The summer grasses—
<i>tsuwamonodomo ga</i>	For many brave warriors
<i>yume no ato</i>	The aftermath of dreams.

Here the repeated *o* sounds (six of the seventeen syllables) create a solemnity that underlines the sadness of the death of brave warriors.¹ Another haiku describes silence in sound:

<i>shizukesa ya</i>	How still it is!
<i>iwa ni shimiuru</i>	Stinging into the stones,
<i>semi no koe</i>	The locusts' trill.

Only through sound can silence be known. The stillness of the mountains is interrupted by the prolonged din of the cicadas, but when they stop, the silence is overpowering. In this haiku, the vowel *i* occurs seven times out of seventeen in the poem. The *i* is the sound of the cicadas.

Four stages of this haiku have been preserved. They suggest Bashō's dissatisfaction even with versions that other poets would be delighted to have composed.² The first was:

<i>yamadera ya</i>	Mountain temple—
<i>ishi ni shimitsuku</i>	Seeping into the stones
<i>semi no koe</i>	Cicada voices.

Yamadera, the popular name of the Risshakuji, is a temple in Yamagata that Bashō visited, but *yamadera* otherwise means “mountain temple,” the scene of the haiku. The term *shimitsuku* is used to describe a liquid seeping into another substance. The haiku says that the cries of the cicada permeate the stones. The second version is stronger:

<i>sabishisa ya</i>	What loneliness—
<i>iwa ni shimikomu</i>	Penetrating the rocks
<i>semi no koe</i>	Cicada voices.

Loneliness was akin to the medieval concept of *sabi*. It was not necessarily disagreeable; the Buddhist monk found peace in solitude. The verb *shimikomu* is more intense than *shimitsuku*, penetrating rather seeping into the boulders. The rocks are also more impressive than the stones of the first version. But Bashō was still not satisfied. The third version was:

<i>sabishisa no</i>	Into the loneliness
<i>iwa ni shimikomu</i>	Of the rocks penetrate
<i>semi no koe</i>	Cicada voices.

Here the loneliness is not the general atmosphere of the landscape but a condition fostered by the rocks. Bashō's fourth and final version reads:

<i>shizukesa ya</i>	How still it is!
<i>iwa ni shimiuru</i>	Into the rocks stab
<i>semi no koe</i>	Cicada voices.

The substitution of *shizukesa ya* for *sabishisa ya* was crucial. Loneliness was a conventional topic of poetry, but mentioning silence, despite the din of the cicadas, was a masterstroke. The verb *shimiuru* is the strongest of all. It suggests that the cries of the cicada do not merely penetrate the rocks but stab deep into them.

Bashō's haiku include various examples of synesthesia, the transference of an impression from one sense to another:

<i>Kiku no ka ya</i>	Chrysanthemum scent—
<i>Nara ni wa furuki</i>	And in Nara all the old
<i>hotoke tachi</i>	Statues of Buddha.

The musty scent of chrysanthemums is equated with the dusty, peeling statues in the old temples but also with Nara, a city living in its past. Scent and sight are interchanged. Bashō composed this haiku at the time of the chrysanthemum festival in the ninth month. It thus evokes both the time of composition and the musty past.

The senses of sight and hearing are joined in another haiku:

<i>Umi kurete</i>	The sea darkens—
<i>kamo no koe</i>	The voices of the seagulls
<i>honoka ni shiroshi</i>	Are faintly white.

Here, the cries of the seagulls against the black sky seem like flashes of light.

To create such poems was not easy, even for Bashō. In his *Sarashina Diary*, he related how, as he lay one night in his room at an inn, he attempted to beat into shape the poetic materials he had garnered during the day, groaning and knocking his head in the effort. A priest, imagining that Bashō was suffering from a fit of depression, tried to comfort him with stories about the miracles of Amida Buddha, who had vowed to save all men, but he only succeeded in blocking Bashō's flow of inspiration. Groaning and knocking probably accompanied the creation of many of his haiku. The successive revisions he made to the wording and even the underlying meaning of a haiku enable us to trace his efforts to reach the exact center of the perception he described.

Not all of Bashō's haiku were polished and revised. If, during his travels, he was a guest at someone's house or at a temple, he felt obliged to compose a haiku of salutation and thanks, rather like signing a guest book. Such

haiku were dashed off easily and seldom revised, but they too have charm. At the house of a rich man, his host in Obanasawa, Bashō wrote:

<i>suzushisa wo</i>	Making the coolness
<i>wa ga yado ni shite</i>	My abode, here I lie
<i>nemaru nari</i>	Completely at ease.

Bashō mentioned coolness as a compliment to a host whose house was pleasantly cool in the summer. He and the host had not previously met, but he felt completely at home, as he conveyed by using the word *nemaru*, from the local dialect, meaning to rest comfortably. The use of this word may have indicated his hope he might converse with the host as intimately as someone who spoke the same dialect.

During his *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to Oku*) journey, Bashō composed poems at almost every place he stopped, but not at Matsushima, the place he most wanted to see. He related at the outset, while making preparations for travel: “To strengthen my legs for the journey I had moxa burned on my shins. By then I could think of nothing but the moon at Matsushima.” On arrival, however, Bashō seems to have been stunned into silence by its beauty. This was not his only such experience. During his travels he passed Fuji many times, but his only haiku on the mountain was:

<i>kiri shigure</i>	Fog and rain showers:
<i>Fuji wo minu hi zo</i>	A day one can't see Fuji
<i>omoshiroki</i>	Is interesting.

Although Bashō did not compose a haiku at Matsushima, his prose description is a highlight of the diary:

No matter how often it has been said, it is nonetheless true that the scenery of Matsushima is the finest in Japan, in no way inferior to Tung-ting or the West Lake in China. The sea flows in from the southeast forming a bay seven miles across, and the incoming tide surges in massively, just as in Zhe-zhiang. There are countless islands. Some rise up and point at the sky; the low-lying ones crawl into the waves. There are islands piled double or even stacked three high. To the left the islands stand apart; to the right they are linked together. Some look as if they carried little islands on their backs, others as if they

held the islands in their arms, evoking a mother's love of her children. The green of the pines is of a wonderful darkness, and their branches are constantly bent by winds from the sea, so that their crookedness seems to belong to the nature of the trees. . . . What man could capture in a painting or a poem the wonder of this masterpiece of nature?

Somewhat later in the journey, Bashō visited Kisagata, a place of great scenic beauty where, recalling Matsushima, a great number of islands were scattered in the sea. Here he composed this haiku:

<i>Kisagata ya</i>	Kisagata—
<i>ame ni Seishi ga</i>	Seishi sleeping in the rain,
<i>nebu no hana</i>	Mimosa blossoms.

This haiku, in the manner of older schools, has a pun at its core. The word *nebu* (or *nemu*) means “to sleep” and is used in this sense with what precedes—Seishi is sleeping. But its homonym means “mimosa,” and that goes with what follows—mimosa blossoms. The pun was not intended to be humorous but to add to the complexity. Bashō had been dazzled at Matsushima by its unclouded beauty. Now he is at Kisagata. It is an equally lovely place, but seen in the rain it is somehow melancholy. The sight recalls Seishi (Xi Shi), a pensive Chinese lady who was famous for her seductive frowns. Mimosa, a delicate summer flower, recalls the delicate Seishi.

Some haiku are openly funny:

<i>natsugoromo</i>	My summer clothes—
<i>imada shirami wo</i>	I still haven't quite finished
<i>toritsukusazu</i>	Picking out the lice.

There are probably no hidden meanings behind this haiku!

Toward the end of his life, Bashō insisted on the importance of “lightness” (*karumi*). The term seems to have meant simplicity, as opposed to the complexity of the haiku like the one about Seishi. His last few haiku, composed shortly before his death, are plainly expressed and almost unbearably moving.

<i>kono michi wa</i>	Along this road
<i>yuku hito nashi ni</i>	There are no travelers—
<i>aki no kure</i>	Nightfall in autumn.

<i>kono aki wa</i>	This autumn
<i>nan de toshi yoru</i>	Why do I feel so old?
<i>kumo no tori</i>	A bird in the clouds.
<i>aki fukaki</i>	Autumn has deepened:
<i>tonari wa nani wo</i>	I wonder what the man next door
<i>suru hito zo</i>	Does for a living.
<i>tabi ni yande</i>	Stricken on a journey
<i>yume wa kareno wo</i>	My dreams go wandering about
<i>kakemeguru</i>	Desolate fields.

These haiku are almost entirely in the colloquial language. Bashō, at the very end of his life, seems to have rejected the literary language of his earlier poems. These are so direct and unadorned as to be almost painfully beautiful.

Bashō is celebrated not only for his haiku but for his poetic prose. Indeed, the fifth of his travel diaries, *Oku no hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to Oku*), is probably the most widely read work of Japanese classical literature, although all five diaries rank as masterpieces of “diary literature,” a peculiarly Japanese genre. In no other country has the diary played so important a part, from the first examples in the ninth century to the present. In Bashō’s third travel diary, *Oi no Kobumi* (*Manuscript in My Knapsack*), written in about 1690, he acknowledged his debt to his predecessors, the diary writers of the past:

Nobody has succeeded in making any improvements in travel diaries since Ki no Tsurayuki, Chōmei, and the nun Abutsu wielded their brushes to describe their emotions to the full; the rest have merely imitated. How much less likely it is that anyone of my shallow knowledge and inadequate talent could do better. Of course, anyone can write in a diary, “On that day it rained . . . it cleared in the afternoon . . . there is a pine at that place . . . the such-and-such river flows through this place,” and the like, but unless a sight is truly remarkable one shouldn’t mention it at all. Nevertheless, the scenery of different places lingers in my mind, and even my unpleasant experiences at huts in the mountains and fields can become subjects of conversation or material for poetry. With this in mind I have scribbled down, without any semblance of order, the unforgettable moments of the journey, and gathered

them together in one work. Let the reader listen without paying too much attention, as to the ramblings of a drunkard or the mutterings of a man in his sleep.

Bashō's first four travel diaries, though definitely not the ramblings of a drunkard, may seem unfinished despite their beauty, because the prose and the haiku have not been well blended. Bashō had yet to acquire his mastery of the art of combining in a seamless manner events of a journey with the haiku composed on the way. *The Narrow Road to Oku*, his account of a journey to the northern provinces in 1689, took him four years to write, even though in a modern edition it runs to perhaps twenty-five pages. Undoubtedly Bashō revised the text many times before he was willing to let it out of his hands.

The work opens with a celebrated passage:

The months and days are the travelers of eternity. The years that come and go are also voyagers. Those who float away their lives on ships or who grow old leading horses are forever journeying, and their homes are wherever their travels take them. Many of the men of old died on the road, and I too for years past have been stirred by the sight of a solitary cloud drifting with the wind to ceaseless thoughts of roaming.

The opening words were adapted from a work by Li Bo, but nobody considered this plagiarism. On the contrary, such borrowing was not only tolerated but deemed essential; a literary work without allusions seemed lightweight. But *The Narrow Road to Oku* is not a pastiche assembled from the writings of the great poets of the past; it is the record of an actual journey, and people today still follow Bashō's footsteps along his course, though the passage of three hundred years has obliterated or coarsened most of the sights he described.

The haiku in *The Narrow Road to Oku* include some of his most famous. The first, written just before he started on his journey, is the most difficult to understand without a commentary:

<i>kusa no to mo</i>	Even a thatched hut
<i>sumikawaru yo zo</i>	May change with the dweller
<i>hina no ie</i>	Into a doll's house.

This translation is approximate. The background of the haiku was apparently Bashō's sale of his house to a man with small daughters. At the time of the annual Feast of Peach Blossoms, dolls would be displayed in the house now that girls lived there, but Bashō was a bachelor and as long as he had lived in the house dolls had never been displayed. The thatched hut will change into a doll's house.

The next poem, the first of the journey, is much easier:

<i>yuku haru ya</i>	Spring is passing by!
<i>tori naki uo no</i>	Birds are weeping and the eyes
<i>me wa namida</i>	Of fish fill with tears.

Grief over the passage of spring was, of course, often expressed in poetry. Bashō could not have been wholly serious in declaring that there are tears in the eyes of fish, though he may have felt such empathy for other creatures that he felt they shared his grief. The first line of this haiku would be echoed in the last line of the final haiku of the journey, *yuku aki zo* ("autumn is passing by").

The Narrow Road to Oku consists of prose passages describing places Bashō visited, together with poems inspired by each. Because most of Bashō's journey took place during the summer, the haiku naturally have summer as their season, though summer haiku had been composed relatively seldom. A curious result of the popularity of *The Narrow Road of Oku* is that today more summer haiku are composed than for any other season.

The haiku, good at the beginning of this diary, get even better as the journey proceeds. The prose is marvelous from the start. Perhaps the most affecting section of the entire diary occurs about halfway through. Bashō visits a monument that survives from the eighth century. The text inscribed on the stone relates the circumstances of the building and repairing of a castle that had stood nearby. It is not in the least of literary interest, but it moves Bashō profoundly:

Many are the names that have been preserved for us in poetry from ancient times, but mountains crumble and rivers disappear, new roads replace the old, stones are buried and vanish in the earth, trees grow old and are replaced by saplings. Time passes and the world changes. The remains of the past are shrouded in uncertainty. And yet, here

before my eyes was a monument that none would deny had lasted a thousand years. I felt as if I were looking into the minds of the men of old. “This,” I thought, “is one of the pleasures of travel and of living to be old.” I forgot the weariness of my journey and was moved to tears of joy.

Wherever Bashō went on his travels, he searched for places mentioned in the poetry of the past. Often nothing remained, but this monument was proof that even if mountains crumble and rivers dry up, written words will survive. Later on in the journey, at Hiraizumi, he recalled lines by Du Fu that insist that nature is hardier than any work of man:

It was at Palace-on-the-Heights that Yoshitsune and his picked retainers fortified themselves, but his glory turned in a moment into this wilderness of grass. “Countries may fall, but their rivers and mountains remain; when spring comes to the ruined castle, the grass is green again.” These lines went through my head as I sat on the ground, my bamboo hat spread under me. There I sat weeping, unaware of the passage of time /

<i>natsukusa ya</i>	The summer grasses
<i>tsuwamonodomo ga</i>	For many brave soldiers
<i>yume ni ato</i>	The aftermath of dreams

Bashō was moved to tears by Tu Fu’s poem, but perhaps more important was his earlier discovery that the written word lasts even longer than mountains and rivers.

The Narrow Road to Oku has inspired many poets. Bashō was acclaimed by his successors as the “saint of haiku,” and he was revered not only for his haiku and his diaries but as a man of great goodness who lived in near poverty and inspired the love of many disciples. It may be imagined what consternation was caused when in 1943 the diary of Sora, Bashō’s companion on *The Narrow Road to Oku* journey, was discovered and published, revealing serious discrepancies between the accounts of Bashō and Sora describing the same sights. Worshipers of Bashō refused to believe he could have told a lie, but Sora’s diary is so devoid of literary pretense that one can only suppose it is true.

For example, when the two men arrived at Nikkō, Bashō was so moved by the name of the place (*nikkō* means sunlight) and by its associations with the Tokugawa shoguns who have their mausoleum there that he wrote:

<i>ara tōto</i>	How inspiring,
<i>aoba wakaba ni</i>	On the green leaves, the young leaves
<i>hi ni hikari</i>	The light of the sun.

But Sora's diary stated that it rained on the day that they visited Nikkō. Bashō evidently sacrificed truth to beauty. Again, Bashō described with wonder the marvelous interior of the Konjigidō (Golden Hall) of the Chūsonji, but Sora prosaically related that they could not find anyone to open the hall and therefore had to leave without seeing the famous sculptures.

The believers in the "saint of haiku" in desperation insisted that Sora had either lied or was forgetful. Only after years had passed did they and other scholars decide that *The Narrow Road to Oku* actually was enhanced by Bashō's departures from the facts. This proved that he was more concerned with the artistic effect of the diary than with mere accuracy.

Although Bashō is without doubt the greatest haiku poet, at times he has been criticized. In 1893, Masaoka Shiki, aged twenty-six, wrote a series of short essays on Bashō, which included these remarks: "Let me state at the outset my conclusion: the majority of Bashō's haiku consists of bad verses and doggerel; those that might be termed superior amount to no more than one out of dozens. No, even if one searches for barely acceptable haiku, they are as rare as morning stars." Shiki, about to start a school of haiku on his own, seems to have felt that the best way to establish his credentials as the champion of a new kind of haiku was to attack the reputation of the master. Of course, he hoped that his intemperate comments would startle people, but his real enemy, as he later disclosed, was not Bashō but his numerous followers, whom Shiki blamed for the decline in the vital importance of the haiku. The followers of Bashō showed no awareness of the changes that had occurred in Japan during the past three hundred years, and their incompetent guidance of amateur poets had reduced haiku composition to being nothing more than a means of earning a profitable income. Shiki successfully established his school, and many other schools proliferated, but the reputation of Bashō remained

untarnished. His poetry will surely last as long as there are people who can read Japanese.

Notes

1. If the second line were *heitai tachi ga*, an expression of identical meaning, the poem would be destroyed by the unsuitably cheerful sounds.
2. I have tried to make the translations as literal as possible.