

芭蕉

MATSUO BASHŌ

JAPAN (1644–1694)

LANGUAGE: JAPANESE

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
む			
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 \_\_\_\_\_

# MAKE IT FLOW

Now it's time to think about:

- FORM: Do you want your translation to follow the same form? Will it have the same number of lines and stanzas?
- SOUND: Which sounds stand out to you in the original? Will your translation sound similar? Is that important to you?
- SYNTAX: This means the word order. Word order changes across languages, so you may need to rearrange words so that the poem “flows” in English. Read your translation aloud. Does it sound natural to you? Read it aloud as a group. What do your group members think?

Remember that you can't possibly capture every aspect of the original language, and you can't avoid adding something in the new language.

[illegible]

## REFLECTING AND FINDING MEANING

Group Member Names:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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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?

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

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

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## 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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