

Bashō's Blueprint

by Mankh

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Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto
Bashō

The old pond—
a frog jumps in,
sound of water

trans.

R. Hass

1

old pond . . .
a frog leaps in
waters sound

trans.

W.J. Higginson

&

P. Harter 2

“That’s boring,” a fifth-grader exclaimed, after I read Bashō’s frogpond haiku to an elementary school class. In a manner of speaking, he was accurate—nothing much really happens. You might as well say “a leaf fell” or “a flower bloomed” . . . all lovely and amazing, yet rather ordinary as far as a poem, right?

Not so fast!

So what is it that makes Bashō’s classic not-boring, fascinating, in fact, one of the most well-known and oft-referred-to haiku?

When I first got into studying haiku and talking about the form with other poets, I heard of how this famous one was an example of enlightenment. That made some sense to me, the frog-splash being a moment of AHA Awakening . . . yet, something was missing.

After about six years, one day it dawned on me (personal frog-splash moment) that Bashō’s haiku is a blueprint for every day, providing a means for deep connection with the natural world of things, for connecting the timeless with the present moment, and for transcending the incongruities of the modern world.

First of all, the poem is simply a lovely moment, an exciting little depiction of a nature scenario. On another level, the scene (pond) is the ancient and eternal, as well as the clear, empty mind. The frog is beingness and potential action. The water-sound (splash) is the

subsequent confluence, the revelatory NOW . . . happening within, and without.

Using Bashō's Blueprint, I wrote these:

in the garden
a butterfly cruises through
without a sound

at the old folks home
a grandchild visits
the sound of laughter

Upon receiving the previous issue of this journal:
opening *Frogpond*—
the sound of
biodegradable wrapper

But does this formulaic writing diminish Bashō's, turning it into a kind of refrigerator-magnet, Mad Libs poetry? I don't think so, though I admit I typically don't try to write haiku using this format. Yet, even Bashō himself uses this blueprint:

Winter solitude—
in a world of one color
the sound of wind.
trans. By R. Hass

³
Beyond haiku, I call it Bashō's Blueprint because it has become one of my mantras for making whole what seem like incongruous moments or experiences. This world is ancient, and moment typically follows moment with nothing much unusual happening. However, every moment holds the possibility of something different, life-changing, enlightening.

¹
Hass, Robert, ed.,
The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa
. NJ: The Ecco Press, 1994, p. 18.

²
Higginson, William J., with Harter, Penny.
The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku
. NY: Kodansha International, 1985, p. 9.

³
Hass, p. 33.

Author's Note: For more variations of Bashō, there is Hiroaki Sato's One Hundred Frogs (Weatherhill, 1995), which includes over 100 translations plus a number of adaptations and parodies, some of which are also at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/basho-frog.htm> (11-24-09). For further commentary on Bashō's frogpond haiku, see Bashō and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary by Makoto Ueda, pp. 140-142.