



Bashō's
"The Narrow Road
to the Far North"
and selected haiku

A HAIKU JOURNEY

Photographs by Dennis Stock
Translated and Introduced by Dorothy Britton



bashō's "the narrow road to the far north"



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The calligraphic imprint on the cover reproduces Bashō's own signature; the same signature together with Bashō's seal appears on the verso pages of the translated text of *The Narrow Road to the Far North*.

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*A seashell
Is a Japanese poem
Of seventeen syllables—
Small and formal in shape
But containing an ocean
Of thoughts.*

POETRY in microcosm—a world of ideas in three brief lines of verse—was given vibrant life and form by the great nature-lover and pilgrim-poet Bashō, who lived in Japan in the seventeenth century. Bashō was his pen name. It was his third, in fact. His first published verses were signed Munefusa, and a decade later he chose the name Tōsei, which means “Green Peach,” in admiration for the Chinese poet Li Pai (705–762), “White Plum.” It was not until he was thirty-six, an established poet with a following, that he changed his pen name to Bashō.

A pupil brought him a curious plant which had been introduced to Japan from China. It was a kind of plantain, or banana tree, and the poet fell in love with it at once. He was fascinated by its long, broad leaves “big enough to make a cover for a *koto*.” Frayed by the wind, they made him think of the tail of the mythical phoenix or of a green fan torn to shreds in a gale. “I love to sit under my banana tree,” he wrote, “and listen to the sound of the wind and rain upon its leaves.” He tended his exotic tree and tried to protect it from encroaching vegetation.

introduction

How I hate to see
Reed shoots, now that I've planted
A banana tree!

Neither is the vine
Of the wild morning glory
Any friend of mine!

The Japanese name of the plant was *bashō*, and it was not long before his pupils were calling his solitary abode *Bashō-an*, "Banana Tree Cottage." What more fitting name could he now take for himself too, the poet thought, than that of his beloved tree?

Bashō's surname was Matsuo, and he was born in 1644, the youngest son of the seven children of a samurai in the service of the Lord of Ueno Castle, located midway between Kyoto and Ise Shrine. At nine, Bashō became page and study-companion to the nobleman's eldest son, a delicate boy of eleven who was talented in the composition of poetry. Together they learned the craft of verse from Kigin (1624–1705), a noted Kyoto poet who was a disciple of the great *haikai* master Teitoku (1570–1653). The two boys became devoted friends.

When Bashō was twenty-two, his aristocratic companion and master died. Heartbroken, Bashō was sent on his first pilgrimage—to Mount Kōya to enshrine a lock of his dead friend's hair at the great Buddhist monastery. There, amidst the temples and the tombs, in the depths of the hallowed forest of gigantic cryptomerias, the poet thought deeply about life's transiency and *sabi*, the pathos inherent in all things which is especially well mirrored in the cycle of nature. He determined to leave the castle and devote his life to poetry and contemplation. He also wanted to be far from the sight of his master's beautiful young widow, for he secretly loved her and knew no good could come of it.

The young man went to Kyoto where he begged his master's teacher Kigin to take him into his home as servant-disciple. Bashō spent five years in Kyoto, studying Chinese classics and calligraphy as well as poetry. Another sad love affair persuaded him to renounce the world entirely and become a student of Zen. When in 1672 he followed Kigin to Edo (present-day Tokyo), whither the latter had been summoned by the shogun, the twenty-eight-year-old Bashō threw himself wholeheartedly into the practice of Zen meditation under the guidance of the priest Butchō.

Bashō's first poems had appeared in print when he was twenty, and by the time he was thirty-six, he had published numerous poems and anthologies

and had acquired a devoted coterie of disciples. That year, one of them, a wealthy fish wholesaler named Sampū, gave Bashō the tiny watchman's lodge on the banks of the Sumida River that came to be known as Banana Tree Cottage. The following year, 1681, Bashō published an epoch-making verse.

On a leafless bough
In the gathering autumn dusk :
A solitary crow !

This verse marks the beginning of Bashō's own distinctive style. There is nothing contrived. No puns. No attempt at wit. Spare and unpretentious, the lines are a quiet, refined observation of nature. Completely objective, this poem projects the dreariness and sadness of an autumn evening and its undertones of old age and death, without explicitly saying so.

Bashō's pure observation of nature, with his profound underlying mysticism, reached its peak with his most famous poem issued five years later (1686) in a collection of his own and his pupils' poems entitled *Spring Days*.

Listen ! A frog
Jumping into the stillness
Of an ancient pond !

On the surface, this poem simply presents a beautiful picture complete with sound effects. It carries one, in imagination, to the veranda of a temple in Kyoto, perhaps, overlooking a landscaped garden hundreds of years old with a moss-edged pond. One hears the sudden plop of a frog jumping into the dark water on a still spring afternoon. But the thought processes started by this poem go on and on. The pond could be eternity, God, or the Ultimate Truth about this universe and man. And we, brash mortals with our works and our inventions—each one of us no better than a frog jumping in—make but a moment's splash, and the ripples circle and die away

Bashō had always admired the "wandering poets" Li Pai and Tu Fu of China and Sōgi and Saigyō of Japan and wanted to make his own poetic pilgrimage. He made not one, but several journeys in Japan, always taking with him one or two of his disciples. His first, a leisurely peregrination in 1684 to Ise by way of his old home in Ueno, is described in *Nozarashi Kikō*, "A Weather-beaten Journey." Later, he followed the Tone River to the "water town" of Kashima to visit his Zen teacher Butchō and the resulting volume was entitled

Kashima Kikō. He also travelled to see the celebrated cherry trees of Yoshino not far from Kyoto when he visited Ueno again and was invited by the son of his late master to attend a cherry-viewing party in the castle grounds.

Ah! what memories!
Myriad the thoughts evoked
By those cherry trees!

In 1687, he visited Mount Kōya for the second time while en route to the beaches of Suma, Akashi and Waka-no-Ura and wrote *Oi no Kobumi*, “Notes from a Pilgrim’s Pack.” Bashō then proceeded to Sarashina to view the harvest moon at Mount Obasute, “the Hill-Where-They-Abandoned-Old-Women,” and penned his *Sarashina Kikō*.

But his most famous haiku journey, the longest of the trips, made in 1689 when he was forty-five, was to the Michinoku district, Honshu’s remote north-eastern provinces. The trip was a difficult and perilous undertaking, and the poet and his disciple Sora travelled mostly on foot. But then poets like Sōgi (1421–1502) and Saigyō (1118–1190) had trod the same path even centuries earlier! The journey took Bashō five months, with little lingering on the way even for the illness that plagued him at times, and his account of it, the *Oku no Hosomichi*, “The Narrow Road to the Far North,” is the masterpiece of his prose-and-poetry travel diaries.

Bashō had sold his house before he left, setting off into eternity, as it were, and was not really expecting ever to return alive. Now homeless, he passed the two years following his northward pilgrimage sojourning at various summer cottages lent him by disciples. He stayed for months at *Genju-an*, “the Hermitage of Ephemeral Life” at Ōmi, and then later at *Mumei-an*, “the Hermitage Without a Name” at Ōtsu, both on the shores of beautiful Lake Biwa. He also stayed at *Rakushi-sha*, “the House of Fallen Persimmons,” near Kyoto. And then in 1692, his disciples built him a new *Bashō-an* in Edo on the banks of the Sumida River quite near his old cottage and planted in the garden not one, but five banana trees.

In 1694, Bashō set off once more, this time to walk to the southwestern provinces of Japan as far as the great island of Kyushu. But alas, he got no further than Osaka, where he fell grievously ill of dysentery and died, an old man at fifty. He was buried at a temple adjoining “the Hermitage Without a Name” at Ōtsu, whose view of Lake Biwa he had loved so well.

POETRY'S shortest fixed form, the haiku, has a unique background. In the exquisitely refined court circles of Japan's Heian period (8–12th centuries), sensitivity to nature and the ability to write poems and instantly quote and recognize classics of Japanese and Chinese poetry were social requirements. At the same time, Heian court life was so circumscribed, and all its aspects so familiar, that explicitness was boorish and conversation came to be a gentle art of understatement and allusion.

It was hardly surprising, then, that the *chōka*, or “long poem,” lost in popularity to the *tanka*, or “short poem,” in which a wealth of meaning could be suggested in five lines—five lines elegant in shape and rhythm.

Mi-chi-no-be ni
Shi-mi-zu na-ga-ru-ru
Ya-na-gi ka-ge

Shi-ba-shi to-te ko-so
Ta-chi-do-ma-ri tsu-re

[Let me guide your pronunciation. Say the following sentence, sounding only the vowels and you have the Japanese sounds *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, and *o*. “But he soon set off.” As you will notice, Japanese vowels are pronounced as in Italian or Spanish. Consonants resemble English, except that *g* is hard only when it starts a word, *i.e.*, *ga* as a first syllable is pronounced as in “galore,” whereas within a word or as a particle, it becomes glottal, like the *nga* in “singable.” Double consonants are each pronounced separately, *i.e.*, the word *hokku* sounds like “hock-coo,” and the name Gassan, like “gus-sun.” Double vowels are herein represented by single vowels with a macron over them and should be pronounced twice as long. An exception is *i* which is printed twice, *e.g.*, Iizuka.]

In the *tanka* as above, the *shichi-go chō* (the seven-five meter which is to Japanese poetry and drama what Shakespeare's iambic pentameter is to English) is arranged as a triplet (three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables) and a couplet (two lines of 7 syllables). Since the syllables are equally accented, the effect is similar to three and four foot lines of English spondees. Keats's much praised line from “Hyperion” begins like the first line of a *tanka*:

Robs not | one light | seed . . .

Yet English has difficulty in keeping strictly to accented syllables. Here is a trans-

lation of the above *tanka* maintaining as closely as possible the Japanese meter. It is by Saigyō, and Bashō refers to this poem when he writes about seeing the same weeping willow in the village of Ashino (see page 34).

On that roadside lea
Where pure, crystal waters flowed,
Grew a willow tree;

For a little while I stayed
There and rested in its shade.

Rhyme is a device unsuited to the Japanese language, but in English it helps to suggest the formal elegance achieved in the original by those elements impossible to translate, which the poet James Kirkup so aptly calls “the subtle play of sound and meaning.”

A *tanka* is usually not recited, but is sung to tunes from the old Buddhist chants, and there is always a pause between the triplet and the couplet, like that between the octet and sestet of a Petrarchian sonnet. The *tanka* is now almost always called *waka*, which means “Japanese poem,” once a general term for all forms of native Japanese verse.

The intellectual, aesthetic Heian courtiers devised from *waka* a poetic diversion they called *renga*, or “linked verse,” in which one person wrote the triplet and another added the couplet. There were also *kusari-no-renga*, “chains of linked verse,” a poetic game any number could play. Since the rules were less exacting than for the composition of serious *waka*, verse linking became immensely popular. For many reigns, the enjoyment of poetry was largely confined to court circles, but by the end of the sixteenth century, members of the rising merchant class began to take a lively interest in verse linking, especially that in a lighter vein which came to be called *haikai* (later renamed *renku*).

The starting triplet, the *hokku*, had a special importance and was always composed by the most distinguished person present. There were two principal requirements: the *hokku* had to contain a seasonal word and a *kireji*, or exclamatory “cutting word,” such as *ya* (!) or *kana* (how...! what...!).

Over the centuries, the poetic images of the Heian and succeeding periods became stylized into little more than so many conventional word combinations that merely needed assembling. Originality all but disappeared. Then Bashō came along. A skillful writer of linked verse, Bashō infused new art and sensitivity into the form, raising it from a mere pastime into the realm of true poetry.

But Bashō's greatest contribution was towards making the starting triplet, the *hokku*, an independent poetic form of miniature perfection, later to be renamed haiku.

HAIKU and photography have much in common. Like pictures that tell a story, these short verses are thought-provokers. The haiku poet rarely describes his own feelings, but lets the juxtaposition of his images make us feel his emotions instead. Seemingly objective, a good haiku should rouse in the reader's mind a deeply subjective response and set into motion a world of thoughts. Of course, their centuries of conditioning give the Japanese a certain advantage, for the images focused upon in this poetic form rely heavily on traditional responses. *Hana*, literally "flowers" but actually referring to cherry blossoms; *samidare*, the long June rains; *semi*, the cicada with its lonely cry—words like these immediately conjure up for the Japanese a particular and specific mood. Moreover, the cycle of the seasons of which the Japanese are keenly aware, is the theme upon which Japanese poets have based their variations. For example, each of the eight haiku by Bashō, whose images Dennis Stock has visually translated in the first color folios of this volume, has its seasonal word. "A frog" and "the flowers" (cherry blossoms) are spring words. "Cool," quite naturally, is a summer word and so is "Buddha's birthday" which falls on the seventh day of the Fourth Moon of the lunar calendar, the first summer month. "The full moon" is always the specially beautiful harvest moon of autumn, and "snow," of course, is winter.

A haiku makes demands. So much is left unsaid that its three brief lines need more than a casual reading. One should try to immerse oneself in the poem and let the images propel one's thoughts to deeper meanings. Perhaps the visual dimension of this book in the form of Dennis Stock's photography will help do just that.

THE *Narrow Road to the Far North* is not just an ordinary travel diary interspersed with poems. The poetry is as integral to the book as the prose, and one complements the other. Bashō sometimes even took liberties with fact to achieve a skillful balance in the work as a whole, as well as in the "chapters," or

sketches, each one of which, as Soryū says in the Epilogue, “is a pearl.”

To me, *The Narrow Road to the Far North* has the unity of a large musical composition with many and varied movements. Like melodies that come and go, thought patterns introduced by Bashō in one sketch often recur. For instance, the last haiku (a final tour de force whose double meaning is made clear in the prose phrase preceding the poem) implies sadness for departing autumn and is a variation of the theme of departing spring in his beginning haiku on page 28. Place names are worked into the fabric, as in the ingenious “rhapsody on water” of the Passwater Barrier sketch. With earthy motifs jostling lofty themes, and lyricism contrasted with harsh dissonance, Bashō’s gamut of word color resembles a composer’s tone palette.

There is inner counterpoint. Echoes of other poems and stories intertwine the images. But when Bashō plucks a single string that would have set off sympathetic reverberations in the mind of a well-read contemporary, today and in another tongue, some further “orchestration” is required. Professor Hirō Nakano’s comprehensive notes in the 1973 Nichieisha edition of the *Oku no Hosomichi* have enabled me to fill out Bashō’s more fleeting allusions and make them meaningful in English. I am indebted to the late Professor Asatarō Miyamori (*An Anthology of Haiku: Ancient and Modern*, Maruzen, 1932) for biographical and historical information and to Mr. Nobuyuki Yuasa (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, Penguin Classics, 1970) for English spellings of Chinese names; and also to the Royal Horticultural Society for help with the names of plants.

As for Dennis Stock’s photographs that add a new visual dimension to the eight selected haiku in this book as well as to *The Narrow Road to the Far North*, I cannot help but think how delighted Bashō would have been with them. Mr. Stock’s photographs are veritable haiku themselves. Truly objective, as only a camera can be, they are at the same time as subjective as Bashō at his best, arousing in the mind of the sensitive observer a whole world of thoughts and emotions.

DOROTHY GUYVER BRITTON
(Lady Bouchier)
Hayama, August, 1974

eight haiku

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