

The Haiku Masters:
Four Poetic Diaries

ALSO BY GAIL SHER

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The Haiku Masters:
Four Poetic Diaries

Gail Sher



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For Brendan



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Preface

In the sixty-odd years since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the poetic form known as haiku has moved from the wards and precincts of Japan's old cities to circle our planet. What was once a specifically Japanese verse practice, rising to extraordinary popularity during the feudal Edo Period (1615-1868), is now the most widely practiced form of poetry in North America, Europe, and possibly worldwide. The scholar Haruo Shirane calls it Japan's most successful export. Schoolchildren in Colorado or Oklahoma who have never tasted sashimi may be seasoned composers of haiku. They can do it in traditional seventeen-syllable form, as well as the more contemporary free-style version, which Jack Kerouac announced:

POP-American (non-Japanese) Haikus, short three-line poems or 'pomes' rhyming or nonrhyming delineating 'little Samadhis' if possible, usually of a Buddhist connotation, aiming towards enlightenment.

Haiku and its related writing forms—which include linked verse *renga* and the prose-and-poem hybrid called *haibun*—are looked on with suspicion by Western gatekeepers of literature. Poets, though, have used them to see the natural world sharply, refresh our language, and to redirect our focus: “aiming towards enlightenment” might be a whole new way of writing in the Occident. Gary Snyder (who received Japan's Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Grand Prize in 2004) was asked in *The Bloomsbury Review* to comment on what inroads haiku has made into Western culture.

I think it's on its way, but I wouldn't say it's anywhere near yet. This doesn't translate into consciousness and respect for [haiku] in the English department, or in the comparative literature department, or in *The New York Review of Books*, where they want to see more irony and intellect. The post-modern mental habit is anti-simplicity, among other things.

Surely there are those who squint at haiku as a holdover from the American sixties, which along with Zen, the search for a tranquil simple life, an ecology ethic, and the effort to limit petroleum intake, will vanish.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Poets of distinction—including Nobel Prize recipient Octavio Paz, Yves Bonnefoy in France, and Sweden's Tomas Tranströmer—use the form prolifically and unapologetically. Hundreds of North American poets have pulled off a near-revolution with the form (Kerouac called it the rucksack revolution). In fact haiku has been written in the New World since Mexican poet José Juan Tablada published a book of his own in 1911. And Japanese-language haiku clubs, *ginsha*, were founded in San Francisco, Fresno, and Stockton, in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Japan considers four poets the masters of the craft. So different are they from each other, you might imagine they watch over haiku, like guardians of the Four Directions at some rustic wooden temple. Each introduced a new sensibility to the practice. These nearly legendary Japanese poets are the “Four Masters” of Gail Sher's book: Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), Yosa Buson (1716-1784), Kobayashi Issa (1762-1826), and Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). With Shiki haiku advances to the opening of the twentieth century. In fact he edges so near to our own world that poems of his are included in a recent anthology of haiku on baseball.

I find it worth noting that Shiki was also the first poet to use the modern term “haiku” for the short seventeen-syllable poem, of which

millions get written every year in Japan alone. His baseball haikus do just what haiku's always done, taking extraordinary interest in ordinary, commonplace things. "Plainness and oddness are the bones," as Basho said of haiku. In feudal Japan haiku helped poetry break free from the old aristocratic scene, so onion farmers and fishermen, not just court poets could write it. In the States it does just fine—as Snyder noted—outside the English department.

In the annals of haiku, Gail Sher's *The Haiku Masters* is unique. There exist many volumes on how to write or teach haiku. Dozens of fine translations of Japanese poets can be had in English. Until now, though, nobody has thought to write an original book on the four master poets—a book that recounts their biographies (or auto-biographies) in the rhythmic interplay of prose and verse known as *haibun*. Gail's diary-like chapters follow the arduous search of each poet, her own poems responding to their hard-won spiritual and poetic insights. When I link those two terms—poetic and spiritual—it is a move all four poets would understand in a flash. Haiku—the best of it—conveys a flash of *satori*, and this is its enduring Zen legacy.

The old masters saw simplicity and poverty as central to the haiku search. "Eat vegetable soup rather than duck stew," Basho told his students. I do not mean to dismiss or romanticize Issa's suffering. He saw each of his infant children die, as well as their mothers. Poverty surely had something to do with it. Shiki, a generation later, went through crippling years of pain, a victim of spinal tuberculosis, frequently bedridden, wracked with fever, and confined in his dying years to a sickroom. Only Buson lived a full-length span by modern standards, and he was notably poor until achieving a bit of success as a painter in his old age. What I mean is none of them wavered in their conviction that this pursuit—of one of the world's briefest yet richest poetry forms—was the only life worth living.

come to my hut
and hear the cry
of the bagworm

Basho

Haiku was these men's way of tracking life into its deepest lair.

Gail Sher's instinct is to write about the four Japanese haiku poets in a way that feels deliberate as their lives and writings. Her book comes from years of immersion in their work. Not incidentally, Gail took Buddhist vows and for some years wore robes at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, just as Basho and Buson wore robes. But where does one find the tenderness Issa or Shiki turned into companionship with spiders or peonies? Maybe the source is a life dedicated to *ahimsa* (Sanskrit: non-injury), which is not just fancy Buddhist teaching or monkish precept, but simple bedrock decency. Cause as little harm as possible. If you turn *ahimsa* the other direction and see it from a point that doesn't refer to yourself, it means giving careful, unobtrusive attention to living creatures—a practice that radiates from the lives of these masters. I find something irreducible in Issa's comment on a walk with his uncle: "Three years of study seem worthless compared to this conversation."

So this book belongs with your rucksack, walking staff, and old stalwart boots. A companion on the journey. Part of the delight is to hear Gail's haiku echo against those of the old masters, and to realize she's inviting you to compose your own. "Come to my hut / and hear the cry / of the bagworm." How do you answer?

Basho: "Don't follow in the footsteps of the old masters. Seek what they sought."

Andrew Schelling

Fourth of July Valley, Colorado

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BASHO: EPOCH OF DUSK



The Way of Elegance

I am a poet. As a dropout from *bushido* society, I reject the vulgar values of the merchant class. Stitched together by a single thread of art, literature provides an alternative. I call it *fuga-no-michi*, the “Way of Elegance.”

atop a clothesline pole
one black crow—
in the day’s snowy silence

Onomatopoeia, Rhyme, Slant Rhyme =
My Favorite Tools

*the old pond
a frog jumps in—
the sound of water*

*furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto*

It is spring. I am at my riverside hut in the north of Edo. Through the soft patter of rain comes the throaty cooing of doves. Then the sound of a frog leaping into water.

For me a frog is a dear little creature. By focusing on its leap (rather than croak), the poem—its warm, slow-moving day aspect—perfectly matches the tranquility ripening in me.

Kikaku responds with this *wakiku*: “a spider’s nest / hanging on young reeds.” Might it normalize a bit what some call my “perspective by incongruity?”

hi, hi . . .
yo, yo . . .
o frog, your old old voice

Makura Kotaba: Pillow Word:
Its Double Entendre

*a flash of lightning;
through the darkness goes
the cry of a night heron*

*inazuma ya
yami no kata yuku
go'i no koe*

Late in life, during a visit to my native village, Iga, I am lying, comfortably suspended in the magnetic silence of an oncoming autumn storm, when suddenly lightning flashes. Through the darkness that returns, a night heron screams.

A night heron not only has a terrifying voice but lustrous wings that glow in the dark. The flash of lightning, plus this bird with its weird and ghastly scream, create an eerie beauty.

The “pillow word?” Since *go'i*, the name of the night heron, is identical in pronunciation and ideograph to *Go'i* (The Five Modes) of Tung-shan, these are present as a shadow.

August moon
In its depths tonight
the sound of flowers

Kake Kotoba: Pivot Word

*the temple bell fades
and the scent of cherry blossoms rises
in the evening*

*kane kiete
hana no ka wa tsuku
yube kana*

The motion of the poem is carried by the pivotal verb *tsuku*, which means “strike” or “ring.” (The cherry blossoms ring their scent.) Since *kane* (temple bell) and *tsuku* have the same phonetic element in their ideographs, hearing with your nose is the way to the poem’s interior.

rice and beans
warming the room
too

The Right Word Rightly Used

*now being seen off,
now seeing off—the outcome:
autumn in Kiso*

Midway on my pilgrimage to see the full moon at Sarashina, friends bid me farewell. We wave and wave and wave till nothing is left but autumn.

windless day—
dusk too
disappears

Mushin: The Art of Artlessness

*look, children
hailstones!
let's rush out!*

I am indoors. When the storm ends, me and my young friends run outside to see the hailstones all piled up—maybe gather some!

waves crash
and what with glorious
peaks and flowers . . .

Kokoro: The Heart/Soul of a Poem

*coming along the mountain path
I find something endearing
about violets*

It reminds me of Ch'ang-sha's response to the head monk who inquired after his wanderings: "First I went following the scented grasses; then I returned following the falling blossoms." He never strayed from the aesthetic point.

Sometimes my poems are plain in setting, straightforward in structure, regular in pattern and lucid in diction. In fact, they look so ordinary, one wonders where their real meaning lies. These poems are intentionally plain and ambiguous. They present an incident without commentary to force the reader to experience it herself.

Looking frivolous, this poem simply presents a violet blooming beside a road. I do comment—that I find it endearing—but it is vague.

The mountain road is lonely, tiresome. Suddenly, the loveliness of purple brightens a corner of the path. The sensation I feel is so tender, so all-inclusive, specificity would burden it, hamper a reader's roaming, explorative mind.

Hokku should not spell everything out. What remains unexpressed is rooted in its beauty's source, deeper than human understanding.

dawn melts into light,
pale clouds rise
picking herbs a young girl yawns

Yu Wei: Aftertaste

*the cry of the cuckoo
goes slanting—ah!
across the water*

*hototogisu
koe yokoto ya
mizu no ue*

I composed this poem at the urging of my disciples Sanpu and Sora who, seeing me grief-stricken at my nephew's death (which occurred in my hut), suggested that I write on the theme "*hototogisu* by the water's edge." I drew on the couplet of Su Tung-p'o—"The gleaming water extends to heaven, / and the white mist lies stretched across the water," which to me connotes not only the spaciousness of water but the bird's lingering sound in its hovering mist. The latter tails off like a comet or like smoke from a steam engine on a balmy summer day, like the vanishing spirit of Toin who faded away just as ephemerally. Kikaku calls it "magic" (when an aural perception suddenly becomes a visual one).

The *hototogisu*, a gray-headed Asian cuckoo whose song is a series of notes rather than the two notes (cuc-koo) normally associated with this bird, appears in the Fourth Month (May), at the beginning of summer, after migrating from the south. The very name, *hototogisu*, invokes its lonely cry.

Though it is traditional to think, "Even if the *hototogisu* sings noisily, one must compose in such a way as to suggest waiting for its voice impatiently," I choose to portray its actual behavior. (Unlike most birds, which rest on trees while they sing, the *hototogisu* sings or cries as it flies.)

Here, as the *hototogisu* soars overhead, its sharp penetrating cry lies sideways, hanging over the water's surface, probably at dusk or night.

Ue, the poem's last word, means "surface" (as in water's surface) but it includes the area above the surface. The subtlety of that space prepares the space in one's heart to receive the scream's piercing land, like a sword, shattering all conceptions of cuckoo, cry, slanting, water.

what is this sound
in the evening wind
as summer overlong lingers . . .

Yugen: Depth of Meaning

*at the same inn
play women too were sleeping:
bush clover and the moon*

As legend has it, one day the monk Saigyō, having encountered a sudden shower in the village of Eguchi, asks for shelter at a nearby house but is denied by its mistress, a courtesan. Thereupon he sings:

*You'd never bring yourself
to hate and forsake this world
no matter how I plead . . .
Yet, how can you begrudge
to lend a temporary shelter?*

The mistress responds with the *waka*:

*Knowing you are someone
who has forsaken this world,
I naturally thought
you would not be concerned
with this temporary shelter.*

The story comes to mind as I see bush clover blooming in the garden and the autumn moon shining in the sky, seemingly companions. At the inn a similar bond develops between a traveling poet in gray robes and two pretty courtesans who also happen to lodge there.

Regarding *yugen*, we have a proverb—“The crow goes ‘caw-caw,’ the sparrow, ‘chirp-chirp.’” Truth itself spurns embellishment.

a fish, a leaf
a moment
in the river

Aware: Ah—Elegant Sadness

Matsushinma ya
ah Matsushinma ya
Matsushima ya

Pine Islands, ah!
Oh, Pine Islands, ah!
Pine Islands, ah!

Standing on the shore, seeing the two hundred islands carved by tides
and wind-twisted pines rising at sharp angles . . .

long gone, the monk
who tolls the evening bell—
yet its echo, in my heart, this rainy night

Do Not Simply Follow
in the Footseps of the Ancients.
Seek What They Sought.

*the fragrance of chrysanthemums
at Nara:
many ancient Buddhas*

*kiku no ka ya
Nara ni wa furuki
hotoke tachi*

On October 27th of 1694, on Chrysanthemum Festival Day (*Choyo*), which fell on the Ninth of the Ninth Month, I composed this poem while stopping in Nara (Japan's capital in a period that saw Buddhism flourish as a state religion) on my way to Osaka. The *hokku* can be taken as a single scene in which the “many ancient Buddhas” (*furuki hotoketachi*—a *haikai* phrase) are surrounded by chrysanthemum flowers (*kiku*), a seasonal word for autumn, but it is better rendered as a combination poem in which the two parts are unified by scent.

The chrysanthemum, considered the aristocrat of flowers in classical poetry, possesses a powerful but refined fragrance (not sensual yet strong and pure, as in incense offered to the Buddha). *Furuki* means not just old, but timeless. The many Buddhas in the capital of Nara evoke a similar sense of dignity, solemnity, and grace. Inhaling their fragrance, one feels their life and breath.

The poem is rooted in *nioi*, a linking technique wherein a delicate, almost imperceptible flow of air moves from one stanza to the next. Here the *nioi* stays in a single verse.

from my sagebrush bed
the sky's vault vast
beyond it, vaster still . . .

Kajitsi: The Formal Aspects of a Poem

(*Ka* is the “beautiful surface of the poem.” *Jitsu* is the “substantial core.” Studying both, Fujiwara-no-Kinto composed his *Nine Steps of Waka*, a reasoned study of the poem’s architecture.)

*I am resolved
to bleach on the moors
my body is pierced by the wind*

*nozarashi wo
kokoro ni kaze no
shimu mi kana*

In the Eighth Month of the first year of Jokyō, I leave my dilapidated hut on the riverside. The autumn wind is blowing with an unaccountably chilling sound.

The *hokku* breaks after *ni* (in). *Kaze no* (wind’s) begins the second clause. Thus elliptical wording in two parts (“My body is pierced by the wind and I am determined to bleach my bones on the moors”) is laid over a poem whose structure is in thirds.

Increasingly aware of the pains of living, I wish to enter a realm of perfect liberation by any means possible. One way, suggested by the sages, is to travel—to go on a journey with all its hazards. I see in my mind’s eye my own skeleton, lost in the wilderness, beaten by rain and snow.

In Japan, any travel is risky. Indeed, soon after taking to the road, I am confronted with death in an abandoned child.

But it's not enough to simply travel. In fact, travel can be a distraction. As Huang-po Hsi-Yun said to his assembly: "You are all eaters of brewer's dregs. If you go about on pilgrimage as you do, when can you meet today?" He was not attacking pilgrimage *per se*, he was scolding a lazy, absent-minded attitude. "You cannot meet today. You cannot meet this moment, if you just wander around consuming smelly secondhand truths."

near me
near death
trembling peony

The Lyricism of Tu Fu and Li Po, the Zen
of Han Shan, and the Romantic Love of Po Chu-i=
My Poetry's Four Principal Flavors

*when I look carefully
nazuna is blooming
beneath the hedge*

If one looks around in the right frame of mind on a rainy evening or dewy morning, one will notice the tiniest of weeds flowering in response to the coming spring. As the Chinese say, "Everywhere I am startled to find things renewing themselves."

Attracted by flecks of white beneath a hedge, I pause to examine teeny four-petaled blossoms erupting with vigorous spirit. "Ah!" I exude, for when I discover something, it comes to exist for me for the first time. As if I created it myself!

Of all living beings, these little weeds (shepherd's purse) have the least capacity to protect themselves. They simply endure what is given to them.

Once I wrote in an unrelated postscript, "As we look calmly, we see everything is content with itself," a line I derived from a poem by Ch'eng Ming-tao. It applies here as well.

poppies open
shatter in the wind
today

Wabi: Elegant Simplicity

departing spring!
birds crying
tears in the eyes of fish

yuku haru ya
tori naki uo no
me wa namida

Departing spring is the time just before the beginning of summer—the trees have blossomed and the rainy season is about to begin.

I am poised to venture on my journey to the north (*yuku*, meaning both “to go” and “to pass time,” conveniently conveys ceaseless passage).

This, the second *hokku* of my trip (the first travel poem), is made to seem as if written as my friends are seeing me off at Senju, a northern suburb of Edo. Everyone weeps, aware of the hardship of the journey and the possibility that this separation could be forever. (Actually it was composed later, when I put *Oku no hosomichi* together.)

Naki refers to the cry of any animal, though its homonym means “weep” so this meaning is an overtone. As “I” disappear, wind becomes my wailing voice.

sloughing to Katada
eyeing, and again, eyeing
that unbudging cloud

Each Poem, the “Only” Poem

*a cloud of blossoms—
was that the bell of Ueno
or Asakusa?*

As I am musing beneath a cloud of cherry blossoms, the distant BONG of a temple bell pierces my consciousness. “*That* was a temple bell!” I realize. “From what direction did it come? I’m not sure.”

Ueno and Asakusa are names of districts in Edo that have large temples. My hut is just a few miles from both. Though normally one could easily identify their bells, since it is cherry blossom season, all is wrapped in haze. Merging the delicious, dreamy mind of a man on a spring day with these “clouds” of blossoms, I *feel as though* distinctions are impossible.

Clarity, purity, harmony, nonattachment—literalness can destroy their virtue. While we must be clear, the wandering thought, at times, is superior. Wu-men warns: “To be alert and never ambiguous is to wear chains and an iron yoke.” The *Ts’ai-ken t’an* says, “Water which is too pure has no fish.”

tossing his ball
through yesterday’s sky
the child sleeps

Compassion: Its Ever-Varied Face

*the whitebait!
they open black eyes
to the net of the law.*

The title—“Inscription over a Picture of Kensu”—refers to Hsien-tzu, a T’ang-period figure usually portrayed standing in a stream catching shrimps with a net.

As to the Priest Hsien-tzu of Ching-Tiao, we do not know anything about his origins. The record that remains is very strange. He had no fixed place of abode. After receiving transmission of mind from Tung-shan Liang-chieh, he lived as a layman at the River Min. He did not cultivate Dharma devices, and he did not follow conventional modes of behavior. Each day, along the bank of the river, he set about catching prawns . . . When it got dark, he made his bed in the paper money at the White Horse Mausoleum of Tung-Shan. The residents thereabouts called him Father Prawn.

Money in old China was made of metal. Paper money was burned at funerals to supply the dead with finances needed in the next world. Undoubtedly, the White Horse Mausoleum had a storeroom full—a comfortable spot for a character like Hsien-tzu.

Whitebait are silvery fish, tiny (an inch or so long), clean-looking, and lovable. Their luminous black eyes, large and deep in proportion to their size, open calmly to the Law.

While an ordinary Buddhist monk would never catch fish or any other living creature, Master Shrimp’s viewpoint was that it didn’t matter, for the net that catches and kills is also the net of Dharma.

curling in the heat
young grass blades—
up and up the mountain's smoke

Ordinariness: A Most Valuable Poetic Quality

*salted sea breams
their gums too look cold—
the fishmonger's shelf*

Because of the stormy winter weather, shelves at the fish shop are almost empty. Only two or three salted sea breams lay there, white teeth exposed.

When my disciple, Kikaku, overpraises my image, saying that with it I had attained “true mystery and depth,” I tell him that what I most value is the poem’s “ordinariness.”

“ouch!”
that's how you know
a Sitka

Sabishi: Spiritual Loneliness

*the morning glory!
this too cannot be
my friend*

*asagao ya
kore mo nata waga
tomo narazu*

(Around the time when I closed the gate of my residence in Fukagawa is the poem's title).

Ya conveys the idea—“There is just this morning glory in the whole world.”

Having returned to Edo (near the end of my life, a poet of some fame) I am forced to live more gregariously. The leisure I'd enjoyed, along with natural beauty that helped dissolve my loneliness, are no longer accessible. In addition, I discover that the principle of *sabi*, at which I had arrived after a long search, does not seem to be universally valid.

While I want to be left alone, to relish the morning glory's friendship, not only am I now too old and weary to get up early enough, but even when I do, its lovely flowers fail to provide consolation.

“as for their tororo”
cries the man
but no one pays attention

Sabi: An Undertone of Loneliness
from the Purer “Loneliness” of *Sabishisa*

*let my name
be “traveler”;
first rains.*

It is the beginning of winter. As I am about to set out for Iga, near Kyoto, from my hermitage in Edo, it rains. Only a true “traveler” would understand why I go anyway.

At my farewell party the night before, we compose a *ren-ku*. This stanza was its *hokku* and my host capped it

*may you have camellia flowers
as shelter, night after night*

as if to say, “All are wanderers, but if camellias do not punctuate our wandering . . .”

Later the verse opens *Oi no kobumi*, preceded by the lines:

*The weather was unsettled at the beginning of the Tenth Month, and I also
felt as unsure of my future as a leaf in the wind.*

Though the juxtaposition of “traveler” and “first rains” may seem facile, with it I celebrate Saigyō’s *waka*, Sōgi’s *renga*, Sesshū’s painting, Rikyū’s tea ceremony.

The host at Iwaki, a person called Chotaro, composes the *wakiku* and offers a farewell dinner at Kikaku’s residence:

*once more taking sasanquas
for my lodging*

Though my *hokku* certainly carries my resolve to travel and endure the loneliness and uncertainty implied in “first rains,” I hope that it simultaneously conveys the fact that I (like ancient travelers) revel in the upcoming trip. “First rains” implies excitement—anticipation of delight. “Let my name be ‘traveler’” similarly echoes the words of the *waki* priest who introduces himself at the beginning of a Noh play before journeying to meet the spirits of the dead. (I like to attach text from this play to manuscript copies of the *hokku*.)

Thus “first rains” becomes a medium through which I travel across time, relishing with the “ancients” the ineluctable flavor of *fukyo* (poetic “madness”).

The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat or in old age leading a tired horse into the years . . .

in shallow wind, dead leaves whisper
I wait for moon to rise above the peaks—
how chill the grass once blooming with
so many different flowers

Makoto: Sincerity

*autumn nearing
inclination of my mind!
a four-and-a-half-mat room.*

At Bokusetsu's hut in Otsu, on the twenty-first day of the Sixth Month, the summer season had begun perceptibly to incline toward autumn. Grief-stricken at the news of Jutei's death, in failing health, the bareness and simplicity of the tea room—my mind goes here.

in the wild violets, birds—
a child stops
clutches her monkey

Kokai: A Feeling of Regret
After Reading a Poem

*come to my hut
and hear the cry
of the bagworm*

This poem, written in 1687, appears in *Sequel to Empty Chestnuts* with the headnote, “Listening to the Quiet.” In response, Sodo (a scholar of Chinese literature and a *kanshi* poet) writes a *haibun* essay called “Comment on the Bagworm” on which my “Postscript to ‘Comment on the Bagworm’” remarks. The whole thing results in an extended prose dialogue, where, in linked-verse fashion, we alternately meditate on the nature of reclusion.

Because of a passage in *The Pillow Book*, the bagworm (*minomushi*, a seasonal word for autumn) is thought of as a creature that, with the arrival of the autumn winds, plaintively cries, “Father! Father!” (*chichi yo chichi yo*). In reality, the bagworm does not make any sound at all. It just sits in its little bag, gestating and metamorphosing into a moth.

Another bagworm story: Once Vimalakirti, a contemporary of the Buddha, becomes ill. The Buddha sends Manjushri with 32,000 bodhisattvas, arhats, and devas to inquire after his health. (Vimlakirti graciously accommodates them all in his ten-by-ten-foot room.) “What is the bodhisattva-gate to the dharma of not-two?” someone asks. Everyone attempts to answer, but Vimalakirti? He says nothing. He just sits there like a bagworm. Still, everyone says he heard quite a lot, probably because teacher-student intimacy also is based in thundering silence.

and still . . . your cypress hat
hanging in its shadow
stirs me through and through

All Eternity Is Yesterday

*a village where no temple bell sounds—
what do they do?
twilight in spring.*

Written in the vicinity of Kanuma (in Shimotsuke Province), this *hokku* alludes to monk Noin's *waka* in *Shinkokinshu*:

*spring nightfall
in a mountain village
where, at the sound of a bell
tolling the close of a day,
cherry blossoms keep falling*

When, at evening, a temple bell is struck, it echoes the great void. Whose resonance carries timelessness. Anyone who hears it must in some way feel validated.

It recalls another poem:

*though in Kyoto
I long for Kyoto
the song of the cuckoo*

blossoms from a tree tremble, shake, fall . . .
even after waking
their motion in my chest

Karumi: Lightness

*in plum-blossom scent
pop! the sun appears—
the mountain path*

On the slopes of a pre-dawn mountain, groves of plum trees are in fragrant blossom. It is earliest spring. Bitterly cold. Plum trees hold snow as well as blossoms.

With *notto!* I emerge from my absorption. For I am near death. Trudging along in the freezing, early morning, lost in the pervading plum-blossom scent, just as I'm entirely ready for the sun—pop!—it appears!

This *hokku*, composed with Yaba in Edo and subsequently published in *Charcoal Sack*, opens our sequence. Yaba's *wakiku* keeps the same season—lingering winter cold—but expands it.

*here there pheasants
cying as they fly away*

In Yaba's verse, the sharp cries of the pheasants scattering from the grass echo the sun as it pops through the fragrant morning.

And *karumi*? It's the plain theme, lighthearted tone, and rich resonance of a dawn mountain road on a refreshingly beautiful February day.

above flowers
below fragrance
o lotus!

Zen Is Poetry. Poetry, Zen.

*summer grasses!
the remains of dreams
of warriors.*

I am visiting the ruins of Takadate Castle at Hiraizumi, where a historic battle was fought in the civil war of the late twelfth century. It was a terrible tragedy, ending with the great general Yoshitsune committing suicide after killing his wife and children.

The *hokku* is preceded by a *haibun* essay:

The glory of three generations of Fujiwara vanished in the space of a dream; the remains of the Great Gate stood two miles in the distance. Hidehira's headquarters had turned into rice paddies and wild fields. Only Kinkeizan, Golden Fowl Hill, remained as it was. First, we climbed Takadachi, Castle-on-the-Heights, from where we could see the Kitakami, a broad river that flowed from the south. The Koromo River rounded Izumi Castle and, at a point beneath Castle-on-the-Heights, it dropped into the broad river. The ancient ruins of Yasuhira and others, lying behind Koromo Barrier, appear to close off the southern entrance and guard against the Ainu barbarians. Selecting his loyal retainers, Yoshitsune fortified himself in the castle, but his glory quickly turned to grass. 'The state is destroyed, / rivers and hills remain. / The city walls turn to spring, / grasses and trees are green.' With these lines from Tu Fu in my head, I lay down my bamboo hat, letting the time and tears flow.

The “remains of dreams / of warriors” are the dreams of the three generations of Fujiwara who valiantly conquered the Ainu tribesmen and built a splendid civilization only to see it disappear, and of Yoshitsune’s

brave retainers who died for their master. The ephemerality of ambitions is foreshadowed in the opening phrase of the prose passage, a reference to the Noh play *Kantan*, about a man (Rosei) who napped and dreamed a lifetime of glory and defeat while waiting for dinner.

Thus the traveler takes on the aura of a *waki* (traveling priest) in a Noh warrior play who visits the site of a former battlefield and then, as if in a dream, watches the ghost of a slain soldier re-enact his most tragic moments on the battlefield.

In the green, green, warm-blooded grass, the glorious luxuriance of summer joins vanishing chasm of dreams.

in the deutzia
Kanefusa appears
white-haired
[Sora's capping verse]

lovely! lovely!
her discarded stems
caught by the photographer

Get on a Sleigh:

BUSON'S HEART SONG



*Born near the sunlit Naniwa River, I spend many springs and
autumns in the bird-crying eastern country.*

[1] Kema is a farming village. With clear weather we can see the Ikoma Mountains in the east and the Senri Hills lying low across the river to the north.

spring thaw—
one small carp
hides in the shallows

[2] In spring, the mustard's yellow blossoms blow in beds as far as eye can see. As willows lose their leaves, bush clover, madder and maidenflower burst into bloom.

'neath white-crane sky, the old year sinks
out back on the hill
I stand in fukakusa grass

[3] With autumn, falling blocks fill the air with sadness. Wild boars
knock dew from the maiden-flowers with their tusks.

autumn begins—
here and there
windows partially-closed

[4] Winter starts with drizzle, then turns into squalls, first of rain,
then rain mixed with snow. Ducks and geese migrate from the north.
Sometimes we spot whales.

old, old, old
the sound of the mountain
today

[5] But it's the fox fires that grab me, mysterious lights glowing in tall
dry grass. Winter showers sound like rats scrambling across a koto.

how red, yet teeny (tiny)—
plum blossom buds
in the cold north wind

My master Soa calls his house at Nihonbashi Yahantei (Midnight Pavilion) because nearby is a bell tower whose midnight toll reminds him of Chang Chi's "The sound of the midnight bell reaches a traveler's boat."

[6] Here's a story about Ihoku (a friend) that typifies my years with Soa: For a while Ihoku lives in the north. When he comes back to Edo, he has a hard time and stays in a miserable cottage on the edge of town. Soon he uses up his money on food and rent. At which point I help him set up a monthly poetry circle. I run all over town and do everything I can. Before long, Ihoku's place becomes a popular spot, the center of a flourishing circle.

a butterfly crosses my cryptomeria hedge
circles the neighboring garden
and comes wheeling back
fluttering in the pine tops
over the water basin

[7] Ihoku, meantime, has a valuable letter that Kikaku had once written. To thank me for my help, he offers me this prized possession, but I say, “No thank you. In my place it would be like a ‘green rug.’ There is a Chinese anecdote about a famous official who wakes up in the night to find thieves taking everything. “Wait,” he cries. “That green rug is a family heirloom. Would you please leave it behind?” I feel that I am too poor to keep an object merely of sentiment.

night falls:
catching the stream's current
a wooden clog

[8] Abruptly Soa dies. I sit in his empty room. I go through his papers and try to compile a work that I want to entitle “Lone Crow.” But it is no use. For the next ten years I simply wander.

ho! a blossom!
one magic purple flower
below the *torma* and offering-bowls of rice

*With my rather high forehead, thick eyebrows and crooked
moustache, my shadow-of-a-beard looks not so much as if I let
it grow on purpose as if I carelessly neglected to shave.*

[9] First I stay with Jou whose villa is covered by trees and overgrown with grass. One autumn night while his old caretaker idles away the evening, Buddhist rosary in hand, I am in a back room struggling to compose hokku. After a while I pull a quilt over me and as I'm beginning to doze off, I hear loud banging sounds on the storm doors enclosing the veranda. There are twenty or thirty bangs and my heart is pounding fast, but when I get up to look, no one is there. I go back to bed. The same thing happens again. Utterly unnerved, I ask the caretaker about it.

“it’s father!” cries the son
spotting in some branches
an imperceptible breeze

[10] “It’s a badger. Next time he comes, you chase him away. I’ll go out the back, hide behind a hedge and wait for him.” Before long the bangs start. “There he is!” I open the door. With a cry the old man dashes out. But there’s not a soul in sight. This same incident occurs for four consecutive nights. Just as I’m feeling too exhausted to stay in the villa, Jou’s head servant comes to see us. “Early this morning, a villager killed an old badger at a place called Yabushita,” he says. “I’m sure he is the one playing tricks on you. Please have a restful sleep tonight.”

late winter night—
on the kettle hanger paused
I see it seeing me see

[11] Sure enough, the badger doesn't come. But I feel sorry for the animal. I don't like what he has done to me, but then again, he is a visitor who has come to console this lonely traveler sleeping away from home. Perhaps he and I have karmic ties. I am so grief-stricken that I give alms to a mendicant friar called Zenku and ask him to offer prayers for the badger's soul.

white sails chase
the passing sound of rain—
below the waves, one trailed cloud-scrap

[12] Following Basho north I too dress as a monk. My shaven head shows every bump and irregularity. The venture takes a year during which time I become ill, go hungry and suffer from extreme heat and cold.

daybreak—pale flowers—
glancing at the moon
an old man stoops

[13] While I neither keep a diary nor write many poems (life on the road is simply too harsh and painful), at Ashino, the place of Saigyō's famous tree, I cannot help myself.

*the willow is bare
the clear stream has dried, and stones
lie scattered here and there*

You may recall that Bashō, when he visited this spot, wrote:

*over an entire field
they have planted rice—before
I part with the willow*

What with the willow's lacking leaves and the stream lacking water, my scene seems more desolate than that of both Saigyō and Bashō. It may be, however, that I am more lonely.

but when the fields are cut
the smell from hulling rice—
feels more elegant and leisurely

Tao Ch'ien's prose poem "Return Home!" begins: "I will go home. My fields and garden are lying in waste."

[14] Near Kema, in the province of Tango, 'neath the shadow of Mount
Oe, rough waves pound on rocky bays and inlets. Winter breakers toss
white foam as if to meet the sky.

frosty tree, sparkling sun,
from dazzling limbs
one spinning twig

[15] Su Shih's prose, "The mountains towering high, the moon looks small; the level of water having fallen, the stones are exposed," I find especially poignant.

yellow wings, yellow light
to somewhere far off
their zigzag trail

[16] A narrow strip of land juts far into the bay. (Sesshu has painted the slender strand of pine that stretches across the water almost meeting the mountains on the other side and forming a lagoon.) Around this lip, that quivers like a living thing, tall peaks lock the bay as if in a huge womb.

ruffling the lake
its moony midnight glaze—
waterbird's dream

[17] It is often said that in Japanese music, the space between the notes is the most important part. For me, time away from Kyoto is like this. Sitting in muggy Shikoku, I think of the soft new shoots on one of my favorite trees and realize that now I truly belong to Kyoto.

I lean against thin railing
lift my face to rain
look! a pair of swallows



Water goes and clouds stay. Trees are old. Birds sleep. The dark bamboo forest looks as though steam still lingers from his tea kettle.

[18] *come, traveler,
get on a sleigh and visit us
from the land of the Buddhas*

I call out. Both (the collection and gathering) are hosted by Shoha's son, Kuroyanagi Korehoma. As I remember the poet, close to death, grasping my hand saying tearfully, "I'm sorry I won't be able to join you in the new haikai movement," I now, like then, cannot stop crying. "My haikai has disappeared into the western land of death," poor Shoha lamented again and again.

dawn, snowy dawn—
from the hunter,
crane's asylum

[19] *ring around the moon*
 like a frayed old umbrella—
 cold drizzle ahead

The old umbrella describing the ring also stands for the shimmering light of the moon at the coldest time of the year. It is not used for the autumn moon, but only in winter, as Master Nankaku once said.

scattering its petals, a single rose—
huddled against cold
I watch

[20] “What can a poet do to arrive at such a transcendental state of mind?” Shoha asks. “Study Chinese poetry,” I answer.

plucking, this fall, one red chrysanthemum
which I sketch
but never fathom

[21] The poet should not deliberately try to write a poem. He is to wait until his mind reaches the state most susceptible to poetic creation. When that state arrives, he should start composing with his eyes closed, since the verse is to mirror the landscape he sees in his mind's eye. The composition has to be done in the presence of past masters, because haikai is a traditional verse form. The masters will disappear as soon as the creative process is over. All that is left will be a poetic paradise that is the poet's own.

from a mountain bird
a mountain song—
piercing the blustery wind

[22] To Masana and Shunsaku:

*cool feeling!
detached from a bell
the sound of the bell*

*moon after rainfall
who is it at night
with white limbs?*

These are not in the fashionable style. Too much fashion is annoying.

piled on its leaves
midnight snow
ah . . . white camellia . . .

I overhear people saying of me, "How hale and hearty the old man is!"

[23] I love Kyoto's beautiful landscapes and never forget to view cherry blossoms and the red maple leaves of the eastern suburbs and western mountain.

vesper bells:
absorbing their echo
sparkling wisps of red and black

[24] I have been very close to the courtesan Koito. Once, in fact, Doryu, who is (no surprise) a Confucian scholar, remonstrates with me. I admit that because of my useless romantic feeling, I lose my dignity in my old age. Though I forbid myself, I continue to see her—it's well-known.

tonight, it's my bird's tin roof
that the moon appropriates
for a mirror

[25] Admittedly I am troubled when my bantering mood spills over into *renku*.

carolers depart
but the wind . . .
I linger on the doorstep

[26] Toward the end of autumn, I drag my walking stick to a place called Tahara in the farther part of Uji. I let my eyes be pleased with high cliffs, cascading water, odd stones and strange rocks. I write

*a tearing of silk
streaming out from a biwa
the voice of autumn*

while recalling Po Chu-i's "Four strings, one voice, like the tearing of silk cloth."

though clear, the fountain runs deep—
near a shimmery root
the tea master lingers

[27] While the young people are greedily hurrying ahead, I, far behind, quietly look from place to place. I find five mushrooms as big as small grass huts. How splendid! I wonder why Chief Counselor of State, Lord Uji TAKAKUNI, wrote only about the strangeness of hiratake mushrooms and never mentions the splendor of matsutake.

*you should see
the five mushrooms with dew-drops
that were not picked!*

the squirrel gallops off—
in its wake of leaves
two butterflies wrestle

[28] Uji River's most rapid torrents are at a place called Komekashi. Water and rocks struggle with each other. Splashing, leaping waves make a spray like flying snow. The sound roaring in the gorge overpowers human voices.

a mother to her doe—
with each call
the moon, in mist, lowers

[29] Then the withered winter sky with quiet rainfall. Late crickets sing. Wind, morning and evening, penetrate my robes. But I get sick. My chronic chest pains worsen. Inside I know that my life is ending.

as the Chinese bellflowers and pinks go to seed
the long-awaited bush clover begins to open—
though I tenderly wash them,
the buds on the tips of the muddied clover
rot without blooming

Dusk falls early in the afternoon. Showers come frequently.

[30] Around the middle of December, though my inner sickness seems to pass out of my body and my suffering appears to be healing, I have no appetite, my body and mind are exhausted and each day hope seems less. Everyone gathers and wishes only for my good.

from earth, sky, trees
not a single sign—
yet autumn . . .

[31] Tomo, Kuno, Gekkei, Baitei—many both in morning and evening help me rise and lie down, but I moan, especially on the twenty-second and twenty-third nights. I can tell that people feel extremely downhearted and unsure watching this sick face. I say, “This stupid old man’s wishes are all fulfilled. But my daughter has no worldly connections, and the matter of her future lingers in my mind. Perhaps after I go, two or three of you people may show her kindness. Well, concern over things will get in the way of passing on with a peaceful mind.” With that I pull the quilt over my face.

brittle, shiny, brown—
burrowing beetles, as winter appears,
wall up their doors with earth

[32] Dawn is near. My family and students are beside me. Closing my eyes I hear myself say, “The time has come for me to leave this world. Is the night still deep?”

winter sun sets
but glistens still
in the rock-moving Zen master’s headband

[33] On the night of the twenty-fourth, my sick body is very calm and my speaking becomes natural again. I call Gekkei and say, "I made some poems during my sickness. Write them down quickly." Brush and inkstone are prepared and I recite:

*winter uguisu—
long ago in Wang Wei's
garden hedge too!*

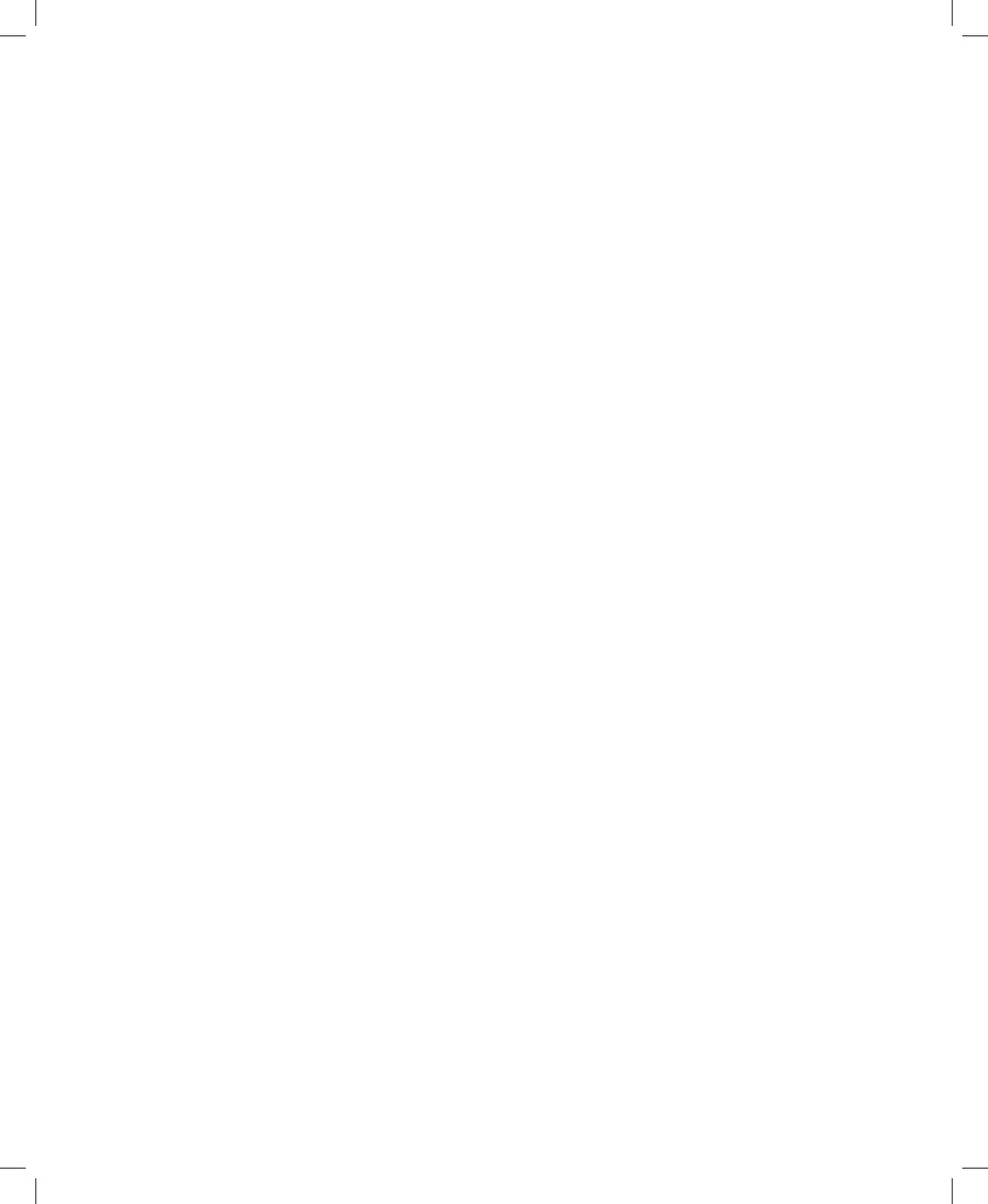
*uguisu!
what is that rustling—
frost on the bushes*

And after a while:

*with white plum blossoms
these nights to the faint light of dawn
are turning*



ISSA ISSA



*oh Issa
carver of poems
even in soba flour*

[1] Listen. A mother crow caws pitiably for her injured young. As for me, I sometimes wonder, which is worse—feeling the feelings of the distraught crow or feeling the lack of them?

scattered seeds—
on hunter's soil
a crane

[2] When I hear the story of the stepmother who agrees to feed her near-famished stepchild only if the village statue eats the rice she cruelly makes him offer it (of course the stone statue wolfs it down) I can't resist:

*serves the old woman right—
now she must feed
her own children
her stepchild
and the stone statue*

Basho
your rainproof paper hat
the one you made
imitating Saigyō's—
I too have felt desperately alone

[3] Though Senroku and I have different mothers, that in itself would not account for the hostility between us. Surely we were enemies in a previous life. Satsu also, vicious and contentious as she mostly is, cannot be without motives carried over from a former debt.

fog rolls in—
fat gulls
hover over the water

[4] Father's words, arising from his delirium, "Don't fall in the well!
Don't fall in the well!"—I would die to be again the child he has in
mind.

New Year's Eve
listen—
snow is falling

[5] When Satsu hears “Don’t fall in the well!” she screams (beet-red, pointing a finger at the dying man), “Your precious son! So you love him as much as this?”

scattering rice...
pigeons and sparrows
shoo away the clucking chicks

[6] “While you are in Zenkoji would you please bring me some sugar,”
father requests towards dawn. (Sugar forces down the phlegm that
interferes with his breathing.) Satsu: “It’s just wasted on someone
about to die.” She rattles on, really being bothered by the fact that
father shares his sugar with me.

full moon—facing it
knees braced
beneath my robe

[7] Children from my village observe a peculiar custom: capturing a lively frog they bury it, cover its grave with plantain grass, and run away:

Hey ho! The frog is dead!

Hey ho! The frog is dead!

Come, let us bury him,

Come, let us bury him,

Under plantain leaves!

Under plantain leaves!

bowing over
the frog's grave—
cherry blossoms

[8] Having planted a chestnut in a sunny corner of my garden, I am thrilled to see it sprout, but soon, a new addition on my neighbor's house blocks it from light and rain. Thereafter my seedling manages to grow little more than a foot. When winter comes, my neighbor shovels snow off his rooftop onto the ground breaking the sapling at its base. Indeed, such is the fate of this poor tree that every winter, snow from the roof stunts it again.

draped over a stone—
are you dead yet
little goldfish

[9] Having walked a good way beyond the village of Tsuchikuchi to visit Chorai, my beloved friend, I learn he has been dead these fifteen years. His successor (a priest) denies me even so much as a place to rest.

wet spring night...
wandering aimlessly
Chorai close by

[10] As for my unpaid debt to father (a drifter is hardly filial)—my wanderings, my staying away till my hair is white—no wonder I consider whether the Five Violations can be worse than this.

even in his company
seeing his gray hair
I long for his company

[11] My inability to sever the ties of affection for my daughter Sato reflects a profound misunderstanding of the nature of impermanence. For this reason I am deeply embarrassed. Yet I hear of enlightened masters pleading with their teachers, “Don’t die, don’t die, please don’t leave us.”

midsummer night—
the feverish man
frets over
his little boy
of years ago

[12] I quickly forgive Takamaru's parents for weeping shamelessly, even though they are priests who preach indifference to life's vicissitudes. "Who can blame them?" I assure myself. "It is only human that their hearts should be deeply oppressed by their unbreakable attachment to the child."

wedged in the pocket
of the drowned boy,
blossoms of butterbur

[13] As for the hollow New Year observances, you'll find no crane, no tortoise, no pine beside my door. Why should I sweep out the dust when my tiny cottage might, at any moment, be whisked away by the wild north wind?

silent house
silent snow
I stand in the moonlit doorway

[14] *my Kiku—
she never cares
how she looks*

I inscribe imagining I am capturing something of my wife with her baggy mompe, cotton kerchief, and scarlet braids. Now I see that I, who think nothing of visiting the Lord of Kaga in my scraggly clothes, am merely recognizing (and admiring) something of myself in this lackadaisical side to her.

morning-glories
stumbling upon them
outside my gate

[15] No matter how many villagers pick fruit from the old chestnut tree near Suwa Shrine, it never lacks (at the very fewest) one or two of its little prickly husks for the next hungry person.

dusk
cakes rising on the stove—
the moon

[16] Until he learns its meaning, Ota, the wealthy baron, is naturally irritated at receiving from the farmer's daughter, instead of the cape he requests in the sudden rainstorm, a sprig of kerria. He is deeply embarrassed however to learn from a retainer that her gesture, being a punning allusion to an old poem, is a poetical way of expressing that no cape is available. Ashamed of his ignorance, he becomes an eager student of literature.

dawn
softly softly
through the undergrowth



SHIKI: EPITAPH OF A FLOWER



[1] *My father dies*. I am five. In order to support Ritsu and me, mother sews. The living room is constantly cluttered with her paraphernalia.

carrying dawn
a dove sails off—
following it with my eyes

[2] One day, while my uncle, Kato Tsunetada, is massaging my maternal grandfather's back, Kinbei, owner of the Tanakaya pawn shop on Tojin Street, walks in without even knocking and demands payment of a debt. Displaying a polite amount of embarrassment, grandfather replies, "Kinbei, I am so sorry. I can barely afford rice for our New Year's cakes. The children are screaming for their kites. I will surely pay you after the New Year. Please be patient."

a temple gate creaks—
the sound of wind
through the door-crack

[3] At first silent, Kinbei stands up muttering angrily, “What do I care about your kites and your rice cakes? At least I can take this!” and he storms out carrying my mother’s precious brass handwashing basin. Not noticing mother’s pain, grandfather remarks, “Kinbei always was a man of action.”

bolt upright
on the still, blue water—
morning moon

[4] Uncle Tsunetada notices. He resolves at once to retrieve the handbasin. During the day he pounds rice. At night he copies text from elementary-school books. After several months he proudly redeems the basin whereupon grandfather looks at him with annoyance, “Do you suppose you’ll become a great man by worrying about such trivial things?”

“how charming!” I think, seeing
one wisteria tuft, trailing from its vase
onto my pile of books

[5] Later, when uncle and I are walking in the country he happens to say, "It is remarkable how a piece of white paper will turn black when you spill India ink on it." Then he reflects, "When a man puts on a woman's clothes and does his hair up like a woman, he looks just like a woman. Yet a man is a man; one can never say he is a woman." His words are stirring and I cannot help but think, "Three years of study seem worthless compared to this conversation."

"no, not the scarlet peach blooms,
it's the forsythia . . ."
I say to the flower lady

[6] While I am aware that philosophy is serious and literature is not serious (Buddhist priests, for example, don't write novels), I am also aware that I cannot live without novels.

“more arrogant than a farmer
which he is not”—he reads—
drenched in a ray of sun

[7] I am eighteen when I start writing haiku. At nineteen I call on old Ohara Kiju (a disciple of Baishitsu, one of the three great haiku masters of the Tempo era) whose study (I take this as a sign of his complete dedication and immersion) is wall-to-wall haiku. Kijo is very kind and reads my poems. By way of response, he composes two of his own about a dragon bounding over Mt. Fuji. I hope it's not too presumptuous to read this as an endorsement—that he is confident I will become a great poet.

so cool, the sea
through a hole in the storm lantern—
Buddha too opens his altar doors

[8] My interest in haiku and novels begins to overshadow the attraction of my university classes. At one point I actually stop attending them and move out of the dormitory. I rent a house in Komagome, a very quiet spot suited to the studying I plan to do. But when I sit down to study, a haiku emerges before I even read the first page. Since I have dutifully put everything related to poetry aside in order to force myself to concentrate on the task at hand (my university exams), I don't have anything on which to write my poem. So I write it on the lampshade. Soon I become engrossed in covering the lampshade with haiku.

bulging, swelling
rosebuds on my fence—
“hello rosebuds!”

[9] Needless to say, I fail my exams. Which gives me an excuse to withdraw from school once and for all.

beyond young leaves
water, wheat,
the mirage aswirl with sun

[10] *I am twenty-two when I first cough up blood.* In response I adopt the penname Shiki which means *hototogisu*, the bird that (according to legend) coughs blood as it sings. Having made this concession to my illness, I proceed to live an intensely active life with the result that I suffer several more lung hemorrhages.

summer dawn—
a slug, its crawl,
smearing the dewdrop

[11] When the Sino-Japanese War breaks out, with all my heart I wish to go to China. My two friends, Kuga and Iogi are adamantly opposed. Iogi, a surgeon, reminds me that, if nothing else, the sanitary conditions should dissuade me. My greatest enemy, he stresses, are not shells and bullets. If I fall ill, there will be no medical care. As the boat chugs away, the clarity of its whistle arouses the thought, “I will never return alive.”

clipping roses in a clear spell—
from my bed
hearing the shears

[12] Ironically, even as we wait to disembark, a truce is declared.

at his gate
instead of sun . . .
its memory in his body

[13] Aboard ship I cough up blood. The hemorrhaging continues, as drugs (except for cholera) are unavailable. Even so, a case of cholera breaks out, with the consequence that when our ship docks in Shimonoseki, disembarking is prohibited. Instead, the ship proceeds to a quarantine station. Six full days we are detained, at which point I am so weak I have to be carried by stretcher to the Kobe hospital.

“you see,” she says—
as she cleans its cage
the bird begins to sing

[14] The pain hits my pelvis. I can barely walk, which means I can no longer avoid facing the fact that I have tuberculosis, that it is incurable, and that I will never be able to do anything more strenuous than read and write. As you might expect, I become fierce about reading and writing.

pelting rain:
my life and lives
in the cock's sober cry

[15] *Having set my heart on a lineage*, I think my life is over the day
Kyoshi, a mere boy, refuses to be my literary heir. My disappointment
reflects my own immaturity. One needn't ask. Kyoshi, along with
Hekigodo, are to become my literary heirs whether they want to or not.

from rock to rock
lifting his robe . . .
even the stream seems to curtsy

[16] Kyoshi's refusal comes as a great shock. He admits that he wants to be a writer but not badly enough to study. I say, "Then your aims and mine are completely different."

'neath a thinner and thinner moon
slender branches
shiver with the bell

[17] We leave the restaurant separately. Hands in the sleeves of my kimono, I drift aimlessly back to Uguisu Lane.

summer evening—
even my jacket
wants to flee

[18] Formerly I was desperate; now I am alone with no one but my
dying self to rely on.

the waterbird's neck
as the rainbow
gathers its clarity

[19] Dawn peeps through the shabby paper glued over a hole in my screen.

one limb
in a spot of light
turns...suddenly...up

[20] In my dream a tormented beast accepts the paw offered by a gentle rabbit.

*taking the rabbit's paw
in both of its own—
kissing it*

So exciting is my dream that my underkimono soaks through with sweat and my temperature soars to 102 degrees.

misty dawn—
in my fire
in full color

[21] Mother and Ritsu cannot leave my side. Sachio, Hekigoto,
Kyoshi and Sokotsu take turns trying to divert me. Diarrhea, flatulence,
nosebleeds, migraines—my only hope is morphine, but since my
allotment is restricted, relief is never long.

crows at four, sparrows at five
thus I reckon
the endless summer night

[22] “Some dumplings would sure taste good right now,” I say cheerfully. Ritsu doesn’t respond. So I say, “Go now. Buy me some dumplings!” What is an invalid to do?

evening falls—
from the shadow of a hill
the old man’s sigh

[23] With the canary, however, Ritsu sits motionless in front of its cage for hours at a time, simply gazing.

“is today Wednesday?
I thought . . .” she begins
stroking its light blue feathers

[24] Though I care more for the sublime in poetry than the elegant, more than both, I care for plainness, its pleasant freshness. For example, when I write about Ritsu awakening from a nap and swatting a fly, commonplace though this image may be, my particular perspective conveys the heat, my sister's exhaustion nursing me, my crankiness and inability to sleep and a little of her embarrassment in the face of having dozed in front of me.

is it death it paints
this mirror moon
lighting my eyebrows?

[25] Actually, it is not just tone but scale—the seeming banality—that give my poems the unassuming, mortal quality, that I have come to so appreciate. I could be talking to myself.

in the bubbles of a spring
how still
its horny body

[26] *From 1897 I have to wait*, virtually immobilized, in steadily increasing pain, for death to come. My inflamed spinal cord, tubercular boils, pus and festering sores are agonizing. Since there is no treatment, all that can be done is to wipe away the pus and wrap the sores in cotton bandages. I am a mass of oozing slime girded in oiled paper.

hot-water bottle tepid
I hug it anyway, cheered, somehow,
by a glimpse of winter moon

[27] Bujian and I correspond until he dies, of my same disease. That is spring 1901. Some time later, members of his family pay me a call. They are struck by our many similar mannerisms—not letting our nurses leave our bedside even for a second, becoming angry when demands are not fulfilled before we even finish expressing them, finding it difficult to breath in the presence of a large person, showing intense likes and dislikes of people, feeling pain if the coverlet is hard but also if it is soft, overeating and becoming furious if visitors comment on our lack of thinness whereupon we both poke out our match-stick legs saying, “How ’bout these?”

Bujian Bujian
you are my brother—
we have never met
but only you
understand how I suffer

[28] Living with ever-palpable death, my relationship with time is different from most people's. On the one hand, it passes slowly, making boredom a constant torment. On the other, it seems fleeting, leaving me with an unsheddable sense of urgency.

spring evening:
squandering its light
the cloister's duff

[29] I take pleasure in the bathing drama that goes on inside my large wire birdcage. It used to be that even before one's hand is out of the cage, having replenished the water in their basin, the finches arrive and splash away till most of the water is gone. Which, needless to say, leaves the other birds very little to go on. Lately, however, I've noticed that the two black-headed manikins zip in ahead of the finches. After them come the Jakarta sparrows, the zebra finches and finally the canaries. The basin's edge is thronged with birds in order of arrival. As each pair finishes, they fly up to their perch and flap their wings furiously. Their joy is so great, I am not even jealous.

just outside my door
they chirp and play—
I myself have not
been able to bathe
for five years

[30] *when I can read at all*
 I read newspapers and magazines
 even at this, pain often interferes

The boy who was so promising, who at age eleven wrote poems in classic Chinese, never expected to be reduced to statements like the above.

“your chrysanthemums, honey,
you know that pink . . .”
but her voice trails off

[31] When my diaper is changed, I peek at my abdomen. (It's been hurting a lot these past few days.) It is completely black. I'm sure another fistula will open.

windy night
loosely fastened, beyond the moor—
to whom might it belong?

[32] Six months later (March 1902)

I gather all my strength and look at the fistula on my stomach for the first time. I expect it to be small, but it is a hollow.

ladling trout
'neath the mountain's blue sky
the surprise, my surprise!

[33] Meanwhile I cannot write at all. I must dictate what I have to say.

spring quail
from Shimosa's Yuki Village—
oh teeth, would that you were here!

[34] Left alone one autumn night, my eye falls on a penknife and an eyeleteer on the inkstone box. I think of the razor in the next room, but I can't even crawl.

demure yew
in the shade
waiting your turn

[35] Instructions for My Funeral:

I feel it necessary to formalize such directives because of the tendency people have to misconstrue a thing. My death is an occasion for joy. Let's not mince words. I want:

No advertisement

No speeches

No posthumous Buddhist name

No tombstone made of natural stone

No wake before the coffin

No tears

Please laugh and talk in an ordinary way. Celebrate!

“in the shade of trees I sleep”—
this, on a piece of paper
tied to his quiver

[36] *Today, as usual, it rains.* My grogginess is intolerable, so I take morphine. Then I try to sketch the Ezo chrysanthemum.

abandoned train station
a stone Buddha sits
autumn leaves in hand

[37] Four or five years ago, when I first became an invalid, I used to say I wouldn't mind being unable to walk far, if only I could walk in my garden. After a few years, when I could no longer walk, it still seemed that simply being able to stand up would be a joy. By the summer before last I had reached the point where I grumbled, "I'm not hoping to stand—I only ask the god of sickness to let me sit up." Yesterday and today my complaint has been, "Who cares about sitting up? What joy to simply be free of pain, able to lie down in comfort for a single hour!"

along the railbed too
on the road to Akabane—
next year I'll have time

[38] Morphine Diary—1902

*I take the drug
two to four times daily
along with sedatives
and medicine for my stomach—
even so my condition gets worse—*

that crow where we hang the wash
looks at me . . .
looks away

[39] *I cannot think
the evening news confuses me
I cannot write
or talk
with any degree of coherence*

occasionally I lift my head
peer through the glass
at the garden's rampant bushclover

[40] *I cannot move my body—
only if I take three
doses of painkiller can I achieve,
even for a short while,
a sense of well-being*

“to bloom afresh
stick wilted stems in strong sake”—
if it works for wisteria, churns my mind . . .

[41] *my body hurts*
I have no strength
even to take up my writing brush—
to whom shall I talk
how shall I pass the day

“how deep is it now?”
“has it buried the pampas grass
yet?”

[42] *I have legs
like someone else's legs
I have legs
like huge immovable stones
if one so much as touches them
all the earth's plants and trees
cry out
heaven and earth quake*

the stalks
his knife—
the monk hesitates

[43] *call Kyoshi too*
please call Kyoshi too—
Ritsu hold my writing board
Hekigoto guide my brush
and Shiki—too weak to speak—
slowly write three deathbed poems

windy winter night—
wild ducks settle into sleep
in the harbor where the boats tie up

The Haiku Masters: Four Poetic Diaries

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