

芭蕉

MATSUO BASHŌ

JAPAN (1644–1694)

LANGUAGE: JAPANESE

FORM: HAIKU

古池や

Furu ike ya

蛙飛び込む

kawazu tobikomu

水の音

mizu no oto

(A *Rōmaji* version has been included below the Japanese characters.)



Matsuo Bashō was born in Japan in 1644. Introduced to poetry at a young age, he became a well-known poet and teacher. He later renounced the social, urban life of the literary circles—choosing instead to wander throughout the country to gain inspiration for his writing. Traveling alone off the beaten path in medieval Japan was regarded as immensely dangerous, and at first Bashō expected to simply die in the middle of nowhere or be killed by bandits. As his travels continued, however, he met many friends and grew to enjoy the changing scenery and the seasons. Bashō was one of the earliest (some say the first) to write *haiku*—a type of poem comprised of just seventeen syllables. He is internationally appreciated as one of the greatest poets of all time.

TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSARY			
CHARACTER	RŌMAJI	DEFINITION	POSSIBLE SYNONYMS
古	furu (adj.)	lived long	old, ancient, venerable
池	ike (n.)	pool	pond, lagoon
蛙	kawazu (n.)	a small web-footed water animal	frog
水	mizu (n.)	liquid of rain	water
の	no (possess.)	letter and symbol that signifies ownership—belonging to	's
音	oto (n.)	sound of spattered water	splash, plop, ker plunk
飛び込 む	tobikomu (v.)	move suddenly downward	flies into, dives, plunges, jumps, leaps
や	ya (interj.)	expressing surprise	Wow! Alert! Pay attention! Look at this!

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

PHRASE BY PHRASE

古池や

Furu ike ya _____

蛙飛び込む

kawazu tobikomu _____

水の音

mizu no oto _____

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

MAKE IT FLOW

古池や

Furu ike ya _____

蛙飛び込む

kawazu tobikomu _____

水の音

mizu no oto _____

REFLECTING AND FINDING MEANING

Group Member Names:

Date: _____

Pick a scribe for the group, and work together to answer the questions.

What are the best parts of this translation, and why do you think they are good?

What elements of the original poem did you lose in the translation? What did you manage to keep?

Did you achieve something new with your translation, and if so, does it make sense in the poem or not?

POETRY INSIDE OUT TRANSLATION CIRCLES[®]

1. Become acquainted with the poet and poem.

- Look at the Poem Page as a class and identify the key parts, including the name of the poet, his or her country of origin, the dates he or she lived, the language of the poem, the poetic form, and the poet's biography.
- Ask for volunteers to read the poem aloud to the whole class. Anyone who is willing can read the poem aloud. If possible, start with someone who speaks the language of the poem.
- Listen to the line breaks and music of the poem, what stands out for you?
- Now read the biography silently to yourself. You can underline or highlight sentences or phrases that jump out at you—they may be helpful in the translation process!

2. The first draft—Phrase by Phrase.

- The group of four breaks into pairs. Balance the spoken language strengths of the group members when possible.
- Remember, sometimes when you translate a poem from one language to another, you need to add small words like *the*, *it*, etc. Be on the lookout for where those words might be needed.
- Also feel free to write in several words from the glossary for one word in the original—you can decide which one you like best later!

3. Share and revise—Make It Flow.

- The pairs come back together as a group of four and share the translations they have come up with.
- Ask yourself what you liked about the other pair's translation? What do you like about your own?
- As a group, make a single translation. This is when you should make decisions about whether or not to follow the form, rhyme scheme, and sound of the original poem.

4. Defend your translation—Reflecting and Finding Meaning.

- As a group, discuss possible interpretations of the poem.
- Talk about words or phrases that were particularly difficult to translate, and why.
- Discuss what of the original poem was lost, kept, and gained in the translation process.
- In the whole-class discussion be prepared to:
 - (a) Discuss and support your group's translation choices.
 - (b) Talk about what was interesting or difficult to translate.
 - (c) Share possibilities about what the poem might mean.

BACKGROUND NOTES

I. About Japan

- Japan is an island country in East Asia composed of four main islands and over six thousand smaller islands. Though Japan is slightly smaller than the state of California, it has a population of over 127 million people.
- Japan's name in *kanji* (Japanese characters) translates to "sun origin," and so Japan is known as the "Land of the Rising Sun."
- Japan's capital city, Tokyo, is the world's largest metropolitan area, with about 9.1 million people, as well as the world's largest urban economy.

II. About the Japanese Language

- Japanese is spoken by about 125 million people, primarily in Japan. Historians are unsure of the language's origins, though it does share similarities to Korean. Chinese documents from the third century recorded a few Japanese words, but substantial texts did not appear until the eighth century.
- The Japanese language can express different levels in social status determined by a variety of factors, including profession, age, experience, and/or class.
- Modern Japanese writing uses two main kinds of characters: *kanji* and *kana*. Kanji are Chinese characters that are blocky and squarish in form. They have the same meaning in Japanese as in Chinese, but are pronounced differently. Kana are roundish in form, like English cursive, and are used phonetically to sound out the long Japanese words.
- *Rōmaji*, the Japanese word for roman letters, is the Latin script transcribed from Japanese characters so that non-Japanese speakers can read and pronounce the Japanese words. It is a tool, though at times imperfect, to bridge the gap between the Japanese and non-Japanese worlds.

III. About Matsuo Bashō

- Matsuo Kinsaku (Matsuo is the family name, and Kinsaku was his given name at birth) was born in 1644. The son of a low-ranking samurai warrior, Kinsaku was apprenticed as a child to a lord's son named Todo Yoshitada. Together Kinsaku and Yoshitada practiced composing *renga*, a form of collaborative poetry. Kinsaku went on to study with a local poet named Kigin and publish his poetry in various anthologies.
- By 1680 Matsuo Kinsaku had a full-time job teaching twenty young poets. His disciples built him a hut and planted a banana tree (*Bashō*) in front of it. Kinsaku renamed himself after the banana tree and became Matsuo Bashō.

- In 1682 Bashō left Edo, the capital city (now Tokyo) on the first of four long journeys on foot up and down Japan, composing *haiku* (a form of poetry described in section IV below) along the way. On his longest journey, in 1689, Bashō walked over 1,200 miles through northern Japan. This trip was commemorated in both memoir and verse in his most famous work, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.
- Bashō sought solace in Zen meditation. Trying to erase his personality, he strove to simply be and see the scene in front of him. Through his Zen practice he entered a calm, visionary state.
- Bashō practiced *haikai no renga*, or “comic-linked verse,” a genre derived from satire and puns. He raised the genre from an aristocratic game of wit to a truly artistic pursuit. His role in elevating and transforming the newly popular *haikai* played a significant role in giving birth to modern haiku. Today haiku is one of the most well-known and often-practiced forms of poetry worldwide.

IV. About Haiku

- *Haiku* is a Japanese poem traditionally comprised of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables that create a single, memorable image. For many, haiku is more than poetry; it is a way of life. Deceptively simple, in three short lines it sets a scene and then delivers a surprise. This surprise is usually an insight, image, or comment that casts a new light on the previous lines.
- Essential to the structure of haiku is the “cutting word,” or *kireji*, which divides the poem in two. It acts as a disruption and implies a relationship between what comes before it and what comes after, oftentimes juxtaposing the two. *Ya* (や) is one of seven common *kireji* used in Japanese haiku. *Ya* (や) is derived from a Chinese character meaning “this.”
- The roots of haiku can be traced as far back as the Heian period (794–1185) when nobles at court played at creating long-linked poems, or *renga*, in a group. A single poet began a “link” with a particular theme, and others improvised responses, one by one, in short verses that altered and expanded upon the theme. In the courts of the day, there was an acute fascination with verse that was concise in description, full of understatement rich with suggestion, and composed by more than one poet. Typical topics included love, youth, life, vanished summers, and explorations of nature. Haiku came about as poets began to compose the opening verses of *renga* as stand-alone poems.
- Writing haiku involves acute attention to the rhythm and sound of poetry, and requires a vast store of synonyms in order to be as concise and precise as possible. The translation and composition of this form teaches students to manipulate words and syntax, moving beyond basic sentences to more sophisticated, thoughtful, and succinct modes of expression.

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