

Links of Humanity

Jeff Robbins, Fukuoka, Japan

Assisted by Sakata Shoko, Fukuoka, Japan

Makota Ueda in his biography of the poet Bashō says:

Bashō always conceded that in the art of haiku many of his students were his equals, but in the craft of renku (linked verse) writing, he believed he alone held the innermost secrets.¹

And yet Bashō's linked verse, especially his *tsuke-ku* or "following verses," are mostly unknown in the West. I know of 13 *kasen*, or sequences of 36 stanzas, translated in eight books,² but these include fewer than one hundred Bashō stanzas, a mere 5% of the 1700 following verses he contributed to 300 sequences in 30 years.³

In this article, instead of full sequences, I translate stanza-pairs, the first of each pair by another poet, the second by Bashō. From the 246 stanza-pairs in renku scholar Miyawaki Masahiko's *Bashō's Verses of Human Feeling*, I have selected eight pairs, searching for those in which Bashō "grasps the heart" of the preceding stanza in a way that registers in our modern world. The pairs chosen deal with sociological themes that concern us today: child care, war, dysfunctional families, prostitution, and in the final two pairs, trust and altruism. Modern readers and writers of English-language haiku will want to explore the astonishing range of social subject matter and compassionate intuition that Bashō reveals in these links.

Although the two stanzas appear together, keep in mind that the first poet had not the slightest conception of where Bashō would go in following. Our first pair begins with a stanza by Yaba, who worked as a clerk in a money exchange:

Flawless blue
fabric spreads over
the dyer's yard

**Infant crawls about
getting "that place" dirty**

Hiro niwa ni / ao no da-zome o / hiki-chirashi

Hai mawaru ko no / yogosu i-dokoro

Here we are at the home-and-shop of a cloth dyer. We see drying in the sun a perfectly woven expanse of fabric dyed indigo blue with no other colors, no designs, no blemishes anywhere. A baby crawls about here and there, sometimes sitting to explore what she finds, sometimes scooting about on her bottom. She may be wearing a diaper; even without safety pins, Velcro, or plastic pants, the Japanese have a long tradition of tying on loincloths. Miyawaki notes that the “dirt” on these buttocks may be poop, or dirt from the earth, or dust from the house, or—especially in this house—the residue of dyestuffs in any color; any or all of these could be there on the derriere. The jump from expanse of immaculate blue fabric to haphazard collection of whatnot on this soft chubby bottom is great fun.

Early winter afternoons are mild, but then a sudden cold shower chills to the bone. Before there were textile mills spinning thread and weaving fabric by machine, women and girls made their family’s clothing from plant fibers growing in stalks, vines, and under bark. The fibers were spun by hand, woven on simple looms, then sewn by hand; to produce a single *kosode*, or ordinary house robe, from scratch required in the neighborhood of 30 hours of female time.⁴

Our next pair begins with a stanza by Ranchiku:

With one sleeve
missing, winter shower
gets inside robe

**Four or five sons
barking in a ruckus**

Kata-kata wa / sode naki kinu ni / moru shigure

Segare shi-go-nin / hoete kurushiki

The sudden cold rain gets inside the *kosode* because instead of one sleeve there is just an opening around the shoulder. Why,

you ask, is one sleeve missing? Bashō provides the answer: The family has five sons—and apparently no daughters—so no one to help mother make clothing for this zoo. She ran out of fabric while making multiple robes and had no time to spin more yarn or weave more cloth—what with all the work and chaos created by five boys. Boy, are they making a lot of noise!

In yet another family setting, Yaba begins and Bashō follows:

Glaring about
she orders the children
to behave

**While puffing away
ash from broiled *miso***

Gyōgi yōse to / kodomo o nume-mawashi

Yaki miso no hae / fuki harai-tsutsu

Miyawaki notes that the children are scattered all over the room, so mother has to “glare about” to address all of them—not that they listen. So, where does Bashō go from here? She is broiling soybean paste on wooden skewers to make a side dish. A bit of ash from the fire has gotten on the sticky *miso*. Watch her bring the skewer close to her mouth and puff the ash away. The astonishing delicacy of this action which even the fingers of elves could not perform is the polar opposite of her glaring and shouting at her kids. Both shouting and puffing are her breath, her life force. In the link between the two stanzas, we see Bashō’s genius, his profound insight into human experience.

Next, a poet named Koeki starts off:

In the cold wind
at sunset, long-drawn-out
cries of hawks

**Foretell the heads to fall
in tomorrow’s battle**

Kaze samuki / yūhi ni tobi no / koe hikite

Ikusa ni asu no / kubi o uranau

Koeki's verse is magnificent by itself, but even more stunning is the way each element—the wind, the sunset, the “long-drawn-out” cries—feeds energy into Bashō's ode to fate. Every time I read the verse I am once again surprised by the direction he chose. He took the elements Koeki provided and turned them toward that great question of existence which can never be confirmed: is the future ordained, or free?

Bashō's stanza is pacifist because of what it does NOT say. If it was “foretell which side will win” or “who will kill the most enemy,” then it would be competitive and war-mongering. The way Bashō wrote it, the verse recognizes no winners or losers, only the loss of life.

An even more personal experience of war is this pair begun by a poet named Chisoku:

After the years
of grieving, finally
past eighteen—

**Day and night dreams
of Father in that battle**

Uki toshi o / torite hatachi mo / yaya suginu

Chichi no ikusa o / oki-fushi no yume

Bashō fulfils this journey into the heart of one whose father died years before and who has grown up under the weight of that grief; now in the prime of youthful vigor, he or she looks back over those years of dreams constantly reverting to that one moment on a battlefield never seen in reality.

Miyawaki assumes this young person is a boy:

For a child, his father is his model to learn from by observation, his goal in life. The verse can mean that the boy⁵ has reached the age when now he can go to war, so to see a dream of father in battle is the same as being on the battlefield himself; or his regrets for his father can never be forgotten. The bond between father and son is well expressed.⁶

All the verses in this article, I believe, speak to hearts and minds of all ages; however, I would especially like to see this stanza-pair reach the hearts of those whose fathers died in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. I hope that counselors who work with the bereaved will share this verse with them, so the thoughts of Bashō may come alive in young minds today.

Next we begin with a stanza by the unknown Chosetsu:

Startled by clappers,
a window in the thicket

**Sister cries
for her life married
to a thief**

Naruko odoroku / kata yabu no mado

Nusubito ni / tsuresou imo ga / mi o nakite

The residents of this house or shack feel threatened; they startle at ordinary autumn sounds in a rice-growing village. Noisemakers are hung over the fields and shaken to scare away hungry birds. Trees and shrubs surrounding the house grow wild, so from the road most of the house cannot be seen. Is the one visible window also an eye watching the road, armed and ready to defend the freedom of those within? Bashō continues the mind-journey, clarifying that the householder is a thief, yet focusing on the woman “married” (probably without formal wedding) to him. Chosetsu’s verse is profound social realism, but a masculine, antisocial reality. Bashō looks, rather, at the other side of the gender coin.

Within the boundaries set by the poets, we create the drama. My thoughts go to Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, also married to a thief, the despicable Bill Sikes. Nancy participated in the evil of Fagin’s gang, yet when the time came she fought courageously for life and decency. I imagine the warped humanity of Fagin and Sikes into Chosetsu’s stanza, while the liveliness and integrity of Nancy⁷ enters Bashō’s stanza.

The next pair begins with a stanza by Rotsu, a beggar-monk

who from age 26 to 39 wandered about Japan, but then settled down near Bashō's hut in Edo. He portrays a "play-woman"—typically a young village girl indentured to a brothel to save her family from financial ruin. Brokers went to areas struck by famine, searching for "bargains." Mikiso Hane describes how girls were told they were going to the City to be maids or waitresses, but then were forced, from age 12 or 13, to have sex, sometimes with brutal or insulting men, every night of the week, and were beaten if they refused or tried to escape. Their only hope was to pay off the loan with the money they received from each customer after the brothel took its share and charged them for room and board—the system set up so most women remained in slavery until they died, often from syphilis, in their early twenties.

Now to this brothel
my body has been sold—

**Can I trust you
with a letter I write?
mirror polisher**

Kono goro muro ni / mi o uraretaru

Fumi kakite / tanomu tayori no / kagami toge

There is no way this play-woman can send a letter that will not be seen by the brothel, so she asks the mirror polisher if he will post it outside the brothel (without informing his employer). Here is the fullness of Bashō's genius, his deepest penetration into the human heart: "Can I trust you?"

The mirror in Japan for a thousand years has been associated with the Sun Goddess Amaterasu ("Heaven-shining"). Being round and shiny, a mirror was considered a "child of the sun."⁸ Shinto teaches that sin is not original or ingrained. We are clear inside, but accumulate sins like dust on a mirror. To restore the original purity, all we need do is wipe the dust from the mirror.

In Bashō's day, mirrors were bronze plated with an amalgam of mercury (as in dental fillings). In time the plating got cloudy.

A mirror polisher was a craftsman who ground the surface on a whetstone and polished it with mildly acidic fruit juice to restore the original clarity. In effect, he is a servant of the Sun Goddess—one who can be trusted with a woman’s private message. Miyawaki suggests that our appreciation for Bashō’s stanza deepens if we imagine the letter is written to her boyfriend back in the village, the boy she has known since childhood and had just begun to love when she was taken away. Every time she looks into her wonderfully clear mirror to fix her hair or makeup, she will see him, the carrier of her message, she will see her lover reading the letter, and she will see the holy Sun shining with Hope.

Our final two-step begins with a stanza by Sora, who was a samurai in Ise before he retired at age 32 to study Shinto, write poetry with Bashō, and accompany him on his travels.

The punitive force
already has set forth
in solemn dignity

**For one night’s vow
he empties his purse**

Sude ni tatsu / uchite no tsukai / ikameshiku

Ichiya no chigiri / zeni kazuketaru

The emperor has ordered troops to subjugate the rebels; the samurai gather, and when morning comes, leave camp with stiff military precision. Meanwhile the commander of the rebels (Han Solo) has spent the night in a brothel, and when morning comes makes a hasty departure so he can prepare his army. Before he leaves, since he is not likely to need cash ever again, he gives all he has to his partner in “one night’s vow.”

Here we have a play-woman who got lucky. Now she can purchase her freedom, return to her home village, a hero because she saved her family from ruin, marry that boy she loves and have children. Bashō converts Sora’s masculine military theme into a blessing for the feminine. Although the woman is never

mentioned, looking deeper, we find her “solemn dignity” in enduring years of violation, and now the wonder of her good fortune.

In each link Bashō forged, we see the astonishing range of his mind, leaping across boundaries, going outside the box and also deep into the box, ever probing human life and heart. It is my hope and belief that readers will benefit from Bashō’s compassionate expression of perennial concerns—and writers of haiku benefit from study of the directions in which he takes subject matter introduced by others. Bashō, the Poet of Humanity.

Notes

1. Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō*. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1982), 70.
2. “Withering gusts” in Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); “Summer moon” and “Winter shower” in Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1970); “Renting a horse” in Hiroaki Sato, *Bashō’s Narrow Road* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996); “Even the Kite’s Feathers,” “Throughout the Town,” and “At the Tub of Ashes,” in Earl Miner, *Japanese Linked Poetry: An Account with Translations of Renga and Haikai Sequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); “Under a Tree,” “A Kite’s Feathers,” “At a Fragrance of Plums,” and “Broad Bean” in Hiroaki Sato, *From the Country of Eight Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981); “The Hawker’s Goose” in John Carley, *Frogpond* 36:1 (Winter 2013); the four kasen in “Monkey Raincoat”—“Winter rain,” “Summer moon,” “Autumn cricket,” and “Grass and Plum”—have been translated by Lenore Mayhew, *Monkey’s Raincoat* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1985) and by Earl Miner and Hiroko Odagiri, *The Monkey’s Straw Raincoat* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).
3. The total number of Bashō’s following stanzas is from Miyawaki Masahito, *Bashō no ninjo-ku: Tsuke-ku no Sekai—Bashō Ninjoku—Tsukeku no Sekai* [“Bashō’s Verses of Human Affection—the World of Following Verses”], (Tokyo: Kadokawa Gakugei Shupan, 2008). The number of sequences to which he contributed is from Ogata Tsutomu, *Bashō Taisei* [“The Big Book of Bashō”], (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1999).
4. I read this somewhere and cannot find it again; however, an expert at the Edo Tokyo Museum confirmed the 30-hour estimate.

5. There is no indication in Japanese of gender.
6. Miyawaki (see note 3), pp. 77–78.
7. In particular as played by Kay Walsh in the 1948 film with Alec Guinness as Fagin and Robert Newton as Sikes.
8. An expert at the Ito History Museum in Fukuoka told me this—which does not mean every Japanese thought this way, only that some did.



Jeff Robbins has studied Bashō's poetry, prose, letters, and spoken word for thirty years, and hopes to publish three volumes of Bashō's humane, life-affirming works. Two volumes of his Bashō4Now trilogy are now complete and available POD (print on demand) from the University Book Store in Seattle. All royalties from Take Back the Sun: Bashō Empowering Women will be donated to the struggle against human trafficking. Royalties from What Children Do: Young and Alive with Bashō will go to promote literacy and gender equality in the Third World. Homepage: www.basho4women2youth.join-us.jp.

Sakata Shoko, a certified Instructor of Japanese Language, helps Jeff discover the meanings in Bashō only a native speaker can recognize.

