Iron Road to the Deep North of Japan

by Martin Sprott

1

I had to get lost to find my way to the north of Japan. Deliberately and thoroughly lost among the vertiginous buildings of downtown Tokyo. It was at night, when the air between the gigantic buildings hung still, caught in the second between inhaling and exhaling, the city catching its breath. Dust motes froze, lit in cadaverous white pillars by the advertising screens and strobe lights that threw images of soap bars, coke bottles and cherry trees twenty stories up into the sky.

Looking for a map and directions to unlose myself with I passed through intricately connected tunnels above and below ground, all the time swept along by a crowd as in a hive. The first two shops with books that I found were bursting, chaotic places. Pink, purple, yellow, and red manga comics were stacked in piles from floor to ceiling and heaped in bargain bins. The male clientele stood reading in front of the stacks, barely moving. Neither place had anything as mundane as a map. The third shop was a booming, music-with-a-few-books store housed in a metal building with ceilings and doors so low that I was ducking my head at each turn. The lift was broken so I climbed the stairs listening to the different types of music that pulsed out from each level and blended into each other at every turn of the staircase. I found the books collecting dust on a rack at the back of the eleventh floor and among them, the most dust encrusted of all, a guide to Japan, of sorts.

It was the travel diaries of the poet Basho. In the light from sickening neon lamps, inside and cavorting adverts outside, I read about this diminutive monk, master poet and sometime water works clerk. He made several journeys around seventeenth century Japan making pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines and visiting Japan's most beautiful scenery. He was following in the footsteps of other master poets, particularly Saigyo who wrote and travelled around Japan in the 11th century. Travel was also a means to enlightenment for Basho. Restricting himself to what fitted into a small backpack he reduced his life to the essential, freeing himself from distraction. On the road and on return he wrote of his experiences in travel journals that were a heady mix of prose and haiku.

I still did not know where I was in Tokyo, but I suddenly had the ghost of a plan for the rest of my time in Japan. My backpack had enough space for four books, three T-shirts and a toothbrush so I decided to trace one of the journeys. I chose what Basho called the "Narrow Road to the Deep North," his journey into the northern provinces of Japan. In 1689it was a demanding journey of 1,500 kilometers on foot, using roads notorious for banditry. It took Basho 6 months to return home. I had barely ten days, but also the expansive Japanese railway network as a prop.

2

The following morning I was on the seven am bullet train out of Ueno station. By welcome accident, I was staying in Basho's home district. In his time, Tokyo was called Edo, Ueno was a mere village, and his house was a straw hut under a banana tree. My train rolled out of a Ueno of high-rise

buildings, part of the wave of concrete and steel blocks that swept seamlessly out from the center of Tokyo. Basho set out on a spring day that must have been so fine that it broke his (low) resistance to emotional nature references. He records leaving Ueno in a haze of cherry blossom with a view of Mount Fuji. Lines of people came to bid him farewell. There were people lining the way as I departed too, but they were commuters, arranging themselves in the formidably precise queuing system. If anyone waved or cried, I missed it.

My shark nosed express train carved out of the station and accelerated swiftly as if riding on, well, on metal rails, to two hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. It then stayed at that speed for one hour before reaching the edge of the Tokyo metropolitan area. This was my first overview of the sweep and reach of urban Japan, what I came to think of as 'the machine.' As industrial Japan had blithely leveled the rural paths that Basho had followed, putting in iron roads to the north, so I skipped far too lightly over his first two and a half months on the road. I missed places like Black Hair Mountain, the "Killing Stone" and the Shirakawa Barrier. Most of all, I missed the travel itself, for on his spring journey Basho was walking among fields of wild roses and through fallen blossom so thick that it looked like fields of snow. My consolation was the prospect of seeing Matsushima bay, then and now reportedly one of Japan's most beautiful sights.

3

I stopped just short of Matsushima to visit the Myojin shrine in Shiogama. A highway runs past the station carrying an unbroken stream of traffic. I wandered along it passing one truck sales shop after another, all with identical white vans in their forecourts until, no longer believing that I would find Shiogama's center, or its temple or even a pleasant corner of it, I retreated to the station to ask for directions. The stationmaster waved his hand as if describing the Loch Ness Monster. Three hills away and to the right he seemed to mean and so it was. After a long and undulating walk on the highway in the other direction I found an orange temple gate standing like four proud brushstrokes in the air and going through it I abruptly left the world of strip malls, car sales and repair shops to step onto a wide and nearly sheer staircase up through a pine wood. With each step, the modern world fell further away and I was walking in Basho's footsteps for the first time. At the top, I emerged into the brooding presence of a massive Buddhist temple. Sitting on the last step, I read the account of Basho's visit and felt his time and world lying over mine.

Basho saw this temple soon after its reconstruction in 1604 and he too was carried back in time to the foundation of the temple, "images of five hundred years ago floated before my eyes, and somehow I felt so strange." Little can have changed since his time. I walked around the long hall temple, its roof like a capsized boat, supported by wooden pillars and lowered like a frown. In the courtyard, an ancient tree contorted elaborately around itself, its weight held by stakes like an old man on crutches. I was completely alone there and overwhelmed by the peace and a sense of compressed time.

A map on the temple gate showed a line out of Shiogama across the bay to Matsushima. I had expected to go on by train, but since Basho had crossed the bay using a fishing boat, it seemed right to go by water too. The way to the port led through a supermarket car park, between industrial sheds and out across concrete docks. I was clearly not the only person to have had the idea of following Basho's path, for tourist ferries sailed every half an hour

across the bay to Matsushima. Each boat had a flock of gulls wheeling around the stern for crisps thrown by passengers. Some birds performed loops, wheeling and diving and catching scraps with aerobatic skill, others bullied and snatched from smaller beaks.

The bay is a collection of small, craggy islands with pine trees clinging to the outcrops that could come straight from the imagination of Lewis Carroll. The sort of place that you would expect to find caterpillars perched on top of rocks, their tails wrapped casually around the bases of pine trees while smoking narghile pipes. Shrouded in mist it felt like a bonsai garden at sea. Basho, in a moment of rapture on seeing the sight, is said to have exclaimed, “Matsushima! Ah Matsushima!” I wondered if he would today, for an oil refinery now towers over the bay, its flares visible like winking, orange cat’s eyes. A stream of traffic flows on a highway along the coastline.

Ojima Island is a few meters from the mainland and was inhabited by hermits for centuries. Basho walked around here, moving between the columns of smoke from their fires. I wandered slowly around exploring the remnants of their huts and caves. We both visited the remains of Zen Master Ungo’s hut, but unlike Basho, any feelings of mystery and wonder were undercut by the steady hush-hush of traffic passing on the coastal road. I gave up mourning such poisoned beauty and returned to the mainland.

As in Shiogama, a temple offered itself as an enclave from industry. I approached the temple of Zuiganji along a silent pathway lined by pine trees standing in wide beds of moss. The main hall was another upturned Viking ship, its doors were open so that trees in autumn sprays of gold and red and bronze could be seen in all directions. I stood in front of the temple listening to the sound of the mist dripping from tree branches and considered the tiny, but regular actions that had preserved this peace for over nine hundred years. Plucking the individual blades of grass that raised themselves through the beds of moss, gathering the fallen leaves from the gravel, oiling and repairing the wooden beams of the buildings. Date Masamune, a feudal lord whose legacy is still felt in the northeastern provinces, had rebuilt the temple eighty years before Basho arrived. The golden walls and ornaments that he built into the inner sanctum were just visible through the slats of a closed screen.

With the sunset and the night, drawing in I walked to Matsushimastation, the headlights of cars and trucks on the pathless road looming and swerving, looming and swerving as they saw me. Several kilometers inland was the town and temple complex of Hiraizumi. Basho lost his way on the way here and found himself in the port town of Ishinomaki. Here he saw the first stirrings of industrialization across the bay, “with hundreds of cargo boats thronging the inlet and houses vying for land, smoke from heath fires rising. I sure never intended to end up in a place like this,” he wrote.

This was exactly my thought on arriving in Hiraizumi and winding through deserted suburban streets under a moonless sky to find my mechanized hotel. Two and a half months into Basho’s journey and one day into mine, it began to rain.

4

Hiraizumi is a place of awful sadness. Basho loved almost nothing better than a good demonstration of the transience of human life – he even changed his name to Basho, the Japanese for banana tree, because it

symbolized fragility, dying easily in Japanese winter snows – so Hiraizumi was right up his street. The Fujiwara clan established a great court here in the twelfth century and in a story that went deep into Japanese legend, destroyed it within two generations in rivalry between brothers. Surveying the site Basho reached back into time to find the right words. He quoted the poet Du Fu who, in 735 and after another rebellion wrote, “A country torn apart, the mountains and rivers remain; a spring, in the ruined castle, the grass is green.” Basho then laid out his bamboo hat and “wept without sense of time.” I would have wept without sense of time too, but for the rain, that was sending icy tendrils of water down my cheeks and neck. Any tears would have been lost and to be honest, the fate of the Fujiwara clan was pretty abstract to me, so I walked up to the great halls on nearby Mount Kaizan.

At the top of the hill stands the heart of the Chuson Ji complex, a mausoleum containing the remains of the Fujiwara clan. The Konjiki Do building has a square Buddhist temple form with that gracefully curving roof, but like a Russian Matryoshka doll, it stands inside another, larger temple to protect it from the harsher effects of the passing of time; which is odd, because it is not beautiful. Completely covered in gold leaf it looks every inch the monument to newfound wealth that it is, standing inside the irony that it has lasted four hundred years longer than the fortune that built it.

Back outside the rain swept down the leaves and branches of weeping pines. It coursed over the tops of the plainer wooden temples down the slope, leaving them black and sleek, like enormous beetles stranded in the forest. I left Hiraizumi gratefully. It may just have been the weather, but the downfall of the Fujiwara clan seems to have left a long and tragic shadow over this scrappy agricultural town. From there I was, for a little while, in step with Basho. His next stop was the Shitomae Barrier, which means ‘pissing in front.’ He found little welcome in the region and holed up against heavy wind and rain for three days in a miserable lodge. In subdued spirit he wrote: "A horse peeing by my pillow.”

5

Heavy rain was lashing on the day that I arrived in Naruko, the village that sits on the barrier today and the lodges that I plied for shelter were all full. The only bed available was in a truckers’ motel beside the highway. I took it and was glad that I did. Right along the length of Japan there are points where columns of magma rise from below the continental plate edge upon which Japan rests. At the top of these plumes at almost any time of day, you are certain to find a group of Japanese men and women and in one region in the far north, macaque monkeys, lying in baths of searingly hot water with their eyes closed, breathing heavily and waiting until they cannot stand it anymore. These are the Onsen, a word flexible enough to cover everything from volcanic valley to the bath you sit in and Naruko is a powerful example with wafts of sulphur on the high street strong enough to reduce people to gagging helplessness. Well, me at least.

My motel that had the aesthetic of a Mies van der Rohe experiment in concrete that failed at the outset and since then had hit even harder times. I was handed a pile of towels, bath robes and a key to the ironsen almost in apology and compensation for being there, so I descended into the basement and entered a room made from old railway sleepers, white paint flaking, the air thick with sulphur fumes, the floor a deep gray pool of swirling water. Four heads were balanced on the log rim, their eyes closed and thoughts no doubt focused on that last possible second. I was not going to let mere skin blistering temperatures deter me so I sank deep into the water

and waited out the moment when my body would call a halt.

Basho slid into an Onsen late in his journey, on the north coast at Yamanaka. “As I enter the bath, the water soaks my flesh and penetrates to my muscles and bones. My heart relaxes and I feel a fresh luster in my face. It’s a separate universe, a paradise cut off from the floating world…” Rejuvenated and thinking of the flowers associated with long life he wrote: "No need to pluck chrysanthemums; The fragrance of these springs.”

No more, Stop! And I was up, standing in a long movement with grey water cascading along my arms and then out and wrapped in a towel and finished with Japanese baths, my body so superheated it had its own microclimate, steam rising from my shoulders as I padded back in slippers and a blue bathrobe. I made my way to dinner.

We were seven fellow travelers in identical blue house robes kneeling at a low table that was slowly, but steadily laden with six courses of the best food that I ate in Japan. Travel may be supposed to have ascetic value, it may be supposed to reduce you to the absolutely necessary and that is noble and certainly no more than I had expected in this forlorn motel, but if fortune smiles on your journey why should you turn up your nose. Wouldn’t it be churlish? As painstakingly prepared dishes of succulent raw and crackling fried fish, piping hot seaweed and many other things that I could not identify were delivered on beds of steaming puffs of rice I did my best impression of a Serengeti crocodileat the height of the Wildebeest migration. My robe, I found, was wonderfully expandable. The owner of the motel was Mrs. Yusa who took great pride in the enthusiasm of all of her guests for her culinary work. Her job of serving done she took a seat at the head of the table and settled into interrogating me about what I was doing. She had a children’s picture dictionary and with the aid of its cartoon houses, rivers and postmen we were able to converse, albeit in a form that was dominated by objects rather than abstract concepts as advanced even as like or dislike.

With the help of the dictionary, Mrs. Yusa explained that she wanted to take me to visit a geyser the following day and that she would show me the way to where Basho crossed the Shitomae Barrier. Car, volcano, geyser (it took about five minutes before I made the link between fountain and volcano to get that third word), steering wheel motion, Basho. The other guests, truck drivers and a retired teacher, all agreed that this was an excellent idea and everyone left for bed.

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The following day started clear of rain. Mrs. Yusa drove me up into the mountains. I had expected just to look at a jet of super-heated water, but this being the heart of Onsen country, I had to bathe in it. The spout rumbled into the air and cascaded back for one minute every five minutes, running off into a series of pools allowing you to scald yourself in the sulphuric water. So I did, plunging in naked, a white beetle under the trees.

I was keen to walk out of Naruko, across the Shitomae barrier. There was, apparently, a forest trail following Basho’s path, so Mrs. Yusa dropped me at the foot of a hill with strong warnings to be careful and not to get lost. She cautioned me neurotically about everything short of bandits preying on stray travelers in the woods. I parted her company regretfully, for hers was the best hotel I had stayed in, she was the best cook (or had a great cook on

her payroll, that was never clear) I had come across and she had let me into her world in a way that no other Japanese had done or was to.

The trail climbed up through thick pine woodland and my spirit leapt for finally I was travelling as Basho had, if only for a short way. A very short way. The trail with its polished steps and red velvet rope stopped after three hundred meters. The beams of sunshine through the trees above that had promised a great ascent into the hills beyond came from a road that cut through the woods. I had to turn onto it. There was no other way, not even a pavement.

A few hundred meters along I found a path that led into the trees again and rejoiced once more at “being in the wild,” but again not for long, for the path soon wound around a valley and in the winter cold, trees stripped of leaves, I could see that every slope had been bulwarked with concrete slabs against erosion. Far below on the valley floor the river that had tumbled and danced freely over boulders in white spray a few hundred meters higher up was sucked down into concrete tubes and stilled behind a dam. Five hundred kilometers outside Tokyo in the hills of a rural prefecture and I was still inside the machine.

7

The Japanese have a different conception of nature to that of the West. The Western view, it is said, treats nature as an ‘other.’ There is a dichotomy between human life and everything else. That other is affected by what we do like building roads or dams, but it stays fundamentally separate as something that we call ‘the natural world’ or ‘the environment.’ Because of this split, because Westerners do not conceive of themselves as part of nature, the West is supposed to have greater capacity to wreak havoc on the environment than peoples from the Buddhist tradition.

The very word nature is difficult to translate into Japanese. The term Shizen is used which means ‘of itself,’ natural in the sense of staying true to an inherent nature. In this scheme, humans are an inseparable part of the world and have their own distinctive, natural state. We have, however, the capacity to act against this natural state and so against the flow of wider nature. The definition of what a natural human state is, however, is open to interpretation.

Shizen is not a simple vision of man in a balanced environment or prelapsarian state. In the 19th century when the idea of nature first arrived in Japan from the west, it came with a lot of Darwinian baggage. Nature meant conflict and survival of the fittest, which nicely suited the fast industrializing Meiji Empire that was pushing out with its army and economy against Russia and China. At the beginning of the 20thcentury as Japan’s development slipped behind the West this conveniently switched to a more strongly cultural and nationalistic interpretation. Nature or Shizen become synonymous with the nation. It had always been in part a religious concept; the natural state was to be achieved through the practice of particular cultural rites, the painstaking maintenance of sites like Zuiganji, or the sort of ascetic denial practiced by Basho on his travels. With the nationalistic turn, however, it was appropriated by nationalizing the Japanese religion Shinto. Human nature became state nature.

What I saw in Japan was that this cultured conception of nature that

depends upon who defines the natural state and how they define it works well for managing the environment at a small scale. It works well at the level of a bonsai tree, or a shrine or a pine clad island. It even works well at the scale of a mountain, like the complex at Hiraizumi. Objects that conform to personal or shared social conceptions of what is beautiful and worth preserving are incorporated into human activities. They are maintained by actions that can be repeated over hundreds or even thousands of years; actions that we define as the rituals or rites that help us to find our cultured selves in nature. Tending the moss in a temple garden, cutting the grass in the meadows around Chuson Ji or clipping the leaves of a bonsai tree to form its shape over decades.
This conception of nature is less well suited for dealing with nature, for managing the environment at the level of an entire country. Policies for industry, housing, and development are set by competing interests outside the realm of cultured nature, or they are allied with an instrumental view of nature like the nationalistic interpretation of Shinzen. Either way it led to the odd mix of revered cultural sites and sand blasted hillsides that I was walking through. Memories of the oil refinery and the highway that loom over Matsushima Bay were clear that afternoon.

8

I had to leave the woods once more, climbing out of the valley to reach a tiny rural station. I sat in the sun under a well-tended gingko tree with my feet resting in a pile of its bright golden, fallen leaves, waiting for a train to arrive to take me east. The gingko tree is a wonderful thing. Its leaves splay out like supplicant hands, pastel green in summer lighting up golden yellow in autumn. The leaf form comes from its ancient structure. The veins never merge for the Gingko tree is a living fossil dating from the Permian era some two hundred million years ago, before modern plants emerged. This may be a snip in geological time or cosmological time, but it makes the thousand-year-old sites that I had been visiting look rather juvenile and Basho's journey feel like it was just yesterday. With this cheerful, time compressing thought, I left on the train for Kisegata on the north coast.

Basho arrived there in foul weather. He describes a sea wind, "that swirled the sand and rain misted down." The wind that I encountered had long ago left the sand swirling stage and was on to the wrenching trees out of the ground stage, it was the breathe of leviathan, roaring and ripping at the train, shaking it in gusts and rattling it sideways omits rails. It was a black night outside. The windows were enveloped in a thick, felt darkness that changed texture with the wind and the movement of the carriage. Sometimes it had the still and calm of a wood; mostly it was an icy absence, an abyss over the sea.
Kisegata (that's Chee sa gata to you and me. Saying Kee se gata reduces most Japanese to confused stares of incomprehension and some station guards to irritated shouts of what I could only interpret as "get out of my face gaijin!") sits on the Sea of Japan, more or less under the path that North Korean test missiles follow on their way out to the Pacific. I walked out of its station into the teeth of the storm and in the thirty seconds that it took to find a taxi was wet to my liver.

The driver dropped me in front of a hulk of a building in a town center that was a mere four streets wide. I booked myself into this wood and concrete block that had an edgy feel to it. The lobby was full of what looked like travelling salesmen, shabbily suited and shabbily drunk. The woman behind the counter would have done well as a Soviet camp guard. Her face, body,

and character were all equally angular. There was no food, so I sat in my room to read Basho's thoughts about the place. "…its appearance suggests Matsushima, but with a difference. Matsushima seems to laugh, while Kisegata looks embittered. Grief piled upon loneliness: this place resembles a spirit in torment." Listening to the wind screaming outside and sounding exactly like that lost soul, in a super-heated room with a broken thermostat, I needed some air to clear my own thoughts.

Dear reader, if there is one thing that you take away from this meander through northern Japan, please learn from my mistake, and let it be this. Should you ever find yourself in a strange land in a strange building that is being rocked by something that measures unpleasantly high on the Beaufort scale and you feel tempted to open a window, summon your spirits, and resist that temptation. Resist it, particularly if the room you are in is facing the oncoming gale, open to the sea.

A blast of rain soaked wind tore through the narrow opening to rip the window out of my hand and hammer it repeatedly against the outside of the building with an awful, glassy crash, dash, crash. While leaning fully out of the window into the teeth of the gale to try to pull the window off the wall and close it I noticed the six-story drop, down toe blank concrete car park. I managed to pull the window to, but could not close it. The complicated latch and lever system was blocked. I thought I must have broken it while trying to wrench the window shut and as the wind repeatedly grabbed the handle from me and I had to lean back out to bring it home, it resisted all efforts to fix it.

Calling someone for help meant waiting for a lull in the wind. When it came, I leapt for the phone, dragged it close, and then leapt back to the window hanging on with all my force to stop it heading out for another crash and dash that might finally shatter it. When she came, the Soviet reception guard pulled a tiny lever sideways and smoothly closed the window. The roar subsided and she left without commenting on my drenched clothes, the curtains on the floor or the pool of water under the window.

"In the rain, Xi Shi asleep Silk tree blossoms." Basho.

9

The storm subsided while I slept. All that was left in the morning was a salty, lashing wind. The camp guard pressed a small, pink umbrella with cat patterns into my hand as defense against any rain that might appear.

Waves the color of jade and with furious white caps tore into the coast. They crashed into storm breakers and into a lighthouse with enough power to shake the beach a hundred yards away. Breakers leapt up the side of the lighthouse bursting into foam and hanging in veils around the light. A fleet of fishing boats was tied up behind jetties that shook to the rhythmic boom and crash of the surf. Basho had taken about across the bay and admired the peak of Mount Chokai, a nearby volcano that on clear days reportedly floats above the town. Since this was closed to me by the weather, I walked through the town to find the Kanmanjuji temple. It was Sunday morning and there was not another soul in the streets. Birds of prey were wheeling high in the sky above me, hugging the bottom of the clouds and turning in tight feathering spirals. Half admiring them I turned down a cross street and whoosh, one of the birds swept over my head. I thought I had imagined the

closeness when whoosh, it happened again and this time I had seen how the bird pulled in his wings to drop out of the sky spreading his feathers at the last moment and swiping at my head with his claws. Three more came in behind him in the same way, whoosh swipe. Galvanized and not really believing it I defended myself with the only weapon I had, the Hello Kitty pink umbrella. As more birds swept past I waved it above my head trying to swat them as they came close. Perhaps it was the cat pattern, but they did not like it. They withdrew to skulk aggressively like hooded teenagers around Kisegata's only large tree.

With the benefit of a few months and several thousand kilometers distance, I can see that they were used to hunting scraps from the fishing boats. These had been tied up because of the storm and so they were hungry. Since I was the only human around early on a Sunday morning, I must have looked like the only snack opportunity in town. I got out of their way fast and headed towards the Temple, hoping for the sanctuary of a Buddhist complex in this otherwise aggressive town.

I walked too far though and turned down the wrong street into a cornfield. Misreading my map – this is a habit. In the worst of many instances, I have walked a group merrily to the edge of a Welsh mountain cliff and almost over it in a fog – I pressed on towards the far-offline of trees. That is until the tops of the trees rose up before me in a black cloud. Hundreds of crows in the biggest murder I have ever seen all rose at once and flew towards me. I started nonchalantly back to the main road, trying not to look like a wounded animal or in the least bit scared until the first crows appeared in the corners of my vision and above my head and looking back I could see the whole mass of them curving around like a breaking, black wave.

I ran. Visions of shrieking gulls, shredded feathers, broken beaks and pecked out eyeballs in a small Californian town kept my legs milling all the way back to the road where all but the meanest looking birds were put off by the roar of passing trucks. These last, cat sized beasts flapped along steadily beside me from tree to tree all the way into town, cocking their heads and croaking. What their motivation was I have no idea. Even time and distance has not helped to rationalize it. They might just have been hungry, but to be mugged by two groups of birds on one day seems like a conspiracy.

Kanmanjuji was the saddest temple that I saw in Japan. It was a fitting repose for Basho's spirit in torment. Ill-kempt and locked tight shut, it was as inviting as a clenched fist. There was no hint of the blossom or view of Mount Chokai that had so charmed Basho. The only hint that human life remained was a shed filled with dozens of cats. They were huddled together for warmth in an enormous and slowly shifting pile, lying on a blanket that someone had lain out for them. Apart from my Hello Kitty umbrella, it was the only sign of care that I saw in the whole town.

"Cutting through the fields, on the right, The rough sea shore." Basho.

10

A short bullet train ride to the south brought me to Yamagata. It was dark when I arrived so that I emerged from the station with a great sense of dislocation, for Yamagata is a hyper-modern city; a splinter of Tokyo that has landed in all its neon brightness and glass tower sharpness half way up

the country. It was raining. The streets were filled with purposeful commuters. The lights were a wash of whites, oranges, blues, and greens and at each corner, high-pitched, beeping alarms stopped people from crossing the roads. With taxis pushing pedestrians aside, rain streaming down their windows and umbrellas passing in front of neon sign-filled windows I suddenly knew where Ridley Scott found inspiration for his film Blade Runner and for a few seconds I was wildly daydreaming of electric sheep. Halfway through his journey Basho had been advised to visit a temple complex of particular beauty, “a place of purest serenity,” floating in the mountains, remote, beautiful and mystical. He duly made a detour of several days south. My hotel owner informed me that like everywhere else in Japan, there was a train station there now. So I rose early and set out for one last stop along Basho’s journey.

The village of Rishakuji was empty at the bottom of its valley. All around were hills spread out like cakes in a royal bakery, their dark, winter trees frosted lightly with snow from halfway up their slopes. High among the pine trees to the west I could make out the crests of the temple complex, its roofs a set of black paint strokes above the snowline.

At the foot of the slope, I encountered Basho and his travelling companion Sora. Two bronze statues smiling merrily, their eyes fixed in a gaze upwards to the mountain, but I did not recognize the figure of Basho, for the cheery, Bilbo Baggins figure they had moulded did not resemble in any way the troubled figure that I had accompanied across the country. His poetry and the prosaic descriptions of the journey to the deep north came from sickness, from his decision to see the sights before he died. All along the road, he was fighting with an unnamed and back then probably unknown ailment. He was cold, wet, tired and often in danger. It was out of this hardship and his discipline to keep going that came the finely honed triplets of poetry that captured the spirit of the country. The carefree figure that stood lightly by the path might have been found in a straw hut under a banana tree in Ueno on a summer’s day, but not here in the north, not after months on the road and with the prospect of many more ahead.

I walked up the mountain following a path between pine trees and boulders. A handy tourist map showed the points on the path where various hermits had lived, where dedicated pilgrims over a thousand years have put up shrines, and where Basho stopped to catch his breath. Fumbling the map and managing successfully to lose it, I stood to catch my own breath. The forest air smelled richly of pine needles in early morning dew. The trees stood as proud as the columns of a gothic cathedral, their grey-green capitals arcing and lacing into the blue sky. The silence was broken only by drops of melting snow water curving off the ends of branches and falling through streams of light to tap onto the forest floor.

At the summit, the temples were locked and bolted, but unlike Kanmanjujiin Kisegata, they felt open. Canvas sheets betrayed signs of restoration work and each had viewing bars through which visitors could glimpse the deity. Or was it the other way around? Up here, with views across the valley, anyone sitting cross legged for a thousand years had something worth looking out at. I sat in the sunshine gazing at the hills, absorbing the stillness. After some contemplation, I consulted Basho to hear his impressions of the place. He too had found the temples bolted shut, but found, “the scene so beautiful, the deep, lonely tranquility: I could feel my heart turning pure.” He was moved to write:

"Penetrating the rocks, Cicadas' cry."

So I sat with him for a long while, listening to the cultivated silence that filled the mountain halls, a silence that reaches back six hundred and a thousand years and probably reaches as many years forward. When I came down into the valley, the village had woken. The first tourist bus was turning into the car park in front of the Buddha temple. A virulent-orange colored cement truck choked along the main road. I watched it heading up the valley, following the river, up into the mountains and as it turned a corner out of sight, I left for Tokyo.

Epilogue

The Tohoku earthquake of March 2011 devastated the area that Basho travelled through on his journey to the deep north of Japan. The tsunami wave rolled across the towns of Sendai, Ishinomaki, Shiogama, and Matsushima Bay. The water rose up around Ojima Island and broke inland, uprooting trees and pulling down the halls and temples of Zuiganji and the town around. When they receded, they took many of the inhabitants of the area with them.

It is an overwhelming human tragedy. Those lives with their stories and their potential are gone. It is much less a cultural tragedy though. Just as Date Masamune restored this temple in the ninth century, so it will be re-restored again. The wooden halls will be reconstructed. The golden temple ornaments and rich hangings will be either saved or recreated. In time the lines of pine trees and the beds of moss underneath them will regenerate, the dew dripping silence will reign once more and a new shrine will be built for those who lost their lives.

Far more serious, however, is the loss of land and lives to the south around the Fukushima nuclear plant. The Shirakawa Barrier and the Killing Stone that Basho visited before going to Matsushima lie just outside the 30-kilometer exclusion zone. Nature in the Western sense, the other that lies outside our sphere of influence, let alone control, rose up and dealt a powerful blow to the industrial construct on the coast of Japan. The Japanese people may well have felt the same as Basho when he saw the industrial smoke rising over Ishinomaki and said, "Isure never wanted to end up in a place like this."

More than anything else, it will take time to resolve the situation around the plant. Sealing, decontaminating and removing the damaged reactors will take decades. The land around is contaminated to varying degrees by Caesium and Strontium which have half-lives of 30 years meaning that it will be around one hundred years before radiation levels return to safe levels. Apart from a few workers, the exclusion zone will remain largely closed to human life and any of the activities that could lead to cultured nature. That essential part of the meaning of "deep north" in this area will be lost.

The silver lining to this is that another sort of nature will have the chance to move in. It will wind vines and tendrils around door and window frames, it will plunge roots deep between paving stones and under roads. If Chernobyl is any example, it will turn the exclusion zone into a state of wilderness that humans will be able to return to when it is safe and hopefully wonder at the natural state it has achieved.

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