

Ripples

old pond/frog jumps in/ water's sound --Basho (1686)

From that verse on, Basho said, each verse was written as if his last. Presumably he meant that partly as a joke, playing with the difference between “last poem” as a genre (a kind of epitaph composed in advance) & the *last* poem written. In each case, Basho disappears into the experience that gives rise to the poem. He’s not standing back making some generalization, but first & foremost just reporting *what is*. Usually that means a place (*old pond*), a time (*that moment*) & a direct perception (*the water-sound*).

Perceiver, perception, & what is perceived become one at that intersection. The moment stands apart from time, as well as within it, like an Ansel Adams mountain face—on the one hand, *just what is at that instant, from that point of view*; on the other, *wow!* Hands clap. Wings of the mindful heart, the empathic mind, catch updrafts. Not that experience is always joyful.

Moments of immersion in experience come in all flavors, for example. On the one hand, the art only embodies, reflects, & reports; on the other, it can provide some values added, from momentary escape in craft to a transformation that goes on resonating long after the poet. On the one hand, Basho disappears into the experience; on the other, he resonates all the more across time, space & circumstance.

The disappearance of the self in a momentary artistic &/or meditative union with nature directly perceived can look like that ultimate disappearance of the self in union with the original nature that cast it into its current form to begin with. One doesn’t need to think of death, or intentionally allude to it. The surrender of the self is part of the art’s objective, at least for an artist like Basho, most himself at one with land & nature, not in the abstract but in the direct experience.

For some years, it was believed his actual last poem went something like,
on a journey, ill/ through withered fields, my restless dream/ goes wandering still.

It wasn’t his last, however. The following came after, but since he wasn’t at the Kiyotaki Falls at the time, it was more or less dismissed as “a revision” of something written earlier. More recently, scholars have reconsidered, & acknowledged it as his last written poem—

kiyotaki ya/ namu ni chiri komu/ ao mastuba
clear cascades/ into the current falling/ green pine tips

Note that at the very end, Basho’s family name, *Matsuo* (pine) joins with the *ba* (leaf) of his pen-name *Basho*. He didn’t have to be at the geographic falls for his words to offer an accurate rendering of his inner experience at that time. It was said that he woke one more time, with one more last poem, but was urged back to sleep to conserve his strength, so his *last* last poem was never spoken (or at least heard & written down).

As Gita wrote recently in the log-book at Inspiration, “And since the plane was leaving, the last last words were never spoken....” In my version of Basho, the wandering spirit of poetry goes on inspiring fresh last poems wherever people tune into original nature.

rickety old bridge
my shadow falls through
without a splash --Gita (2015)

[The *Hai!* page at www.bodlibrary.com has more in this vein, & www.bodlibrary.info has more Basho.]