

Basho's poems reign near top of haiku genre

"Abide by rules, then throw them out!
— only then may you achieve true freedom."

— Matsuo Basho

My column this week serves a dual purpose. Last winter, I was enrolled in Japanese 425, a literature course on haiku poetry taught by Professor Stephen Kohl. We read and discussed Matsuo Basho's classic "Oku-no-Hosomichi" ("The Narrow Road to the Deep North"). Our final project was to write a 15-20 page paper related to Basho's poetry. I never wrote it, and have had a glaring "1" on my winter 2002 grades ever since. So, nearly a year later, and after numerous false starts, I have finally begun. So part of this goes out to Professor Kohl to say I haven't forgotten about my paper and, furthermore, I never stopped reading Basho. For the rest of you, enjoy the column.

Matsuo Basho was not the first haiku poet, but he is arguably one of the most influential. He mastered the now familiar five-seven-five syllable form more than 300 years ago, which remains immensely predominant in Japan and is often fetishistically adhered to by

American haiku writers and translators of Japanese haiku.

The haiku form evolved out of a longer, 31-syllable Japanese form called "tanka." In Yoel Hoffmann's compilation "Japanese Death Poems," he writes the following: "The tanka poet may be likened to a person holding two mirrors in his hands, one reflecting a scene from nature, the other reflecting himself as he holds the first mirror." Hoffmann notes that haiku poems drop the reflection of the poet and leave only the mirror reflecting nature.

Another important form here is "renku," "renga" or linked verse that would be composed by numerous people. According to Jane Reichhold (writings on the subject available on the Web site <http://www.ahapoetry.com/renga.htm>), renga has an 800-year history. Other sources claim it's more than a thousand years old. Regardless, Basho composed linked verse throughout his life, and many of his earliest poems were anthologies of linked verse written with other poets of his day.

Basho was born in 1644 in Ueno, Iga Province, and was originally



Aaron Shakra
The poet's tree

named Matsuo Munefusa. He served in a samurai household of his master, Yoshitada. Once Yoshitada died, Basho left behind his samurai name and position. In 1672, he reappeared as an editor of the poetry anthology "Kai Oi" ("The Seashell Game"). In 1687, he left for Edo (modern-day Tokyo), and there he took a job at a waterworks company in order to care for his nephew, Toin. He continued establishing a name for himself in haiku contests and with collaboration of other poets. Before long, Basho had gained a following and disciples of his poetics.

Although he wrote haiku, Basho's most famous writings mix haiku and prose in a form called "haibun." His

first of these was "Nozarashi Kiko" ("Travelogue of Weather-Beaten Bones"), which was composed from a journey Basho took between 1684 and 1685.

Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism and Zen informed Basho's writing. He claimed he always carried around a copy of the Taoist writings of Chuang Tzu. He studied Chinese poetry and took to the works of Tu Fu and Li Po. Sam Hamill, one of Basho's recent translators, notes that while Basho's earlier poems were clearly derivative of these influences, Basho began to come into his own as he entered his forties. He attracted students, who built him a small hut on the Sumida River in 1680 or 1681 that was eventually named Basho-an after a plantain tree was planted in its yard. This is the name which the poet eventually took for himself.

Note that while there are various translations of Basho's work, not all are equal. In Kohl's class last year, we read from the most common and prevalent "Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches," translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa sometime in the 1960s and

soon named after Basho's most famous haibun. Last summer, I picked up a copy of the aforementioned Hamill's translation of his works. The edition of this currently in print is called "Narrow Road to the Interior: And Other Writings." It contains the same haibun that Yuasa selected, plus adds 200 selected haiku with the Romanized Japanese translations.

While I am not familiar with the Japanese language, in my opinion, Hamill's translations are superior. This is because he seems to take into account the SOUND — onomatopoeia, rhyme and slant rhyme — when translating Basho's poetry into English. However, I wouldn't have been able to make this discernment had I not been able to compare and contrast. For those looking for a greater selection, Professor Kohl maintains a Web site at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~kohl/bas> that contains numerous translations of the poet.

For me, a few questions about the poet still remain. In Hamill's afterward to his translation of Basho's work, he mentions the poet wrote

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Reno isn't lots of gambling fun when you're under 21

Winter break was a time of exotic destinations for some travelers. My roommate went to sunny Mexico. My boyfriend and his family went to tropical Hawaii. I took off for (drumroll, please) Reno, Nev. The closest I got to a warm shore was when I heard my cell phone chime its beach tune.

The billboard displayed on Reno's "strip" reads, "The Biggest Little City in the World." Well, it really should read, "The Biggest Little Bore in the World." My father, who enjoys a game or two of keno, has been taking nongambling Mom and I to Reno every few years. While there, we filled our time strolling the dirty sidewalks and have since memorized every pawn shop selling the old watches of unlucky gamblers among Reno's desert landscape.

Going to Reno in December 2003 left out a large chunk of activity options for me because I turn 21 in May. I don't

long to bet my hard-earned money, but walking in casinos with Dad is always inevitable. However, I chose to avoid the casinos this time because I always seem to get kicked out by some grumpy old security officer. I really wasn't in the mood for being accused of attempting to illegally throw away my money. You know, being interrogated about something I have no desire to do really makes me feel left out! I didn't want to gamble anyway. So I decided to find fun away from the gaming rooms.

One delight in Reno that can be accessed easily by bus is the Meadowood Mall. Mom and I went during our first day, but since it was Dec. 21 and our wallets were already drained from Christmas shopping, window shopping was our only option. We walked and looked, and when it was time for a hot drink to help us brave the cold outside, we realized the mall had no



Natasha Chilingirian
Nat goes to town

espresso bar. I stood in line for 30 minutes at Cinnabon to get a hot tea, and when I finally ordered, the Cinnabon boy seemed very appalled that I wanted milk in my tea. Not so delightful.

On the second day, Mom, Dad and I decided to bus it to Carson City, which we heard was a "cute Western town." When we stepped off the bus, we couldn't believe our eyes. I had imagined streets of saddle shops, museums and shops selling cowboy paraphernalia,

but instead, the town consisted of several blocks of stores and one casino. The gray sky seemed to be closing in on us. I longed for my hotel room. Nevertheless, we went exploring.

"Scary Western people" would have been a more accurate description of Carson City. In one smoky tavern, we spotted a woman in a puffy-sleeved dress from the 1800s, and another in a giant fur ensemble. The city's personnel looked like the cast of "Blazing Saddles." At first glance, Reno makes Las Vegas look like the pinnacle of glamour, but Carson City did the same justice for Reno. I felt very civilized back in Reno, dining at a restaurant in the bustling Eldorado hotel.

My trip ended on a pathetically happy note. Mom and I discovered there was a Walgreens within walking distance from our hotel, so we spent our last morning in Reno there. It was

wonderful. There were rows of perfume and soap, aisles of makeup and hair products, piles of magazines and shelves of glittering accessories. We went on a mini shopping spree with a portion of Dad's keno winnings, and pathetic or not, it really was the highlight of my trip. It's amazing how extraordinary everyday things can look in bleak settings. After going in gift shops full of plastic frogs and cigarette lighters, Walgreens looked like Saks Fifth Avenue.

Reno may be a drag, but at least I found joy at the end. One of my Walgreens purchases was a body mist that smells like the tropics. When I took the first whiff, I dreamed of traveling to a sunny destination with plenty of beaches. Oh well, maybe next year.

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HEINL

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karaoke over the songs, only occasionally actually playing an instrument or showing that he had anything to do with the music itself.

This might seem like an artistically dubious thing to do, but it works. The album is made up of the kind of 1950s or 1960s country-western songs that

are often performed in karaoke bars. The second half of the album consists of a karaoke version of the first half, so listeners can perform their own in the privacy of their homes.

"With or Without Me" also works as a throwback to a particular style of country music from 30 or 40 years ago. Right down to the font on the front cover of the disc, this album looks like it could have been put out by George Jones or Patsy Cline. I would almost

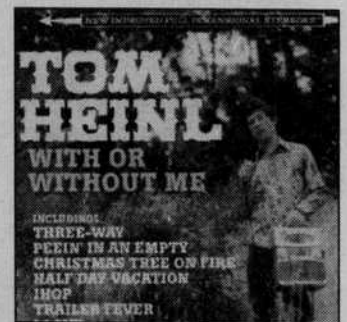
expect it to find in buried in the vinyl rack of a St. Vincent DePaul's.

But other than being built around an interesting concept, the album is above all else funny. Heinel mixes a great eye for the low points of modern society with a country artist's panache for the pathetic. Songs like "Half Day Vacation" and "Trailer Fever" are ballads about the lifestyle of those with severe income deficiencies, while "IHOP" could be the

theme song for anyone who has found themselves hungry and inebriated at 2 a.m.

While there are few outlets for comedic performers in the music industry these days, Heinel is an artist who deserves an audience. Let's wish him some luck in finding one.

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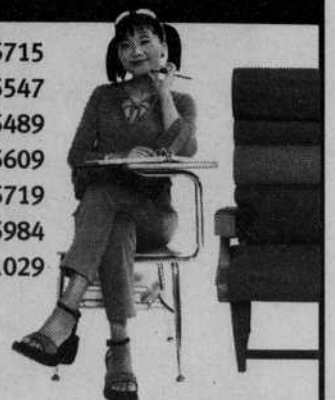
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