



Before he was Basho

Born outside of Kyoto, Matsuo Kinsaku was the son of a low-ranking Samurai. Little is known of his early years. However, after writing verse as a child, Matsuo moved to Edo (present-day Tokyo) where he worked towards establishing himself as a writer. He quickly became a central figure in the burgeoning literary scene of Edo, writing numerous hundred-verse renkus (with another poet), presiding over haiku contests and producing anthologies of verse.

By the age of 34 Matsuo was recognized as a master and a circle of poets began to form around him. Ironically, it was at this time Matsuo began to recede from the scene. He moved to modest dwellings — a gamekeepers hut — outside of town. It was there that he received an unexpected gift that changed him: One of his students gave him a banana tree, or basho. The banana tree is a broad-leaved plant that tends to dwarf other plants around it. It also was an exotic tree, uncommon to Japan.

Perhaps for these reasons, from that point on, Matsuo (who had used other pen names before) became known simply as Basho. Every hut he inhabited the rest of his life included a basho tree and he often traveled carrying one with him.

Basho's studies began to widen, encompassing much Chinese literature. He also shaved his head and began work as a lay-monk. He developed a love for solitude and it was then that his true poetic form began to present itself. He began to combine his influences, particularly the traditional forms of Japanese poetry with Zen-inspired aesthetics.

Much is known of his life as a poet as his followers took care to record as much about Basho as they could. They sensed his mastery. And in the last nine years of his life he experienced his most fertile period as a poet.

During this period, he also began his period of life on the road. He gave up virtually all his possessions and took to the countryside of Japan. He kept records of his travels in what he called his "sketchbooks". These included everything from direct recordings of the day's events, to haiku composed along the way, to fictionalized stories that he thought of as he traveled.

Basho achieved a realization during his travels, a satori where he sensed muga, which is the elimination of the self and the absorption of the self into what one is writing about. Of course, the master himself put it best.

One of his disciples, Doho, wrote: "The master said, 'Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo stalk from a bamboo stalk.'"

Basho taught that the poet should always detach the mind from the self and enter the object, "sharing its delicate life and feelings."

Each time Basho set off on a pilgrimage he would sell all he had, fully expecting that each trip would be his last. He referred to it as setting off into eternity. But each time he returned safely, with sketchbooks full of newly composed haiku and travel stories. And each time he returned his disciples would provide him with a home that included basho trees planted in the garden.

In 1694, Basho truly set off into eternity, this time on a trip to Japan's southwestern provinces. He grew gravely ill shortly into his trip and died of dysentery at the ripe old age of 50. He was buried in a temple at Otsu overlooking the lake he loved to gaze at, Lake Biwa.

This was his final haiku, written for the friends he was staying with at the time of his death:

*Sick on a journey -
Over parched fields
Dreams wander on*

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