

The Haiku of Basho

Matsuo Basho was born in 1644 near Kyoto, Japan. As a boy, he was already interested in poetry, and in his twenties he studied extensively with notable teachers of literature in Kyoto. He was acknowledged as a master of haiku by the time he was about thirty years old. During the last ten years of his life, Basho traveled a great deal, making pilgrimages alone or with companions. On these trips, he visited famous places of Japan and met with other poets. He died during one of his pilgrimages, at the age of fifty. The following is a small sampling of Basho's haiku.

Ballet in the air . . .

Twin butterflies

until, twice white

they meet, they mate

(Page 9)

For a lovely bowl

let us arrange these

flowers . . .

Since there is no rice

(Page 10)

Seek on high bare trails

sky-reflecting

violets . . .

Mountain-top jewels

(Page 9)

April's air stirs in

willow-leaves

A butterfly

floats and balances

(Page 11)

Now that eyes of hawks

in dusky night

are darkened . . .

Chirping of the quails

(Page 10)

In the sea-surf edge

mingling with

bright small shells

Bush-clover petals

(Page 12)



The river

gathering May rains

from cold streamlets

for the sea . . .

Murmuring Mogami

(Page 12)

White cloud of mist

above white

cherry-blossoms

Dawn-shining mountains

(Page 13)

*(Editor's note: The Mogami is a
river in Japan.)*

(The haiku on this handout are taken from *Japanese Haiku: Two Hundred Twenty Examples of Seventeen-Syllable Poems*, translated by Peter Beilenson [Mount Vernon, NY: The Peter Pauper Press]. Copyright © 1955–1956 by the Peter Pauper Press.)

