

## THE HAIKU UNIVERSE: ON NATURE

*Hasegawa Kai, Trans. by Cheryl A. Crowley*

Heaven and earth have their great beauties but do not speak of them; the four seasons have their clear-marked regularity but do not discuss it; the ten thousand things have their principles of growth but do not expound them. The sage seeks out the beauties of Heaven and earth and masters the principles of the ten thousand things. Thus it is that the Perfect Man does not act, the Great Sage does not move—they have perceived [the Way of] Heaven and earth, we may say.

*Zhuangzi*, trans. by Burton Watson<sup>1</sup>.

Understanding of this verse has been lost with the passage of time:

*furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto*

old pond —  
a frog jumps in  
sound of water

When I first heard this verse, I wondered what Bashō had found so interesting that he was moved to compose it. A frog jumps into an old pond and makes a splash—fair enough, its literal meaning is clear. When I heard Yamamoto Kenkichi's statement that it "opens up the realm of nature's stillness,"<sup>2</sup> I thought, very well. However, maybe there was something else that Bashō wanted to express? I believe that the commonly accepted interpretation is not, to borrow Bashō's own words, "*hiai tashika* (solid in its haiku character)."<sup>3</sup>

Shiki writes in "An Essay on the 'Old Pond' Verse," "there is not the smallest thing to add beyond saying that it is about the sound the speaker heard when a frog jumped into the water of an old pond," but surely that could not be all there is to it.<sup>4</sup>

This was a verse that was entered in the *Kawazu no ku-awase* (Frog Verse Competition) held in the spring of 1686 at the Bashō-an Studio in Fukugawa. Bashō disciple Kagami Shikō's *Kuzu no Matsubara* (Kudzu Matsubara)<sup>5</sup> says that Bashō first composed *kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto* (a frog jumps in / sound of water) as he listened to the splash of a frog jumping into water. Then, at the competition, Kikaku recommended that *yamabuki ya* (kerria [*ya*, a cutting word]) would be good for the first five morae, but Bashō decided to go with *furu ike ya* (old pond [*ya*]).

Kikaku's recommendation of "kerria" was related to the fact that the word calls to mind verses like this one from the *Kokinshū* (anthology of ancient and contemporary waka):

*kawazu naku Ide no no yamabuki chiri ni kerri hana no sa-  
kari ni awamashi mono o*

at Ide, where frogs trill  
the kerria flowers  
are scattered —  
if I had known that they were blooming  
I would have come to see them<sup>6</sup>

It would have made people laugh to juxtapose *yamabuki* not with the trill of the frog but with the splash it makes jumping into the water, instead of drawing on the conventional waka classical tradition, where *yamabuki* was matched with *kawazu no koe* (frog's trill) and *kawazu no koe* with *yamabuki*. This frog is one that jumps right in without calling out like those in classical verses.

By the standards of the day, Kikaku's proposal takes a position critical of classical waka diction. Using "kerria" in the first five morae and following it with "a frog jumps in / sound of water," was definitely a severe critique of the conventionalized, old-fashioned juxtaposition of "kerria" with "frogs' trill." No doubt at the time Kikaku thought doing so was haikai, and I expect that the other disciples' thinking was much the same. I believe that the reason that Bashō rejected Kikaku's suggestion and went with "old pond" was because he wanted to advance one step beyond

what Kikaku and his other disciples conventionally viewed as haikai during that time. By the spring of 1686, for Bashō, obvious criticism of convention itself seems to have already become conventional. It is likely that Bashō was trying to criticize both Kikaku's past thinking about haikai, as well as his own.

Thus, Bashō did not compose a verse in the waka-like manner of "the kerria flowers / at Ide, where frogs call," but neither did he choose, like Kikaku, "kerria — / a frog jumps in / sound of water." He neither followed the convention nor did he explicitly criticize it. In the miraculous, innovative space he created with the phrase "old pond," he transcended both. "Old pond" is Bashō's creative criticism of both waka and earlier haikai.

We will not be able to recognize that this was probably the original implication of the "old pond" verse unless we consider it in the context, or *ba*, of the haikai of its day, which was conscious of the waka tradition. What I mean when I refer to the *ba* of the haikai of the day is specifically the session of *Kawazu no ku-awase* held in the spring of 1686 at the Bashō-an Studio in Fukugawa. It was a lively, dynamic *ba*, where Kikaku gave Bashō his recommendation, and disputation about it arose.

When I first read the "old pond" verse, the reason I felt frustrated was that I could not immediately participate in the *ba* of Bashō, Kikaku, and the other disciples; the greater part of the *ba* contemporaneous with the verse—the *Kokinshū* verse, Kikaku's recommendation, *yamabuki*—were lost in the past. If I hadn't encountered Shikō's *Kuzu no Matsubara*, my frustration would never have abated. It was like an ancient statue, so broken you cannot tell from an arm, or face, or breast.

From its earliest conception, Bashō's "old pond" verse was deeply rooted in the *ba* of its time. When this *ba* disappeared along with the era of which it was a part, we lost the sense of the verse's original implication of creative critique of both classical waka and of the haikai of its day. And what was left is only this: a frog made a splash when jumping into the water of an old pond.

In that sense, Shiki's statement that "there is not the smallest thing to add beyond saying that it is about the sound the speaker heard when a frog jumped into the water of an old pond" is persuasive. Why, then, is "the sound the speaker heard when a frog jumped into the water of an old

pond" all that is left? It is because today, old ponds and frogs are much the same as they were in Bashō's day.

When the haikai's *ba* was lost with the passing of the era of which it was a part, the verse's original implication of creative critique disappeared along with it, and all that was left was the part that was rooted in the *ba* of Nature where the meaning of "old pond" and "frog" are still the same today. No doubt all words everywhere are destined to such a fate. It is good to be tolerant of semantic shift.

Could Bashō have anticipated the fate of his verse?

The "old pond" verse teaches us that beyond the haiku's seventeen morae there is a *ba* not expressed in words, and that a haiku's words take the *ba*'s assumptions as given. In order to read a haiku, you cannot just understand its literal meaning, you also must know its *ba*. You must participate in its *ba*. In other words, poets and readers must share a common context (*kyōtsū no ba*) for haiku to make sense. I believe that the fact that haiku is limited to seventeen morae is related to this.

Hypothetically, if a haiku were as long as a novel, everything could be expressed in words. However, that does not work, because haiku are so short. Naturally, there is much left unspoken. So it is that there has to be a common context, where poet and reader achieve mutual understanding without words. Or rather, it would be better to think that the reverse is true, that the creation of this short verse form haiku was possible precisely because of the existence of a common context.

The "old pond" verse was written because people were aware of the *Kokinshū* waka that was the source of Kikaku's suggested "kerria." Everyone connected to the haikai community of the day had read and internalized classics like *Kokinshū*, *Ise monogatari* (The Tales of Ise), and *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji). It was not only unnecessary to quote word-for-word from the premised classics, it was actually boorish to do so. Better to say nothing at all.

The short poetic form we call haiku came into existence when people were trying to get the most out of the unspoken yet rich shared common context. It is not that haiku are short without reason; they were made short deliberately. Moreover, in the final analysis, the characteristic of

haiku being rooted in *ba* comes down to the nature of words themselves.

If there is a clearly specified *ba*, as in the case of spoken conversations, words can be lively and animated even when phrases are brief. However, where *ba* has been eliminated, words become mere symbols at an abstract level, as in the case of legal or mathematical texts.

Fundamentally, words themselves are deeply rooted in their *ba*. When we aim to make the most of this aspect of language, a literary form as short as that of haiku can function.

Haiku is the art of *ba*. It possesses vitality as long as a common context of its language exists; if that context is lost, it no longer can be understood. This is true not only of premodern verses, but also of those written in the modern period.

*kichikō no hana no naka yori kumo no ito*

out of the heart  
of a bellflower — a spider's  
silk

When I read this verse by Takano Sujū, it reminded me of the garden of the house in which my mother grew up, where I often played as a child. It had raised beds planted by my grandmother, and there were many flowers there that she grew in carefully cultivated rows: daffodils, snapdragons, poppies... and others whose names I do not know. She grew bellflowers, also. Crouching between the rows after rainfall, I often saw that tiny spiders had strung wet diaphanous webs from leaf to leaf of plants bent over with the weight of water droplets.

The reason I immediately understood this Sujū haiku the first time I read it was because I had a memory of bellflowers and spiders from those childhood days, and I could readily put myself in the *ba* where Sujū saw his bellflower. When I read it, I certainly was able to do so without becoming frustrated as I did with the "old pond" verse, or being conscious of its *ba*. However, it was not because this verse did not depend at all on *ba*; but because this verse's *ba* is one of nature, in which bellflowers and

spiders exist; at the moment, everywhere, as commonplace as air.

The verse's meaning looks safe right now, but if and when the *ba* that now exists disappears, it will quickly become incomprehensible; it is just as precariously positioned as the "old pond" verse. If in the future a day comes when the bellflower species goes extinct and fades from human memory, this will become a verse that nobody understands. Will people then read the words of this verse like looking inside a mysterious conch shell whose inhabitant has died and disappeared?

Of course, bellflowers may never become extinct. However, it is possible that they will. I say that because in fact, after her death, my grandmother's garden fell to ruin, and in no time at all became nothing more than sandy ground.

And, even without thinking it through that far, what do non-Japanese who have never seen bellflowers understand of this verse, though they can read its words? Likewise, as the number of children and adults who do not know bellflowers grows with the continued advance of environmental destruction and urbanization, the range of people who can comprehend this verse will shrink accordingly.

Looked at the opposite way, one might argue that the *ba* of nature that Sujū's verse creates with its bellflower and spider is a very powerful one. Anyone who is familiar with bellflowers and spiders would understand this verse, and as long as there are places where such things exist, it has almost endless longevity. This is because this verse refers to nothing outside of nature for its *ba*. It makes no reference to classic waka from *Kokinshū*. And, although in 1935, the year that it was published in the journal *Hotoogisu* (Cuckoo) was the same as that in which the Emperor Agency Theory Incident took place, and Japan was becoming increasingly militaristic, there is no mention at all of its historical context.

All that this verse references for its *ba* is nature, in which bellflowers bloom and spiders spin webs as they have done in the past in Japan and no doubt always will. The power of this verse rests in its elimination of everything not purely natural from its *ba*.

Ultimately, all that remains of Bashō's "old pond" verse is the part that is based on the natural imagery of a frog in an old pond—the splash



that was made when a frog jumped into an ancient pond. If we call that semantic shift, can we not say that Sujū's verse has been subject to this phenomenon since the moment it was written, and that Sujū originally intended to write a verse that anticipated it doing so?

We can see some of the genius of modern post-Shiki haiku in its ubiquitous preference for drawing exclusively on nature for its *ba*.

In placing particular emphasis on nature, Shiki strove to eliminate all impurities from the *ba* of the "old pond" verse, including both allusions to *Kokinshū* waka and critiques of it; and to limit its *ba* purely to the universals of nature. Shiki's fervent wish was to make haiku the literary form of a new era, one that anyone could understand. That meant only using words that were accessible without the need for any kind of specialized knowledge; in other words, a literary form that relied solely on words as written.

In order to do this, first you have to do away with references that make sense only to people who had read classics such as *Kokinshū* and *Genji monogatari*. In its place you introduce what he called purely "ordinary, everyday," and "familiar" natural imagery. Shiki remade the *ba* of haiku into one in which everyone could take part. Shiki's haiku revolution was one in which his advocacy for *shasei* (realism) and repudiation of *tsukinami* (cliché) is most obvious on the surface, but even more than that it was a revolution of *ba*.

Still, the revolution that made haiku a modern literary form left one problem unresolved. This is because while it recast haiku's *ba* as the universalism of nature, haiku's dependence on *ba* did not change. This is a contradiction of the notion of a modern literary form being one that relies solely on the words from which it is made. The contradiction was not so obvious during an era like that during which Shiki lived, in which nature was "ordinary, everyday," and "familiar."

However, fundamentally nature is not something with absolute universality. In the first place, because haiku were written in Japanese, the nature that they took for their *ba* was limited to that of Japan, in which the Japanese language is rooted—in its widest sense, the nature of the Asian monsoon region. If readers do not know the natural landscape of

Japan, they will not understand a haiku even if they can read its words; this applies to Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

Furthermore, even within Japan, nature is so much under threat from urbanization and pollution that it is no longer "ordinary, everyday" and "familiar" as it was during Shiki's lifetime. Those who live in cities in particular have to travel at least a little bit if they want to compose a haiku in the midst of nature, even to hear the splash of a frog jumping into water. Perhaps haiku will become incomprehensible to people other than those who have access to nature.

That the context of nature is no longer as common as air clearly calls attention to the fact that haiku is fundamentally an art form dependent on *ba*, and that it is necessary for its readers to share in its *ba* in order to understand it.

Haiku embraces modern paradoxes of nature. Thus, modern haiku both closely adheres to nature, and simultaneously tries to shake it off. Nature in haiku creates both desire and revulsion. These two qualities are its antagonistic twin children.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, Burton, trans. *Translations from the Asian Classics: The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> "The old pond in this verse is thought to be the remains of a holding cistern alongside the Bashō-an Studio where Sanpū kept live fish taken from the river. Tradition has it that Kikaku recommended *yamabuki ya* (kerria) for the first five morae [Shikō, *Kuzu no Matsubara*]. The juxtaposition of kerria and trilling frogs was conventional; the resonance between the two images conveys a seasonal implication of late spring that is quite heavy and the overall character of the verse is cloying. By contrast, *furu ike ya* (old pond) opens up a realm of nature's stillness." Kenkichi, Yamamoto. *Bashō zen hokku, jōkan* (Complete Bashō hokku, Vol. 1). Tokyo: Kawade shōbo shinsha, 1974.



3            *“yu suzumi senki okoshite kaeri keri*  
               Evening cool  
               I got stomach pains and  
               went home  
  
               *Kyorai*

When I first began my training, I asked our Teacher how to compose hokku. He said, 'You must make it powerful, and solid in its haikai character.' When I composed another hokku experimentally and asked him about it, he laughed loudly and said, "No, not like that either." Kyorai, Mukai, Hattori Dōhō, and Ebara Taizō. *Kyoraishō* (Kyorai's treatise). Tokyo: Iwanami bunkō, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> "The reason that the 'Old pond' verse has become so well known is that Bashō and his followers treated it as the work that first defined their school's new style and thus demarcated the border of a shift to a new epoch in haikai. People afterwards agreed and spoke of it this way also. However, as a result, when times changed, memories of this most memorable of verses were lost, and it was misunderstood as being the greatest verse of Bashō's oeuvre. Finally a plethora of spurious interpretations emerged, and fantastical false claims about it were created which were confusing to laypeople. So, if one wants to know the value of this verse, one can do no better than to know the history of the haikai that preceded it; in terms of its meaning, there is not the smallest thing to add beyond saying that it is about the sound the speaker heard when a frog jumped into the water of an old pond. Adding even the least little thing denies its essential truth. The verse is distinguished by its clarity, and its lack of obfuscation, artifice, and distortions. What else is there to add?" Shiki, Masaoka. *Haikai taiyō* (Haikai essentials). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955.

<sup>5</sup> From *Koten haikai bungaku taikei* (Classical haikai literature compendium) 10, *Shōmon hairon haibun shū* (Bashō School haikai theory and haikai prose collection), Shūei-sha.

<sup>6</sup> Ide, in the south of Kyōto Prefecture, is an *utamakura* (poetic place name) associated with kerria and with frogs.