Santōka, New Jersey

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Under
Ground
Press

SANTŌKA AT A DINER IN JERSEY
山頭火、ニュージャージ州の一膳飯屋にて

So. There he is:
Santōka. The
wandering wonder
of the haiku free world
standing outside a
diner in Jersey
chanting the Heart
Sutra
begging bowl in hand
hoping to receive
enough to get a
cup of coffee.
Hilda the waitress
comes out to usher
him in, sits him
at the counter
pours him a coffee
"On the house!"
while the owner
whose name is
Demetri
feigns disapproval
but nods.
Finished his
coffee, on his way
out notices
the daily special
chalked on a
little blackboard which he

erases with the
sleeve of his
Buddhapriest robe
and writes:

"Trailing clouds
of glory walk off
to stars"

Then he turns to
all the customers
says in Japanese
"一禅飯や!"

[Ichi zen meshi ya]
chuckles and leaves,
having preached
the dharma.

SANTŌKA DINER 2

Trying to sleep on a Jersey shore sandy beach
he finds the sound of waves disturbing
not to mention state bird mosquitos
which don't even care
if he's Mister Big Shot enlightened Zen priest.
"Where's your satori now!?" buzz buzz
at his ear.
Buzz off! He complains.
Don't they ever sleep!
Up he gets, sand brushed off,
remembers his sedge umbrella hat.
Where are some mountains?
Mountain calm mountain voice mountain sleep.
He finds an all night diner.
Waitress not fazed one bit,
she's seen it all, all types.
"Regular or decaf?"
He asks for Blue Mountain.
She stares at him.
"Okay regular."
After drinking his coffee
He writes something on a napkin
finds some coins in a pouch
pays the waitress
walks off
into the night.
Waitress, who of course
reads Japanese, puts
the napkin in her
pocket

wipes the counter
wipes the stools
sweeps the floor.
"Nature!"

SANTŌKA PINES

Saké is what he asks for
but none's to be had.
Off he walks in search of
liquid mountaintop fire.
No stores stock it.
A word never heard.
Culture shocks!
(("Japanese rice wine" he needed to say.)))
Finally finds one nifty with words
figures out what he wants
has only one brand,
one he dislikes.
It'll do; he walks off with a
1.8 liter bottle in a paper brown bag
under state law.
Where on earth to drink it.
A path off a paved road to a spread of pines.
In a while there's an opening.
Sits on sandy forest floor, nutrient poor.
Opens bottle swigs.
Nowhere is any person he knows,
nowhere is anything to know
though he knows very well having little.
Took a vow to live as
every nonhuman living thing
with nothing but earth
underfoot, sky above.
Take another swig.
No one to drink with.

Turtle. Turtle's busy.
Moving.
Another swig. Then another.
Looks around starting to relax.
Alone, feels
right at home
in ever new surroundings.
No temples here no bells to ring.
No place to stay
but taken in by the sabi* scene.
Another swig.
This stuff's not bad.
Gets a bit tipsy.
Past pain,
Past pain-in-the-ass self,
past past itself, all drop away.
Take another swig sprawl out largely.
Saké half gone.
Life half gone.
All empty anyway.
Sky clear, mind clear,
hear being here.
Each and every thing together
breathe through pines.
Peal of sonorous snoring.
Peace out, New Jersey.

* sabi: 寂び. Lonesome, mellow, desolate,

deserted….

MIXING WITH THE LOCALS

Santōka is walking through a middle class residential area in Cherry Hill headed nowhere in particular. A little girl with curly blonde hair riding a tricycle sees him and not knowing what to make of this raggedy fellow pedals hurriedly towards him to get a closer look. He's murmuring words she doesn't understand but they have a certain rhythm she thinks is pretty cool.

What's in that bowl? Why are you wearing a straw umbrella on your head when it's not even raining. Santōka just smiles and nods. She gets off her tricycle takes him by hand leads him to her house. "Look mommy it's mister umbrella hat in a rain coat and it's not raining!" Mother with a flare for the exotic doesn't call the cops like some might.

She sees coins in his begging bowl and being a quick study figures him out then goes to fetch her purse. Places a bunch of coins in his bowl. He chants and rings a little bell with one hand in front of his chest.

Long story short mom makes them all lunch. They eat outside at a picnic table in the backyard. He's a weather-worn hardened-by-travel unshaven site to behold. She calls a neighbor who studied in Japan for a year back in college. Neighbor's Japanese is rusty but she can get the basics of his story.

Why did he come to America? Why is he here in New Jersey? What's he doing here in Cherry Hill? Santōka provides no satisfying answers to any of these questions. The best the neighbor can make out is that it has something to do with a kind of short poem called a haiku. Making haiku in America. Haiku and walking.

Neighbor remembers someone nearby who belongs to a haiku club. A phone call. Soon the club-member lady arrives. She brings a book of English translations of traditional Japanese haiku. Names such as Bashō, Buson, Issa and many others. Turns out Santōka can read English and can even speak some though can't pronounce it very well so it is a little hard to understand him.

He's aware of this which is why he's reluctant to speak. He points to Bashō's name: "Walk." He points to himself: "Walk."

An awakening flashes across the club member's face. She says to the others "I think your guest is a genuine wandering haiku poet! Oh this is very special! Such people just don't exist anymore!"

Though Santōka can read English he can't understand it spoken. Spoken speed is too fast. He'd need it slowed down considerably. He can write it. Though to native readers his written English might seem strange—full of grammatical perplexities—they might be able to get the gist of what he's trying to express.

Club member using note paper asks Santōka if he would mind writing a haiku in English. He grimaces, shrugs: "Maybe, no."

Club member takes that as a refusal; her face shows disappointment.

Santōka writes:

Just
lay
yourself
down
blue sky

Club member, mother, neighbor, and little girl look at what he wrote. The three adult women look confused. They look at each other as if no one knows what to say.

Club member, trying to be polite, says "I'm not sure I understand. Is this a haiku? Where… where is the five seven five? Blue sky is not a season word, is it? How can it be a haiku without a season word?" She shows signs of panic.

Little girl exclaims enthusiastically "I get it!" as she flops herself down on the green grass lawn and looks up at the sky.

Santōka smiles.

NO MOUNTAINS

Santōka was told by people in the south that he'd have better luck finding saké in North Jersey and that he'd find the land less flat there, if not exactly mountainous. He was told about the Palisades.

So off he went. The New Jersey Santōka walked through is pretty much developed. There are no mountain paths along which one can walk without seeing a billboard. There are no ongoing green mountains one can go into seeing no one for almost ever.

Looking at a map he found Fort Lee. Right across the Hudson from Manhattan. He was told he could take a bus but he doesn't have enough coins in his pouch for bus fare. Anyway he's used to walking. Walking is the point.

In a letter he brought with him from a friend where he once lived, in Kumamoto on Japan's southern island of Kyūshū, is an address of a relative who is living with his wife in Fort Lee and working at a Japanese Bank there.

Santōka sends off a postcard, all but the address of which he writes in Japanese. "I'm heading there on foot. Should be there by week's end."

He leaves from Camden, where he had visited the grave of an American poet and slept in the backyard of a house where that poet once lived.

あざみあざやかなあさのあめあがり

Thistle whistle-clear post-drizzle morning

There are no state-long scenic walking routes, for there is no one to walk them. No one walks except for exercise or leisure. It's a lost art, lost life. Walking. So he follows the outstretching grey of automobile roads laden with billboards advertising consumption to a world of drivers. Just like back home in Japan. Roads that run through towns into farmland into more towns followed by more farms. At times a city.

He could have hitch-hiked but that's not his style. Who would pick up the likes of him? Dirty rag priest robe and straw umbrella-hat. Though there were some who did stop to offer him a ride. A bunch of young greasers in a muscle car. Out for a joy ride. They had booze and maybe not good intentions. The booze, one might think, would have attracted the saké-loving Santōka, but, no, he waved them off. As they pulled away one threw an open can full of beer at him, a hook shot from the passenger seat window, which spattered on the roadside and wet his leg-wear.

Not only was a full can of beer tossed at him, the young ruffians also hurled words: "Go back where you came from!"

Santōka stroked his goat-like beard. He took a notebook and pen from his satchel, wrote

咲いてもたんぽぽ 踏まれてもたんぽぽ

In bloom or tread on, ever dandelions

Put his pen and notebook back and walked on. He walked and walked. It began to get dark. He saw a diner's neon sign, looked in his pouch to see how many coins he had. "America on a dollar a day" he remembered seeing an ad for a travel guidebook.

A diner, to him, was like a mixed gender public bath back in Japan in which everyone is naked and everyone is equal. Same big soul as America's first feminist poet told it. "The female equally with the male." Egalitarian, a diner, he sensed, is such a place. Only everyone is wearing clothes; just like everyone in a communal bath is wearing their birthday suit.

He sits at the counter. A waitress brings coffee. He orders a jelly donut. "Is that all?" the waitress asks.
He empties his pouch of coins onto the counter. She eyes them, eyes him. "Okay. I get ya." When she brings his order it's two donuts instead of one. She winks at him. She'll be forever in his praises.

He wants to leave her a tip but she puts it in his begging bowl. Then she puts some packets of saltine crackers for soup into his bowl. And some dinner mints from a dish by the cash register.

"Come see us again."

Her big heart
in her few words

Now it is time to rest. Where's a good place? Down the road a piece town becomes country. Farms. He comes to a corn field. "Jersey corn!" World famous. Or he's just being corny. Wandering in Japan he'd often slept rough, in mountains or fields.

酔うてこほろぎと寝ていたよ

Drunk, sleeping with crickets

But this night he has no saké. At such times with no saké he is often visited by severe bouts of piercing self-criticism through which he can, depending on degree, become suicidal.

Though this night the kindness of the waitress warmed his heart enough to allow him sleep without saké.

Throughout the night he was visited by various nocturnal critters. On a bad night they would be nothing compared to his own demons. When he awoke, damp and achy, he found several insect bites on arms and hands.

ひとりで蚊にくはれてゐる

On my own bitten by mosquitos.

Ants all over the dinner mints he'd received. Brush them away. Open a cracker packet. Breakfast. In his satchel is a water flask; drink from that in sips. He

breathes in the dawn. A new day's poem spreads over the land.

From his satchel he removes a sutra book and a mortuary tablet on which is written his mother's posthumous Buddhist name. Unwrapped from white paper, held in hand, he recites to it a sutra. Replaces both to his satchel.

Next he takes out the letter from his friend in Kumamoto. Looks at the address of the relative in Jersey. Mediterranean Towers. Hmmm. Why, he wonders, "Mediterranean," in New Jersey. Melting pot. Tossed salad. Olive oil.

Onward, northward, morning birds just up and out in search of food. Step by step. Slowly. In a low murmur, almost a hum, recites the Heart Sutra as he walks. Huhhhhhhhhhh. Breath. Huhhhhhhhhhhh…..

People in cars begin their morning rush to jobs in search of money to use in search of food. Sound of tires on asphalt. Huhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. No breath. No breather. Getting closer to cities roadside grasses acquire a greasy film. Asphalt asphyxiation.

On a ship on his way to America, paid for by a group of haiku friends/supporters, another passenger, an American, hearing Santōka is bound for Jersey, told him it's a real shitpick of a place.

It is in fact the case that a certain area of New Jersey might be called environmentally challenged. There is that one area driving north to NYC one encounters "the smell", which is a rotten egg smell caused by maybe hydrogen sulfide. There are oil refineries, there are landfills. It might be a monster from a sci-fi

movie, arisen from the deep. SMELLZILLA!!! Run for your lives!

But it wouldn't faze Santōka one bit. He is used to the horrors of industrializing Japan.

So far, though, no shit, no pick. No rotten egg smells. What he finds odd is no mountains.

分け入っても分け入っても青い山

Going on
in ongoing
mountain green

Which, going on into mountains, is not second nature but original nature. The nature humans evolved in. In Jersey there's just outstretching flatness, just distances, which it is the purpose of roads to just cover.

Without mountains to savor, without saké to mellow him, what is there in Jersey into which these will transsilence [sic]? This strange place, strange people, strange language, strange customs, and he himself a stranger wherever he happens to be, an outsider.

Resting on a bench at a bus stop in a small central Jersey community, he wonders about New Jersey's essential nature. What is it in it's character that makes it different from anywhere else in these United States? Before leaving Japan he'd done some reading. Settlement history. Big factor. The various cultural elements and languages that come together on these coastal plains. These ingredients make this Jersey stew.

It's a place not known for its good manners. It isn't known for scenic beauty. It isn't known for old families from Mayflower days. It isn't known for anything to brag about, which is, for him, one of its attractions.

Its lack of any presumptuousness. Its unpretentious denizens. The Zen of New Jersey; the "is what it is"-ness, without any ism. You can be yourself as opposed to trying to be a somebody. Like the coastal plain it overwhelmingly is, everything is levelled. No high, no low.

Which is bullshit of course because Jerseyites are people like people everywhere, who play the social game, play make pretend. Somebodies. Identities. Unaware of their true New Jersey nature even though they live in New Jersey. In that sense they can't tune in to the comfort offered by their own surroundings: physical, cultural, spiritual.

Pretty much like anywhere then, not living the life of their lives.

A local cat appears at his leg. Rubs on it. "Well well what have we here?" An orange marmalade kitty. He moves to pet it; the cat is receptive.

"You must be wanting something to eat. Kitty all I have is today's crackers." He opens a packet of crackers, crumbles one in his palm then holds it down for the cat, which signals with its head for him to put the pieces on the sidewalk.

He does, then eats the other cracker himself. Lunch.

別れともない猫がもつれる

No saying goodbye tangled up with kitty

The cat follows him briefly as if it would become a travel companion, but decides to stay in its own territory.

Step by step. In a low murmur, almost a hum, recites sutra as he walks. Huhhhhhhhhhh. Breath. Huhhhhhhhhhh…..

Along a major highway though not a toll road through a city. Cars zooming, coming/going exhaust/ed. Noon sun beating down on his sedge umbrella-hat.

Hours later at the outskirts of the city, things turning suburban, an officer of law pulls off the road in front of Santōka, cuts off his forward movement, finds it necessary to give a single blast of the patrol car's siren. Officer young man.

"Good afternoon, sir. Where are you headed?"

"Sorry, English not good."

"I see. Where are you from, sir?"

Santōka hesitates, repeats quietly to himself questioningly,"where." "From." "Ah! From Japan."

"Japan. Okay. So you're just visiting?"

"One more please."

"You. Visit. America."

"Oh. Yes. Visit. Fort Lee. New Jersey."

"Okay. Got that. Can I see some ID please. Do you have a passport?"

"Passport. Yes. I have."

Santōka takes his passport from his satchel.

"Okay. That's you in the photo. No problem. Way you're dressed… Are you some kind of pilgrim?"

"Pilgrim? Hmmm. A kind of pilgrim. Maybe."

The officer relates the scene to whatever he knows in his own culture. He imagines a scene from an old TV show called ***Kung Fu***. He thinks Santōka is like one of the long-white-bearded masters at the Shaolin Temple in China.

"Okay sir. You have a good trip. Be safe. Would you like me to drive you to the other end of town?

To himself, as if repeating the words slowly to aid his comprehension, "drive me… end of town."

"Diner, please."

The officer smiles. "Oh you'd like a lift to a diner? Oh okay. Sure, I guess I could do that. I'll take you to one along your way down the road a bit. Hop in."

To himself, "Hop in."

"Ya oughta feel privileged to ride in the passenger seat. Most of my customers ride in the back. "

Santōka smiles and nods. "Ah sō desu ka."

"Well I guess that's pretty much for you to understand. Our police humor."

Santōka smiles and nods. "Ah sō desu ka."

"Anyway I guess you don't know that it's kind of an American stereotype that us cops like eating donuts in diners."

Santōka smiles and nods. "Ah sō desu ka."

"Back in Japan. What is it you do?"

"Do….. what do…. I walk. I make haiku."

"What's haiku?"

"Haiku is poem. Short poem."

"Oh! So you're a poet! So, are you famous back in Japan or something?"

"Famous? Not famous."

"Okay here we are. County Line Diner. Come on I'll go in with you and introduce you to Gert. She's head waitress. Giorgos, he's the manager. He's Greek. Here everyone calls him George."

The officer and Santōka enter the diner. Officer to Gert: This here's Mr. Taneda. He's walking across New Jersey, headed for Fort Lee. He's from Japan.

"That's something you don't hear of every day. In fact I been to Japan. My husband was stationed over there. Over there in Okanawa. You ever been to Okanawa, Mr. Taneda?"

"He don't speak a whole lotta English, Gert. Best keep it simple."

In a louder voice, as if Santōka has a hearing problem: "HAVE. YOU. BEEN. TO. OKANAWA?"

Because the waitress mispronounced Okinawa, he has no idea what she's talking about. Anyway he says no.

"Anyway I'm going to leave him with you, Gert. Our guest from Japan. Put it on my tab okay?"

"Will do."

"I gotta get back out on patrol. Catch them bad guys, ya know?" The officers winks at Santōka. "Good food here. You eat, I pay. Understand?"

"You pay."

"Okay. You got it. You have a safe trip, ya hear?"

"Ya I hear."

The officer leaves.

"Why don't you just sit right here in this booth hon."

"Why I don't?"

"Oh well just sit here hon."

"Hon. What means hon?"

"Oh that's short for honey. It's a way of talkin' nice to customers. Okay here's a menu. Our special tonight is meat loaf. Now you go 'head and order anything

you want, 'cause the nice officer is going to pay for it."

"Special."

The evening sky is beginning to darken when Santōka leaves the diner. It's been a long while since he's eaten a full meal. Or had meat. He's feeling sleepy. A bit more walking.

There is a stereotype about people from New York City or New Jersey, which is that they are unkind, gruff, rude. Many would not believe that a police officer or a waitress, or anyone, could be so kind to Santōka, and it might in fact be the case that if he were seen as "immigrant" he would not have been treated so well, if not actually harassed. Instead he was seen as an exotic foreign guest, which placed him in a different mode of perception and allowed him to receive preferential treatment.

Eventually he comes to a public park. There is a sign that says no admittance after dark, but, he thinks, he can say he doesn't understand. He sleeps well with a full belly on a park bench. Wakes before at first light, drinks water, recites sutra for his mother.

Santōka doesn't realize how lucky he is that he was not attacked or even killed sleeping in the park. These are no longer times when small town residents don't lock their doors at night. Homeless people are at times attacked by hoodlums. He's very fortunate. Though Santōka is at times a danger to himself as well. He's attempted suicide a few times. Alas, always at risk.

Step by step. In a low murmur, almost a hum, recites sutra as he walks. Huhhhhhhhhhh. Breath. Huhhhhhhhhhh…..

Another day of walking. Another night. This time he finds a picnic bench outside a Target.

Up again at first light. Chanting to his mother's mortuary tablet.

On the road again. Soon a roadside sign reads "Ft. Lee 10 miles." Before long he's walking along Linwood Avenue towards Mediterranean Towers.

He spots a liquor store. He'd been told it would be easier to find saké here in North Jersey. The store was just about to open. Santōka stands outside. Not begging; just waiting.

The store does stock saké. Several brands to choose from. *Ama-kuchi* as well as *kara-kuchi*. This time there are 500 ml bottles as well. He has enough money to buy one.

It's still morning and a weekday. The relative will be at work. Santōka found a place named Constitution Park. Odd name for a park. Who names a park Constitution?

He'll take his constitutional morning drink.

Green grass. Trees here and there. Places to play sports. Finds a bench and sips saké. Watches people walking, people jogging, people pushing baby carts.

How many of these people have experienced whirling dervish ecstasy? Odd question, he thinks. Probably none. Rephrase it: they ever experienced

shaman altered-state connection? Through peyote or ayahuasca or god-vision berry. Or anything. What disconnects them? Have they ever been one with their surroundings? Or do they need to go to a church for a weekly dose of spirit? He takes another swig.

It's a way of life that diverts them, disconnects them. Something is needed—not drugs or booze but…—to disconnect them from their disconnection. To bring them back. To their true natures. Everything's paved over, concrete. asphalt. Skies are lined with condensation trails. Jets going coming. Oodles of airports. Roads are lined with billboards. Got milk? Got saké. Takes another swig. Even the grass isn't what would naturally grow here. A kind of pavement too. All enclosure. All webbed in. Fishtank mental space. Where's the ocean?

No wonder; no wonder people can't hear earth and sky around them, can't hear their own lives. If people want fuller lives, open up to everyone and everything. It'll come flowing. Just like that down in Camden poet put it.

Freestyle haiku. Free way of life. Return to nature. Follow your nature.

Going on a-musing until he mused himself sober, he knew it's likely no one would be home at his friend's relative's place in the high-rise towers. He decided to go check it out anyway.

Entering the lobby, he was surprised to see a doorman standing at a counter. To himself: "La de da!" The doorman eyed the scarecrow-like Santōka suspiciously, a look Santōka was not unfamiliar with.

Santōka manages to get the doorman to understand that he is there to see Kudō. 15th floor.

The doorman telephones the apartment. Santōka is surprised someone is home.

"A Mr. Taneda here to see you Ms. Kudō."

Ms. Kudō comes down to the lobby by elevator.

[From here, the conversation is in Japanese but is rendered in English.]

Formal greetings are exchanged while deeply bowing to each other.

"I'm really sorry to be bothering you at this hour."

"No that's completely okay. We heard that you are on foot. You couldn't have known exactly what time you'd arrive. If it had been a train or bus station I could have come for you by car."

"Madam Kudō drives a car?"

"Yes. I decided to take driving lessons here. One really needs a car here in America. Mr. Taneda, I hear that your haiku name is Santōka."

"Yes it is. By birth I'm Shōichi. I had another haiku name as a young man. Snail Prince, but then I decided on Santōka. Maybe Mountaintop Fire in English. By the way it feels so good to be able to speak Japanese. My English is minimal, just like haiku."

Ms. Kudō senses the humor and smiles. She had heard from her husband's relative that Santōka is

rather eccentric, but she did a good job of concealing her shock when actually confronting him in person. He hadn't bathed since the "back of Camden creek," where he had communed with Walt Whitman, nakedly sharing some brotherly poetic love. He had been walking and sleeping rough for days. Unshaven, wearing a dirty, tattered priest robe, it was as if some homeless person had turned up. And in fact he was a homeless person. Even in Japan he'd been seen as suspicious. Vagrancy is frowned upon.

And he smelled. He smelled of saké, but he also smelled like a hobo. The first thing she thought of was getting him to bathe—and Santōka loves hot spring baths—and, luckily, in Japanese custom from way back, it is polite to, after initial greetings, offer a visitor a bath.

"Here in America we can prepare a bath instantly. There is running hot water. So…would you care to bathe?"

"Actually I was hoping to go to Broadway in New York first. There is a song from some time ago called *Funky Broadway*. There's a line that goes "dirty filthy Broadway" and I thought dirty filthy Santōka should appear on dirty filthy Broadway."

Ms. Kudō giggles.

"A bath would be wonderful. Thank you."

"Let's go up to our apartment. My husband usually comes home around 8. But I'll call his office to tell him you're here. Maybe he can get home earlier. Let's go up, shall we?"

Compared to anything Santōka knows in Japan, as an adult on his own, their apartment is spacious, even luxurious, with a view out over the Hudson River to the Manhattan skyline and the George Washington Bridge.

"It's a wonderful place, isn't it?"

Ms. Kudō, shaking her head no with humility: "We could never live in such a place in Japan. My husband's bank pays for this."

"Still, you're very lucky."

Ms. Kudō explains to Santōka about the differences in taking a bath in America. She suggests that, since he cannot wash his body on the floor outside the tub as people do in Japan, he should wash while showering first, then run hot water and soak, letting out the hot water when he's done.

"By the way Mr. Taneda, we have our own washing machine and dryer here. So while you are bathing I can wash and dry your clothes and they will be ready by the the time you're done your bath. Just leave everything on the floor outside the bathroom."

Santōka never heard of a home clothes dryer. But he didn't want to appear behind the times so he said nothing.

In the bath he saw a lot of things he'd never seen before. Hair rinse. What is that? What's it for? Conditioner. What the … Moisturizer…. Body gel….

Santōka travels light, and lives light when not on the road. In his little cottage, he has few possessions. The clothes on his body. A pot to boil rice. A bowl to

eat it in. …. The idea is reduction. Marie Kondo and her decluttering campaign has nothing on Santōka. Santōka declutters his mind as well, empties it to welcome haiku. Haiku, though he doesn't know it, can't know it, is his enlightenment. Though he pathetically hopes for a kind of enlightenment set down by Buddhist authority.

Reduction to bare necessity. Simplification. To reduce worldly matters to such a minimal scale opens a person to a deeper, more expansive, life. To a larger degree of life's immensity. The few words of a haiku express his expansive life of few things.

Not many care to comprehend the economics of his way of life in relation to spiritual matters. Modern economics, as taught in schools and practiced by businesses and governments, does not even recognize life as spiritual. Yet Santōka senses there is no distinction between spiritual and material. So maybe economics is in fact economics.

"How about some tea?"

At her request, he recounted some of the details of his travels in New Jersey.

"Why is it you decided to visit New Jersey? There are other places that are so famous. Niagra Falls, Grand Canyon….. Why New Jersey? Does your being here have something to do with making haiku?"

"In the sense that haiku is my way of life, then, yes, my being here has something to do with haiku. Anywhere I go, or don't go, has something to do with haiku. In that sense.

Anywhere I go
or don't go
here I am.

The conversation was becoming a game show in which she tried to guess why he came to New Jersey. It was obvious that Santōka was not yet ready to discuss the purpose of his visit. But, she wondered, what had he told the immigration agent when he entered the country? Business? Pleasure?

"I'm embarrassed to talk about it."

"About why you're here?"

"Yes."

"I'm a good listener." She pours him another cup of Japanese green tea.

"Some people would make fun of me. Call me crazy. Though I do have emotional problems and have had what a doctor says are nervous breakdowns."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I burnt all my diaries from before I became a novice monk."

"Oh? Is that some sort of requirement?"

"Not a requirement, no. Symbolic, really. Shedding my past. Like getting rid of unnecessary things. As you know, I have only the clothes I'm wearing."

"Most people could not do that I think. You must be very strong."

"Strong, weak, who knows? Not me. Anyway…. Anyway…. To answer your question: Why am I here? In New Jersey…"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pressure you."

"No no. It's okay. It's just that it's not something I talk about. Mine is a story with more than its fair share of suffering. Though who can measure, really. Making haiku is the only way to make sense of it all. Otherwise I'm just a drunk, a worthless beggar tramp, a total mess of a human being. Of no use to society. By conventional standards I'm a complete failure. On the other hand, it should be obvious to anyone even mildly observant that I don't care much for conventional standards. If I did, would I be making freestyle haiku?

I must be cursed by the gods, if you want to look at it that way. And for what reason do I deserve such pain? Me or anyone. What is it I did to offend a god.? Just be born? And why would I choose to be born in such a world of suffering? Or would anyone? If there is indeed a choice. Unless it's karma. Some punishment for a past life."

"We all seek explanations."

"That is so. In most cases that's all we have. As answer to 'What's all this about?'"

"So, instead of explanations you make haiku?"

"Oh! Madam Kudō is very perceptive."

She in humility shakes her head no.

"Trying to figure a way out of my own mess… That's why I walk. Or write. There is no way out, but there's a way to go through it calmly. So, as master Bashō said, making haiku soothes the heart. He's right."

"I suppose haiku can be a way of life for some. For others it's something else. Singing, painting, playing an instrument….."

"Madam Kudō is wise indeed. And what is Madam Kudō's way?"

"I have various hobbies, but…"

"But."

Her silence.

"Has Madam Kudō any children?"

"I was unable to."

"I see."

"I try to make myself useful, I got various certifications. I can teach Japanese to foreigners, for one. I can work as a nutritionist's assistant at geriatric care centers. Other than that I seek what brings me personal pleasure. Singing, hiking, drinking with friends, and so on. But I wonder."

"Wonder? Wonder what?"

"Is it enough? I wonder if something is still lacking."

"Mr. Kudō is a good man?"

"Oh yes he's a dear man. Much more so than a lot of Japanese husbands I hear about from women I know. It's just that….. and I really shouldn't be talking about him like this or talking at all about such matters. Especially since we just met."

"Madam Kubō, although I am not formally ordained, as a novice priest there are still many who confide in me and ask my advice. Obviously, I'm the wrong person to ask for advice, but they don't know that."

"Well, since you put it that way. Ours was an arranged marriage. Even so, I've come to love him in my own way. Still, I must say that I yearn to feel like a woman. I want a man who has some passion for me to take me into his arms."

"I see. That sounds completely natural. But if you attempt to pursue that, there is a risk."

"Yes. I would risk bringing shame upon my husband, his family, myself, my family."

"You could end up someone dead to the world. Pretty much like me."

"That's right. Even so, I want to feel like a woman before I die. Which requires a certain kind of man."

"That's a good point. It's not something one can do for oneself, is it?

"Not to my knowledge."

"Does that certain kind of man exist?"

"Not as yet."

"It would seem ours are almost opposite conditions. You seek fulfillment through the love of a man. I am unable to find fulfillment through a woman's love."

"Really? Why is that? Are you….. homosexual?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. It has been my thinking that it's because when I was a child my mother dropped herself down a well. Suicide."

"Oh my."

"Yes. Quite traumatic. Then, as a younger man, I was never able to really love a woman. In fact I was married once—like yours an arranged marriage—and have a son. Grown up now and with a family of his own."

"But you have your haiku. I have an empty room in my heart where a man's love should reside."

"Mmmmmm. I don't know what's to be done about that."

"Neither do I, but it is helpful to be able to talk about it with you."

"I feel more comfortable about answering your question now. About why I'm here in New Jersey. Even most Japanese have never heard of Seisen."

"Seisen?"

"His full name is Ogiwara Seisensui. Seisensui is written 井泉水. It's a pen-name. Tōkichi was his given name. He is the one who mentored me in making freestyle haiku. Even though I'm a couple

years older. If you want to call it a movement it can be called a movement. He started it, he and another fellow. He was a bit of a rebel when young, kicked out of jr. high school for criticizing the system, then got into booze and so on. After a while he decided to buckle down and study. Graduated from Tokyo University. Back when it was Tokyo Imperial University.

Anyway, long story short, he was particularly influenced by the American poet Walt Whitman, who lived his later years in Camden, here in New Jersey. Of Manhattan a son, as Whitman himself tells it. Which you have a nice view of out your window. He essentially made the first free verse poem. It's possible the notion may have presented itself to someone somewhere before him, but Whitman "patented it," so to speak. Let's say it was an idea waiting to happen.

So, through Seisen, Walt Whitman influenced me. Kind of like a poetic ancestor, or grandfather maybe. I sense his spirit all around. It maybe sounds silly, but during my roaming back in Japan, I sense the spirit of poets who lived in those places. So I'm here for Whitman. It's really just a very personal thing that's maybe hard for people to understand. Maybe it sounds kind of silly."

"Oh! Let me put some fresh tea leaves …."

TO RUTHERFORD

Cheapest way is walking, as always. As well as the only genuine way to travel. Without a machine of any kind.

Mr. Kudō showed him the route on a map. If you've got little time, Jersey has the roads.

"One road you'll walk on is called Redneck Ave." He explained the meaning and smiled: "New Jersey has some strange names. Like Japan."

Then Mr. Kudō got an idea. "Come to think of it, my wife Yumi has her own car. It's probably less than an hour's drive to Rutherford. Shall I ask her drive you?"

To which Ms. Kudō chimes in: "It's no problem for me to drive you there. I've never been to that part of the state. It would be nice to have a look."

Off they go, Santōka and Ms. Kudō. Santōka never owned a car. Though back in Japan he'd ridden in trains and streetcars, or traveled by boat, there is no record that he ever rode in a car until the police car mentioned earlier in this story.

Music from inside the car. Ms. Kudō found an oldies station. "On the Road Again." "Nice!" he smiled and tapped his foot to the beat. "I like boogie. I don't like

jazz. I mean old style jazz. New style okay. Old style irritates."

"I see." Ms. Kudō nods but is more focussed on getting on the right road. It's good that Santōka likes to talk. Ms. Kudō is in general not an outgoing person. Shy. When Santōka arrived she made a special effort to be affable.

Santōka, who has a keen intuitive sense about people, seems to think she's highly intelligent. Not only that but gentle. Once they are on the road they need to be on, he tries to get her to open up.

"Madam Kudō, I suppose you attended university."

"Indeed I did. I studied at International Christian University. It's often called just ICU. Have you heard of it? It's in Tokyo."

"Of course. It's a highly ranked university."

"How about you, Mr. Taneda?"

"Please. My friends call me Santōka. Yes. I attended Waseda University. Also in Tokyo."

"I see. You mentioned we are going to Rutherford to see the house in which William Carlos Williams lived. Could you tell me something about him?"

"Well I'm not an expert or anything. It's, once again, the Japan-America connection, as with Whitman, like I mentioned the other day."

"I've heard of Whitman, but I don't think I've heard of William Carlos Williams before. Is he famous?"

"Now, in the literary world, yes. Outside that I doubt many have ever heard of him. While alive, not so much. He was known in some circles within the poetry world of course, but, in general, no. He was a medical doctor by profession. Like Whitman he was doing something new, and anyone—just as our freestyle haiku in Japan—doing something different encounters resistance."

"What sort of resistance?"

"You've heard of Lafcadio Hearn? In Japan he's known as Koizumi Yakumo."

"Yes. He's well known in Japan. Didn't he write ghost stories or something?"

"Ghost stories and much else. A lot of Westerners at the time knew what they knew of Japan through his writings. Well, in an early critical essay he viciously attacked Walt Whitman. And, like that, some critics attacked Williams. Just like they attack Seisensui and our freestyle people. 'THAT'S NOT HAIKU!' they rage, and they used to refuse to include us in their anthologies."

"Does that mean poets aren't free to write as they please?"

"Ah; insightful question! In fact there are some self-appointed guardians of social morality who see such matters as free verse or freestyle haiku as deviant, and they feel threatened, and they want others to feel threatened too."

"You mentioned Ogiwara Seisensui was influenced by Whitman. How about Williams?

"Yes. As were many. Like Shakespeare in England or Bashō in Japan, Whitman's influence is huge. But there are points on which Williams is unsatisfied with Whitman."

"Oh really. What points might they be?"

"He said Whitman was not a word man. He said the same about Kenneth Rexroth—a more recent American poet with close ties to Japan—'not a word man.' It is an evaluation we might assume Williams used often. His thinking was that poems are things made of words—not ideas. And Whitman was all about this ideal of democracy. A child might ask: "Well then what are words made of?" And Williams might reply "Nothing." Cha cha cha!"

"That's a dance! The cha cha."

"Back in the day it was three chas—now only two."

"O-cha: our Japanese green tea."

Santōka chuckles.

"Is poetry connected to dance?"

"Oh my! Indeed it is. And as you know dance becomes more expressionistic and free-form. A waltz is a museum piece. And a lot of people really like museums. Museums for minds that live in the past. Do you like to dance, Madam Kudō?"

"Back in Japan I sometimes went to discos with people in my singing group. Yes! It's fun!"

"Sounds 'groovy!' Heh heh. You'll have to educate me about the lingo here. Anyway, Williams credited Whitman for opening the common ground to poetry, and he was energized, as were other poets, by the spirit of Whitman."

"But he said Whitman was not 'a word man'?"

"Right. So there he was, Walt Whitman, standing alone at the Jersey shore, pants rolled up over his calves, but metaphysically naked, breakers spreading over his ankles. He reaches down to cup some of the Atlantic in his hands and hears that its language has no color other than the skin of his own palms. And this is the birth of free verse."

"Wow! Can we find liberation just looking at water in our hands?"

"Or anywhere, which is what Whitman was telling us, but critics complained that his poetry was just a matter of writing down the words as they come into your head when in an oceanic spiritual-emotional state. It may have been so for some or even for Whitman himself because it's just as easy for ecstasy to take control of writing as it is for adherence to predetermined forms to take control of writing. Even "the variable foot" Williams was ever going on about. His "American measure."

"So it sounds as if it's all either mind control or not."

"You're right. Poetry is a matter of relinquishing control, of letting the poem be as it will. But Williams was introducing a new form of mind control to replace older forms. Whaddup wit all dat, dawg? Williams thought such matters were methods of exploration. For him they were. Keep up with

Einsteins. The color of his palms. Okay. We all find our own way, or follow a way laid down by others."

"Where do you pick up these American slang expressions? 'Dawg.' It's kind of silly, but cute."

"Listening to young people talk in diners. 'You feel me?' Please tell me a popular expression."

"Well, among my American acquaintances, who are all women, I often hear 'Oh my god'. 'Oh my god' this, 'Oh my god' that. You could make a haiku:

When she first heard she
was like 'oh my god!' then I
was like 'oh my god!'"

"Heh heh! Madam Kudō has hidden talent!"

She giggles. "Then what is this free verse or freestyle you're involved with?"

"Well, contrary to what some think, it's not just a matter of writing down the words that come into your head. There is a visceral, whole-body feel to them, a sensitivity, and that is what decides how they are set out on paper. Prior to being on paper of course they're in me, having arisen in me by means of a particular experience, which is often walking. But if it were just the physical act of walking each poem would likely be a repetitive step by step march."

"So it's all about motion? About moving?"

"Basically. Not so much "movement" as in the "modernist movement," but there is a connection with that too in the sense of an ever-pressing and involuntary need to move onwards. Why does

anything move, even an amoeba? They have their pseudopod and as I said before our Williams had what he called his "variable foot. I have my own feet in their variable conditions connected with the wind's direction."

She smiles.

"Williams was intent on keeping his and everyone's poetry up with the times, with the intellectual times I mean. So there's Einstein with his relativity and Williams with his variable foot. But nothing's new under the sun and our ancient Daoists and Vedics had gone into these matters long, long ago."

"I read a book called THE TAO OF PHYSICS. Very interesting. So, Santōka-san, you have no interest in intellectual developments? Just Zen and haiku?

"Well, I'm not much of a priest." Shakes his head in self-criticism. "I'm totally unfit as a priest: an impostor, maybe. But I read a lot. Most writers like to read. I keep abreast. I go to the cinema. Read newspapers. I don't ignore the world. I'm not a hermit. As you know there is a lot of Western influence. Not many read Zhuangzi these days. Bashō took Zhuangzi everywhere he went. But all that's seen as old fashioned now, which is too bad because the butterfly is ever fresh."

"So, then, what is 'The Way,' so to speak?" She smiles.

"The way is under your feet."

Smiling: "How does that connect with your haiku?"

"Well, they're—many of them—made while walking. In Williamses' case, his sense of place is with his times. Industrialized, urbanized. Such were his times and that is what he was given to work with, given the way he chose to live. A profession, married with children; a scene to which most Americans of his time could relate. That was his material.

I'm an outsider. My material is walking, so the haiku are born of that experience. Each step is a new step. Into the unknown. Williams said poems are made of words. Words he finds for life from the way he chose to live it. Mine are made of walking, of the total physical, mental, spiritual act of walking that comes out as modulation of sound called haiku. Hopefully the poems resonate with my entire existence. 'Can't step twice in the same stream.' In that sense I'm not connected with any literary movement. It's a flux that can't be labelled. It's beyond concept.

I don't know to what latest scientific or intellectual developments they might relate, my poems. If any. Nor do I know to what non-intellectual developments they might relate. But to deny someone's poems because they don't fit in isn't very intellectual, is it? Or is it? I don't know. And, well, The Beyond: it never fits in, does it? It's always beyond."

"Mmmmm. Well, it seems we're here. That must be the Williams house on the corner. That blue-grey one. See: there's a plaque. But, if it's okay, if you have time, I'd like to hear what you think about politics and art, or if not all art at least haiku. Did you ever write what might be called political haiku? Or haiku in support of some social cause?"

He smiles: "I have no time because there is no time to have. But, as for what you ask, yes and no. It's

impossible to not be political in a large sense of that word which goes beyond form of government, particular politicians and political parties and includes ideology, which comes with this package we call mind. Values and all that. Good and bad. Zen tries to drop all that. Haiku and Zen are similar in that sense, though haiku need no do away with mind completely. If it did there would be no haiku. Haiku, as I mentioned, is, at least as I see it, a free flowing entity and doesn't get caught up in those stagnant waters of politics. Ruling part or opposition. One way or the other. Or tries not too. But, for example if I observe a scene of poor laborers and that scene inspires a haiku, is that haiku political? Or a starving old woman, or see soldiers return from war with only one leg. Yes, it becomes material for haiku, as does anything else. It doesn't mean those haiku are socialist of anti-war. They're free-flowing streams.

Otherwise, personally, I'm for whatever helps everyone. Sad to say, it seems that politics is not about that."

"Thank you so much. You know, ordinarily I have no chance to hear about these things in person, directly from a poet. Or anyone. I read books of course, but this is so 'live'. I wonder how you'll find Dr. Williams after all these years of death."

Santōka chuckles. "I wonder if the 'happy genius' of his household is home. Maybe I'll catch him dancing naked in his north room, waving his shirt round his head. Thank you for driving, Madam Kudō. You're a good driver! And thank you so much for your warm hospitality. Mr. Kudō too."

"Our pleasure. We rarely have any visitors here in America. It was a pleasure to meet you. Are you sure

it's okay to just leave you here? Will you be okay roaming around on your own?"

"That is what I do. Please don't worry. Thank you for your gracious hospitality."

"Enjoy the rest of your journey. You have our phone number. If you need anything while you're here in America…. And please drop us a line once you're back in Japan. Send us some New Jersey haiku!"

He gets out of the car: "Abayo!" And in a beggar-priest version of a Mifune Toshiro ronin samurai walk he heads off to the house on the corner.

Scott Watson
万流庵

The All-Flowing Cottage
2022