the mind *of Autumn*

In the autumn of 1684 the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho left his hut in Edo and began to walk away. He traveled empty-handed, packing no supplies and carrying only the staff of an ancient who was reputed to have passed into nothingness. Karl Plank recounts his remarkable story.

Mountains in Tianzi range (China, Hunan Province). Courtesy Wikepdia Commons, photograph by Jorg Radestock

In the autumn of 1684 the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho left his hut in Edo and began to walk away. He traveled empty-handed, packing no supplies and carrying only the staff of an ancient who was reputed to have passed into nothingness. Thus, he journeyed toward Ueno where he had been born and his mother buried the previous year. A son's pious pilgrimage, perhaps. Basho had been too ill to attend his mother's funeral at the time. To express his devotion, he reunites with his surviving family and a brother gives him strands of his mother's white hair. *Autumn frost*, Basho calls it. Autumn frost that melts in the heat of his tears.

Or possibly, he begins his life as a wayfarer simply because it is autumn and the mind of autumn requires leavings.

Basho wrote about the 1684 journey, as he did four subsequent travels, in a literary prose that showed his mastery of the *haibun* form, a hybrid genre combining prose poetry with haiku. The travel journals were not diaries as much as reflections of his experiences and perceptions. If chronicles, they recorded his imagination and sensitivity at work. Indeed, he himself had been suspicious of travel diaries, noting that reports of whether it rained along the way and when it stopped had no import. One should write, he said, only of the *truly remarkable.*

This is what his journal does: witness to the remarkable as seen from the footpath. He advises:

spend nights on a journey,
then you'll know my poems –
autumn wind

(Barnhill[1])

In mid-fall, he begins to journey and his poems offer the wind of the eighth moon that had urged his steps.

The first haiku of the 1684 journey tells us that the autumn mind begins with bleached bones:

bleached bones
on my mind, the wind pierces
my body to the heart

(Barnhill)

Basho sees the exposed skeleton of a dead body by the roadside and feels a deathly chill that penetrates his core. The

poetic association of autumn and mortality is common enough. Hopkins' beautiful 'Spring and Fall', for example, portrays a young girl's sadness at "Goldengrove unleaving," continuing to note that she does not realize she mourns already for herself. Yet, where Hopkins' Margaret faces autumn gently, innocently, Basho's denuded, unburied bones convey a brutal reality that is cold and stabbing. There is no innocence, only immediate awareness of an uncivilized scene. These bones, left above ground open to elements and predation, are castaways, the leftovers of what once was a body and is no more. What Basho imagines in the abandoned pile of bones is the disappearance of a life, his own.

Autumn's connection with mortality nests within the mind's awareness of the disappearing of familiar realities. In autumn, the poet contemplates things as they change and change signals the onset of absence. What once was is no longer the same; what once was disappears. It no longer is present, no longer is. In this way, autumn gives figure to one's own aging and dying. Basho reflects:

This autumn—
why am I growing old?
bird disappearing among clouds

(Hass)

The haiku, mindful of process, engages with the use of *disappearing*. Is the bird in the clouds becoming absent or simply not apparent, present but not in a way that is visible? Autumn is the season for asking *why am I growing old?* But what does such a question envision?

Basho notes in the 1684 journal that on the day he crossed the Barrier of Hakone between Edo and Kyoto, rain was falling and clouds hovered low. Weather itself may not be *remarkable,* but his perception is. He writes:

Misty rain,
can't see Fuji
– interesting!

(Hass).

The *misty rain* (*kirishigure)* gives the haiku its seasonal reference (*kigo*). This is autumn rain whose fog clouds visibility and recognition. It makes the evident world vanish – on this particular day, Mount Fuji, the *axis mundi* for those who revered it. The inability to see Fuji understandably gives Basho pause. I do not imagine him thinking that the highest mountain in Japan had ceased to exist as much as had ceased to be available. It is a Yeatsian moment of the center's not holding, not because there is no center but because one can no longer find it, an effective collapse of what holds the world together and affords orientation within it. Basho's world, at this moment, has lost definition, lost its markings, and in that, Basho himself might well consider himself lost. Like those who have awakened to ruined Temples or fallen towers, Basho confronts an absence of mythic scale. This feels ominous.

Yet, Basho's response suggests otherwise. He voices no despair, no lament, no panic or even disappointment (the disappointment, one might imagine, of a sightseer who had come for the view). He does not say *alas* or *woe*, but *interesting!*. The exclamation point in Hass's translation lets the line gesture toward amusement or fascination (Barnhill renders it to that end, *so enchanting*). Why does the vanishing of Fuji not disturb him? What does he find *interesting!*? The second line provides one clue. Basho might have said simply that he sees rain and clouds, but he puts what he sees in terms of the negative: he sees not-Fuji. In naming the absence, the *misty rain* becomes Fuji-shaped and the mountain present in his eye as what is missing. Fuji has not disappeared in the imagination, only in the immediate visible space before Basho. That *Fujisan* is so present in its absence he might find *interesting!* no less than the bird one still sees in the clouds even when it has flown away.

Another of Basho's haiku from the autumn of 1684 (though not from the travel journal), opens a different path to interpret the poem. He writes:

with clouds and mist
in a brief moment a hundred scenes
brought to fulfillment

(Barnhill).

The *clouds and mist* (*kumo kiri no*) of the opening line return us to the *kigo* of autumn rain, only now the fog does not lead Basho to comment on disappearance but on the emergence of imaginative possibility. If the *misty rain* hides Fuji, it no less offers a blank canvas for him to bring *a hundred scenes . . . to fulfillment*. His imagination, freed from the way the mountain compels attention, now roams without interference. The absence of Fuji invites imagination's play or even contemplation of the rain itself whose softness hides the hardness of the mountain and brings its own consolation to the liminal moment.

It is *interesting!* that the mountain can vanish, that the visible become invisible, that Basho may still 'see' it in its absence. It is *interesting!* that *misty rain* has this power over the monumental, the soft over the hard, that in the void of the visible, the imagination plays without constraint. It is *interesting!* to ponder the *misty rain*. Autumn rain does not bring Basho to despair or grief, but to engagement. That the mist has become *interesting!* means that it has become a source of curiosity and attention in its own right. In the fog, he sits fascinated with the question of what is before him.

Basho does not become fascinated with himself, but with the autumn rain. Though he seems to have seen himself mirrored in the pile of bleached bones, he attends more to what is around him. For Basho, this is often a turning to the natural world; his writings are not filled with people and their goings-on, as much as wind, rain, birds in clouds, and the blossoming of plum or cherry. All the more striking then is his autumn haiku in which attention shifts to the person who lives nearby. *Deep autumn–/*, Basho writes, *my neighbor / how does he live, I wonder?* (Hass). The autumn mind here opens to the knock of another, an awareness of his presence that interrupts self-preoccupation. The *neighbor* has become *interesting!*, but in what manner? Have the changes of *deep autumn* led Basho to be curious about how his neighbor is faring in this season whose challenge they share? Can Basho be of help to the neighbor whose living has become a matter of concern?

Such curiosity has ethical importance. Any aid we might give another follows from prior attention to how he or she is doing and attention follows from a curiosity that wonders about that other in the first place. Thus, Mark Wunderlich's "Heaven-Letter" shows the poet praying:

Bless Carlos, sharpening his saw in the yard, his night-lamp the emblem of / your favor . . . Let me aid the bachelor neighbors and the harelip with her stupid dog, / the tinker with his yard of noise, and the shape that parts the curtains / of the empty house across the marsh.

He has noticed the lantern, the yard-noise, and the mysterious movement of the neighbor's curtains, has been curious enough to pay attention and followed the path of that attention to interceding care. More bluntly, the scarecrow in Fred Chappell's 'Scarecrow Colloquy' asks:

The man who nailed me up …
does he still thrive?

We can imagine this as Basho's question as well: in *deep autumn*, the season when things begin to disappear, does my neighbor *still thrive*? *I wonder.* Can I help?

The mind of autumn may create a path of empathy, but a different resonance seems at stake in the haiku. Perhaps Basho wonders if the neighbor can, in fact, help *him* to contend with autumn. Is there something in how he lives that can instruct Basho in the time of steady vanishing? Is the wondering also a plea or an expression of need? That the haiku ends with *I wonder* emphasizes that there is an ongoing question at stake, a question that will not be answered apart from this neighbor whose autumn mortality mirrors Basho's own. In solitary pondering, Basho acknowledges the depths of a social self.

Put another way, the autumn mind must finally come to terms with loneliness. Basho's question of the neighbor probes the extent of all that is disappearing. His concern may be for the neighbor's welfare, but more fundamentally it asks if the neighbor is still there or if, like Mount Fuji, he has vanished in the mist. After inquiring whether his man *still thrive[s],* Chappell's scarecrow reveals the underlying need: *Does he never remember me ever*? For Basho, the season's question is not mortality, but ultimately: am I alone? In *deep autumn* the haiku yearns with desire.

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Notes:

1. the translations of Basho's haiku are from David L. Barnhill, *Basho's Haiku* (New York: SUNY, 2004) and from Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku* (New York: Ecco, 1994). I have indicated in parentheses the particular translator of a given haiku.

2. This piece first appeared in *The Rivanna Review* 5 (2022): pages 13-16.