

Farewell Haiku of Bashō and Chiyoni

Richard Tice

Haiku¹ used to have a highly social function. Before the twentieth century most were written at social gatherings or at times of greeting and departing, and either the host or guest or both would create haiku for each other. Such poems were called *aisatsu hokku*, a haiku of salutation, or greeting, often given as a gift to a visitor (Donegan and Ishibashi 68-70). Generally cheerful and complimentary, the haiku affirmed life. In contrast, another social haiku was written only once, the *jisei hokku*. Traditionally, Buddhist monks and many poets left a *jisei*, a farewell poem to life, created on one's deathbed by the poet and recorded by a follower or friend. These were usually composed as *kanshi* (poems written in Chinese), *waka* (two lines of 5-7-5/7-7) or *hokku*. Unlike most haiku, which generally convey emotion and meaning through objective observation, *jisei hokku* were often very personal and poignant (Hoffman 27-28). Following in the tradition of writing *jisei*, Bashō and Chiyoni, the foremost male and female haiku poets of Japan, bequeathed two of their most memorable poems, one last legacy to their followers.

Matsuo Bashō (1644-94)

In the fall of 1694, Bashō traveled from Edo to Ueno in central Japan. From Ueno he decided to visit Ōsaka, only forty miles away, to reconcile his two Ōsaka disciples, who frequently quarreled. Although only fifty years old, he struggled to complete the short journey and became ill by the time he arrived. Despite chills and fever, Bashō participated in a few short poetry excursions and small gatherings, but finally he

became so sick that his disciples moved him to a room rented from a florist. News of his illness spread, and many of his disciples traveled to be with him. Kikaku, perhaps Bashō's most famous disciple, arrived by accident, not knowing that his teacher was ill. He was the one who wrote a moving account of the master's last hours, *Kareobana* [*Withered Pampas Grass*, 1694], using the image of the withered fields of Bashō's last haiku (Keene 118-19, 123).

Late at night on November 25, Bashō called his student Donshū and dictated his *jisei*:

旅に病んで夢は枯れ野を駆け巡る。

tabi ni yande yume wa karen o kakemeguru

fallen ill on the journey...dreams weave through desolate fields

tr. Richard Tice

After a short time, he recited another haiku, this time in Shikō's presence, but Bashō's voice was so weak that Shikō could not understand the first line. Because Bashō seemed too sick to speak, Shikō did not ask him to repeat, so unfortunately the first part remains unknown. The two lines were:

“... なお駆け巡る夢心”

(... nao kakemeguru yumegokoro)

(continuing to roam about, my dreaming mind).

Bashō asked Shikō which he preferred; Shikō replied, “How could your first hokku be inferior to any verse?” (Ueda 413; translation Ueda). Four days later Bashō passed away.

Bashō's *jisei* is both a poem of sorrow and hope. The poet has fallen ill on a journey, and now only his dreams seem to travel, wandering aimlessly through desolate fields. The poet's loss of control is suggested by the six-syllable line (*ta-bi ni ya-n-de*), which exceeds the standard five syllables, and the word

kakemeguru, which means wandering aimlessly or wandering around in circles. The season is winter (season word = *kareno*, dry empty fields), so the illness is heightened. The season, the illness, and the withered fields all suggest impending death. *Tabi* [travel, trip] is a pivot word, a word that opens up a poem to multiple meanings. The trip to Ōsaka can also be the journey he has taken throughout his life, but he has fallen ill—the last illness ending in death. The form his life has taken has begun to break down, and even his dreams wander beyond him. But though Bashō has broken down, at least the dreams continue, however out of control. There is even a suggestion, a kind of hope, that his dreams, particularly his greatest dream of following the way of haiku, might continue, even if they leave his body by the roadside.

Kaga no Chiyojo (1703-75)

Kaga no Chiyojo [Chiyo, a woman of the Kaga region] was the only woman before 1900 to attain national fame and a master's status as a haiku poet. She became a haiku student at the early age of twelve, and by seventeen came to the attention of Shikō, Bashō's disciple above who became her teacher (Donegan and Ishibashi 28, 30). She enjoyed enormous popularity both during and after her life despite the fact that haiku was primarily a male activity. Most men and perhaps many women during the Edo period (1603-1876) felt that women were too emotional and uneducated to write good haiku (writing haiku supposedly required an extensive knowledge of classical Japanese and Chinese literature), and Chiyojo and her haiku, despite their renown, have also been severely and extensively criticized (Blythe 1:207; Donegan and Ishibashi 68-69, 74, 231-32).

Chiyojo's life was not easy—she experienced the early deaths of her husband, a child,¹ her parents, her brother, and her

¹ There is an ongoing debate about whether Chiyo actually ever married and had a child from that marriage (Donegan and Ishibashi 31-32; Tsuneishi 354).

brother's wife, and she had to run the family's scroll-making business alone for many years. At age fifty-two she finally renounced the world and took Buddhist vows in the *Jōdo Shinshū* [Pure Land] sect, adding the suffix *ni* [nun] to her name.² Today, most know her as Chiyoni, rather than her names before she became a nun. Already a renowned haiku poet, she chose the way of haiku as her path to enlightenment, a practice allowed in her sect (Donegan and Ishibashi 35, 41-43, 60; Tsuneishi 354-55). During the final years of her life, Chiyoni's health failed, and she was cared for by her closest friend and disciple Suejo and her adopted son Haku. Chiyoni died in November 1775, age 72, but a few days before her death she composed her *jisei*, written down by an unknown scribe (Donegan and Ishibashi 38-40, 60, 190; Hoffman 152). Her final parting haiku is

月も見て我はこの世をかしく哉。

tsuki mo mite ware wa kono yo o kashiku kana

looking also at the moon I write to this world “yours truly”

tr. Richard Tice

The *jisei* is cast as a letter, correspondence to the world—women used the personal pronoun *ware* [I] in their letters and ended them with the word *kashiku*, a word like “yours truly.” The *ku* starts with *tsuki* [moon], a Buddhist symbol for detachment and enlightenment, setting the season as fall, and thus anticipating the coming winter, or death. *Mo* [also] tells us that the moon viewing is in addition to all else that she is doing and has done (Donegan and Ishibashi 190). The poem communicates her farewell to a world she loves, resonating with a poignant irony, a longing for spiritual detachment but an unwillingness to forgo, even one last time, an experience of beauty. The moon both keeps her in the world but takes her out of it—a fitting way to say good-bye.

² Her Buddhist name was Soen [Simple Garden]; she apparently used either Soen or Chiyoni to sign her poems.

Many other well-known haiku poets, including the masters Buson, Issa, and Shiki, wrote *jisei*, sometimes in anticipation of their future deaths, but unfortunately English readers don't have easy access to the poems. Sometimes readers can find them in articles and biographies of individual poets. Yoel Hoffman's book on Japanese death poems has the broadest coverage and focus and may be the only book-length work in English covering numerous *jisei*. Readers with access to the *ProQuest Combined* database can access the specialized dissertation *Japanese Tokkō Soldiers and Their Jisei* by Mayumi Ito. For shorter works, readers can try to find Ogawa Kiyoko and Ogawa Tadashi's "A Short Study of *Jisei* (Swan Songs)," which examines several *jisei waka* and Shiki's *jisei haiku* (three of them) in depth. More easily accessible, though limited in scope, are Chris Kincaid's article "*Jisei*: The Japanese Death Poem" and Gabi Greve's blog "Dead Body (*hotoke*)," available online.

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