



ON  
THE ROUGH ROAD

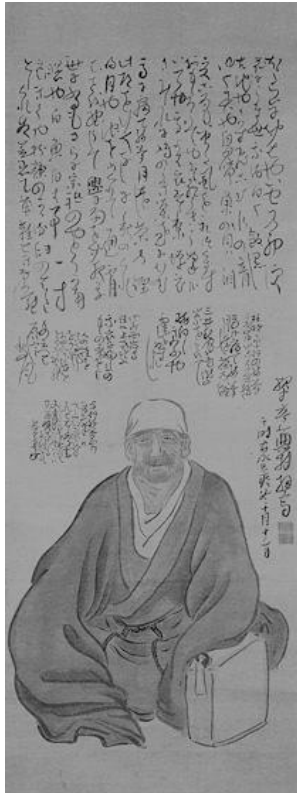
With Bashō

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Inspired by  
Matsuo Bashō's  
Oku no Hosomichi

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## Background

Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), recognized as the greatest master of Haiku, composed his most popular verse in the year 1686:

*furu ike ya  
kawazu tobikomu  
mizu no oto*

*an ancient pond  
a frog jumps in  
the splash of water*

(Source: Wikipedia)

Three years later, Bashō set off from Edo with his student Sora on a 2400 km journey to the Northern provinces of Honshu, which he later described in his book *Oku no Hosomichi*, a masterly construct that shines with simple prose and immaculate haiku.

The verses in this publication are inspired by that magnificent work which is both travelogue and poetic symphony sprinkled with references to ancient Japanese history and literature, drawing on the work of revered poets like Saigyō.

Far from treading on Bashō's toes, this compilation is an inward journey that presents an inspired view through a personal prism, always keeping a marked respectful distance from the master.

Under his every verse, I found questions that defined the shape of my footsteps behind his. In the understanding of his momentous journey, I unravelled new answers that propelled me onward.

*hana ni akanu  
nageki ya kochi no  
utabukuro  
- Bashō, 1667*

*blossoms all around-  
I grieve I cannot open now  
my poem bag*  
(Source: Tim Chilcott Literary Translations)

## The Beginning

Late spring, 1689. With a burning desire to traverse the distant Northern territories beyond the Shirakawa barrier, Bashō sets aside his fear of a hard and precarious journey and bidding a tearful farewell to his home and friends, leaves Edo after making the first entry in his travel journal.

a heavy heart  
holds my feet  
the moon already striding ahead

What do we seek? Are our questions still nebulous and inarticulate, barely discernible in the gloom of obdurate denial even as we set off on a quest for answers, or do we dare to give them voice and form, feel their coarse derision scratch the inside of our unyielding mouths? Is a quest fearful because the questions are still strangers or only because we realize that some answers can never be found?

slowly, softly  
yesterday  
slides out of this morning



## Waterfall

Beyond the shrine on Mt. Nikko, the caves behind the cascade of Urami-no-taki, the Rear View Falls, allow for quiet contemplation, shielded by a kinetic curtain of murmuring water, drawing Bashō to remark on the practice of a spiritual summer retreat.

how different  
the sound of this strange river  
calling our names

Does silence free the mind to orbit at will around the object of its desire or do familiar, primal sounds break through the walls of our wilful echo chambers and let untethered thoughts float free? How far do we have to go to get away from ourselves?

late night  
the tearful hills  
still telling us stories

## Interlude

In Kurobane, Bashō stays with a good friend and his brother, both poets, taking time to explore several shrines and retreats. Near Ashino, he rests awhile near a rice field, in the shade of an exquisite weeping willow. The tree had been glorified by the poet Saigyō whose passage through the Northern regions several hundred years earlier inspires Bashō's own travelogue.

behind your moving lips  
the soft echo  
of well-worn stories

An old friend in a brand new circumstance is a bearer of much pleasure. Is it just a yearning for a hook to anchor our past as we forage in an inscrutable future, something familiar in a strange environment? Or is it just a desperate need to find someone familiar with our own strangeness?

winding hill tracks  
searching for beauty  
on both sides

shadows lengthen  
will this meadow know me  
if I return

## Moving On

History fills the deep crevices of our curiosity with a sandy precipitate that is both delight at discovering mortals larger than our own aspirations and relief that it validates the red striations in the dark whirlpools of our limitations.

Passing the Shirakawa Barrier in wonderment at its beauty, feeling the first impediment to his exploration burn away in an imagined burst of autumn glory, Bashō hunts in vain for Katsumi (Iris) flowers around the Asaka Mountain. Near Fukushima he finds an old fern stone, whose markings were once used to dye cloth, lying face down, half-buried in the mud.

gust of wind  
reaching for the wild jasmine  
at the same time

Is it fair to judge the present based on its utter disregard for the past?  
Or does each new morning birthed by the screaming night, rightfully  
cut the cord before it slips away?

an ancient wind  
stirs on tired branches  
fanning tears in new eyes

## Footprints of the Rain

Tired and unwell, bothered again by a recurrent illness, after a sleepless, stormy night at Iizuka hot springs, Bashō plods through the muddy roads in Kasajima District; passing villages that like portents of wet weather are called Raincoat and Rain Hat.

misty eyed,  
I walk in the footprints  
of the early rain

in the pouring rain  
sharing tales of monsoons past  
my broken umbrella

How easily we assimilate the ordinary into our fears so we begin to look at them as objects of fortune or impending doom. As if every single thing, even the fleeting and inanimate, were somehow woven into our private whirling continuum, solely engaged in the mindless dilemma of our transient existence.

here, finally,  
I open my bag of regrets  
to the rain

## Still this River

Beyond Sendai, Bashō contemplates the ephemeral inevitability of life, admiring a thousand year old stone monument and reflecting upon a crowded graveyard under the pines. Bashō serenades the beauty of Matsushima Bay with its numerous islands, before reaching Hiraizumi where again he contrasts the embattled remains of the dreams of three generations of Fujiwara nobles with the ceaseless rivers that he views from Takadate Hill.

where he once stood  
cradling his dreams  
I wait for the night

Do we fear death itself or are we afraid of being forgotten after we are gone? Does it matter that there will be no trace of us, neither the light nor shreds of dark, in the new dawn?

still this river  
gathers stars  
into her dream

## Rough Weather

Heading westward from Iwate, Bashō takes the deserted road to the Shitomae Barrier, only to be stuck in the miserable dwelling of a border guard while a wild storm rages for three whole days.

one trembling leaf,  
then another,  
then- a storm

tear stained sky  
the storm  
that never was

Perhaps life offers two different ways to experience its incomprehensible core- a slow, sedate pace, each moment unfolding after the next, emotions spreading like gentle ripples across the unhurried pond of existence or a frenzied cloud burst, all the joy and angst crammed into a shiny little sliver of compressed time. Which one is more honest?

three days the storm raged  
the desert lily still thrives  
even though you are gone

## Rejuvenation

Following a strapping armed guide, Bashō traverses the treacherous road into Dewa Province to Obanazawa where he rejoices in the fine hospitality of a good friend.

the morning flows  
through languid fingers  
watercolour on silk

Where does a questioning mind find comfort away from the soft indentations of its own armchair - in the simple pleasure of sedentary living and luxurious pursuits, in the bridging of its emotional chasms or in the disquiet evoked by the clashing cymbals of an excellence greater than its own?

soft, so soft,  
your fragrance,  
in this journey's pause

## In the Silence

Climbing up to the mountain temple of Ryushaku-ji, Bashō is touched by the utter peace and stillness of its rocky precincts.

hush  
I hear the moon  
slip into the pond

So many shrines and monasteries are perched on hills as infinite reminders of a single premise that all good is somewhere above us and all bad somewhere below and that the gruelling ascent to those exalted spaces will somehow sanctify and validate our existence. Is that the journey we're on?

wordless longing  
the way  
the stars speak



## Down River

On a traditional rice boat, Bashō sails down the River Mogami from Oishida towards the Three Mountains of Dewa. Even swollen rivers, pregnant with heavy rain, have stories to tell- of early civilization, of lives brutally hard but extraordinarily simple, of the way perhaps, lives were meant to be.

river bend  
carrying the deluge  
on her hip

look at time  
staring at herself  
in the river

If we peel away layer after layer of the complexity covering our lives, can we, with any fortitude, countenance the basic core that resides deep inside? Or will it just crumble into fractured half-truths without the glue of contrived inanities?

swishing blue hips  
reeds stuck in her flowing hair  
oh! how long she rambles

on a cormorant's wing  
I dry this poem  
touched by the blue river

## Uphill

Haguro, Gasson and Yudano beckon from their lofty heights. Bashō braves the snow, ice and high altitudes to worship in the sacred shrines of the Three Mountains of Dewa, revelling in the play of celestial and spiritual light on the slopes.

taste of ice  
on her guilty lips  
this mountain moon

Does solitude help us discover the reason we are born into a social group? Can life's mysteries be solved by renouncing one's presence from all of its manifest problems and retreating to the silence of one's thoughts? Is enlightenment reached through a lonely, selfish path?

I edge closer  
but she, shy,  
slips behind a cloud

## Through the Blur

Bashō moves on from Sakata, where the River Mogami enters the sea, up along the coast to the brooding haze of the Kisakata Lagoon.

I shed a bitter tear  
see how sweet water  
sinks into the brine

just one seagull  
swooping down through the mist  
a question

Nature enthrals us even in her foulest mood, exalts our beings to prayer or bends our bodies into unwavering submission. We revere that which we cannot understand, that we cannot control. And yet, we believe that our highest virtue is the exercise of complete domination over our own impulses.

behind  
billowing curtains of mist  
the sea changes

## Weary Silence

From Sakata, Bashō commences his return journey, travelling south along the coast, past the Nezu Barrier towards the gate at Ichiburi. But the incessant heat and humidity in the final days of summer, take a toll on his frail health and he is barely able to write.

so tired  
I hear my voice whisper your name  
from a distance

If soulful poetry is an amalgam of words baked in the angst of a lonely heart, polished by tears of unrequited love, embellished by impotent rage, what would a world of uninterrupted calm and beauty spawn? Even an ode to immeasurable joy needs a little flutter of bittersweet sorrow to put a sparkle in the heart's eye.

sullen heat  
my poem waits for words  
in the shade

## Alone Together

At their lodge in Ichiburi, Bashō overhears two young courtesans in the adjoining room composing letters. Distressed at their plight, he wonders at the presence of pilgrim and prostitute under the same benevolent moon.

sharing  
the blanket of night  
we sleep under different stars

If reality is constrained by the limits of individual perception and what we cannot see, conceive or comprehend falls into an unacknowledged surreal space, then how narrow is the prism through which we so willingly judge others' truths. Does our inability to make sense of the abstract force us to box and label everything that touches our lives, so we can fit it neatly into the pre-arranged shelves of our misconstrued certainty?

in the warm night air  
the fragrance of the desert rose-  
who sighs so sweet

## Finding Words

Crossing the many rapids of the River Kurobe, past fragrant rice paddy fields, Bashō reaches Kanazawa where he attends the memorial service for a young poet and mourns his loss.

after the comma  
sadly  
nothing

there  
in another unmarked grave-  
another unfinished poem

If someone read a song floating aimlessly in its after-life, and smiled or shed a little tear, the writer would never know. But does the poet give his breath to his words, tying tiny gossamer wings to their backs, hoping they will, somehow, remember the way back home? If art is to be so selfless in its timeless bounty, does the artist's purpose in its creation need to be just as selfish?

mourning-  
the way the sky  
brushes a broken wing

inside the raindrop  
secrets of creation  
water to water

## Fleeting

On the road to Kanazawa, Bashō remarks on the cold autumn wind that blows even though the sun blazes red at the end of summer – a reflection on the changing season and the fragility of life itself, both winding towards an ultimate end.

chattering leaves  
how long  
is their story

All that was green lies safe in the earth, hidden from the cold hands of winter, ready to be reborn at the first touch of warmth. But as we let ourselves be moulded by the years, as we continuously destroy and build new facades so we can face ourselves, do we leave behind enough of our core, so that someday, when there is no more reason to change, we can emerge, like the first shoots through the snow, untouched?

last monsoon cloud  
weeps on a rocky shoulder  
soft rain

## Consequence

In Komatsu, admiring the intricately patterned battle helmet of an ancient warrior, Bashō is struck by the incongruity of a cricket chirping inside it, almost as if it were mocking the soldier's past glory.

dawn sky  
why does the sickle moon  
still hang over the cherry blossoms

How is worth measured? And does life care? Aren't we all just cogs in the giant wheel of evolution, charged with nothing but survival and the continuation of our species? Or have we created success paradigms that make us feel elevated and important long enough to forget the inconsequential contributions of our individual lives?

interrupting  
the bulbul's dirge  
one love-struck toad

farewell kiss  
on dawn's glowing cheek  
a dark smudge



## Healing

Revelling in the healing warmth of the aromatic hot springs at Yamanaka, Bashō alludes to the fragrance of the rejuvenating chrysanthemum flower.

why search for words-  
when the frozen moonlight  
sings aloud for us

What remedies a fractured spirit? The further inwards you journey, the more you run your fingers over the painful bruises, the serrated stress lines, the bleeding wounds, the harder it is to accept that the restoration needs to come from outside. Can a soul be mended only by the love of another person? Does the very circumstance of having to heal itself, constrain its recovery?

how low  
the night bows  
to her kohl-lined eyes

rainbows dissolve  
as the sky slides down  
to watch the peacocks dance

## Lonesome Heart

From Yamanaka, Bashō is forced to continue alone without his loyal companion Sora (Kawai Sōgorō) who returns home to recuperate from his illness. Bashō bemoans the loss of his fellow traveller with whom he shared the unique experiences of the far North.

now my sentences  
fall unfinished  
on this solitary road

Sometimes we connect with people who are not like us, people we don't even like. Sometimes a brief interlude with a stranger is more memorable than years with a friend. Are these interfaces a measure of our own mental state than that of the other person's attraction or charm? Little colour magnets to place on the empty spaces of our life's whiteboards. Our own nameless visceral need.

my fickle companion  
shrinks again-  
even my shadow seems indisposed

wearing her dancing shoes  
one breathless leaf  
waits for the autumn breeze

## Another crossroad

At Maruoka, Bashō bids farewell to another friend who accompanied him from Kanazawa. His travelogue is littered with fond references to friends and acquaintances who offer him shelter or companionship or participate in his renga (chained verse) sessions.

like a horizon  
splitting two worlds  
this goodbye

Does love need validation and reciprocity to survive? What about the kind of love one feels for an unseen God, the kind that blossoms on categorical faith? Can love live all by its lonesome, never expressed, never acknowledged by the other, never appreciated? Is that still love or is it faith?

now what does it matter  
that the blue moon  
will rise tomorrow

the goodbye  
fallen between us  
whose is it now

## Ephemeral Light

From Fukui, Bashō travels with the poet Tōsai to see the full moon over Tsuruga harbour but is disappointed by the rain and clouds. Past the Uguisu barrier with the first wild geese of autumn, he is struck by the moonlight glowing on the sand at the Kehi Shrine. Finally on a clear day, he takes a boat trip to the island of Iro-no-Hama, where with a glass of warm Sake in his hand, he feels the desperate isolation of the beach at dusk.

then I remembered  
how the twilight  
curled around your fragile wrist

Silence magnifies everything. You shrink, lower and smaller, into its dark corners and feelings, events and people expand to fill the space around you. Is it the realization that just as a whisper can consume this vast quiet, one wordless moment can end all the time spent being alive? In the absolute stillness, death seems so close that life seems exaggerated.

everything is bearable  
except this silence  
that swallows your name

all my journeys  
all my poems  
awash in this wordless dusk

## Again, the Beginning

From Tsuruga, Bashō travels to Ogaki, where a joyful reunion with Sora and other friends marks the end of his journey. But, like a troubadour who cannot sing his songs in the same place for long, he sets off again, torn from his home like a clam from its shell.

no answers  
yet no questions  
I return empty

gibbous moon  
see how radiant  
almost

What price do you pay to find the truth? How will you know you have found it? And when you do, will it matter?

the wind that brushes my lips  
drifts away  
I with it



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