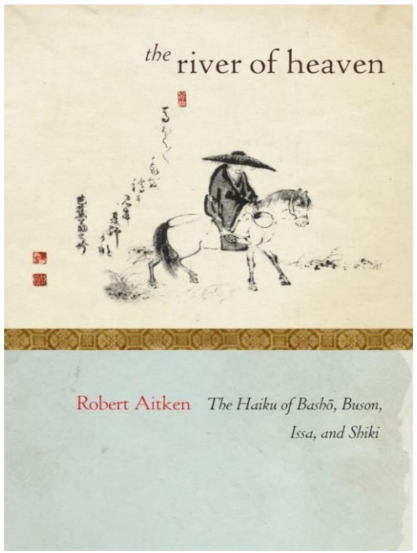
the river of heaven

Robert Aitken

The Haiku of Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki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SELECTED AND WITH COMMENTS BY

Robert Aitken

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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Load every rift with ore.
—John Keats

Recollection of Robert Aitken

BY SUSAN MOON

WHEN AITKEN ROSHI was seventy-nine, he stepped down from being head teacher of the Diamond Sangha and passed the reins on to his dharma heir, Nelson Foster. I was lucky to go to the stepping-down ceremony at the Pālolo temple on Oahu, along with Alan Senauke, to represent Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

The grand occasion included a *shosan* ceremony, in which Roshi sat in a ceremonial chair and visitors asked him questions about the dharma. In the only exchange I still remember, someone asked him: "What is the most precious thing?" and he replied, "A good night's sleep."

I was moved by this intimate and humble answer. Yes, I thought, he must be tired sometimes—he works so hard as a teacher and a writer.

One of my favorites of Robert Aitken's books is *The Dragon Who Never Sleeps*, a collection of his *gathas*, or short verses, for practicing mindfulness in everyday life. His vows drop onto the pages like petals. He writes:

> Falling asleep at last
>
> I vow with all beings
> to enjoy the dark and the silence
> and rest in the vast unknown.

Have a good night's sleep, dear Roshi.

The Summer Moor

Matsuo Bashō

BASHŌ WAS BORN Matsuo Kinsaku in Iga-Ueno, just north of Kyoto, in 1644. His father died in 1656, when he was twelve, and probably by this time he had entered the service of Tōdō Yoshida, the young son of the feudal lord who ruled the area. He wrote his first recorded haiku when he was eighteen and gave himself the pen name Tōsei. Yoshida died in 1666, and Bashō, overcome by grief, was unsettled for a long time, though by 1680 he had a full-time job teaching the writing of haiku and had twenty devoted disciples, who published *The Best Poems of Tōsei's Twenty Disciples*.

He then moved to Edo and on, across the river to Fukagawa, for a reclusive life out of the public eye. His disciples built him a rustic hut and planted a banana tree (*bashō*) in the yard, giving him a new pen name and his first permanent home. Later on, probably for career purposes, he moved back to Edo, where he had another Bashō hermitage, and yet another. (I am reminded of my Zen master Yasutani Hakū'un, who moved from one rental unit to another in Tokyo and moved the name he had given his first little house, "Taihei An, Great Peace Hermitage," to his next rental along with his robes and bowls.)

Despite his successes in Edo, Bashō felt dissatisfied and lonely. He began to practice zazen with the master Butchō Oshō, but it seems not to have calmed his mind. I think it is possible to attribute those feelings of depression to the beginnings of a stomach ailment, possibly cancer.

In the spring of 1684, Bashō's mother died, and he visited his old home in Iga-Ueno to wind up her affairs and deal with her belongings. There he had the most poignant discovery imaginable. He wrote:

> *furusato ya / heso no o ni naku / toshi no kure*
> At my native village
> I wept over my umbilical cord
> first rains of spring.

That same year his disciple Takarai Kikaku published a compilation of Bashō's poems and those of other poets as *Shriveled*

Chestnuts. The poet then went on the first of four major wanderings. He was born to travel, and he wrote at the outset of one journey he memorialized as *The Record of a Travel-Worn Satchel*:

> *tabibito to / waga na yobaren / hatsu shigure*
>
> Let my name
> be “Traveler”—
> first rains of spring.

Traveling in medieval Japan was immensely dangerous, and at first Bashō expected to simply die in the middle of nowhere or be killed by bandits. In spite of this fearsome danger, he enjoyed the changing scenery and the seasons. He met several poets in villages and towns along the way who called themselves his disciples and wanted his advice, and he told them to disregard the contemporary Edo style and even his own *Shriveled Chestnuts*, saying it contained “many verses that are not worth discussing.”

When Bashō returned to Edo after his first trip, he resumed his job as a teacher of poetry, though privately he was already making plans for other journeys. In early 1686 he composed a haiku that marked a transformative experience, an experience that made him the poet we remember:

> *furu ike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*
>
> An old pond;
> a frog leaps in—
> the water sound.

Many scholars simply enter this verse without comment as just one among many that Bashō composed in 1686, but it is not simply one among many. It stands out as one that brings the leap and the sound together, and the sound of the water together with its onomatopoeic presentation, *oto*. With the experience of writing this verse came Bashō’s insight into the way many different dimensions can complement each other—past and present, near and far, color and sound, and so on. Mere imagery was something he left behind forever.

Finally Bashō set about planning for a long journey to the northern provinces of Honshū, and in May 1689, he left Edo with his disciple Kawai Sora. They headed north to Hiraizumi, on the east side of the island, which they reached in late June. They then walked to the west side, detouring to see the island of Kisata at the northern end of Honshū on July 30, and began hiking back home at a leisurely pace along the coastline. Bashō reached the peak of creativity during this journey and wrote many of his finest verses in the course of his sightseeing and encounters with many people who interested him.

During his 150-day journey, Bashō traveled a total of 400 kilometers. He kept a diary of his trip, which he called *The Narrow Way Within* (*Oku no Hosomichi*). He finally completed editing the diary the year he died. The first edition of this work was published posthumously in 1702. It was an immediate commercial success, and many other itinerant poets followed the path of his journey.

Toward the end of his life, Bashō wrote to a friend that he was disturbed by others. He shut his gate in August 1693 and refused to see anybody for a month. Finally he relented and left Edo for the last time in the summer of 16 94. He spent time in Iga-Ueno and Kyoto before arriving in Osaka, where he suffered an attack of his old stomach ailment and died peacefully, surrounded by his disciples.

CROW AT EVENING

kare eda ni / karasu no tomari keri / aki no kure

> On a withered branch
> a crow is perched
> an autumn evening.

Some scholars say this haiku marks Bashō's great awakening. I don't think so, though it does mark an important turning. He was already thirty-six years old and had been publishing haiku since he was nineteen, but none of them had been substantial. With "The Crow at Evening," he began to come into his own. However, the first two lines are simple imagery, and there are technical problems of

grammar. The last line has an intellectual kind of symbolism that is quite out of keeping with his mature work.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

ganjitsu ya / omoeba sabishi / aki no kure

> New Year's Day!
> and I recall the loneliness
> of autumn evenings.

Bashō is facing the vanity of all the celebration, and he feels alienated and lonely. Even more, he remembers that his own thoughts are vain and self-centered and realizes that, really, he walks the universe alone. He stands alone. He lies down alone. He is always alone.

THE SUMMER MOOR

uma hoku hoku / ware wo e ni miru / natsu no kana

> My horse goes clop-clop
> across the summer moor;
> I see myself in a picture.

Sugiyama Sanpū's painting of this scene shows Bashō in his Zen monk or priest habit and hat, riding a cob, the small, stocky horse found in East Asia and across the world. Seeing himself in a picture, the poet experiences subject as object—a global kind of experience that confirms his profound understanding of their essential unity.

AN OLD POND

fuyugare ya / yo wa hito iro ni / kaze no oto

An old pond;
a frog leaps in
the water sound.

This is by far the best-known verse of Bashō's in Japan. The haiku scholar R. H. Blyth told me sixty-five years ago that there was not a schoolchild who did not know it by heart. It is perhaps the haiku known best to Western readers, as well. Yet I dare say few anywhere see into its significance. It was the true turning point for the poet, after eighteen years as a published writer and after he had established a school of haiku poetry with many followers. He was thirty-seven years old, and would live only until he was fifty, yet he composed almost all of his great verses in those thirteen years he had remaining. In a setting of a mossy pond with edges broken down, he encapsulated the timelessly ancient with the immediate sound of a frog hitting the water, to bring exquisite unity to his presentation. Bashō the Japanese poet became Bashō the world genius, who would stride the halls of history's Valhalla with Diogenes, Voltaire, Kabir, e. e. cummings, Thoreau —and with Mazu, Baizhang, Changsha, Zhaozhou, Yunmen, and Dōgen.

MY NAME

tabibito to / waga na yobare n / hatsu shigure

Let my name
be "Traveler"—
first rains of spring.

Look in the phone book of any Western municipality and you will find a number of Washingtons, Lincolns, and Kennedys. That certainly doesn't mean they are all part of a president's family. However, one's name in Japan is one's identity. If you are part of an untouchable clan, you are stuck with a surname that identifies you as an untouchable. All untouchables who manage to migrate hasten to the

nearest official name-changing office to become Tanaka or Watanabe or some other conventional Japanese name. But Bashō would be “Traveler,” even to the point of dying. As he wrote in *The Narrow Way Within*: “On and on I travel; / although when I fall and die / let it be in a field.” He actually did die on his travels, and in his very last hours he wrote, “Taken ill on a journey / my dreams wander / over withered moors.” He was a traveler even in his last dreams.

AT MY NATIVE VILLAGE

furusato ya / heso no o ni naku / toshi no kure

> At my native village
> I wept over my umbilical cord
> first rains of spring.

Bashō is at Iga-Ueno, going through his dead mother’s things, and he comes upon his own umbilical cord, which she had carefully wrapped in a bit of paper marked with his name, Kinsaku, and put away. On reading this verse, my sympathy with the poet was made deeply intimate with the memory of my own experience of finding a lock of my hair in my mother’s things. It retained the freshness of baby hair, which mine had long lost, and was wrapped in a bit of paper marked with my childhood name, Robin.

GIRLS’ DAY

kusa no to mo / sumi kawaru yo zo / hina no ie

> My old hut
> changes owners briefly to become
> a Girls’ Day Festival house.

Bashō had rented his hut to a family for their use as he traveled (soon to be joined by his old friend Sora) to the distant provinces of

the far north. Though the haiku “Departing spring / birds weep / tears are in the eyes of fish” is sometimes considered the first verse of *The Narrow Way Within*, which memorialized the journey, Bashō himself places “Girls’ Day” at the head of his book. He was packing up for his trip, and a family with small girls was to occupy his home in his absence. The Hina Matsuri, or Dolls’ Day Festival, would come March 3, and that was soon. Dolls of the imperial family members would be on display, and the little girls would be fussing over them, serving them tiny cups of water they pretended were tea. Bashō smiles in anticipation.

THE SWORD AND THE ALTAR

oi mo tachi mo / satsuki ni kazare / kaminobori

> Sword and altar
> are both on display
> at this Boys’ Day festival

Bashō and Sora are on their journey. In the town of Senoue during a Boys’ Day festival, they visited a temple where they found the sword of General Yoshitsune and the altar of Zen Master Bankei on display together. Bashō was struck by the juxtaposition, though when I think about it, it is a juxtaposition that was typically Japanese until the nation collectively came to its senses with Japan’s surrender at the end of World War II.

BEHIND THE FALLS

shibaraku wa / taki ni komoru ya / ge no hajime

> For a while,
> let me seclude myself.
> Summer training has begun.

Bashō and Sora had climbed the slopes of a mountain near Nikkō to find “Rear View Falls,” a famous waterfall. It bore this name because one could slip behind it and see the world through the falling water. He reflects that in monasteries the summer seclusion has begun, so behind the falls seems a good place to acknowledge his solidarity with his Zen brothers.

BUTCHŌ’S HER MITAGE

kitsutsuki mo / io wa yaburazu / natsu kodachi

> Even woodpeckers
> dare not touch the cottage
> in the clump of summer trees.

Bashō knew that his Zen master Butchō Oshō had maintained a hermitage for a while near Nikkō, so when he was in the environs, he decided to look for the remains of the hut. He learned that they could be found on the mountain behind Ungan Temple. As he wrote in his diary, “Taking our walking sticks in hand, we set out for Unganji. Some men [at the temple] offered to show us the way ... We scrambled up the mountain behind the temple and found a small lean-to built on a rock in a natural cave ... I left my verse on a post of the hut, and we departed.”

UNNOTICED CHESTNUT TREE

yo no hito no / mitsukenu hana ya / noki no kuri

> Unnoticed by worldly people,
> the chestnut tree
> is in full bloom.

Soon after crossing the Barrier of Shirakawa, Bashō wrote in his diary, “Near this town [Sukegawa], there was a little cottage under a

big shady chestnut tree. The monk who lived there was an absolute recluse." The poet was prompted by seeing the tree to write his verse, expressing his feeling that people who lack the insight of a monk also lack sensitivity to natural beauty. Bashō dressed as a Zen Buddhist monk and did not consider himself to be a worldly person at all. Today in Western Zen centers, there is little distinction between lay and clerical, but in Bashō's time, of course, it was a different story.

IRIS PLANTS

ayamegusa / ashi ni musuban / waraji no o

I will use
iris plants as thongs
for my sandals.

In Sendai, Bashō met a painter who had a taste for poetry and had bush clover, a plant favored by poets for its associations to haiku, growing in his garden. Bashō was impressed with the painter's sensitivity to literature, and when presented with two pairs of straw sandals, he returned the gift with this delightful and fanciful verse.

FLEAS AND LICE

nomi shirami / uma no shito suru / makuramoto

Fleas, lice,
a horse pissing
just outside.

As Bashō wrote in his diary, "The sun had already set [after passing through the barrier of Shimane] ... We found the house of a frontier guard and spent the night under his roof. We were detained by a violent storm, however, and obliged to spend three days there, and

that [experience] had nothing attractive [about it].” This verse is commonly mistranslated something like this: “Fleas, lice / a horse pissing by my pillow / what a place to sleep!” *Makuramoto* is “by my pillow” literally, but it is a metaphor meaning “near where I sleep.” “What a place to sleep!” is not in the original.

SONGS OF THE CICADA

shizukesa ya / iwa ni shimiiru / semi no koe

> What stillness!
> voices of the cicada
> penetrate the rocks.

The cicada (*semi*) live seven years underground in almost inanimate form, and then suddenly crawl up to earth. Looking for partners, they climb to a tree to sing. Then they mate and die, all within one week. The voice of the Japanese locust has the strange timbre of no sound, and though some Westerners call it noisy, to the sensitive ear it has the silence one “hears” inside Grand Canyon. For Bashō it was the ultimate silence that can penetrate rocks.

THE RIVER OF HEAVEN

araumi ya / sado ni yokotau / ama no kawa

> The sea is wild!
> stretching to Sado Island
> is the River of Heaven.

Bashō had passed through the barrier of Ichifuri in what is today Niigata Prefecture and was exhausted, declaring that he wrote nothing. Nothing except one of his finest verses. The “River of Heaven” is the Far Eastern term for the celestial phenomenon we call the “Milky Way” and is a far more poetical expression. I first read

this expansive haiku in Miyamori Asatarō's two-line translation in *Antholog y of Haiku: Ancient and Modern*, back in 1938, in the Library of Hawai'i. I couldn't have imagined that Miyamori was launching me on a lifelong passion for Bashō, or that one day I would actually visit Sado, an island off the coast of western Honshū. I was simply carried away by Bashō's sweeping imagery.

UNDER THE SAME ROOF

hitotsu ya ni / yūjo mo ne tari / hagi to tsuki

Under the same roof
play girls were sleeping
bush clover and the moon

Bashō was completely done in after another day of arduous travel, and he put up at an inn. Lying there, he could hear the voices of women who were obviously prostitutes bewailing their situation through the thin partitions. (Prostitutes are "play girls" in the Japanese idiom.) The next day, he promised to let them follow him and Sora, so that the pilgrims could come to the women's aid, in the event they needed help. Commonly this verse is read superficially to have the moon symbolize the poet, the bush clover the girls. It was this kind of symbolism that made Bashō wring his hands.

THE CALL OF THE PHEASANT

chichihaha no / shikiri ni koishi / kiji no koe

The call of the pheasant!
How I longed
for my parents.

In sophisticated circles of the West, ongoing love and respect for parents have been lost. Philip Larkin wrote, "They fuck you up, your

mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do." Some of us might resonate with Larkin, but Japanese people don't at all. The day laborer and the royal princess bow to their parents before breakfast and light incense in front of their pictures after they are gone. Pheasants will do a diversionary dance to ward off a predator endangering their young, and they symbolize parents in Japanese culture. Bashō's parents have died, so the pheasant calls forth his nostalgia for them. This teaches us something, here in the West.

THE CAMELLIA FLOWER

ochizama ni / mizu koboshikeri / hana tsubaki

A camellia flower
falls,
spilling its water.

The camellia flower is round and plump. When it fades, it falls from its stem with a decisive little thump. When I was practicing zazen in residence in Ryūtakuji in 1951, I had a scroll with a painting of a seated Bashō hanging in the alcove of my room. The alcove was decorated with flowers—camellia flowers that spring. One of them fell with its little thump, and I was inspired to write the haiku "A camellia flower falls / and the Bashō scroll / quivers a little." I had read very few of Bashō's verses at that time, certainly not this one. My unconscious attunement with Bashō and this very verse almost sixty years ago fills me with wonder now.

BLOWING HIS NOSE

tebana kamu / oto sae ume no / sakuri kana

The sound of someone
blowing his nose with his hand

the cherry blossoms.

It is almost blasphemy to blow one's nose with one's hand in the presence of the sacred cherry blossoms. Their brief blossoming time symbolizes the brevity of life, which Buddhism emphasizes, and while it is a time for picnicking and drinking sake, the underlying sacred nature of the celebration is usually not forgotten. But Bashō is saying, "That's fine. There is a place for religious association. Really, though, there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

THE MIND OF AKOKUSO

akokuso no / kokoro shirazu / ume no hana

I do not know
the mind of Akokuso
these plum blossoms!

Bashō was thinking of a poem of Tsurayuki (883–946), whose name as a child was Akokuso: "The hearts of people I know not; / but the cherry blossoms / of my native place / have the scent of long ago." Bashō is echoing Tsurayuki, but he is saying that he doesn't care what was in the old poet's mind when he was writing—all he knows are the sight and scent of the plum blossoms before him.

A CLOUD OF CHERRY BLOSSOMS

hana no kumo / kane wa ueno ka / asakusa ka

A cloud of cherry blossoms!
Was that the bell at Ueno
or Asakusa?

Bashō is in Edo, not in his native village in Iga-Ueno. It is cherry blossom time, and the trees are just past their prime and showering

all around him. He feels as though he were lost in a cloud of them, a samadhi of falling cherry petals, you might say. There is the deep boom of a bell, just that boom out of nowhere. He emerges from his absorption enough to wonder, “Ueno? Asakusa?” It is an experience old-time Zen students everywhere can relate to.

NAMU AMIDA BUTSU

yo ni sakura / hana nimo nembutsu / mōshi keri

When cherry blossoms
are at their best
I offer a Nembutsu.

It might seem ordinary and natural for Bashō to offer a prayer of thanks when the cherry blossoms are at their best, but look deeper. The meaning of this haiku lies in the ephemeral nature of the blossoms. They will soon fade and fall, as we all will. That’s our world and I’m grateful. “Namu Amida Butsu!”

REMEMBERING

samazama no / koto omoidasu / sakura kana

How many many things
come to mind—
these cherry blossoms!

Bashō renounced the world when Tōdō Yoshitada, the young son of the lord of Ueno Castle and his patron, died suddenly. He and Bashō had been intimate friends. Twenty years later, in the spring of 1687, Tōdō Shinshiro, father of Yoshida, invited Bashō for a visit. The cherry trees were blooming, and on seeing them he longed for his dead companion. With this verse, we have a peek into the heart of a very human poet.

THE SHEPHERD'S PURSE

yoku mireba / nazuna hana saku / kakine kana

When I look carefully,
I see a shepherd's purse
blooming under the hedge.

The shepherd's purse is so called because of its triangular, purselike pods. It is a tiny annual and a member of the mustard family. It is native to Eastern Europe and Asia Minor but is naturalized and considered a common weed in many parts of the world, especially in colder climates. Dr. D. T. Suzuki was fond of this haiku, and I remember a talk he gave at the first Koko An, when he declared that people who give attention to a tiny, beautiful flower like the shepherd's purse will never use an atom bomb. Bashō would agree. His verse implies that anthropocentric people don't notice the charming little shepherd's purse.

LOTUS FLOWERS

hasu ike ya / orade sono mama / tamamatsuri

The lotus pond
just as they are, unplucked,
for the Festival of All Souls.

Lotus plants are difficult to grow, and here in Honolulu I know of just two people who know the technique. We depend on them to start our own ponds. We find that once the plants take hold and grow, they flourish more when their flowers are picked. The flowers make a beautiful bouquet for an altar, but Bashō likes them unplucked in their pond. *Sono mama*, "just as they are," is to this day a popular expression in Japan and quite salts ordinary conversations.

FROSTY AT MIDNIGHT

karite nemu / kakashi no sode ya / yowa no shimo

It's frosty at midnight;
I'd like to use the sleeves
of a scarecrow for covers.

Bashō is lying in bed, shivering with inadequate covers, and thinks of a scarecrow—it has clothing. This verse bespeaks his extreme poverty. You or I would simply go and get another blanket, but Bashō had scarcely one. He liked scarecrows—they were a humorous reflection of his ragged self, with his stuffing knocked out of him.

THE CRY OF THE DEER

hii to naku / shiri goe kanashi / yoru no shika

"Hee" cries the deer;
the echo lingers
at night.

In Bashō's time the cry of the deer at night was deemed a mournful expression of unrequited love, but for him it was just a mournful sound, or maybe just a sound. I am reminded of Wallace Stevens, for whom "things as they are" pointed to deep realization.

THE BAGWOR M

minomushi no / ne wo kiki ni ko yo / husa no io

Oh come
to my hut
and hear the bag worm.

This haiku is an in-joke, for the bag worm does not make any sound at all. It just sits there in the spring, hanging from a tree in its little bag, gestating and metamorphosing into a moth. Bashō, ever whimsical, sent this verse to a friend by way of asking him to come and visit. Since his time, the bag worm has been a frequent topic for haiku poets. When I traveled to Kyoto with Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi in spring of 1951, we went to see a famed cherry tree park, where he wrote the verse that has become so well-known: “The place established / for the bagworm / is among the cherry blossoms.”

THE LEEKS

negishiroku / araitatetaru / samusa kana

> The leeks,
> newly washed white.
> How cold it is!

The leeks would be white if they were washed in summer, but this is winter, and they are like icicles. In harmony with the icicles, Bashō notices how cold he feels. He lived attuned to the natural world, and he is attuned to us with his natural yet disciplined rendering of haiku, and we are attuned to him.

A BOWEL-FREEZING NIGHT

ro no koe / nami wo utte / harawatu kōru

> The sound of oars
> striking something—
> it’s a bowel-freezing night.

Bashō is lying in bed in his hut at Fukagawa. His covers are inadequate, and he is shivering in the intense cold. He hears the sound of oars striking something in the nearby river. Even in the

discomfort that would absorb you or me, Bashō is alive to what is going on outside, in this instance, in the river next to his hermitage.

WITH THE YEAR ENDING

toshi kurenu / kasa kite waraji / hakinagara

> As the year ends,
> I find I'm still wearing
> my bamboo hat and straw sandals.

I certainly can relate to this verse. Though the bell is ringing for zazen in the dōjō, I find I haven't even changed into my robes or combed my hair. I've been too absorbed at my computer. Bashō was traveling on pilgrimage, wearing his bamboo hat and straw sandals, even though winter was upon him and it was time to hole up. He's my poet!

WINTER RAINS

kasa mo naki / ware wo shigureru ka / nan to nan to

> Winter rains have come
> have I no straw raincoat?
> well, well!

Another time-has-slipped-by verse. R. H. Blyth quotes Jesus, "The meek shall inherit the earth." I agree that Bashō is meek, but he doesn't think of himself that way. And he doesn't intend to leave any kind of heritage. He just takes note of his situation and accepts it with a cheerful shrug. Well, well! At least it's grist for his mill, as most everything is, and he has another verse for his notebook.

FIRST SNOW

hatsuyuki ya / suisen no ha no / tawamu made

First snow
leaves of the daffodil
bend a little.

As in “The Shepherd’s Purse,” quoted before, and in many other verses Bashō wrote, he shows himself to be attuned to the tiniest or most ordinary forms of nature and to their reactions to natural events. The Pālolo Zen Center is next to a slope that is covered with trees that are full of thrushes. They sing their four-note call mornings and early evenings, or all day if it is overcast. Though it is not mentioned in our publicity, the thrush is actually the motif of the Pālolo Zen Center. Yet there are people who don’t hear the thrush at all, and they wonder that others should comment about it so much. Attuned people whistle the four notes at a thrush, and the thrush will whistle back. These people can do this because their minds are empty of extraneous stuff, and the thrush comes through, loud and clear. Bashō too had an empty mind, and the slight bending of the leaves of the daffodil stood forth vividly bright. Thus he was Bashō, and his haiku inspired his followers, and today they inspire us in turn.

THE BRIDGE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

hatsuyuki ya / kake kakaritaru / hashi no ue

The new snow
has settled on the bridge
under construction.

When Bashō was living at Fukagawa, a bridge was being built across the nearby river. The first snow of winter lies on the partially completed structure. The new white untrampled snow lies on the

new wood of the unfinished bridge, setting forth the virginity they have in common.

SNOW VIEWING

iza yukan / yukimi ni korobu / tokoro made

> Oh, look!
> Let's go snow viewing
> until we tumble over!

Bashō is spending time with friends. He looks out the window and sees that it is snowing. "Look! It's snowing!" he exclaims. "Let's get out there and really enjoy ourselves." Like moon viewing (*tsukimi*), snow viewing (*yukimi*) is usually an altogether passive, aesthetic practice among artists and poets—but not Bashō! "Let's tumble around in it! Let's carouse!"

HAILSTONES

iza kodomo / hashiriarukan / tamaarare

> Look, children!
> Hailstones!
> Let's rush out!

Another "oh, look!" verse. Parents everywhere, including Japan, encourage their children to sit at the window and watch the hail. They wouldn't think of letting them go out there to be in it. Not only did Bashō let them go out in it, he excitedly called them to rush out to feel the hailstones hit their faces. Of course, he wasn't a parent. He knew what the children would want to do, and with the passion of the storm itself, he calls to them, "Let's rush out!" He was what all of us wish we were, the child grown up with the spirit of the child intact.

HAIL ON MY HAT

ikameshiki oto ya / arare no / hinoki gasa

> How majestic the sound
> of hail
> on my cypress wood hat!

Bashō used a seven / five / five syllable arrangement of the lines of this verse, instead of the standard five-seven-five, and we find him (and other haiku poets) doing this occasionally. He is wearing a *kasa*, the circular hat, made of strips of cypress wood rather than strips of bamboo. For him there was something majestic in the sound of hail striking his kasa. I find something extraordinary in his feeling that the sound was majestic.

KŪYA'S EMACIATION

karazake mo / kūya no yase mo / kan no uchi

> Dried salmon
> and Kūya's emaciation too,
> in this coldest season.

Kūya Shōnin was a tenth-century saint of the Pure Land school who went around the country building roads and bridges and digging wells. He was always chanting the Nembutsu, "Veneration to Amida Buddha." When I visited the Rokuharamitsu temple in Kyoto back in 1951, I saw its famous statue of Kūya chanting while on pilgrimage. Half a dozen little Amida Buddhas were coming forth from his mouth, suspended on a wire. In his verse, Bashō presents his identity with the chanting Kūya and dried salmon. He was clear that all things, including Kūya and dried salmon, are one with you and me—in coldest or hottest weather. We and all beings live in this identity. "All beings by nature are Buddha," as Hakuin Zenji says in his "Song of

Zazen.” Bashō knew this truth very well. After all, he was not a master of halls of ivy.

THE VOICE OF THE SPIDER

kumo nan to / oto wo nan to naku / aki no kaze

> With what sound,
> with what voice, oh spider
> the autumn wind.

This verse is not an in-joke like “The Bag worm,” which I quoted some time back, but a profound question in an altogether different dimension. Spiders do have a voice, a way of communicating with each other. “What is it?” Bashō asks. “I want to hear it.” He is the ultimate environmentalist. Without a trace of anthropocentrism, he still feels alien, and he wants to enlarge himself to include the spider world. “Me too,” the earnest entomologist would murmur.

THE ROSE OF SHARON

michi no be no / mukuge wa uma ni / kuwarekeri

> A Rose of Sharon
> by the roadside,
> eaten by my horse.

The rose of Sharon is the hibiscus, a common, dearly loved flower in Hawai‘i and the rest of Polynesia. The red hibiscus is our state flower. In kindergarten we sang, “Hibiscus red, hibiscus pink, hibiscus yellow and gay. / Growing low on bushes green, many new ones every day!” That’s the hibiscus, that’s the rose of Sharon! Tom Joad’s sister in *The Grapes of Wrath* was “Rosashar’n.” Bashō was once taken to task by his Zen master Butchō Oshō for wasting his time on haiku. Bashō responded by quoting this verse. Butchō was

surprised, and exclaimed, “Is there such meaning in haiku?” Yes there is, old-timer, and going deeper into its meaning keeps me enthusiastically at work.

THE BUSH CLOVER

shiratsuyu wo / kobosanu hagi no / uneri kana

> The bush clover flowers
> don’t let their white dew fall
> despite their swaying.

The lespedeza, or bush clover, is a graceful bush whose stems bend over together like the spray of a fountain. It is a favorite subject for haiku poets, and I first encountered it in Bashō’s *The Narrow Way Within*: “In the same inn / play girls were sleeping—/ bush clover and the moon.” He refers to the plant many other times. In this verse he notices that when the wind blows, the bushes move in waves, but the little red and white blossoms don’t drop their dew. He saw this minute phenomenon the way he became aware of the shepherd’s purse blooming under the hedge. I have Bashō’s image in what was originally made as a Buddhist shrine in my living room. I remember how Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi scolded the director of the Bashō museum in Iga-Ueno for not exhibiting Bashō in a shrine. He is a true bodhisattva, the Rōshi said, just as worthy of a shrine as Manjushrī or Maitreya. Indeed!

THE PAINTING OF A MORNING GLORY

asagao wa / heta no kaku sae / aware nari

> The pathos
> the morning glory
> painted unskillfully.

Bashō's disciple Ransetsu painted a morning glory, but not very skillfully. He asked Bashō to write a haiku to accompany it. History does not relate whether or not the poet actually inscribed his verse on the painting. I have a ridiculous painting by Hakuin Zenji of a little bird with a long tail like a peacock sitting on a branch. His inscription reads, "This was supposed to be a wren, but its tail is too long." The morning glory verse can be misleading. It is the flower that brings pathos, not the unskillful painting. The morning glory fades very soon after the sun comes up. It blooms only a single morning—how pathetic! Bashō feels pathos for himself too, and for all beings. Ransetsu's lack of skill offers him a trap. Did you get caught? You wouldn't be the only one.

THE ROSE MALLOWS

kirisame no / sora wo fuyō no / tenki kana

In the misty rain
the rose mallows
make it a fine day.

The rose mallow is a kind of hibiscus. Bashō is saying that it's a day of misty rain but the rose mallows are so brilliantly beautiful that they shine like the sun on a fine day. They are like some women I know who shine like the sun, or like waffles when I'm feeling grouchy in the early morning, or like my beloved haiku, when my Parkinson's disease limits my typing to two fingers that are forever hitting the wrong keys.

PLANTING A BASHŌ

bashō uete / mazu nikomu ogi no / futaba kana

I planted a bashō
and am like an ogre
when bush clover sprouts.

Bashō took his name from the banana tree, a Japanese variety that does not bear fruit. The poet had been given one by his disciple Rika and had planted one earlier next to his nine-by-nine, earthen-floor hermitage, and he had given his home the name “Bashō An.” It was located near a river, where the soil was suitable for bashō, and also for bush clover. The poet was an ogre when he saw the bush clover sprouting by his beloved bashō. The significance of this verse is that Bashō could not just feel like an ogre, he was an ogre. You and I are Gandhi and Sam Hall rolled into one. “My name is Sam Hall, Sam Hall. My name is Sam Hall, Sam Hall. And I hate you one and all, yes I hate you one and all. God damn your eyes.”

A PAULOWNIA LEAF

sabishisa wo / tōte kurenu ka / kiri hitoha

A paulownia leaf has fallen;
won’t you visit me
in my loneliness?

The paulownia tree sheds its leaves in autumn, and here is the first one. Autumn is upon us with its reminder that winter, the time of death for so many beings, will soon follow. Bashō reflects on the inevitable brevity of life and seeks the comfort of his dear disciple Ransetsu. We’re in this together, old friend. He would find no comfort in denying that brevity.

THE OLD VILLAGE

sato furite / kaki no ki motanu / ie mo nashi

An old village
there is not a house
without a persimmon tree.

Bashō is visiting his friend Bōsui at his home in an old village. Every home has a slow-growing persimmon tree. Growing up in Honolulu, I thought the persimmon plant was a bush. I see only a few that are trees today. Every tree in Bōsui's village has a full-grown tree, and Bashō is struck with a sense of timeless antiquity.

AT NARA

kiku no ko ya / nara ni wa furuki / hotoke tachi

The fragrance of chrysanthemums
at Nara,
and the many Buddhas.

Nara was the first capital of Japan, where Buddhism from China was made welcome. The Nara period (710–784) is a historical designation for both. In Bashō's time it surpassed Kamakura for the number, uniqueness, and artistic beauty of its Buddhist images. The chrysanthemum, too, is central to Japanese culture, and is the national crest. The two were profoundly linked for Bashō, as they are for all Japanese.

THE CHRYSANTHEMUM BUD

yase nagara / wari naki kiku no / tsubomi kana

Just as it is
the chrysanthemum bud,
so admired, is thin and weak.

“Just as it is,” *yase nagara*, has the same meaning as *sono mama*, which I discussed previously in “Lotus Flowers,” but it doesn’t have as much currency. The thinness and weakness of the buds are at work—not destiny at work, but are in keeping with the natural order of things. Bashō was not a man of destiny.

THE CRICKET

kirigirisu / wasurene ni naku / kotatsu kana

> The cricket chirps
> in a forgetful way
> this *kotatsu*!

The *kotatsu* was a feature of Japanese homes, and still is in older houses, and for families that can afford a room that is furnished in the old way. It is an opening in the floor about two feet deep and about three feet square. A charcoal brazier is set in the hole with a teakettle steaming on it. The family cat likes to sleep in there, where it is nice and warm. A table is placed over the hole, with a tablecloth covering it. The family sits around the kotatsu with their feet under the table and the tablecloth drawn up to their hips. There is no other source of heat in the house. It is a sleepy place, but the family takes its meals there and sits around there to drink tea and gossip. It is a welcome place for a cricket too, Bashō notices, as it chirps away happily. With his intimacy with all beings, including the cricket, he felt that its call was sleepy and forgetful. You will find the kotatsu only in Japan; you will find such haiku only in the oeuvre of Bashō.

THE TEMPLE GARDEN

hyakunen no / keshiki wo niwa no / oehiba kana

It looks a hundred years old
this temple garden,
with its fallen leaves.

With work their daily Buddhist practice, you can be sure that monks swept the garden clean of leaves yesterday, but today's light scattering gives the garden the look of most ancient moss and stones. To the realized eye, the garden not only looks that way, but is that way. The ancient is the present and the present is the ancient. The scattering of a few leaves in a temple garden is a reminder that time is no time, but the eternal present.

VOICE OF A WATERFALL

ochikochi ni / taki no oto kiku / ochiba kana

From far and near,
voices of waterfalls are heard—
leaves are falling.

It seems to Bashō that he is surrounded by the sound of waterfalls coming from nearby and far away. Here and there, withered leaves fall soundlessly through the damp air, and he can't tell where they come from. It is like an experience he set forth in his verse on a cloud of flowers. "Far and near" reminds me of when I was a little boy, lying in bed after saying good night to my parents. Occasionally I would entertain myself by scratching the sheet. The sound would be near at hand and at the same time, far and dim. Bashō's experience was not an occasional pastime. It was where he lived.

WHO I AM

asagao ni / ware wa meshi kū / otoko kana

I'm a man
who admires morning glories,
eating breakfast.

Bashō was admonishing his disciple Kikaku, who had written, "At a grass door / I'm a firefly freely nibbling / on smart weed." You're just showing off, Bashō had said. Here's who I am, and he presented Kikaku with his morning glory verse. To stress the admonition he used the vulgar *meshi* rather than the ordinary *gohan*. He was ever diligent to keep his disciples on the true path of haiku composition.

HORSETAIL SHOOTS

mafukuda ga / hakama yosou ka / tsukuzukushi

A legendary man
wears a *hakama*
made of horsetail shoots

The *hakama* was a pleated skirt that was worn on special occasions. It is worn today by martial arts players and by laymen at the zendo. Horsetail or scouring brush is a perennial herb with downward-turning shoots that look like asparagus. The legendary Mafukuda was a servant boy who decided to be a monk. The daughter of the family was impressed by his decision and made a hakama for him.

MY LANTERN

mono hitotsu / waga yo wa karoki / hisago kana

Same thing—
my lantern
and a gourd.

Bashō had stowed the belongings of his disciple Sanpū in the rafters of Bashō An, and a gourd got loose from its lashes and hung down into the single room of the hermitage. For the poet it was his lantern; since he was so abjectly poor, he couldn't afford one. It was a humorous confession of how things were for him. Sanpū was a wealthy fishmonger, and the thought that he might be imposed upon never crossed his mind.

PROTECTING THE BUDDHA

kasadera ya / moranu iwaya mo / haru no ame

Spring rains,
the Temple of the Hat
and the Non-leaking Cave.

Bashō visited the temple Ryūfuku near the city of Nagoya. Legend has it that it once fell into disrepair, and a poor woman covered the main Buddhist image with her head scarf to protect it from rain leaking through the neglected roof. Her story became well-known, and so the temple became famous for its "Buddha with a Hat." The Non-leaking Cave was a famous sacred gathering place for mountain ascetics. The radical Sino-Japanese graph for "leak" is the graph for "rain." The water falling freely in the spring rain was only partly resisted by the roof of Ryūfuku and its missing tiles, and was completely kept out of the Non-leaking Cave. Water made up 57 percent of Bashō's own meager body weight. Water, he knew, was a living confirmation of the abstract term "harmony of all beings, living and nonliving," and he shows us that vital harmony for our delectation.

THE GREBE NEST

samidare ni / nio no ukisu wo / mi ni yukan

In the summer rain,
I want to look for
a floating grebe nest.

The grebe is a waterbird that builds its nest out of a kind of straw that floats. Bashō knew that the common fact that a grebe nest floats would not make a haiku. However, if he could find such a nest, a haiku might occur to him. All of Bashō's verses were occasional verses, and he was ever on the alert to find the right occasion.

MELON GATHERING

uritsukuru / kimi ga arena to / yūsuzumi

Melon gathering
"you must wish
to cool off in the evening."

Bashō based this haiku on a verse by the famous Saigyō Hōshi, who lived five centuries earlier, "By the roots of a pine tree / on the banks of Iwata River / you must wish to cool off in the evening." "By the roots of a pine tree" became "Melon gathering," and that's how the master used the occasions he encountered.

A REASSURING HAWK

yume yori mo / utsutsu no taka zo / tanomoshiki

Even when wakening from a dream,
the reality of a hawk
is reassuring.

Bashō's student Totoku was suffering from deep depression. Bashō heard about this and made a long, arduous journey to visit him. He wrote several verses in an effort to revive the spirit of his student.

“Even when wakening from a dream” can be understood as “even when you find yourself so depressed.” It was said that a dream of Mount Fuji the night before New Year’s Day was most auspicious. A dream of a hawk was second most auspicious. I am that hawk, dear friend, Bashō was saying. I assure you that you have been all right from the very beginning. It was Bashō’s hope that Totoku would really hear him and recover from his toxic condition.

A CHOPPED HERB

yomo ni utsu / nazuna ni shidoro / modoro kana

Everyone says
a chopped herb helps
if you are confused.

It was believed that eating chopped herbs mixed with one’s morning rice porridge could help ease confused feelings. For example, one might be having confused feelings on being in love. The *nazuna* being recommended is the shepherd’s purse, which ironically is also used as an aphrodisiac. There was no topic that was not grist for Bashō’s mill.

AN OLD WOMAN FINDS SOLACE

omokage ya / oba hitori naku / tsuki no tomo

They say
a weeping old woman
has the moon for a friend.

In prehistoric times, old people were abandoned on Mount Obasute in Nagano Prefecture. According to a legend recounted by the mountain people, a wife had hated her husband’s aunt. Finally she nagged him into abandoning the aunt on the mountain, in keeping

with the ancient custom. There on the mountain the old woman was utterly miserable and wept constantly. When a beautiful moon came up, she found some solace. A legend is quintessentially human. Bashō lived in that dimension.

THE CHRYSANTHEMUM FESTIVAL

izayoi no / izure ka kesa ni / nokoru kiku

> The full moon and the chrysanthemums
> are in almost complete accord.
> The chrysanthemums are just past their prime.

The chrysanthemums were at their prime the day before, but when dawn came, they had started to change. The Diamond Sutra closes with these words: “All things are under the Law of Change, they are like dew, the clouds, a phantom or the mist. You should contemplate like this.” Change is the fixed rule of the cosmos.

THE FIRE PIT DOG

itsutsu mutsu / cha no ko ni narabu / irori kana

> The fire pit dog
> has a chain
> as warm as my disciples

The *irori*, or fireplace dog, is placed in a hole dug in the earth floor and holds a chain or rope to lower the cooking pot. Bashō found the chain was as warm as the group of twenty disciples that gathered with him at Fukagawa long ago, or his affection for his companion Sora as they made their way north.

THE POETS OF FUKAGAWA

mina ogame / futame no shime wo / toshi no kure

The end of the year,
affect the wedded
sacred rocks at Futame.

Offshore at Futame, on the coast of Ise, there are two rocks known as wedded sacred rocks. One is thought to be male and the other female by followers of the Shinto religion. They are connected by ropes made of rice straw. Bashō was not a Shintoist. He simply used the bonded rock at the end of the year as a topic for an interesting verse.

A QUILT

yogi wa omoshi / go ten ni yuki o / miru ara n

The quilt seems too heavy
for the snow
of the far country.

Bashō had been studying the poetry of Ke Zhi and used his line, “My hat is heavy with snow / under the skies of Wu.” *Go ten* is distant land, and for Ke Zhi that would be Wu, a faraway place, now Feng Xiang, a part of Shanxi province. Here Bashō is using his academic study as a topic for his writing of haiku.

THE RAT AT A RIVER

kōri nigaku / enso ga nodo wo / uruoseri

There's not yet
water to moisten
the river rat's throat.

There was not yet drinking water available for his newly rebuilt neighborhood of Fukagawa, so Bashō had to buy it. He is cautioned by Zhuangzu's lines, "A rat drinks water at a river, / but not more than it needs." Scholars conjecture that Bashō is thinking apologetically that he is buying more than he needs, or that he drinks more than he needs to. They touch the point. The rat is a creature of nature, and with Zhuangzu's creative imagery, Bashō is reminded of nature's teaching of moderation and conservation.

THE HARE'S FOOT FERN

go byō toshi he te / shinobu wa nani wo / shinobu gusa

The Emperor had gotten old;
he was entombed
in the Hare's Foot Fern.

This is a verse based on history. Emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339) wrested power from a military dictatorship, the Kamakura Shogunate, and established a civilian government called Kemmu, or Hare's Foot Fern. He died three years later and was entombed. The government reverted to the military Kamakura Shogunate. The three-year interval is called the Kemmu Period and comes between the Kamakura and Ashikaga periods. *Kemmu* has several meanings, "remembrance" or "hare's foot fern," "to recall" or "endure." The emperor's tomb was probably surrounded by hare's foot fern. It was this multilayered complex of meanings that Bashō so dearly loved and was so talented at putting into verse.

MINAMOTO NO TOMONAGA

koke uzumu / tsuta no utsutsu no / nebutsu kana

Buried in moss and ivy,
for the absent-minded recitation
of the Nembutsu.

Minamoto no Tomonaga, youthful son of Lord Minamoto no Yoshitomo, was wounded in the battle of Nagashima in 1575. It was a knee wound, but with complications from earlier serious illnesses, eventually he died. He was given interment in a grave covered with moss and ivy, in keeping with his station. The Nembutsu prayer of the Pure Land faith would be recited over his grave, “Namu Amida Butsu,” “Veneration to the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life,” over and over. “Namandabu, Namandabu, Namandabu ...” It becomes a blur of devotional sound. I feel with Bashō that this is absent-minded.

CHIKUSAI

Kyōku kogarashi no / mi wa chikusai ni / nitaru kana

The *Kyōku* of tradition
look like those
of Chikusai.

Kyōku are to Noh drama as *Senryū* are to haiku. They are comical or satirical. One of R. H. Blyth’s books was devoted to Senryū.[1] Chikusai was a poor physician in the Kyōku of that name. He made up Senryū at the expense of pompous poets, to amuse his patients. In this verse, Bashō is expressing his poor opinion of the Kyōku tradition. Wheels within wheels, as we have come to expect.

LINHE

ume shiroshi / kinō ya tsuru wo / nusuma re shi

The crane
was stolen
as a white plum branch.

For this verse, Bashō used a legend about the Chinese hermit Linhe, whose crane was stolen. The poet's host had wanted to make the conventional arrangement of crane and white plum branch for his *tokonoma*, but the crane was missing. "Was stolen" was a metaphor referring to the high crime rate in the host's neighborhood. Bashō ends up, as he inevitably does, with a very interesting haiku.

THE TREE PEONY

botan shibe fukaku / wake izuru hachi no / nagori kana

Deep in a tree peony
a bee crawls,
as I bid a regretful farewell.

Bashō had been staying with his disciple Tōyō. It seems that he used the unconventional eight / eight / five syllable count as he was too upset at saying farewell at the end of the visit to remember the rules. It is not that he was a man of easy emotions—tears and laughter flowed from nature itself.

MOUNT YUDONO

katara re nu / yudono ni nurasu / tamoto kana

Too tall to climb,
I moisten my sleeves
in the *furo* room.

Bashō visits Mount Yudono, the most famous of three sacred peaks in the province of Dewa, now Yamagata Prefecture. The mountain is

too tall to climb for Bashō, so he stays to see its famous waterfall, which in its form resembled a vagina. *Yudono* also means "*furo* room," or bathroom, so Bashō has more than enough material.

THE BLOOD OF THE BUSH WARBLER

hototogisu / katsuo wo some ni / keri kerashi

> Maybe the bush warbler
> sang too much
> this skipjack.

Bashō is having dinner at the home of the wealthy retainer of the Akimoto clan and is served skipjack, a tuna that we call *aku* in Hawai'i. It is something exotic for him, and he fancies that a bush warbler must have sung too much. The bush warbler was said to gush blood when it was that enthusiastic.

NO PICKLE-BARREL

ochiba shite / nukomiso oke mo / nakarikeri

> Leaves are falling.
> I don't even have
> the barrel for pickling.

Nukomiso is a pickling material made of bran, salt, and water and is seasoned in a barrel. Even the poorest home in Japan has nukomiso seasoning in a barrel out of the way somewhere. Bashō doesn't even have the barrel. He is poorer than the poor, but he is not expressing self-pity. He is expressing how things are.

FAILING HEALTH

otoroi ya / ha ni kuiateshi / nori no suna

In failing health and strength
my teeth grate
on sand in the seaweed.

Seaweed has always been an important part of the Japanese diet, and its preparation involves getting rid of all the sand that had been clinging to it. It is a little bothersome for young people to chomp down on a remaining grain of sand, but for Bashō, who knew his days were numbered, it is a reminder that he doesn't have long to go. It is like when I slip and catch myself in the shower. In my youth I would think, "I could have hurt myself." In my old age, I think, "I could have broken my hip," and that would radically shorten the time I have to go.

THE CRICKET

muzan ya na / kabuto no shita no / kirigirsu

How piteous!
Beneath the helmet
a cricket is chirping.

This is a truly remarkable verse. Haiku are known for their concentration of two or three elements in seventeen syllables, but I count five! Toward the end of his journey to the then-remote northern provinces, Bashō is visiting the shrine dedicated to the warrior Sanemori. His helmet and fragments of his clothing are on display there. The exclamation "How piteous!" is from the Noh play *Sanemori*. The warrior had led the Taira forces that had lost the battle at Shinohara to the Minamoto army, and all had fled and been captured, except Sanemori. He was finally taken into custody and beheaded. No one could identify the head when it was brought into camp, except the warrior Higuchi Kanemitsu, whose lines in the Noh play read, "How piteous! It is Saito Betto Sanemori!" Bashō's echo of those words in his verse is the genius at work. The battle of

Shinohara was memorialized in the *Heike Monogatari*, an early Japanese history, on which the Noh drama is based. I am grateful to a number of scholars for guiding me through the associations of book to play to words of a player to another warrior and his severed head.

MY WAILING VOICE

tsuka ugoke / waga naku koe wa / aki no kaze

Shake, oh tomb!
My wailing voice
is the autumn wind.

Bashō had heard vaguely of a haiku poet named Ishō in Kanazawa, but on arriving in the town he learned that he had died just a year before. He attended the memorial service and presented this verse to Ishō's older brother. "Shake, oh tomb!" he implores. "Join the wail of the autumn wind and my voice." It is the experience of grief at funerals we all know—grief pervades the whole universe, but expressed with focused metaphors, his own anguished voice joins the howl of the autumn wind and the very tomb itself.

THE WINDS OF AUTUMN

ishiyama no / ishi yori shiroshi / aki no kaze

Whiter than the stones
of Stony Mountain
the winds of autumn.

In the town of Shirane, Bashō heard that in ancient times, the cloistered Emperor Kazan completed a pilgrimage here and in commemoration erected a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon. In Shirane, there are large, curious stones. Bashō was inspired to write

this verse, not about Kannon or the cloistered emperor, but about the stones.

In Japan, “white” does not designate a color, but it is a word that means “no-color.” In his haiku, Bashō is saying that the winds of autumn are even more colorless than the stones of no-color. This poem is even more curious than the stones that inspired it.

BASHŌ BIDS FAREWELL TO SOR A

Kyō yori ya / kakitsuke kesan / kasa no tsuyu

> From today on
> I’ll keep the inscription erased
> dew hat.

Bashō’s travel companion also suffered from a stomach ailment, and he decided to end his journey and go back to Ise to recover with relatives. The inscription was the verse “Between Heaven and Earth / without a fixed abode / we two travel together.” The “dew hat” is a poetical reference to our ephemeral nature. Bashō and Sora, journeying on foot together, were close friends the way celibate companions can be. One can imagine how bereft he must have felt.

FALLEN LEAVES

niwa haite / idebaya tera ni / chiru yanagi

> Before I depart,
> I’d like to sweep the temple courtyard
> of fallen willow leaves.

Students had begged Bashō to write a haiku for them, so he wrote a verse he had been composing. Perhaps we could paraphrase this: “As a guest at the temple, before I leave I should like to do a bit of *samu*—the work practice of Zen monks that is zazen away from their

cushions. In this way I can help realize the adage ‘Clean as a Zen temple.’”

KEEPSAKES

mono kakite / ōgi hikisaku / nagori kana

I wrote something
and ardently tore the fan
the parting!

Bashō was saying farewell to a man who saw him off on his journey to Dōgen Zenji’s monastery, Eiheiji. It was considered elegant and delightfully spontaneous for the literary host to write a farewell verse on a fan and then tear it in two. He would keep the half with the first two lines of the verse and give his departing guest the other half with the third line, signature, date, and seal.

THE DR AGONFLY

tambō ya / toritsuki kaneshi / kusa no ue

The dragonfly!
It tries in vain to land
on a blade of grass.

With “in vain,” Bashō takes the role of the ordinary observer. For his part, he knew very well that “tries to” would be a projection. The dragon does not show irritation, because it does not feel irritation at the movement of the grass, blown by the wind. It tries to land and misses, tries to land and misses, over and over. That’s all!

THE REFUGE

inasuzume / chanokibatake ya / nige dokoro

Rice-field sparrows
find the tea plantation
is their place of refuge.

Tea plants are small, compact, and impenetrable, and within them sparrows feel safe. To this day they are a part of plantation life. When I visited Europe and Latin America long ago, I found that the great churches, completely open, are likewise sanctuaries for little birds. They scramble and scrabble around, feeling at home as they twitter and make messes. They are themselves in what we know to be a human setting, and they teach us that, after all, we and the rest of humanity are not in the least separate from the rest of nature.

WITHERING BLAST

kogarashi ni / iwafukitogaru / sugima kana

The rocks among the cryptomeria
are sharpened
by the withering blast.

The sharpness of rocks among the pointed cryptomeria flowers is accentuated by the witheringly cold, sharp wind. Bashō has been cold a long time. He doesn't see any misery in the sharpness of the rocks or the wind, or anything strange in the shape of the cryptomeria. There is only the harmony of rocks, flowers, and wind—and the harmony that is.

NOT MY FRIEND

asagao ya / kore mo mata waga / tomo narazu

A morning glory!
this too
can never be my friend.

The morning glory grows alone, blooms alone, and dies alone. It has no relationship with anything or anybody. It can never be Bashō's friend, never ever to the end of time. In the last year of his life, he had become bothered by the many visitors who came to see the famous man. He latched his gate for a month and during this time wrote the morning glory haiku.

THE MONKEY'S JACKET

saruhiki wa / saru no kosode wo / kinuta kana

The monkey showman
beats the tiny jacket
on the fulling block.

Fulling blocks were wooden mallets used to beat the washing to get it dry and soft. The clothes were hit on a wooden block or on stone, sometimes near the river where the washing was done. Monkeys in a jacket and on a leash were street performers in Bashō's day, and are still seen occasionally in rural Japan. Here we have a picture of the monkey showman laundering the jacket of his little partner, and one senses that he was a true partner, not merely in their means of livelihood.

VISITING FAMILY GR AVES

ikka mina / shiraga ni tsue ya / hakamairi

All the family,
white-haired and leaning on staves,
are visiting the graves.

Graves are visited formally on an annual basis, between the thirteenth and the fifteenth of July. Bashō and his family are visiting the grave of his older brother Matsuo Hanzaemon. They are surely conscious that they will soon join him, for all of them are white-haired and leaning on staves. Issa has a verse about the other end of life, “Visiting the graves / the youngest one / carries the broom.”—to sweep away the leaves.

OUR NEIGHBOR

aki fukaki / tonari wa nani wo / suru hito zo

> As autumn deepens
> I wonder about our neighbor;
> what does he do?

Bashō was in the throes of his last illness and sent this verse to a poetry-writing party he could not attend. At such a time, one might expect an expression of thoughts that sum things up about a life about to end. But this is Bashō, true to himself to the last, true to Dōgen Zenji’s dictum that the way of the self advancing and confirming the myriad things is delusion. It is rather the way of the myriad things advancing and confirming the self that is true realization. Bashō was quintessentially a man of true realization. At the end of his life, he was not about to send a verse to his friends about himself; rather he sent one that expressed interest in a neighbor whom he had not even met.

We in the West identify some people by their profession—Dr. Jameson or Peter Olson, Esq., for example. In Japan, everybody is identified by occupation or profession—Sato Mitsuko, Piano Teacher; Yamaguchi Itsuko, Medical Doctor; or Nakagawa Masamichi, Plumber. It’s the way they introduce themselves and think of themselves. As Bashō lies dying, he is wondering what the neighbor does for a living or, in other words, who he might be. This is no trivial matter.

BASHŌ'S LAST ILLNESS

tabe ni yande / yume wa kare wo / kake meguru

> Taken ill on a journey,
> my dreams wander
> over withered moors.

Bashō took ill with his old stomach ailment while on a trip to see friends in Osaka and did not survive. He wrote this verse while ill, and it is commonly taken as his death poem, in keeping with Japanese custom. It was not, and Bashō did not intend it to be. A few hours before his death he was asked for a death poem, and he replied, "From old times it has been customary to leave a death poem behind, and perhaps I should do the same. But every moment of life is the last; every poem is a death poem. Why then should I write one at this time ? In these my last hours, I have no poem."[2]

The Spring Sea

Yosa Buson

BUSON IS BELIEVED to have been born in Osaka to a family named Taniguchi in 1716. That would have been twenty-two years after the death of Bashō. Little is known about his early years. It is said that he was the son of a wealthy farmer and a household maid. In any case he was orphaned when he was very young. He moved to Edo to study the writing of haiku and became a disciple of Hayami Haijin, who in turn had been a disciple of successors of Bashō. He took the pen name of Yosa, developed a lifelong enthusiasm for Bashō, and literally followed in his footsteps on the journey that Bashō had memorialized as *The Narrow Way Within*. Buson also studied art and practiced painting in various Japanese and Chinese styles. He became an accomplished and established painter and was not known as a poet.

When he was thirty-five he moved to Kyoto, where he continued to work as an artist, and at age forty-five he married and fathered a daughter. Finally, after a stellar career, he died at the age of sixty-seven as a result of eating poisonous mushrooms. It was not until 1897 that the poet Shiki brought him to public view as a talented writer of haiku. Though he continues to be acclaimed as an artist, he is now considered one of the four great haiku poets of all time, with Bashō, Issa, and Shiki.

THE NEW BEGINNING [NEW YEAR'S DAY]

hi no hikari / kesa no iwashi no / kashira yori

The light of day
Begins to shine
From the heads of the pilchards.

The earth turns, and we are coming into the daylight phase of our lives once again. Animals stir in their dens as they waken. Birds break into their morning song, people in bathrobes put on the coffee. Pilchards strung out to dry for household use or for the market catch the morning sun. The mahasangha of all beings is once again revealed as an interrelationship as the day begins. Though Buson

does not include a season word in this verse, I agree with R. H. Blyth that it belongs with New Year's Day haiku, as the spirit of beginning again is thus the more vivid.[3]

THE TEMPLE BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY [SPRING]

tsurigane ni / tomari te nemuru / kochō kana

> On a temple bell
> a little butterfly has lighted
> and is sleeping.

This verse played a key role in the establishment of the English and American Imagism movement in the '10s and '20s of the last century. The movement began with the friendship and collaboration of Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and extended through Amy Lowell, H.D., D. H. Lawrence, Ford Madox Ford, Adelaide Crapsey, and, to a degree, T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. Lowell's translation of the temple bell verse reads: "On a temple bell, / alighted, sleeping, / a little butterfly."

That's a good translation, and I like a couple of her original haiku, but the wheel has turned, the century has passed, and other countries have joined up. Recently a friend sent me a sheaf of haiku by John F. Turner, his colleague in Australia, that included the verses "Grinding valves; / bees drift in and out / of the workshop" and another: "A night of stars; / a possum peers down / on my swag." *Swag* is Australian for sleeping bag. Turner holds his own as a true haiku poet of his time and place.

Buson was an artist as well as a poet, and with the inclination of Pound, Lowell, and company toward imagery, it is not surprising that it would be Buson and certain imagist poets like Moritake, who preceded Bashō, who would attract their interest.

The temple bell is huge, five feet or so high, weighing several tons, with a profoundly deep and resonant tone. The appeal of the poem is, of course, the togetherness of the tiny, frail butterfly and its massive host, with the cultural associations attached to them both. The postposition *kana* adds something slightly exclamatory to “little butterfly,” but not enough for a punctuation mark in English.

MOUNT FUJI

fuji hitotsu / uzumi nokoshite / wakaba kana

> Just Mount Fuji
> shows above
> the young foliage.

Mount Fuji stands alone in the whole universe. No birds fly there, no stars gleam above. All the Japanese cultural links with the sacred mountain are totally forgotten. In seventeen syllables Buson lays the dismissive stereotype of “The Imagist Poet” to rest.

SMOKE THROUGH THE WALLS

harusame ya / hito sumite keburi / kabe ni moru

> Spring rains!
> people are living here;
> smoke is leaking through the walls.

This is not an interpretive verse, though it may seem so. The point is not that because smoke is leaking through the walls, Buson presumes that people are actually living in this miserable fallen-down hut. In one sense, this verse is like “The Handball,” following, in that the elements are independent and disconnected, and these give life to this verse and make it a true haiku. In another sense it is like “The Fallen Leaves,” also discussed later. The rain, the smoke, and the

occupants of the hut are one presentation of the mind in its vast panorama that offers such richness to the sensitive observer.

IN THE SPRING RAIN

harusame ya / monogatari yuku / mino to kasa

> Ah! A straw raincoat
> and an umbrella
> are walking in the spring rain.

The spring rain allows only the straw raincoat and the umbrella. It subsumes everything else. I am reminded of a haiku I wrote in Japan long ago: “People walking / through the steady rain / within themselves,” but the rain subsumes the people and their very selves.

THE SPRING SEA

haru no umi / hinemosu notari / notari kana

> The spring sea—
> all day long it rises and falls,
> rises and falls.

The spring sea plays a vital symbolic role in Japanese culture. In an elided form, “Harumi” can be a surname and a personal name. It expresses the primordial pulse of life. The father tosses his whooping baby, the deer bounds over the bushes, the nobleman doffs his top hat and bows, the king snakes writhe in rhythmic intercourse. The fisherman doesn’t dwell upon the primordial pulse of life as he laboriously hauls in his nets. That remains for Buson and his readers.

THE HANDBALL

harusame ni / nuretsutsu yane no / temari kana

A handball
is caught in the drainpipe
in the spring rain.

The Japanese handball is an uncovered ball made of tightly bound bits of yarn that children play with. This one is stuck in the drain pipe, its pretty colors running in the relentless rain. “So what,” you might say, “that an old yarn ball gets soggy and a mess?” You would be right. The sheer lack of meaning and the absence of connections, except for an accidental and unexpected proximity, give life to this poem.

THE DANCING GIRL

hana ni mawade / kaerusa nikushi / shirabyōshi

How I hate it
when a dancing girl doesn’t dance
under the cherry blossoms!

True confession time! Buson is not content to let the dancing girl just be someone out to enjoy the blooming of the cherry trees, probably on a picnic with her family or friends, with all the Japanese cultural associations of that occasion. Instead he projects his own desire that this girl, whom he knows to be a professional dancer, dance for his personal pleasure to enhance the celebration.

RIPPLES

shigi tōku / kuwa suzugu mizu no / uneri kana

A snipe flies further and further away—
ripples
from the washed hoe.

A farmer goes to the river to wash his hoe and, as he washes, a snipe starts up from the tall grass at the riverbank and flies away. Further and further away it flies, as ripples from the washing spread further and further outward. A thoughtful child might notice the coincidence of the ripples and the continuing disappearance of the bird, but it takes Buson to frame it so neatly.

RAPE FLOWERS

na no hana ya / tsuki wa higashi ni / hi wa nishi ni

What a field of rape flowers!
with the moon to the west
and the sun to the east.

The brown hills of California are pure gold in spring with the wildflowers of rape. Likewise the rape fields of Japan, where the plant is cultivated for its seeds. The seeds are ground for their oil. The plant is typically four feet high. The fields stretch as far as the eye can see, as Buson says most vividly.

ONE CANDLE WITH ANOTHER

shoku no hi wo / shoku ni utsutsu ya / haru no yū

Igniting one candle
with another—
a spring evening.

Buson may be playing with words here. With another graph, *shoku* means “light,” so the verse could read, “Igniting one with the other ...”

In any case, the verse expresses the propagation of the species, and is also the true story of rebirth. I will not be reborn in a different form, but I will pass on my light. The Sino-Japanese graph for “light” is also the graph for “fire.” I will pass on my fire. And it is spring, the season when dead or dormant beings come up from the earth or out of their caves. R. H. Blyth says, “There is something passing from here to there, a glow, a steadiness in the warm dusk, that we feel it to be life itself, trembling and intangible, yet strong and apparent to all the senses.”

THE LEAKY TUB

senzoku no / tarai mo morite / yuku haru ya

> This tub leaks too,
> the tub for washing my feet
> and the departing spring.

The old tub and the departing spring are in harmony, but the fact that it leaks just as spring is leaking away is but one example of the accidental and arbitrary tendency that things have. All know the innate perversity of inanimate objects. Life constantly offers examples of this perversity, and art must maintain its awareness of how constant is this inconstancy.

THE FALLEN LEAVES

yuku haru no / shiribe ni harau / ochiba kana

> Sweeping up the fallen leaves
> in the train
> of the departing spring.

This verse might seem to be a fanciful and superstitious personification of spring, or we might view it as a conventional poem

using a seasonal word. It is rather a presentation of mind itself in the movement of sweeping the leaves, on and on out to the very orbit of the planet Earth, as it swings back around on its primordial path, coming, yet once again, closer and closer to the sun.

MY DEAD WIFE'S COMB [SUMMER]

mi ni shimu ya / bōsai no kushi wo / neya ni fumu

> What a chill I felt,
> stepping on my dead wife's comb
> in our bedroom.

And what a chill I felt seventy-two years ago, when I read this verse in Miyamori Asatarō's *Antholog y of Haiku: Ancient and Modern*, sitting there as a college student in the Library of Hawai'i reading room. I didn't know Buson from Adam's off ox, and only as I put this manuscript together did I realize that this verse, one that I remembered clearly, was written by Buson. It's all opening out. Only now do I realize that Buson and Aline Kilmer were on the same path: "Things have a terrible permanence / when people die."[4]

SAFE FROM THE CORMORANTS

shinonome ya / u wo nogaretaru / uo asashi

> At dawn
> fish that have escaped the cormorants
> swim in the shallows.

With its implied expression of empathy for inconsequential beings, Buson's verse reminds me of Issa's well-known haiku "Don't kill the fly! / see how it wrings its hands, / how it wrings its feet"—and of the equally well-known entry in *Vegetable Roots Discourse*, "Always leave boiled rice out for mice and keep lamps dark out of pity for

moths. The ancients had this sort of concern, and it's really the whole point of life, generation after generation. Without it, one can only be called a blockheaded carcass."[5]

BIRDS ON THE ROOFTOP

kotori kuru / oto urushisa yo / itabisashi

> The twittering of little birds
> that have come to the rooftop
> is such a delight.

Like his response to little fish that escaped the cormorants, Buson's empathy was not the projection of an environmentalist. His pleasure was that of an observer who delighted in phenomena that advance and confirm the observer.

THE RIVER DEER

kajika naku / sode natsukashiki / hiuchiishi

> The river deer cries;
> my dear old flint-stone
> in my sleeve.

The river deer is a frog that lives between boulders of valley streams. Its song is like the cry of a deer. Buson is hiking up a ravine and suddenly hears the song. His hand strays to his voluminous sleeve, and he feels the old flint-stone he has used for years to light his little pipe, for which he has developed the affection older people feel for things that have enriched their lives over the decades.

RAINS OF MAY [SUMMER]

samidare ya / na mo naki kawa no / osoroshiki

How dreadful
this nameless river has become
in the rains of May!

Seasons are distinctive in Japan. Winter is relentlessly cold; spring has the beginnings of warmth while retaining elements of the cold. It pours rain in the May *samidare*. June is the *nyūbai*, warm and miserably humid; summer months are terribly hot and dry; fall is cool and pleasant. Haiku ideally include a link, or an implied link to the season, and anthologies are arranged by season.

THE SUMMER STREAM

natsugawa wo / kosu ureshisa yo / te ni zōri

What a pleasure
wading the summer stream,
sandals in hand!

Like Bashō, Buson is in touch with the child he once was, and now, as an adult, he is able to put his experience into poetical expression. By the way he frames the vividness of his experience, he stands with the greatest haiku poets of all time.

THE WHITE DEW

shiratsuyu ya / satsu otoko no munage / nururu hodo

The white dew
is enough to wet the hair
on the chest of the hunter.

Buson moves and has his being in the precinct of poetry. Like Wallace Stevens, he finds inspiration in minute details of everyday

circumstances, and thus is able to open out a world that has hitherto lain complexly hidden.

THE HEAT

byōnin no / kago no hae ou / atsusa kana

> Keeping the flies
> away from the palanquin—
> how hot it is!

Trotting along with the palanquin, someone—we may imagine the mother of a sick girl—vainly tries to fan the flies away from her recumbent daughter. The girl is sweaty and disheveled; the flies are persistent; the bearers are grimacing. “How hot it is!” Buson exclaims.

THE WEASEL

tasogare ya / hagi ni itachi no / Kōdaiji

> As the light fades at evening,
> there is a weasel in the bush clover
> at Kodai Temple.

The Zen temple Kōdaiji was built in Kyoto by the widow of the Daimyō Hideyoshi, a hundred years and more before Buson was born. It is now a lonely place, overgrown by bush clover. Buson glimpsed a weasel in the bush clover, and a harmonious scene that is essentially Japanese was set for him. We in the West can surely relate to his experience.

THE PHEASANT

osoki no / kiji no oriiru / hashi no ue

On a slow day
a pheasant lights
on the bridge

The pheasant is a big ponderous bird with many enemies who would harvest its beautiful plumage. It is therefore a very shy bird that avoids human contact. Today is a slow day, maybe a hot summer day or a Sunday, when people are napping at home. So the pheasant feels it might be safe to venture into the human domain. To be so attuned to the pheasant's concerns, and to set them forth so cogently in verse form, Buson must have forgotten himself completely.

MUM AND DAD [AUTUMN]

chichi haha no / koto nomi omō / aki no kure

As autumn deepens
I think only
of Mum and Dad.

This verse rings a memory bell. I am in this enormous room on the island of Shikoku at the outset of World War II. We were being processed to determine who was military and who was civilian. Every night at bedtime we got a little lesson in Japanese from the head guard. "My fatha: *chichi*. My motha: *haha*. Good night." If nothing else the guard, by his selection of words, set forth the lifetime importance of parents for Japanese people, including Buson.

TONIGHT'S MOON

nusubito no / shuryō uta yomu / Kyō no tsuki

The chief of the bandits
would write a song
about tonight's moon.

Moon-viewing and the full moon are important topics of haiku for the Japanese poet. You will find many among Bashō's haiku. Here is one: "Though the moon is full / there seems to be an absence—Suma in summer." Foxy old Bashō! He really had nothing in mind. Buson, as in the bandit chief verse, was a vivid humanist. The translator must be careful not to interpolate "even." Buson did not say or mean, "Even the chief of bandits would write a song about tonight's moon."

TO THE EYEBROWS

tachisaru koto ichiri / mauge ni aki no / mine samushi

One league away
and to the eyebrows
the autumn peaks are cold.

This verse has the postscript, "Buson is walking away from a [three-peaked] mountain. When he reaches a point about three miles from the foot, he turns back and looks up. The autumn breeze strikes his forehead. He feels the coldness of the distant mountain with his eyebrows." Buson experiences the distant peaks as himself.

DEEPER SLEEP

mura mura no / negokoro fukenu / otoshimizu

In village after village
sleep grows deeper—
falling water.

It is time to harvest the rice, and the water is being drained from the fields. For a few days, there is no work. In village after village the farmers had been working overtime for many weeks, and now they can sleep off their tiredness. The sound of the water falling through the open sluice gates is soporific and induces a deeper and deeper sleep.

TONSURING A HIGHWAYMAN

oihagi wo / deshi ni sorikeri / aki no tabi

Tonsuring a highwayman
and accepting him as his disciple,
on a journey in autumn.

To some extent this verse matches “The Bandit’s Warning,” following. The act of tonsuring and accepting a disciple is not casual. It is not done just on request. There must be a bond that is acknowledged by the two involved. Sometimes, however, it happens like love at first sight. It does not matter if the two are nobleman and servant girl. It does not matter if the two are priest and thief.

A CRICKET AND A POT-HANGER

kirigirisu / jizai wo noboru / yosamu kana

A cricket climbs
up the pot-hanger;
this cold evening.

The pot-hanger is a large hook that hangs over the open fireplace. As Buson dozes by the fire, it gradually dies out, and he wakens suddenly to see a cricket climbing up the pot-hanger and notices how cold the evening has become. Perhaps as a painter, he is

attracted by colors in the scene, the black of the hook and the brownish green of the cricket.

THE BANDIT'S WARNING [WINTER]

sanzoku no / satoshite suguru / nowaki kana

> The bandit
> gives warning
> about a storm.

Hakuin Ekaku Zenji presents the fundamental sanctity of everyone and everything in his "Song of Zazen": "All beings by nature are Buddha, as ice by nature is water; apart from water there is no ice; apart from beings, no Buddha." The haiku teacher Yosa Buson expresses the inherent noble decency of banking executives and pimps in his own down-to-earth haiku, "The bandit / gives warning / about a storm." In caps and gowns, the senior lecturers Hakuin and Buson rock the same lifeboat.

The Spring Sea

Kobayashi Issa

IN 1763, twenty years before Buson died, Issa was born as Kobayashi Yatarō. He was raised in a little mountain village in central Japan, where his father was a well-to-do farmer. Little Yatarō's mother died when he was two years old, and he was put under the care of his grandmother. He was continually haunted by the loss of his mother, and when he was six, he wrote:

ware to kite / asobi yo oya no / nai suzume

Oh, motherless sparrows
come here
and play with me.

This verse reflects his misery at not having a mother, and it also marks a promise for future haiku mastery. Early influences seem to have contributed to this promise. His father had a taste for haiku and wrote at least three that were published. When it was thought Yatarō was ready for schooling, he was tutoring with a prominent haiku master who wrote under the name Shimpo.

His father married for the second time, and Yatarō and his stepmother were at odds right away. When a half brother was born, it was Yatarō who looked after the infant, and he was beaten unmercifully when the baby cried. Yatarō worked in the fields for his father, and he was later to recall what a difficult time this was for him. Then when he was thirteen his grandmother died, and he left his native village and went to live in Edo.

There is no record of his youth and years as a young man in Edo until 1787, when he was twenty-four, when we find him studying under the poet Chikua, who sought to revive the style of Bashō. Chikua died in 1790, and Yatarō inherited the mantle of his teacher's school. He accepted tonsure in his family faith of Jōdō Shinshū and took the name Issa (one [cup of] tea). He was expressing his vow to be as simple as his name. This would be in keeping with the Jōdō Shinshū tenet that the sacred and the secular are one.

He married in 1791 and fathered three children, two of whom lived only a month, and the third, a little girl, died just after her first birthday. By then Issa had begun a series of pilgrimages that were his passion to the end of his own life. Like Bashō, he took four major journeys. And like Bashō, his life on the road was his way of inspiration.

Issa and his wife had another short-lived child, and then his wife died. He was miserable at this series of tragedies and tried to find comfort with another wife, but she didn't work out. Apparently in desperation, he married a third time. Then his little house burned down. This must have felt like too much to bear, and he himself died. This was in 1827, and he was sixty-four.

YOU ARE TWO [NEW YEAR'S DAY]

haewarete / futsu ni naru zo / kesa haru wa

Crawl and laugh,
From today on
you are two!

By Japanese reckoning, one is a year older each New Year. As the child was born the year before in May, she is now counted as two, though actually she is only seven months old.

This was 1816, and Issa was fifty-three years old. His two boy babies had already died, and this was the first girl, Sano-jo, who herself would die soon of smallpox. Amid all this tragedy, Issa could be light of spirit.

THE PRIZE

kachin no / mikan kii mii / kisho kana

Looking and looking at the prize
for the first calligraphy of the year—
an orange.

The little boy is encouraged to write something as the first calligraphy of the year. To encourage him they offer him an orange as a prize. He has his eye on the prize, not in the Western sense of "Keep your eye on the prize," and indeed it is not an incentive. It distracts him completely as he stares and stares at the luscious fruit, frustrating his family, who had hoped the prize would encourage him to pick up his brush at last. Issa lays out the situation and shows that he understands what it is to be a little boy better than the family does.

FOLLY [SPRING]

harutatsu ya / gu no ue ni mata / gu ni gaeru

Spring begins;
folly and again folly
returns.

Issa had reached his sixty-first birthday, completing his sexagenary cycle. The wheel has turned full circle, and his first birthday is celebrated again. In an affluent household, he would receive toys for a one-year-old child. Instead he was left to reflect that the folly of his babyhood, which he had dealt with while growing up, was now replaced by the folly of old age. The poet was smiling at himself as one fully in touch.

THE SONG OF THE FROGS

waga io ya / kawazu shote kara / oi wo naku

Behind my hut
from the earliest days
frogs sang of the primordial.

Frogs began to sing at the earliest spring in the rice paddies behind Issa's hut. It was the same song they had sung when time began. It was a croaking song that had no levity. They did not evoke visions of eating and drinking sake and dancing at cherry blossom festivities. For Issa they were singing of the reality of this dewdrop world that he had been facing so long.

COME PLAY WITH ME

ware to kite / asobi yo oya no / nai suzume

Oh, motherless sparrows
come here

and play with me.

Issa's mother died when he was a small child, and his father remarried a woman who beat him. He turned to the sparrows with a plea for companionship. He seemed to accept his fate and to reach out to the sparrows as the way of a child who knew he had to get on with his life. His unhappy experiences laid the ground for a career of sympathetic expression. Another child might have taken the thoughtless, self-centered conduct of adults about him as a personal betrayal and learned to distrust everyone, developing all the miserable features of a borderline personality disorder. We are blessed that Issa had good genes and genius and knew instinctively that he must use his circumstances, and not be used by them.

THE PEACH

kano momo ga / nagare kuru ka yo / harugasumi

Will that peach
come floating along?—
the spring haze.

On looking at a picture of a woman washing clothes, Issa thinks of the Momotarō Monogatari, the Peach Boy Story. An old woman goes to a nearby river to wash clothes and sees a giant peach floating down toward her. She takes it home to her husband for supper, but as they are about to cut it open, a voice inside the peach implores them not to use a knife. They open it otherwise, and out springs a little boy. The childless couple is delighted. They dub him "Peach Boy" and raise him as their own child. The story evolves as the kind of folk story one finds in all cultures. As a youth, Peach Boy overcomes ogres in their castle with the help of a dog and a pheasant, and he comes home a hero. Issa's final line, "the spring haze," gives an appropriate fairy-tale vista and atmosphere to the verse.

AND YET

tsuyu no yo wa / tsuyu no yo nagara / sari nagara

> The dewdrop world
> is a dewdrop world
> and yet ... and yet.

Issa's little daughter died suddenly when she was just old enough to say "mama" and "papa"—one of the most endearing phases in a baby's development. His verse of mourning is essentially a Pure Land Buddhist plaint. Followers of that faith, like Issa, believe that the dead go to the Lotus Land, where they live forever after. He won't see her until he himself goes to that land at the end of his life, and maybe not even then. Yes, it's an ephemeral world we live in, yes my darling child will be happy in the Lotus Land, and yet ... and yet.

ZENKŌJI

harukaze ya / ushi ni hikarete / Zenkōji

> The spring breeze!
> led by a cow
> to Zenkōji.

Issa has made a verse based on a well-known Buddhist story. Zenkōji was a famous temple in Japan, and everyone was supposed to visit it at least once. An old woman who had no particular religion lived near the temple and saw no reason to visit it. One day, a cow caught her horn on a piece of cloth that the woman had laid over a bush to dry. She went after the cow but could not catch her. The cow led the old woman to the precincts of Zenkōji, where she was confronted by an image of the Buddha. For the first time in her life, she experienced a deep sense of veneration. Truly, the Dharma

gates are countless! Issa has chosen to cast his verse in the spring, a season when new sprouts of life appear.

THE MOTHER SPARROW

take ni iza / ume ni iza to ya / oya suzume

> Let's be off to the bamboo,
> to the peach trees,
> says the mother sparrow.

Issa was more than sympathetic. He felt an intimacy with the mother sparrow that relates to what John Keats must have felt when he wrote, "The setting sun will always set me to rights, and if a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and peck about the gravel."[6] Issa and Keats lived in different times and in far distant cultures, yet unknowingly their relationship was mar velously close—as close as their relationship with the little birds was.

LOOK OUT!

suzume no ko / soko noke soko noke / ouma ga tōru

> Look out! Look out!
> little sparrow
> Mr. Horse is coming.

When his mother died, Issa felt alienated by adults, and as we have seen, in his first haiku he begged orphan sparrows to come and play with him. Throughout his life he felt uncomfortable around people, and in his verses we see his love and concern for animals, from fleas to elephants, and indeed his respect for them, in the way he refers here to Mr. Horse, as a child might do.

THE SPRING RAIN

harusame ya / neko ni odori wo / oshieru ko

The spring rain—
a little girl is teaching
a cat how to dance.

The little girl can't go out and play because it's raining, and apparently she has no brothers and sisters to play with. She turns to the family cat, and the cat goes along with the uncomfortable game because it loves the little girl. This is a sweet verse that reflects Issa's loving nature.

THE MEWING KITTEN

naku neko ni / akamme wo shite / temari kana

Playing ball
the little girl makes a face
at the mewing kitten

"Makes a face at" is literally "gives the red eye to." The little girl pulls down the lower lid of her eye with impatience at the kitten, which is mewing disconsolately at being left out of the game. Probably it is trying to bat at the ball. She treats the kitten as she would another child, rather than as a lower species of animal, something Issa could relate to.

THE MONK

nodokasa ya / kakima wo nozoku / yama no so

A calm sunny day—
the monk of a mountain temple
peeps through part of the hedge.

The monk, probably an old man, comes out to the garden of his mountain temple to warm his bones in the sunshine. He stands peeping through an opening in the hedge at the world outside. It is springtime, and he sees that the place is getting green. It's a serene prospect of a quiet, sunny day.

TEARS

oi no mi wa / hi no nagai ni mo / namida kana

As I grow old
even the length of a day
brings tears.

For Issa, the increasing length of spring days brings all woes. His tears are for his dead children, for his dead parents, and for himself. Each day reminds him that all things die, and as the days get longer, the poignancy deepens. "It's a dewdrop world." Our days can be filled with happiness and laughter, but the venerable one with a scythe is waiting, just behind the door.

THE BUSH WARBLER

uguisu ya / gozen e dete mo / onaji koe

The bush warbler—
even before His Lordship,
it has the same voice.

The bush warbler is the *uguisu*, a name that is usually translated "nightingale." It is a passerine bird, more often heard than seen. Its

distinctive breeding call is heard constantly at the outset of spring throughout Japan, and it is known as the harbinger of spring. The poetry of this verse lies in the word “same.” It is the sameness of master and servant, and unless you have a sensitive eye like Issa, that sameness is just something fanciful. It is, however, real for the bush warbler, and for every other nonhuman being.

THE FROG

ware wo mite / nigai kao suru / kawazu kana

The frog
looks at me
with a sour face.

“A cat can look at a king,” in the noble anarchism of nature. It might seem that Issa falls into anthropocentrism by projecting sourness on the frog. I don’t think so. Issa loved frogs and wrote some three hundred verses about them. Mrs. Frog loves the turn of her husband’s mouth. She wouldn’t like him if he were smiley. Issa uses “sour” by way of indicating how dear it is. It is the frog who is projecting its frog nature on Issa.

MONEY [SUMMER]

Kagerō ya / hakisute gomi no / semi ni naru

Heat waves!
Cleaned-up rubbish
becomes money.

Semi was the term for money in Issa’s time, the way *dollars* is in our time, though s*emi* means “pennies.” Money is the root of all evil, but it also keeps body and soul together and makes the world go around. Of course, pennies were all he could expect from his

cleaned-up rubbish. It gave Issa pleasure to earn his living from things intended for the rubbish man and to formulate a verse out of the most unpoetical topic.

THE EXHAUSTED SPARROW

ōzei no / ko ni tsukaretaru / suzume kana

An exhausted sparrow
in the midst
of children.

While some writers, like Hilaire Belloc, have expressed antipathy toward creatures of the nonhuman world, there is a long list of writers who have expressed sympathy. For example, St. Paul was critical of those who ignore the plight of oxen who are muzzled as they are driven ruthlessly around and around to tread on corn to make meal. Issa joins the roster of decent writers with his implied expression of sympathy for the exhausted sparrow that knows it will be killed by the thoughtless children.

THE SILKWORMS

samazuke ni / sodateraretaru / haiko kana

They've brought them up,
and they call the silkworms
"Mister."

All over Japan, silkworms are referred to as O-kaiko sama or O-ko sama, Mr. Silkworm, using s*ama*, which is gentler and more respectful than the ordinary title, *San*. Raising silkworms by feeding them mulberry leaves is the sole means of livelihood for thousands of peasants. There is something endearing, humorous, and

quintessentially Japanese about this expression of acceptance of the silkworms as part of the family and gratitude to them.

THE BAGWOR M

minomushi no / un no tsuyosa yo / satsukiame

> The bag worm
> is fortune's favorite
> in summer rains.

The bagworm is dear to the hearts of haiku poets, from Matsuo Bashō to Nakagawa Sōen. It just hangs there in its tiny abode, gesticulating to become a moth. Bashō wrote: "Oh come / to my hut / and hear the bag worm," which, of course, makes no sound at all. It is dear to the heart of fortune too, staying high and dry in the summer rains.

THE SWALLOW

daibutsu no / hana kara detaru / tsubame kana

> The swallow
> flies from the nose
> of the Great Buddha.

The Great Buddha is the Daibutsu of Kamakura, a beautiful statue that was once the central figure of veneration in a temple, but the temple got washed away in a tidal wave, and it was left to stand alone under the empty sky. It is a tourist attraction, one that you should see, even if you have only a day for sightseeing. There is a mildly humorous juxtaposition of the profane and the sacred of the swallow emerging like snot from the nose of the holy image, but for Issa it was right and proper that a swallow should come forth in this

way—as though it were emerging from a chimney. In writing the verse Issa sought to convey that rightness and properness.

GREAT AND SMALL

suzushisa wa / kumo no ōmine / komine kana

> How cool it is!
> The clouds have great peaks
> and small peaks.

Issa is enjoying the cool of the evening, watching clouds as they build on the horizon. Some of them have towering forms, some have lesser forms. They are like mountains, and that for Issa is worthy as a topic for a verse. However, for those who have spent a while in a zendo, great and small are quintessentially great and small, and at the same time there is no size at all—nothing whatever anywhere. But this kind of identity of form and emptiness is absent from Issa's Pure Land views.

THE KITTEN ON THE SCALE

neko no ko / hakari ni hakari / tsutsu jaeru

> The kitten
> On the balance scale
> Plays and plays.

The family has been weighing the fruits and vegetables they intend to take to market, and on a whim, or seriously to see its weight, they toss the kitten on the unfamiliar metal. No matter. It plays with the hands that toss it, and then just plays with its tail, or runs round and round in its circumscribed space. It is the nature of the kitten to play, just as it is the nature of the farmer to farm, and the skylark to soar. Fulfillment is being yourself and doing your things. Life just doesn't

work for you otherwise. The boilermaker is likely to be miserable as a salesman.

PEACEFULNESS

nodokasa ya / azuma no kemuri / hiru no tachi

> It's peaceful—
> the smoke from Mount Asama
> and the midday moon.

A thin line of smoke rising from the volcano and the faint, pale daytime moon that one sees in earliest spring form a scene of utmost tranquility. The moon rides high and far away, cold and dead. The volcano is violent, destructive, and immediate. In the deep mind of Issa, they are both serene, and together they are peacefulness itself.

THE CRANE ON THE RUBBISH HEAP

hakidame e / tsuru ga orikeri / wakanoura

> A crane has lighted
> on a rubbish heap
> at Wakanoura.

Wakanoura is a beautiful, scenic spot that now lies within the Seto Naikai National Park, south of Osaka, in Wakayama Prefecture. It has been famed for its scenery from earliest times, and is mentioned in the *Man'yōshū*, Japan's oldest poetical anthology. The crane is a beautiful bird in flight and in its dignity when on land. It is a jewel in a dunghill there on the rubbish heap, and Issa has created an even more vivid disparity by locating the crane on its rubbish heap in a place of such fame for its beauty.

THE UNEATEN DUCKS

harusame ya / kuwarenokori no / kamo ga naku

> In the spring rain
> the ducks not eaten yet
> run around quacking.

In connection with this ironic verse, R. H. Blyth points out that Christ is called “The Good Shepherd” and he asks, “But what are sheep kept for?” He quotes *Will o’ the Mill*, a novella by Robert Louis Stevenson: “The shepherd who makes such a picture carrying home the lamb, is only carrying it home for supper.”[7] Blyth was a vegetarian, whose sympathy was with ducks and lambs, but what about Issa? Even with his implied sympathy for ducks, he probably ate them when he could. We don’t know.

POUNDING RICE [AUTUMN]

yamamizu ni / kome no taukete / hirune kana

> I have a noonday nap
> making the mountain water
> pound the rice.

This is rightfully one of Issa’s best-known verses. I read it long ago when I first learned about haiku, the time when I was also so impressed with Buson’s verse about treading on his dead wife’s comb. Issa takes a nap, letting natural forces do the job. I am reminded of hearing a customer gossip with the barman in a little restaurant. “I don’t worry about how my kids will turn out,” he said. “If I just give them three square meals a day, and plenty of cuddling, they’ll grow up and naturally be what they’re meant to be.” And, I can add, he’ll have a chance to retire, like Issa.

LIKE AN *OKUMI* [WINTER]

okumi nari ni / fufikomu yuki ya / makura moto

> In the form of an *okumi*,
> the snow sifts in
> by my bed.

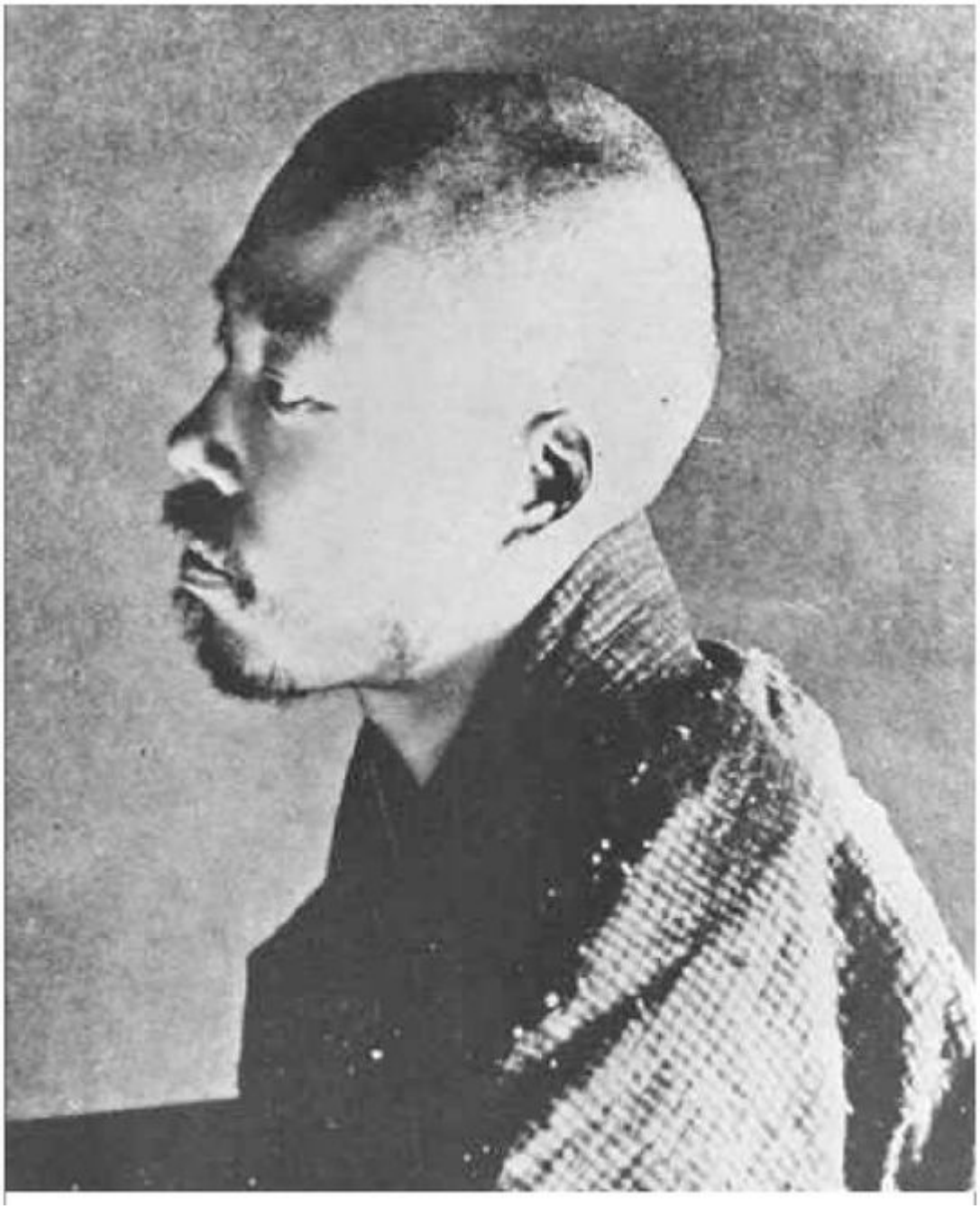
This verse has the postscript “Issa is in a state of illness.” He lived in a hovel that allowed snow to sift through spaces between the posts and the plaster of the building. The fine white particles gradually collect on the floor near his bed in the form of an *okumi*, the fan-shaped insert on a kimono. Issa watched this process with the mind of a child, with the unsophisticated mind that was his hallmark.

THE HOLE IN THE SNOW

massugu na / Shōben ana ya / kado no yuki

> The straight hole
> I make by pissing
> in the snow by my door.

Another verse of Issa’s childlike mind. His lavatory is outside the house, and during the night maybe three feet of snow have fallen. He stands at the door for his morning piss, and it makes a straight, round hole in the snow. He is amused by his creation, thinking, “Look at that!” It is an occasion, and as haiku is occasional verse, he sets it forth for us to enjoy.



The Spring Sea

Masaoka Shiki

SHIKI WAS BORN in Tokyo as Masaoka Tsunenori in 1867. In his last decades there were automobiles, telephones, and electric lights. He could remember when he rode in a bugg y, did his correspondence by mail, and used kerosene lamps. Thus he was a man of transition. He was also a great haiku poet, one we celebrate today with Bashō, Buson, and Issa. Shiki contracted tuberculosis on returning from a stint as newspaper reporter for the China-Japan war when he was just eighteen years old, and he became bedridden three years later. He knew that he would soon die, so most of the haiku masterpieces we have that are by Shiki are products of a genius lying in bed, keeping journals, and don't reflect real-life encounters. Withal he was an innovative poet, as one might expect of a man of transition, and he single-handedly revitalized the forms of his predecessors. He coined the term "haiku, play verse"—"play" in the sense of "dramatic endeavor" in place of Bashō's *hokku*. Bashō had used the term *hokku* ("verse that explodes forth") in the first three lines of linked verses, reflecting his own innovation of using the hokku as a separate form. Shiki was regarded as a man of change, though he followed the traditional forms of his predecessors. The free forms of haiku came later. With all the problems occasioned by his illness, he worked along there in bed, and his journals do not mention nursing and the burgeoning blood. The end finally did come, and he died at last at the age of thirty-five. Visualizing how he labored and fulfilled his genius during all the problems of his fatal illness, I think of my own weak efforts to tap, tap, backspace, tap, backspace. He is my great personal inspiration.

HER GALA DRESS [NEW YEAR'S DAY]

hatsu shibai / mite kite haregi / mada nugazu

The New Year's theater;
returning but not changing

from her gala dress.

The young girl has gone with her friends to the New Year's theater wearing her best clothes, a long-sleeved kimono with a brocade obi. It was probably bought for the occasion. She is so pleased and excited that when she returns, she does not change into her ordinary dress. She sits with her family to tell them how wonderful it had been.

There is something endearing about the way she maintains the world of dreams, not yet ready to be her ordinary self once again.

DAIBUTSU [SPRING]

daibutsu no / utsura utsura to / haruhi kana

The Daibutsu
dozing, dozing,
all the spring day.

The Daibutsu is the Great Buddha, probably the one in Kamakura, rather than the one in Nara, since he is outdoors, dozing in the spring sunshine. The Great Buddha is a huge figure, impassive, with half-shut eyes. Though he sits in deep samadhi, he seems to be half-asleep. The morning star realized and confirmed his ground, as it realized and confirmed the ground of all beings. His presence declares himself so that all beings can make his ground their own. *Namo tassa, bhagavato, arahato samma sambuddhassa*.

LIGHTING THE LAMPS

hitomoseba / hina ni kage ari / hitotsutzutsu

Lighting the lamps,
One shadow is for each
of the dolls.

Each doll has its very own shadow, and at the same time, they are all shadowed. This bonds the dolls as they sit there, otherwise quite separately. Like the best verses of the other great haiku poets, something very slight is presented, but yet it is something unforgettably significant. While Bashō, Buson, and Issa did bring forth slight phenomena of human affairs, Shiki made them his primary concern. Prostitutes were play girls for Bashō, but they were whores for Shiki, and as such they were topics for some of his verses.

"AUTHOR UNKNOWN"

yomibito wo / shirazaru haru no / shūka kana

> "Author unknown"—
> An anthology of poems about spring,
> a masterpiece.

Shiki had been reading the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*), the oldest known anthology of Japanese poetry, dated around 759. His mind was stirred by the unknown, for the name of the anthologist is lost to history. All old cultures have their anonymous anthologies. For Hawaiians it is the *Kumolipo*, "The Origin of Darkness," a prehistoric cosmologic genealogical chant of 2,012 lines that was translated into English by Queen Liliuokalani, and then by Hawaiian scholars. The *Kumolipo* is taught today as a song with its hula to young students and is an important element of the burgeoning Native Hawaiian movement. The darkness in the title of the chant is not something to be avoided. It is not the opposite of light, but the source of creation and creativity. Shiki was reminded that he lived in this unknown and unknowable primordial dimension. Once again he found that he rested, not merely on a sickbed, but on the original bed of humanity, where nationality, national culture, and race are superficial delusions.

THE YOUNG LEAVES

sanzen no / hei tatekomoru / wakaba kana

Three thousand warriors
shut themselves up
in the young leaves.

This is a reference in Japanese history to warriors who retreated to the fastness of their castle in the face of an advancing enemy. It is early spring, and the castle is surrounded by trees just coming into leaf. Briefly and poetically, the warriors have shut themselves up in the young leaves. One can imagine Shiki lying there, searching through his books for a haiku topic, the way Bashō searched for a grebe's nest for the same purpose. Genius is a matter of doing it, whatever the circumstances.

A WHITE BUTTERFLY

nadeshiko ni / chōchō shiroshi / tare no tama

A white butterfly
flits about the pinks—
I wonder whose soul it is.

The pink is a small white flower with four petals. The reference is to a battle in the twelfth century between the Taira and Minamoto clans, in which the Taira forces suffered a crushing defeat. Which of the Taira warriors is now flitting about the pinks as a white butterfly? Shiki wanders in imagination as he puts down his history book, flitting about his topic like the butterfly.

MY THREE-FOOT GARDEN

sanjaku no / niwa wo nagamuru / haruhi kana

I gaze
at my three-foot garden
one spring day.

Three-foot gardens are part of every city compound of Japan, bringing the tranquility of nature into busy, harried urban lives. Shiki is sitting bundled in his chair at his window, and in his time of dying, his little garden brings him the season of renewal and regrowth that lies beyond himself.

THE SAMISEN

samisen wo / kaketaru haru no / nochaya kana

A samisen is hung
in a teashop on the moor
in spring.

The samisen is a rectangular stringed instrument played by geisha entertaining businessmen and by upper-class women for their guests and for their tired husbands. As it hangs there on a day of spring in a country teashop, it presents its joyful and relaxing purpose for those with the eyes and ears of a poet.

TRAMPLING ON A PICTURE

botan saku / jōdo no tera no / ebumi kana

Peonies bloom
at a Buddhist temple
displaying an *ebumi*.

Christianity was banned during the Tokugawa period. In Kyushu in spring the authorities would set a small ceramic plaque called an

ebumi, “picture trampling ,” on the ground and line up villagers to step on it. The picture would be of Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Those who refused were thus identified as Christian and were crucified. As peonies bloom, a Buddhist temple displays a striking example of violent antecedents, perhaps of that very temple.

THE BANNER

koshibai no / nobori nurekeri / haru no ame

A traveling show—
the banner is wet
in the spring rain.

In Japan you still see *koshibai* in country towns. The director has his rig on a bicycle. He parks his bike and walks around the block, hitting clappers to announce the show. Children gather, and each of them gives the director a small coin Mama provided. When the young audience is ready, the director tells a story about Minamoto Yoritomo or one of the other folk heroes. He unwinds large pictures from the roll on his rig, one by one, as he recounts the story in a singsong voice. The children love it and follow the story with rapt attention. In the haiku, the banner announcing the show hangs limp in the spring rain. The children are peeping out their windows, hoping against hope that the rain will stop and they can see the show.

THE MOGAMI RIVER

zunzun to / natsu wo nagasu ya / mogami gawa

How swift the Mogami River!
It washes away
the heat of summer.

From the snows of Mount Nishi Azuma, the Mogami flows in what is now Yamagata Prefecture, through the basins of Yonezawa, Yamagata, Shinjo, and Shonai, to the Sea of Japan at the city of Sakata. It is one of the swiftest rivers in Japan, and it doesn't just wash away the sands from its shores. It washes away the heat of summer from the dimension of heat and cold!

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

kao wo dasu / nagaya no mado ya / haru no ame

A face shows
at a tenement window
during a spring rain.

Nature is both squalid and pure, as the tenement and the rain, as the miserable face at the window, and as the splash on the sill. In fact, nature makes all things beautiful, as the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us. It is the rain that reminds us of this unity and beauty. It is everywhere, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: "The rain is raining all around, / it falls on field and tree, / it falls on the umbrellas here, / and on the ships at sea."[8]

THE HOLLYHOCK FESTIVAL [SUMMER]

chi ni ochishi / aoi fumiyaku / matsuri kana

Hollyhocks fall to the ground
trampled underfoot
at the festival.

The Hollyhock Festival is held at the Kamo shrine in Kyoto on May 15. It is a popular event, celebrated throughout the city. Women wear hollyhocks in their hair, and residential gates are decorated with them. The festival itself is crowded, and the very hollyhocks being

celebrated are thoughtlessly trampled. The irony is not lost for the poet.

FLIES

umabae no / kasa wo hanerenu / atsusa kana

> Flies from my horse
> don't leave my kasa—
> what heat!

The horseflies accumulating in great numbers on his bamboo hat would insulate the hat somewhat and keep the poet a mite cooler, but only a mite cooler, surely. Shiki is sensitive to subtle points in his everyday world, as earlier poets were to theirs, of tiny flowers under the hedge, and flower stems bending slightly by the wetness of rain. The wheel turned, and Shiki experienced the advent of the automobile and the virtual disappearance of the horsefly. The wheel continues to turn, and poets sensitive to the subtle world are thankfully still appearing, even in modern times. William Stafford wrote a delicate poem about his shadow on the wall, cast by a nuclear explosion, which "ended me, person and shadow, never to cast / a shadow again."[9] The wheel continues inexorably to turn as it did for the planet Uranus, and the poets will be quiet at last.

IN THE DISTANCE

rokugatsu no / umi miyuru nari / tera no zō

> The temple Buddha—
> in the distance,
> the June sea.

The temple stands several miles from the seashore. In the halfdarkness beside the altar, one can see through the open entry

the sun glittering on the waves of the ocean rather far away. It is warm there in early summer. The worlds of dim light and sparkling water, near and far, are brought together most profoundly. It is the setting of the Buddha exemplar. The greatest Buddhist monasteries, like Dōgen Zenji's Eiheiji, are located, for the sake of the Dharma, deep in remote mountains. This one is located, for the sake of the people living nearby, fairly near the sea.

THE GREAT PAPER KITE

ōdako ni / chikayoru tobi no / nakari keri

Not a single kite
approaches
the great paper kite.

Kite fighting was popular in Japan in Shiki's time. The great kite, the falcon, circled slowly around, dominating one part of the sky. In Shiki's verse, the ordinary bird kites are afraid to approach it. In the United States these days, and I suppose in Japan too, boys don't fly kites anymore. They would endanger planes coming in to land. Old-timers like me regret that youngsters are missing the fun they used to have.

THE HORSE

natsu kawa ya / uma tsunagitaru / hashibashira

In the river in summer
a horse is tied
to the post of a bridge.

The river is probably not very broad or deep, and comes perhaps to the knees of the horse standing in it. It is standing with its head bowed, as horses do when they are waiting. It must be very pleasant

for the horse, standing in the cool running water on a hot summer day. The water swirls around the post of the bridge that holds the reins of the horse. It knows what is happening and simply awaits the outcome.

ANGRY AT LOSING

yari hago ni / makeshi bijin no / ikari kana

> Beaten, losing
> at battledore and shuttlecock
> the lovely girl is angry.

Battledore and shuttlecock was a lawn game played by the leisure class on New Year's Day in Shiki's time. A very pretty girl loses a round and allows herself to show how upset she is. Her face is flushed, her color is high, and she is even more lovely than usual.

SKYLARKS

kumo wo fumi / kasumi wo sū ya / age hibari

> Skylarks soar,
> treading the clouds,
> breathing the haze.

It is really Shiki who soars, treading the clouds, breathing the haze. Lying there, coughing up his lifeblood, he soars on his genius, overlooking the solicitous nurse fussing with his pillow. He smiles as he adds yet another verse to a journal that will be stacked with others by his bed.

THE *SANMON*

sanmon ya / aota no naka no / namiki matsu

> The *sanmon* is at the end
> of an avenue of pine trees
> in the midst of rice fields.

The *sanmon*, or “Mountain Gate,” is the great gate to a monastery. It is two stories high and very ornate. The first story is the gate itself, and it is always wide open. The second story is one large room, containing full-sized images of the sixteen Arhats, traditionally the disciples of the historical Buddha. They are all glad to serve the farmers and their families. The *sandō*, or “Way to the Mountain,” is lined with pine trees as it runs through rice fields. The sacred way with its trees of timeless significance is a constant reminder to workers, bent in labor in the fields, that the holy runs through their lives.

THE CREEPING GOURD

samidare ya / tana e toritsuku / mono no tsuru

> In the summer rain
> the creeping gourd
> has reached the trelliswork.

Here we see the inexorable power of nature in the inevitable rain in spring and, from a conventional standpoint, the incredibly minute steps nature takes in the movement of the gourd vine to the trelliswork. I suppose there are naturalists who are in accord with nature’s power, but who among them has the talent required to express it, in accord with that power?

SHARING [AUTUMN]

te ni mitsuru / shijimi ureshi ya / tomo wo yobu

His hands full of basket clams
he joyfully calls
his bosom pal.

Human experience is only meaningful when it is shared. From our sandbox days, playing together was encouraged by our teachers. Earlier as toddlers, grubbing around together under the dining room table was a delight. Here the boy with his hands full of clams calls to his best friend to share his experience. In twenty years he will telephone his old friend to share old memories.

THE ANNALS OF THE THREE EMPIRES

nagakiyo ya / kōmei shisuru / sangokushi

I read *The Annals of the Three Empires*
one long autumn night
to where Emperor Guangming dies.

The Annals of the Three Empires is a literary history of the early days when the Great Wall of China was constructed. The Emperor Guangming died just a few pages before the end of the book, but Shiki was too sleepy to finish it. If he had been able to finish the book, he would not have had a haiku.

BATTLEDORE AND SHUTTLECOCK

yarihago no / kaze ni jōzu wo / tsukushi keri

Playing battledore and shuttlecock
in the wind
is challenging.

Battledore and shuttlecock is a popular game in Japan, and is played by adults and children alike. The wind is really a third player in windy

weather, for the shuttlecock is made largely of feathers and is very lightweight, making it difficult to control. This verse seems akin to *Senryū*, the fun-loving verse of Japan.

HAIL [WINTER]

tokidoki ya / arare to natte / kaze tsuyoshi

> Now and then
> it turns to hail—
> the wind is strong.

This is a scene of winter weather. The wind is blowing hard, and in the icy weather the rain turns to hail from time to time. The very simplicity of the image gives the haiku its edge. We feel the destructive power of nature in just three short lines. Compare another winter verse by Shiki, “In the abandoned boat / the hail / bounces about,” where you find an additional sense of loneliness with the empty boat.

THE DEPTH OF THE SNOW

ikutabi mo / yuki wo fukasa wo / tazune keri

> How many, many times
> I asked about the deepness
> of the snow!

Here Shiki allows himself a verse that reflects his situation, bedridden and unable to slosh about like the man who has a childish love for playing in snow. The fact that he posed his inquiry over and over shows his profound nostalgia for those old days. I feel a similar nostalgia as I watch my granddaughters push each other around in their toy truck. I am wheelchair bound, as Shiki was bedridden. Old age and illness are thus siblings.

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