In 1693, Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō went into hiding for two months, locking his door to all visitors. On his motivation for this self-imposed isolation, he wrote: “…if anyone comes, I have to make unnecessary talk. If I go out to visit anyone, I feel bad for disturbing him. I should be content without any friends. I should feel wealthy in spite of my poverty. A fifty-year-old man writes this for himself as precept for his edification” (Reichhold 203). Outside his hut, he posted the following haiku:

*asagaoya hiru wa jō orosu mon no kaki*

Morning glories—
at noon, fastening the lock…

entry’s gate

(Reichhold 370)

The *haiku* reflects a theme in Bashō’s work: a tension between his desire to commune with the egoless world of nature, and to be in proximity with humanity. At the time of composition, Bashō was fifty years old and living at the edges of the bustling capital city of Edo. His literary reputation was formidable. Having spent the balance of his life perfecting the art of *haiku*, he was known and respected as an ascetic, traveling poet. He was constantly on the road, roaming in coarse sandals with a single pack for necessities, often subsisting on a single meal per day, uncertain about the location of each night’s rest. He was most famous in Edo, which he made a temporary home when he was not traveling. However, he was uncomfortable with the constant social expectations of urban living. In addition to visits from aspiring poets and colleagues seeking his participation in poetry circles or contests, non-poet friends and
acquaintances no doubt came to see him daily, filling his life with the traffic of humanity. It was a far cry from the peaceful, ascetic life he led on his frequent travels.

It was probably this constant traffic which compelled him to lock himself away for a month, leaving a terse *haiku* for would-be visitors. Scholar Makoto Ueda describes Bashō’s situation as such: “He had become a poet in order to transcend worldly involvements, but now he found himself deeply involved in worldly affairs precisely because of his poetic fame. The solution was either to renounce being a poet or to stop seeing people altogether” (Ueda 33). For a time, Bashō appears to have chosen the latter. The *haiku* cited earlier expresses his desire for isolation with startling force. It begins with the exclamatory grammar of “morning glories” *asagao ya* 薄や, though the exclamation is not one of surprise; Bashō was familiar with the morning glory’s transient beauty, the early bloom curling away from advancing daylight. Instead, the exclamation in the interjective particle *ya* や implies Bashō’s desire to identify with the flower, so much so that he “fastens the lock” *jo orosu* 紺おろす. Locking out the people beyond the fence and readers of the *haiku*, he isolates himself in attempt to commune with morning glories, and poetry, without human interruption. Finally, his inversion of a more typical phrase, “gate’s entry” *kaki no mon* 塀の門, emphasizes the barrier, which is always solid, rather than the entrance, whose character depends on its open or closed state. The *haiku* becomes its own lock, fastening before the reader’s eyes.

As formidable as this lock may be, it seemed to have little affect on Bashō’s unsettled state of mind. Inside the safety of his hut, he wrote the following:

*asagao ya kore mo mata waga tomo narazu*

薄や足も又我が友ならず

morning glories—
even these
are not my friends

(Reichold 370)

The despondent tone suggests isolation from humanity is not what Bashō sought, though at one point he may have believed it was the solution. What, then, was the cause of Bashō’s dissatisfaction? In what human conundrum did he dwell?

*UFLR 2011*
The act of dwelling, as Bashō performed it, is steeped in shades of meaning, such as ‘to dwell,’ sumu 住む or to reside, as he did, in a small hut at the city’s edge. It also implies the various humble structures in which he lived: yado 宿家 kusa no to 草の戸, and sumika 居。It speaks to his tendency to ‘dwell’ psychologically, to exist in a given state, a non-physical location he poetically mapped and remapped throughout his life. It certainly means ‘to dwell,’ or fasten one’s attention, as his poetic attention constantly clung to pine trees, to sudden rain, and to the silences around sound. In haiku, his vision appears spontaneous, while his haibun, or prose-poetry hybrids, tend to draw out scenes with deliberation. In either form, Bashō, perpetually caught between the egoless world of nature and social world of humans, makes both explicit and implicit references to the concept of ‘dwelling.’ It is through these dwellings that we may find our way into this late-life solitude, to unravel this period of closure and frustration, when even poetry acted as a kind of barrier. It is also the means by which we will find our way out.

Among Bashō’s dwelling-themed haiku, one of the most significant is also the origin of his penname. Called Matsuo Kinsaku in his youth (Ueda 20), he developed several pen names when he began writing under the tutelage of then-notable poet, Kitamura Kigin (Keene, The Narrow Road to Oku 5). After moving from his hometown to the capital city, the young poet slowly built up his literary reputation (Keene, The Narrow Road to Oku 5). By 1681, under the name Sōbō, he had dabbled in local publications and competitions, acquiring a small but devoted following (Ueda 19). That year, one of his disciples planted a bashō, or banana tree, in the small garden outside the poet’s humble shack (Ueda 19). The shack soon became known as the Bashō-an, or Cottage of the Bashō Tree, (Keene, The Narrow Road to Oku 5). Not long after the plant’s arrival, the resident poet wrote the following haiku:

bashō nowaki shite ame ni tarai wo kiku yo kana
芭蕉野分して雨に盈を聞く夜かな

storm-torn banana tree—
listening to night rain
fall in a basin

(Reichold 258)
The *bashō* is a delicate, non fruit-bearing plant with broad green leaves. It has a hardy tropical silhouette, but the leaves are fragile. On the occasion of this *haiku*, as the poet sits at home, a storm ravages the tree, and the whipping wind and rain batters his small home. The storm ekes in through a leaky roof, the sound of rainwater splashing into a tub which he has placed on the floor. It is this combination of sounds and moods—a storm stripping the leaves of his banana tree, the steady drops of water in a tub, and the relative quiet of the hut’s interior—that compels him to write. Eventually the resident took on the plant’s name, and the poet, Bashō, was born.

This *haiku* marks the period in which Bashō took on the name for which he would be known for centuries. More importantly, it reveals a crucial tension in his work and world view. He is moved by the delicacy of the banana tree, the futility of his hut—already collapsing under the weight of nature’s irresistible presence—and yet here he sits, enjoying a modicum of warmth and safety. In this contrast of external destruction and interior calm, it is the steady drip of rainwater into a tub that hones his awareness. Man-made, natural, and poetic worlds coalesce in the variegated sounds of evening, allowing him to live fully within the moment without being overwhelmed by any of its disparate aspects. He is simultaneously full of emotion and devoid of it, having recognized a moment of harmony that evaporates even as it is named.

Bashō often evokes moments of confluence among disparate elements, but it is the way he evokes such confluence in the context of human dwellings that reveals his deep ambivalence with the social world. Consider the following *haiku*, which Bashō hung on the post of another Edo hut, just before departing on a journey that led him to write his seminal travel journal, *The Narrow Road to Oku, Oku no hosomichi* 奥の細道:

*Kusa no to mo sumikawaru yo zo hina no ie*

草の戸も住かはる代ぞ雛の家

even this grass hut
changes with new residents—
house of dolls

(Reichold 316)

*UFLR 2011*
This “grass hut” Kusa no to is a humble reference to Bashō’s own home, another rustic dwelling, which, upon his departure from the city, he sold to a man with a wife and children. Thus, “the time for changing occupants” sumikawaru yo is a transition from Bashō’s solitary life to a family life with children. “House of dolls” Hina no ie reveals that at least one of the new occupants is a young girl, and in her honor, the family will set out dolls on the third day of the third month, a ritual of the Girls’ Festival. The shift here is two-fold: from single to many, as the number of occupants multiply, and from internal to external, as Bashō becomes newly aware of the hut which he took for granted as a solitary dwelling. Seeing evidence of its new occupants, he is startled by a vision of this familiar space filling with unfamiliar life. There is a sense of befuddled wonder in this poem, as if Bashō, head-shaking, wonders at his ability to forget that even his own four walls are subject to the whims of time.

Interestingly, it is only on the occasion of his parting that Bashō truly appreciates the bustle of human life. He prefaces the haiku with a prose passage on past and future wanderings which seized his imagination, rendering him unable to work in his small hut. In an excerpt from the passage, translated by Donald Keene, Bashō writes:

“The months and days are the travelers of eternity. The years that come and go are also voyagers. Those who float away their lives on ships or who grow old leading horses are forever journeying, and their homes are wherever their travels take them” (19).

In the final line, Bashō’s use of tabi o sumika to su, literally “to make travel one’s home,” reflects his longing to abandon the domestic structures of social life. Thinking of the places he has been and the places he yearns to see, he is overtaken by restlessness, by dissatisfaction with his sedentary hut-life. Too contained, he is compelled to leave his human abode. And yet, by deciding to distance himself from the bustling world—a world of man-made structures, neighbors, families, and social rituals—he begins to notice its particular qualities. Divestiture of this hut allows him to see his familiar, burdensome dwelling as something new and inspiring, as a structure of shifting definitions. Simultaneously, the unknown family becomes familiar, their rituals become tangible in this moment of passing. As Bashō moves out and the family moves in, an imaginative space is shared.
And yet, ever uncomfortable with the social world, Bashō depicts the human figure, the family’s young girl, through implication for three reasons. First, the significance of the Doll Festival was widely known, thus Bashō uses its symbols to convey a wealth of information in five syllables. Second, the use of dolls creates a more sophisticated aesthetic than the straightforward presence of a young girl. Through symbolism, Bashō not only encompasses the girl and her family, but also her growth over time and the attendant celebratory rituals. But most importantly, Bashō’s use of dolls allows him to contemplate the family from a comfortable distance. Just as his appreciation is sharpened by the knowledge of his imminent departure, his awareness of the family is filtered through symbolic imaginings rather than real interactions. It is as if he appreciates the human world best at the periphery.

Conversely, his travel haiku evoke a sense of ease, as if his burdens have been lifted. Consider the following:

hitotsu nuide sena ni oikeri koromogae

removing one layer
and tossing it over my back—
the season’s new outfit

(Reichold 300)

As he does in the previous haiku, Bashō employs a well-known human ritual, koromogae 衣がへ, a “seasonal change of clothes.” The ritual involves changing kimono on the first day of the fourth or tenth month (Benesse 560). In Bashō’s case, he is transitioning to summer attire, but rather than observing an elaborate ritual, he creates his own, merely removing one layer and tossing it over his shoulder. The ease with which he sheds a single layer suggests his comfort with having only the minimum material goods, accompanied by only the briefest ritual nods. Making travel his home, he delights in the freedom of this lighter state of being. He expresses a similar joy in the beginning of Genjūan no ki幻住庵の記, translated by Keene as “Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling”: “In this hut where I live as a hermit, as a passing traveler, there is no need to accumulate household possessions” すべて山居といひ旅宿と云ひさる器貯ふべくも無し (Anthology of Japanese Literature 375). The phrase which Keene translates as “to accumulate household possessions” utsuwa.
tamau 器貯ふ implies the various goods one accumulates in a permanent house—dishware, tools, decorations, cleaning implements, and furniture. Unhampered by frivolous property, Bashō’s sense of freedom is grammatically emphatic. The sentiment is framed by “no need for...any” subete...nashiすべて...無し, creating a sense that a burden is thrown off, as does the doubly emphasizing beku mo べくも, which indicates a complete lack of obligation. Like his make-shift “seasonal change of clothes” koromogae 衣がへ, this phantom dwelling allows Bashō to subvert the structures and rituals of the human world. He casts off what is unnecessary and retains only the bare bones, conscious of himself as an eccentric outside societal conventions. His closing paragraph indicates as much:

“But I should not have it thought from what I have said that I am devoted to solitude and seek only to hide my traces in the wilderness. Rather, I am like a sick man weary of people, or someone who is tired of the world. What is there to say? I have not led a clerical life, nor have I served in normal pursuits. Ever since I was very young I have been fond of my eccentric ways, and once I had come to make them the source of a livelihood, temporarily I thought, I discovered myself bound for life to the one line of my art, incapable and talentless as I am. I labor without results, am worn of spirit and wrinkled of brow. Now, when autumn is half over, and every morning and each evening brings changes to the scene, I wonder if that is not what is meant by dwelling in unreality. And here too I end my words” (Keene, Anthology of Japanese Literature 376).

Like his contemplation of the symbolic dolls, his Unreal Dwelling tangles the symbols of solitude and society in their ideal point of confluence: the human residence and its various domestic implements. In this physical dwelling Bashō sees himself as one among many humans. Though he shuns permanent residence, it is the absence of domestic tools within a comfortable domestic space which allows him to take pleasure in his humble dwelling, to accept a measure of his fragile humanity.

Just as he uses the domestic emptiness of the unreal dwelling to highlight human vulnerability and transience, Bashō brings attention to the fragility of interior spaces in all his dwelling-themed haiku and haibun. Like the leaking roof in “storm-torn banana tree—” bashō nowaki shite 芭蕉野分して, he notices another leak in the following:

harusame ya hachi no su tsutau yane no mori
春雨や蜂の巣つたふ屋ねの漏り

UFLR 2011
spring rain—
along a bee’s nest
the leaking roof

(Reichold 379)

As he does in his banana tree *haiku*, Bashō emphasizes the fragility of human dwellings, this time through the visual juxtaposition of nature: rainfall trickling down the bee’s nest, and its fractured human shelter. Again, Bashō’s admiration for nature’s supremacy is enhanced by his rediscovery of the necessary and breakable structures of human society. The tenuous relationship between interior spaces and the vulnerable human body, which Bashō highlights in the previous *haiku* from an interior perspective, is even more powerfully felt in the following, exterior *haiku*:

*ikameshiki oto ya arare no hinoki kasa*
いかめしき音や霰の檜木笠

how unrelenting—
sounds of hail
on my cypress hat

(Reichold 272)

The severe sound of hail pounding down on Bashō’s hat is emphasized by the mimetic use of language, hard *ks* striking the ear just as hail strikes the wooden hat. The sound is daunting, but unlike the cracked roofs of Bashō’s semi-permanent residences, the hat does not leak. By limiting himself to protection of the body, Bashō succeeds in dwelling safely while maintaining mobility, avoiding the restrictions of a roof and four walls. Even the severity of sound is cause for rejoicing, as it is a testament to nature’s immediacy. In “storm-torn banana tree” *bashō nowaki* 芭蕉野分 and “spring rain” *harusame ya* 春雨や, the forces of nature are channeled through human structures into small, sensory experiences—the sound of droplets in a tub, the trace of water along a bee’s nest—while here, Bashō and the hailstorm are separated only by a thin margin. Unlike his two interior *haiku*, where the human is represented symbolically by a cracked roof, the emotional and aural effect of the “unrelenting sound” *ikameshiki oto ya* いかめしき音や brings human
vulnerability to the forefront. Yet, like his haiku depicting a seasonal change of clothes, the relatively slim separation between human ritual and the broader natural world seems to bring the poet a sense of vitality. In the former haiku, he evokes vitality through the motion of tossing a layer over his shoulder. Similarly, he evokes vitality through the sharp juxtaposition of his protected head and the sudden hail storm. Caught beneath an icy deluge, the poet’s dry, human head is reduced to mere sound, as the poet becomes an element of the natural world. It is in such moments of communion with nature that Basho’s haiku achieve this heightened sense of life, as if the freedom from social mores and structures has loosened something of the poet’s fundamental spirit: limited, solitary, humbled by nature and happy to be so.

This is not to say that Basho shunned all forms of human relationship. Indeed, he had close friends and disciples, and those relationships gave him great pleasure. But his friendships were not with common folk. Basho’s friendships were based in scholarship, in a common love of poetry and an indifference to material life (Ueda 117). And though Basho references such people in some of his haibun (Ueda 115) his friends and traveling companions are rarely mentioned in haiku. Even when they do appear, it is usually through symbolic rather than realistic depictions. Take the following two haiku:

*hamaguri no futami ni wakare yuku aki zo*

parting two halves
of a clam shell—
the passing autumn

*waga yado wa ka no chiisaki wo chiso kana*

in my home even
the mosquitoes are small—
feasts for a guest

(Reichold 333)

The first poem laments both the passing of autumn and Basho’s departure from a friend, whose separation he likens to the parting of two

*UFLR 2011*
parts of a clam. In the second, Bashō is delighted by a friend’s visit, and humorously reflects on the meager offering for his guest, small mosquitoes rather than a lavish feast. Neither haiku refers directly to the poem’s other figure, though both arise from Bashō’s interaction with a person with which he feels a sense of kinship. Bashō seems most inspired by friends in transitional states of arrival and departure. Though he had a companion for at least two of his long journeys, his companion rarely appears in haiku depicting those travels. Somehow, the steady presence of others, even intimate friends, did not move Bashō to poetry. Like the leak which brought his attention to the juxtaposition of storm, hut, and plant, and like the cypress hat which brought his attention to the juxtaposition of hail and body, it is the passage of friendships in and out of his life that spurs Bashō to see himself in context with others.

Thus, when he first returned to Edo in 1691, he may have welcomed the clamor of the city, having long been away from friendships and neighborhoods, from the rituals which bind people together. But after dwelling two years in a state of constant traffic, he became frustrated. Unable to reject a life of poetry, and equally unable to wholly embrace the human world, he locked himself away. But that too was unsuccessful, and he was forced to adapt his sense of aesthetics. Previously devoted to the principle of sabi寂, or “elegant simplicity,” the poet now found himself moving toward karumi軽み, a “lightness” which made the crossing of worlds more bearable, even pleasurable. Take, for example, this tactile haiku:

*hiya hiya to kabe o fumaete hirune kana*

ひやひやと壁をふまえて昼寝哉

chilly coolness
my feet on the wall
for a midday nap

(Reichold 388)

Written at a friend’s house, the haiku presents Bashō as a reclined figure, enjoying his own bare feet against the wall’s cool surface. The poem holds none of his earlier ambivalence for human structures, as the poet, in the summer before his death, considers this interior space without a longing for the natural world. Rather, as he ages, his appreciation for the comfort and safety of human dwellings deepens. Even his previous

*UFLR 2011*
longing to make travel his dwelling dissipates, as the following *haiku* demonstrates:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kono michi ya yuku hito nashi ni aki no kure} \\
この道や行く人なしに秋の暮
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
on this road \\
no one travels— \\
autumn’s end
\end{align*}
\]

(Reichold 393)

Written weeks before his death, the road he refers to is probably metaphorical, but Bashō’s life-long habit of traveling gives this poem multiple layers. In his previous travels, he sought solitude, and any fear of death or loneliness was balanced by an appreciation for nature, for the Zen Buddhist experience of dissolution of self. But here, the poet is painfully aware that his journey toward death is solitary, and that lack becomes a rare, explicit reference to human context.

Bashō explicitly references humans in the following *haiku* as well, also written shortly before his death:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{aki fukashi tonari wa nani wo suru hito zo} \\
秋ふかし隣はなにをする人ぞ
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
deep autumn… \\
what do the neighbors \\
do for a living?
\end{align*}
\]

(Reichold 393)

Ueda characterizes this haiku in the same vein as “morning glories—” *asagao ya* 葉や, as a nihilistic lament on the isolation of man: “Even next door neighbors do not know each other; their lives are completely separate” (61). According to Ueda, this lack of communication sends Bashō deeper into disillusionment. But seen in the context of Bashō’s earlier dwellings, the *haiku* takes on a more nuanced light. His previous *haiku* about dwellings sought to subsume the human condition beneath the greater, transient power of nature. But near death, writing again within a home, Bashō contemplates not the structure’s fragility, but the people next door. Autumn depth implies a richness of color, the onset of cold
weather, and slow death in the natural world. Amid this wealth of natural inspiration, Bashō dwells in mysteries of the human world. Perhaps he sees smoke rising from the house, or catches a glimpse of one of the residents. In most other haiku featuring people, implication stands in for the human, but here, and in the previous “deep autumn…” *aki fukashi* 秋ふかし, he uses a direct reference, the ideograph *hito* 人.

Through this ideograph, the human gains physical form. What separates Bashō from these mysterious forms are the walls of human houses. Those barriers, which Bashō so frequently used to emphasize the natural world, have become a bittersweet separation from the human world. Old and frail, Bashō relies on the safety of human structures more than ever, but rather than lamenting his separation from nature, he longs to know about the people beyond the walls of his poetic dwelling. Ultimately, this was his conundrum. Poetry, his means of connecting the human and natural worlds, was also his barrier to a more permanent human dwelling.

Notes

1 Though informed by previous scholars, all translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

References


