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  .  .  .                     For a lovely bowl
Twin butterflies                                let us arrange these
until, twice white                                flowers  .  .  .
they meet, they mate                                Since there is no rice

(Page 9)                                           (Page 10)

Seek on high bare trails                        April’s air stirs in
sky-reflecting                                    willow-leaves
violets  .  .  .                                     A butterfly
Mountain-top jewels                               floats and balances

(Page 9)                                           (Page 11)

Now that eyes of hawks                           In the sea-surf edge
in dusky night                                    mingling with
are darkened  .  .  .                               bright small shells
Chirping of the quails                            Bush-clover petals

(Page 10)                                           (Page 12)
The river

gathering May rains
from cold streamlets
for the sea . . .
Murmuring Mogami

White cloud of mist
above white
cherry-blossoms
Dawn-shining mountains

(Page 12) (Page 13)

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

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