FOREWORD TO THE FINAL REPORT

As the culmination of my experiences traveling through Japan along the “Narrow Road” originally charted by haiku poet Bashō, I am writing a short book in the *haibun* style that is characteristic of his work: short chapters of simple prose, punctuated by about thirty haiku poems that I wrote while traveling. Spending this past quarter at Oxford studying in an intensive philosophy tutorial has not been very conducive to working on this project, but I have managed to find time here and there to work on it, and especially in the past few weeks feel that I have started to really find my voice. I anticipate having the book finished by the end of this academic year and will be publishing it as a PDF that can be downloaded for free on the blog I set up during the trip, which can be accessed at SUMMERGRASSES.TUMBLR.COM. On this webpage, you can already find the link to an Instagram project I created while traveling.

The book is tentatively titled *Summer Rains on Bashō’s Narrow Road*. I anticipate that it will ultimately be about 80 pages; the first 20 are enclosed in this Final Report, followed by a detailed outline which I drew up immediately upon returning from Japan. This outline comprises about 15 pages and contains all of the haiku that will eventually be included in the book, as well as many crucial details that I did not want to forget.

I would like to use this space to express my gratitude for the amazing opportunity afforded to me by the Beagle II Award and those who make it possible. I had the summer of a lifetime in Japan and can say quite genuinely that it was this experience that re-kindled my passion for art, literature, and culture. I have begun to realize that there is nothing I love more than writing, and I know I will continue to do it for the rest of my life, perhaps even as a career.
INTRODUCTION

I have long harbored suspicion that I might only be my “best self” while traveling away from home. This thought first occurred to me while I was visiting Manhattan to visit a friend not long after my eighteenth birthday: away from the familiar settings and contexts that would typically remind me of who I was supposed to be, I became something new and undetermined. I gave everything and everyone a chance. My mind forgot its biases; my eyes remembered how to see.

Over the last two years of my life, I have poured my energies into reconciling this sense of freedom with my day-to-day experience, so that I might be able to reap its benefits even while immersed in the mundane. I seek that same fleeting feeling that Victor Shklovsky once identified as the purpose of the work of art, namely, “to recover the sense of life, in order to feel objects, to make the stone stoney”, or as Walter Benjamin put it, “to recapture the great squandering of one's own existence, which we savor when we're in love.” I have learned incredible things by maintaining a willingness to depart from routine, and always entertaining the possibility of being most surprised by that which I already knew best. And I have come to feel that regardless of whether or not we are actually on the road, each new day can be the starting point for strange and exciting adventures, if only we give it a chance.

But the effort to defamiliarize remains something different altogether from an encounter with the truly unfamiliar, and even as I remained engrossed in discovering
beauty in the nuances of my everyday reality, it soon became difficult to ignore the cloud of wanderlust precipitating inside of me. At the same time, I started learning to speak and write Japanese, sparked by a lifelong fascination with the culture of Japan. As I watched these buds bloomed in tandem, I remembered the haiku poetry of Matsuo Bashō, struck not only by a newfound appreciation for its linguistic elegance, but also by his avid embrace of travel as a way of life. I began to wonder about the poetics of a language which does not presuppose a grammatical subject, about what it would mean to travel his path by train rather than foot, about whether it might be possible to dissolve modern, technological settings in starkly simple aesthetics. And because I am privileged enough to find myself studying at one of the world’s best endowed research institutions, it soon became possible for me to not only wonder about these things but to wander about them, too. In the summer of 2013, endowed with a wealth of information from the Internet and generous funding from my university, I set out for Japan in order to re-trace Matsuo Bashō’s most famous journey, along Oku no Hosomichi, “the Narrow Road to the Interior.”


**SUMMER RAINS**

Each moment will eventually pass; nothing is more certain. Even those which linger long enough to mature into such seaworthy vessels as days and years must at some point be swept away by the relentless current, sailing down the river of time and out of sight. The traveler who learns to accept this, floating along on his back, will always be pleasantly surprised when he opens his eyes to discover where he is, for life itself is a trip. When I gave up my tiresome breaststroke and began to ride the waves, they pulled me to fresh encounters at every bend. And last summer, as I took down the posters that had decorated my sophomoric residence and watched as another class of friends threw their caps in the air and went out into the world, I began to think back to the moon over Joshua Tree, and then back even further to a haiku poet who had so loved travel that he resolved to die on the road, and I grew increasingly eager to rekindle my affair with wonder, that handsome muse which reveals itself only in the midst of new experiences. I longed to fly across an ocean to see places that my eyes had only known in Bashō’s words: the Shirakawa Barrier, the islands of Matsushima. In purchasing a plane ticket, I secured the means to do so, and soon I could think of little else. Once the walls of my home were stripped bare, I was ready to set off for Japan.
On the fourth day of the seventh month, I visited my mother’s hometown of Salinas, California to celebrate my grandfather’s birthday. A great fraction of my extended family had gathered to eat cake and light sparklers at my grandparents’ home in a gated community high in the hills. It was the night before my flight to Japan. I received well wishes and heartfelt goodbyes from a wide array of relatives and friends as the television relayed images of fireworks bursting over cities all across the country. As shouting children tumbled all about the house, I noticed my family’s dog slumped helplessly by the back door, waiting for someone to let her outside so she might find respite from the madness. I opened the door and together we slipped out into the backyard. She sat on the grass and I stood against the back fence, looking out over the lights of homes scattered throughout the dark and quiet valley. As I did so, a great Californian wind stirred up and swept across the top of the hills, blowing all around me as if to say goodbye. I closed my eyes. The wind continued longer than expected.

This send-off was perfect, but time would prove it illusory. The next day, a series of flight delays left me breathless at a gate in Seattle just minutes after they had locked the boarding door for my connection to Tokyo. I could only watch as the plane that should have ferried me across an ocean rolled out toward the runway. I was frustrated, yet had no choice but to regard Seattle as the unlikely first stop in my Japanese journey. My college roommate hails from a small rural area outside of the city, and I was able to
call up his twin brother, who happened to be home for the weekend. Within two hours’
time, the stresses of airline bureaucracy had melted away at the foot of a backyard
bonfire accompanied by leftover steak and homemade blueberry pie, and I dozed off in
bed with the sensation of warmth still dancing on my skin. Before his family took me
back to the airport in the morning, I was serendipitously treated to a breakfast of my
favorite food: Monte Cristo sandwiches with strawberry jam. There is hardly anything
more American than a deep-fried sandwich.

There seems to be some strange effect of seeing another country’s landscape from
the windows of a plane that renders it immediately recognizable as foreign. But what
could this be besides the projection of the mind - are the fields arranged differently? is it
something about the windows on the buildings? As the plane descends, this sense of
difference becomes more tangible: look at the cars driving on the other side of the road -
they're so small! Look at the stores emblazoned with foreign characters - that one says
パチンコ! And soon enough the wheels touch the ground, and the strangeness is no
longer the subtle quality of some distantly-painted landscape, but the texture of your
very reality.

The train ride from Narita airport into the heart of Tokyo takes about an hour,
and makes for a rather gradual introduction to the world’s largest metropolis. It sails
first past green expanses of rice fields, and then through towns and suburbs that grow progressively larger in size until the train dips underground. It became quickly apparent to me that I was the only non-Japanese person in the entirety of the crowded car.

kimono-clad
she listens to her iPod
on summer’s train

I switched trains in an underground station and eventually arrived at Shinjuku; the hostel I had booked was not far from its busy nightlife district. As the synthesized crescendo of Phoenix’s “Love Like a Sunset” thumped against my eardrums, I walked up the stairs out of the station, and into the flashing neon of Tokyo.

Recalling the stories of my grandfather, who loved eating at tempura bars while stationed in Japan with the Navy, I went out for my first meal in Japan: soba noodles served cold, topped with shrimp and vegetable tempura.

The first thing that struck me about Tokyo was how automated, synchronized, and efficient everything seemed to be. It was as if the city was always one step ahead of me. My first excursion was to Shinjuku’s skyscraping business district see the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, and had no trouble finding it thanks to the clear path of arrows, automated walkways, and brightly colored, English language signage.
pointing the way. When I felt thirsty while waiting for a train, sustenance was only a tap away.

prepaid card
against the vending machine
apple tea drops - thunk!

I thus arrived at the imposing, pseudo-Orwellian structure with the greatest ease, and joined my fellow tourists in line for the elevator to the observation deck on the building’s 45th floor.

This was my first opportunity to glimpse the sprawling city from above, and I found the panoramic view quite powerful. The city continued as far as the eye could see in every direction; if New York is “The City That Never Sleeps,” then Tokyo should be “The City That Never Ends,” a hypothesis that would remain true for me as I went on to spend days traversing its expanse on foot and riding subways underground for up to an hour without leaving its limits. The city’s part-time backdrop, Mt. Fuji, was unfortunately invisible in the distant haze.

On my way back to the station, I cut through a public park and stumbled down a narrow channel onto another world. In defiance of the continuity of perpendicular lines on the horizon, there was suddenly a roof of sloping green, hanging over an intricately carved wooden structure: I had found my first Shinto shrine. Founded in 1403, Kumano Jinja was once a sanctuary whose sprawling estate featured two ponds and a waterfall, which pilgrims could use for relaxation and swim. Today the shrine is squeezed
between office buildings and cordoned off by concrete paths. The only body of water I found nearby was a small fountain with a plaque bearing an English name: “Shinjuku’s Niagara Falls.”

After spending a week on this side of Tokyo, known as Yamanote (“hand of the mountain”), I traded the international frenzy of my ten-story hostel for the creaky wood of a ryokan, and the silvers and whites of Shinjuku for the browns and grays for Asakusa. A ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn where guests sleep on futons in private tatami rooms. I was struck by the perfection with which tatami floors are arranged, each room designed to exactly accommodate a particular number of standardized mats edge-to-edge, so that one forgets that the floor could be covered any other way. With no furniture or decoration, it was an ideal place for sitting and facing the wall in zazen meditation, a practice I had begun after receiving instruction during a visit to a Zen Buddhist temple on my last night in Shinjuku.

out of the silence
without interrupting,
air conditioning

This was the third haiku I recorded in my notebook. It was satisfying to see my thoughts scrawled across the page like this, but I felt very anxious about venturing further.
In choosing to spend the second half of my time in Tokyo in the “downtown” area of Shitamachi, I hoped to get closer to the side of the city that Bashō would have known. My lodgings in Asakusa were just a few blocks from the Sumida River, a mile upstream from the place on its banks where his famous bashō an hut once stood. I rented a bicycle to cover this distance and felt very removed from the ultramodern urbanity of Shinjuku as I traversed streets lined with vestiges of prewar architecture, where blatant, black power lines streaked across the sky.

Of course, Bashō did not actually live in “Tokyo” at all, but rather in a place called Edo, which was the name for the city before it became the nation’s capital during the Meiji Restoration. This period marked the start of Japan’s rapid processes of industrialization and modernization, and thus the change of name was not merely ornamental; the city soon began to see a rapid infusion of Western architecture, aesthetics, and ideas, forever transfiguring its landscape.

As I biked along the river, I stopped to visit the Fukagawa Edo Museum, hoping to glimpse through a window into the city’s past. Once inside, I wandered through halls painted with scenes from old woodblock prints until I arrived at a door which opened on to the museum’s main exhibition floor. Walking through it, I found myself facing an orderly grid of machiya townhouses comprising a neighborhood of Fukagawa during the Edo period. It was nighttime, and I could hear raindrops pattering steadily against the baked tile roofs as a wide river coursed past to the west. I began to wander the
narrow alleyways between homes, peeking into their windows. I was quite surprised to
find every single one devoid of residents, but I nonetheless saw evidence of their
livelihoods: here, some fishing poles and a wide sugegasa hat hanging on an earthen
wall; there, a cobbler’s hut with a cat mewing by the sliding paper door. I stumbled
upon a small Shintō shrine where offerings of food had been left and paid my respects
before turning to leave by the door I had entered. As I departed, I heard some crows
begin to sing and turned my head to the east. The first streaks of a pink sunrise were
beginning to appear on the horizon of Edo.

It was only a couple blocks by bike to the site of Bashō’s hut, where today a
tranquil garden sits atop a promontory where the Sumida meets an Edo-period canala. I
locked my bike outside the gate and proceeded up the steps to find a commanding view
of the river and the many bridges spanning it, each one as busy with the traffic of cars
and buses as was the river with barges and tourist boats. The garden consisted of a
small pond flanked by bamboo plants and a shock of green leaves stemming from
several bashō, or banana plants. I recalled the explanation Bashō had given for choosing
to style himself after the banana tree:

“Monk Huai-su ran his brush on it, while Chang Heng-chu looking at its new
leaves, gained strength for greater learning. I do neither; simply idling beneath
its leaves, I admire the way they tear easily in wind and rain.” — BASHŌ
Next to the leaves with his back to the river, Bashō was sitting on his heels in the *seiza* position. Flowing robes of greenish bronze were tucked under his knees and a faint smile played on his lips. I felt as if I knew his secret: this was surely the most tranquil spot in all of Tokyo, where one could watch the hectic business of the city unfold without really hearing it or feeling the least bit implicated. I sensed the opportunity to clear my head of doubt and anxiety and sat down in the shadow of his statue in the *hankafuza* half-lotus position, right foot pulled up over my left thigh. Eyes closed, I focused on the rise and fall of my breath and tried to let the sounds and smells of the river pass in and out of head unobstructed. After twenty minutes, I opened my eyes to find that an old woman had arrived to water the plants in the garden. She smiled at me, and we discussed the beauty of the scenery.

I rode north along the river back toward Asukusa and crossed a canal on my way. As I rolled off the bridge, I caught an unexpected glimpse of a familiar face cast once again in bronze, holding out his walking stick while seated calmly on a bench.

"Over the bridge
biking, when across the road
a winking Bashō"

On my last full day in Tokyo, I unwittingly ventured to the same districts whose flowering treetops Bashō had said he would miss most on the narrow road. The cherry blossoms had long since fallen, but I enjoyed strolling around Ueno Park as summer
rains slipped between the green foliage overhead and pooled on the broad lotus leaves quilted across the surface of Shinobazu Pond. As I ventured out into Yanaka on my bike, I found myself for the first time surrounded by architecture which had survived the massive bombing of Tokyo during the Second World War; along with it survives the quiet charm of the market along the narrow Yanaka Ginza, where vendors sell ame rice candies and yakizakana, fried mackerel on a stick. I could not have imagined that Tokyo could be so peaceful - just a couple of miles from the insanity of Ueno Station, no less.

I returned to Asakusa just in time to catch the end of the annual natsu matsuri, a summer festival. Dancers decked in Brazilian carnivale attire wove in and out of wooden floats, which themselves danced up and down, hoisted as they were on the shoulders of men proceeding in great hordes. As day fell into desk, this colorful parade marched off between the twinkling skyscrapers and somehow overpowered them, if only for a moment.

over my shoulder
the pink and gold sunset
is already gone

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, I rose eager to finally depart from Tokyo, hoping that I, too, might finally understand what it would mean to “send word to the city.” I walked to Ueno Station carrying a large backpack stuffed with a week’s worth of clothes, my hiking boots, some chargers, and an umbrella; to my front was
strapped a smaller bag holding an e-reader, a razor-thin laptop, writing implements, and my journal, as well as a hydration pack with a mouthpiece running out to my shoulder. It was a burdensome arrangement, and I wondered why I could not have instead made the trip with a spartan knapsack as Bashō had. Like him, I carried a small number of farewell gifts acquired from friends old and new, but I had no desire to rid myself of them.

Under the station, I found a tiny shop advertising haircuts at a cost of just ¥1,000 and ten minutes, marketed towards hurried commuters but equally convenient for thrifty travelers. The woman inside let me leave my large pack on an unused salon chair and gestured for me to take another. I requested zangiri-atama (literally, a “cutting-short head”). In response, she took out a photo of Brad Pitt with cropped hair and asked if I wanted bazzu-katto. I smiled and told her I did. Before ten minutes had passed, the dark hair I had been growing out for seven months was curled in pools at my feet.

It was only two stops on the high-speed shinkansen to the major train hub of Utsunomiya. From there, I caught the Nikkō Line through endless tunnels of trees and got off at the sixth and final stop. Exiting Nikkō Station, I looked back to see its wood paneling reposed pleasantly in cream-and-white before the green mountains rising steeply in all directions. The station, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, struck me as a
fine example of the Meiji Period architecture which is conspicuously absent in postwar Tokyo.

I was a bit unsettled to realize that I had neither a Wi-Fi connection nor any idea of where to find the hostel I had arranged. I set off along the main road toward the town, which sat quietly in the early afternoon sun as if in awe of its surroundings. I had hardly walked the length of a football field when I came across a jovial group of locals grilling hot dogs and pouring lemonade under a canopy on the sidewalk. To my happy surprise, I learned that they were the staff of Guesthouse Sumica, the very place I was looking for! What’s more, I would soon realize that the proprietor of the guesthouse was a manifestation of the same “Buddha Gozaemon” who had once served Bashō and his travel companion Sora at the foot of Mount Nikkō; his simple honesty and unbounded good will were unmistakable, and he had even named his hostel for a line in Bashō’s poetry.

The next day I followed the main road to its terminal intersection, which is built atop a stream. On the other side of the water, a steep footpath disappeared into the trees toward many shrines and temples. The town of Nikkō has been linked to this path for centuries by a picturesque red bridge, which I thought I recognized from a photograph,
or perhaps a postcard. I patted my limp pockets and decided to instead proceed across the concrete road which also spans the stream.

three hundred yen
to walk ‘cross Shinkyo Bridge?
cars drive right past

I caught a bus to cover the twenty miles between the edge of town and Nikkō National Park. From the bus stop, it was about a mile’s walk to Futarasan Shrine, which marks the starting point for the long climb up Nantai-san. This was the same mountain whose nickname Sora once played with in haiku:

cut off my hair
and cast it away, at Mt. Dark Hair
changing clothes - SORA

(It was Sora whose choice I had emulated in having all my hair cut off at the beginning of my own journey.)

The climb proved arduous and at times Sisyphean. Each tiresome incline seemed to only bring me to another, steeper incline, and I wondered how Bashō had managed to make the ascent in his grass sandals. I began to feel like this this forty-five year old poet was beating me up the mountain; like he was constantly just steps ahead, and if I pushed a bit harder I might finally catch up. This image provided the motivation I needed, and after several hours I finally reached the peak, where I found myself alone.
Nikkō’s famous sunlight was shining brightly at elevation, providing a remedy for the long gusts of cold air. These must have been summoned by Ōkuninushi, the divine Shintō spirit whose effigy stood on the summit atop a bronze cloud which seemed to be one with the thick clouds hovering behind him. Though shivering, I felt grateful to his winds for re-arranging these clouds, for as I followed his gaze into the valley below, I could finally see the entirety of the beautiful lake which had been enshrouded behind me during the climb. I used the front-facing camera on my iPhone to document my success, snapping a photo of my newly buzzed hair against the jagged horizon, and then spent a while meditating at the foot of a shrine until the cold stirred me. It took several hours to descend back to the Futarasan Shrine by the lakeside. I had passed through it quickly on the way up, but now lingered happily to thank the enshrined mountain deities for my safe passage. Later at the hostel, the Buddha Gozaemon led his guests in a lively card game involving lots of animal noises - a common language for a group of travelers representing seven different nations.

Before leaving Nikkō, I ventured up into the smaller hills close to town in search of Urami no Taki, the “See-From-Behind Falls” that Bashō had written of. Today, a path leads a sparse but steady stream of visitors to the waterfall by way of several dilapidated wooden bridges with tufts of moss peeking through every crack. When I reached the viewing platform, I found the falls to be breathtaking in the most literal
sense of the word. A thick cascade of water gushed from atop a wall of rock, flanked on all sides by greenery and smaller streams of tumbling water. I became mesmerized by the way that water could fall endlessly into a pool below without the waterfall as a whole ever losing its shape. It reminded of a looping gif, and even of the cyclical flux of life itself. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

Enamored as I was with the many beautiful sights of Nikkō, the next morning it was time to move on. I was quite sad to say goodbye to the hostel and its owners, who had treated me so kindly during my stay with games, travel advice, and even a cooking lesson. As I walked to the train station, the tall mountains surrounding the town were shrouded in a white morning mist, as if coyly covering themselves from my gaze.

*the happy nest  
where birds cry “ribbit, oink, moo”
Sumica: a home*

It was six stops on the Nikkō line back to Utsunomyia, and then just one stop north on the *shinkansen* to Nasu-Shiobara. I would be spending that night two more stops to the north in Shirakawa with a host I had met on the Internet, but I decided to stop in Nasu on the way to see another *uta-makura*, covering in one day what had taken Bashō several days to see. I felt uncertain as to whether I’d even be able to reach the “Killing Stone” which sits many miles from the train tracks at the foot of Mt. Nasu, but Japanese efficiency struck once again: after just five minutes of chatting with the a
stunningly polite and helpful station attendant, I was on my way with highlighted bus schedules and maps of Nasu’s mountainous onsen region.

The bus ride took about fifty minutes. I wrote in my journal all the while, even though I had come to believe that looking out the windows of buses, cars, and trains was the least I could do to take in the landscapes that took Bashō weeks to cross on foot. But there wasn’t much to see during this leg of the trip, as the bus was surrounded on all sides by a deep cloud of mist, to the point that I could hardly see the sidewalks as we drove through the streets out toward the rural edges of Nasu. It almost felt like I was sitting in a totally stationary box as various scenes took their turn presenting themselves before my window: first the restaurants and shops surrounding the train station, then a long stream of tall trees, and finally volcanic rocks scattered across a barren plain, just barely visible through gaps in the white fog. It reminded me of playing Pokémon, when you stumble into a dark cave and can only see a small radius around yourself because you don’t yet have the ability to illuminate the place with "Flash."

The bus dropped me in the center of a village which I assumed to be very small. I could hardly tell for sure, as nothing was visible beyond the one block square surrounding the bus stop; indeed, the whole thing may have just been some kind of strange apparition. Immediately, the blatant stench of sulfur let me know I was in the
right place: like any natural hot springs, the area is situated atop hot volcanic currents which impart a characteristic scent. I proceeded to the trailhead and began hiking with my two packs strapped to front and back, politely toting a bright blue umbrella to protect the compartment containing my laptop from the light drizzle. After just a kilometer or two, I came to the Killing Stone.

The Killing Stone, or Sessho-seki as it is known to the Japanese, is a large slab of volcanic rock which kills anyone who comes into contact with it (if the stories are to be believed). It is said to be poisonous because it is inhabited by the spirit of Tamamo no Mae, the nine-tailed fox who once plotted against the Emperor by taking the form of a beautiful, seductive woman. I expected to see just a rock, and indeed there was no sign of the piles of dead bees and butterflies of which Bashō had written. But the magical properties of the stone were apparent nonetheless: a thick Shintō braid was draped across its front, and the impenetrable mist and odor pervading the rocky landscape seemed to emanate from it. In one moment, I suddenly understood how superstitions had come to be.

a valley vanished
in white - mist and gas meet
by the Killing Stone

I stood appreciating the sight for several minutes before wandering into a forest on the greener side of the trail. There I stumbled upon a gorgeous shrine, as well as a stone monument with a Bashō haiku carved into it. When I returned to the town, I was
beckoned by a smiling elderly couple tending to a small restaurant and came inside for lunch. They were quite excited to be serving a foreigner and chatted eagerly about their own appreciation for *Oku no Hosomichi*. I desperately wished that I could have understood more of their Japanese, but it was a happy encounter nonetheless. They served me the “Cowboy Set” of steak with salad, rice, soup, and pickles, then directed me to a small outdoor hot springs where I could soak my feet while waiting for the bus back to the station. I was quite sad to be departing so quickly from a place of such mystical beauty.

One more stop on the *shinkansen* and another on a local line brought me north to Shirakawa Station. I was there to see Shirakawa no Seki, the Barrier whose crossing marked Bashō’s entry to the *Oku* region of Japan, which is alternately called the “Interior,” the “Far Provinces,” or the “Deep North” in English. The diversity of translations stems from the ambiguity of the word “oku.” Geographically, it can refer to the northern part of the main island, today divided into the prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate, Aomori, Yamagata, and Akita (my travels along Bashō’s path would take me to all but one of these). But “oku” also means “far,” “deep,” and “remote” as well as paradoxically, “inside,” “heart,” or “inner sanctuary or room.” *Oku-san* is a term for one’s wife, the person who traditionally maintained the interior of the home as well as the physical and spiritual welfare of the household. *Oku-Iya* is the name of a place, meaning “deep within Iya.”
The Shirakawa Barrier, ancient even in Bashō’s time, was once a military battlement protecting the southern region of Japan (ruled from Kyoto) from the wild and unconquered people of Oku in the north. The structure has been lost to time, but the site of Bashō’s visit remains enshrined in a forest which can be reached by country backroads. A small preview greeted me at the station: a cardboard structure painted to resemble wood, with the characters for Shirakawa no Seki brushed across the top. I walked through this archway and out to the station’s parking lot, where my host Stephanie, an English teacher from Jamaica, was parked on the curb.

I dropped my bags in the back seat and sat in the front. There was a new car scent, and Natasha Bedingfield’s “These Words” flowed from the speakers. As we drove back to her apartment, Stephanie told me about her work at various schools in the rural region. She had begun just a few months prior and was still in the process of learning Japanese and getting acquainted with life in Shirakawa. Back at her apartment, we sat on the floor and streamed her favorite television show, “The New Adventures of Lois and Clark.” Weary from the last week of travels, I found welcome respite in the mundanity, though if it was quite a sudden departure from my morning in Nasu. But even as I felt that I had returned to the safe realm of rationality and civilization, the power of magic come back to haunt me. When I tried to go on the Internet to review my next day of travel, I realized that the Killing Stone was lethally poisonous after all: it had claimed the life of my laptop.
to be continued

(outline to follow)
Outline of *Summer Rains*

I. Pre-trip

A. Introduction
   1. “Beginner’s mind” - shoshin - humility
   2. The open interpretation of haiku (no footnotes)
   3. Translations of Bashō’s work
   4. Explain use of Japanese phrases like *uta-makura* and -*san*

B. General thoughts on trips [Intro + Chapter 1]
   1. I have long harbored suspicion that I only become my best self while traveling away from home. This became especially poignant to me during a visit to Manhattan not long after my eighteenth birthday. Free from the familiar settings that remind us of who we are supposed to be, we become something new and undetermined. Our mind forgets its biases; our eyes remember how to see. Over the last year of my young life, I have endeavored to approach my entire life as a trip, recognizing that each and every day can be the starting point for adventures into new and unfamiliar territory, if only we will let it.

C. “Last” day in America
   1. Grandpa’s birthday on 4th of July in Salinas - classic Americana/California
   2. Letting out the dog, and “the winds whipped all around me”

D. Real last day in Washington
   1. Flight delays, re-routed through Seattle, barely miss the flight (still at the gate)
   2. Steak, blueberry pie, bonfire, and conversations about writing/experience
   3. Montecristo sandwiches for breakfast

II. Tokyo

A. Landing
   1. There’s something about a foreign landscape - but what is it? Different agricultural arrangement, something about the windows, or just in my head... signs in katakana and smaller cars driving on the left side of the road
   2. Train from Narita to Tokyo past rice fields and Japanese-style roofs; woman in kimono texts on her iPhone and kids bounce balls from a festival
      a) she wears a kimono and / she listens to her iPod
   3. Alienation - only white guy
   4. Emerging from the subway into busy street of Akebonobashi with Phoenix playing in headphones

B. Shinjuku
   1. Love the alleyways - packed with outdoor restaurant seating and pachinko parlors - turning on to them by accident/surprise
   2. Always one step ahead of me - maps, signs, moving walkways. vending machines...
a) prepaid card / against the vending machine / apple tea drops - thunk!

3. Visit to the Tokyo Metropolitan Govmt Building - Orwellian, imposing; the view = the city that never ends, Fuji-san not visible through the dusty heat

4. Stumbling upon Kumano Jinja (founded in 1403) - in the midst of the metropolis, a small channel opening n to the physically/temporally distant past, a sloping roof breaking the continuity of perpendicular lines that compose the skyline. A woodcarving stamp reveals to me that the shrine once had sprawling, green grounds, two ponds, and a waterfall. Today this is all replaced by concrete, and a small “Niagara Falls.”

C. Asakusa

1. Start with description of tatami rooms: 5 mats at Taito Ryokan, they fit together perfectly so that it seems like the room couldn’t be filled any other way, sparse, lonely - at least Basho had Sora. Practicing zazen in the room with the air conditioning out of the silence.

   a) to end my zazen / somebody’s dog is barking / from iPhone speakers
   b) out of the silence / but not interrupting / air conditioning

2. Moving “downtown” to Shitamachi, and the difference was palpable: from the shiny silver of Shinjuku to the browns and grays of Asakusa; from the many-storied, international frenzy of the Ace Inn to the quiet, creaky ryokan

3. Closer to where Basho lived in Fukagawa - further up the Sumida River from his hut

4. Visiting the indoor Edo village in Fukugawa, sunrise

5. Meditating in the shadow of the Bashō statue that stands where his hut once was

   a) over the bridge / biking, when across the road / a winking Bashō

III. Nikko

A. Leaving Tokyo

1. Unwittingly mirrored Basho’s last steps by visiting Yanaka (older architecture style, outdoor markets - how could Tokyo be so quiet?) then Ueno (natsu matsuri parade - wooden floats being tossed and carried between tall buildings and flashing karaoke signs, Brazilian carnivale theme)

   a) over my shoulder / the pink and gold sunset / is already gone

2. Next morning had all my hair cut off at a 2,000 yen shop under the station (nod to Sora)

3. Excitement about finally being on the road - if only my backpack were as light as the knapsack that Basho carried

4. From Tokyo, it was 2 stops on the shinkansen to the hub of Utsunomiya, from which it was 6 stops to the end of the Nikko line

B. Nikko

1. Arrive at classical white/lacy station surrounded by green mountains - the town quiet as if in awe of its surroundings
2. Got to inn and was surprised to find that I had book lodgings with a descendant of Basho’s own Buddha Gozaemon - trustworthy, helpful, leading scores of international travelers (Taiwanese, French, Canadian, Australian, American) in games that require no language so we can all make friends (does a frog make the same noise in every country?)

3. Wandering town, find the picaresque/much-photographed bridge (play with those words)
   a) three hundred yen / to walk across Shinkyo bridge? / cars drive right past

4. Take the bus to climb Mt. Nantai - long and sisyphean climb, with incline after incline - trying to imagine old Basho climbing in his sandals, and convinced myself that he was ahead of me, always around the next corner - very difficult but I finally made it, and was amazed at the moment I could see over the mountain and down the other side - statue of Ōkuninushi mountain kami standing on a cloud that blended quite well with the thick clouds behind him - beautiful view of the valley and Lake Chuzenji below - climbed back down and paid my respects to the Futarasan Shrine like Basho, meant something to me for once since I had completed such a hard hike

5. Next day, hiked to Urami no Taki - really liked walking in over dilapidated wooden bridges with moss peeking out of every crack; view of the waterfall was literally breathtaking (only thing that “sees from behind” the falls today is a small Buddha statue, since the ledge has changed) - mesmerized by the way that the water keeps falling but the waterfall never loses its shape; like a looping gif, and somewhat like life itself - stood watching it for a while and then had to let it go, and as I walked out and through the town, I was walking alongside the very water I had previously watched tumble over the falls

6. Leaving - innkeeper tells me he named his hostel for a passage in Oku no Hosomichi; walk to the station and mountains shrouded in mist as if coyly hiding from my gaze
   a) the happy nest / where birds cry “ribbit, oink, moo” / Sumica: a home

IV. Nasu / Shirakawa

A. Nasu - the Killing Stone

1. From the hub of Utsunomiya, it was only one stop by shinkansen to Nasu-Shiobara Station.

2. Directed to the Killing Stone by a very helpful and efficient tourist attendant at the station - highlighted maps and schedules, and I was on my way.

3. 50 minute bus ride to the onsen region, all the while surrounded by a layer of mist and fog so thick that I had the illusion of being suspended within a cloud as trees and buildings would come and go before me. Arrive in a village but it’s impossible to say for sure how big it was since I could only see one block in each direction.

4. Horrible sulfur stench permeating the whole region as soon as I got off the bus

5. Short hike with my big pack strapped on my back and a smaller one braced across my front while politely toting my small, bright blue umbrella

6. It was “just a rock” but the scene looked so incredible - the valley filled with thick white air; could understand how superstitions and mysticism had come to be
   a) a valley vanished / in white - mist and gas meet / by the Killing Stone

7. Ate the Cowboy Set for lunch in the town and bathed my feet in a free, outdoor onsen before catching the bus back to Nasu
8. Sad to be leaving this foggy and mystical place - but the joy and downfall of my modern schedule was that I would reach the Shirakawa Barrier 16 miles to the north that same day.

B. Shirakawa - Shirakawa Barrier
1. 1 stop by Shinkansen to Shin-Shirakawa, then one stop on a local train to reach Shirakawa
2. Was greeted at Shirakawa Station by my host Stephanie, an English teacher from Jamaica who had agreed to host me just one night previously
3. She picked me up in her car w Natasha Bedingfeld playing and then we watched Superman in her room, marking a crazy shift from my mystical morning to a very mundane evening. But I shouldn’t underestimated the power of the Killing Stone - my laptop was dead, dead.
4. Discuss the multiple meanings of “Oku” & Shirakawa barrier marking its entrance
   a) “Oku” has a specific reference in the narrative: on the way from Sendai to Shiogama, Bashō describes a path along the skirt of a mountain as “oku no hosomichi.” But the title suggests more than just this stretch of road. “Oku” has been translated as “Far Towns,” “Far Province,” “Deep North,” and “Interior.”
   b) Geographically, Oku was the provinces of northern Honshū – Mutsu (Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate and Aomori) and Dewa (Yamagata and Akita). But “Oku” also means “far,” “deep,” and “remote” as well as paradoxically, “inside,” “heart,” or “inner sanctuary or room.” “Oku-san” (“wife”) is, or was traditionally, the person who stayed in the interior of the house, in charge of the physical and spiritual welfare of the household. “Oku” is also used as a prefix in combination with place names to suggest both “far away” and “deep within,” as in Oku-Noto, “Remote Noto,” or Oku-Iya, “Deep within Iya.”
5. We drove to the barrier and had a great time wandering the forest that surrounds its ruins [write a haiku about the two trunked pine]

V. Miyagi
A. Staying with Kei
1. Arrival: 1 stop on the local train back to Shin-Shirakawa, 4 stops to the north on the shinkansen, and 3 stops from Sendai Station out to the hilly suburbs of Kitayama
2. Kei was a sweet but shy man - took care of all of my comforts but we didn’t have much to talk about.
3. POURING RAIN (got caught on the way back from kombini)
4. Took the train to Sendai Station and wandered the covered shopping arcades of the city, dropped my computer at the Apple Store
5. Walked a couple miles down the city’s broad, tree-lined boulevards to the outskirts in order to find the ruins of Sendai Castle (listening to “Higher,” Date Masamune standing on the high brick wall, singing along to Kanye West’s “Power”) view/statue overlooking the whole city
6. Kei drove me around to a second-hand shop, a manga store, and a kombini where we bought ice cream
7. Staying in his spooky company dorm - by the time I woke up at 9, it was completely deserted (and no lights at night, wtf). Only saw 2 residents the whole time I stayed there

B. Tagajo
1. Kei drove me to Kitayama Station, with a detour to Sendai Station, it was a total of 12 stops to reach the rural town of Tagajo to the northeast. Beautiful rural excursion especially after the business of Sendai

2. Taga castle ruins in sprinkling rain

3. Flower garden (what kind? - look up in materials)

4. Tsubo Stone Marker - a “certain gift from the past” that made Basho weep - fortune in Nikko had told me to take my power from a big rock in order to let go of my past - I touched the marker through the gate to make sure it was real and was thus was zapped back to the present moment

C. Shiogama

1. Only two stops north to Shiogama

2. Detoured on my way to the water to see Shiogama Shrine - long stone staircase; main shrine completely covered in white for renovations, but I did get to listen to a priest chanting at side hall

   a) spring training / run up to the shrine and back / in sprinkling rain

VI. Coastline

A. Arrival

1. Caught the “Basho cruise” from Shiogama Pier to Matsushima, taking me past a number of island crags along the coast - children on the boat feeding seagulls - annoyed me at first, but then I realized how rarely I have ever watched a flying bird at such proximity, and was hypnotized by the automatic flapping of their wings, so fervent yet so casual

   a) It has been said, both by Basho and many before him, that Matsushima offers one of the three most scenic views in all of Japan. Upon arriving in this coastal town, I felt unable to judge the value of this claim, seeing as the horizon was clogged with grey mist, and raindrops beat upon my head from the moment I stepped off the sightseeing boat. I am lucky that nothing is permanent, because with the passing of some days, the rain let up, and I was able to behold what I must assume to be, in fact, the most beautiful view in and already beautiful country - I have yet to see the two others on the list.

2. At the pier in Matsushima I saw a sign for a Basho museum and beelined for it, only to learn that its materials had all been swept out to sea during the tsunami

3. Quickly decided that I had booked too long a stay in Matsushima - part wanderlust part frustration with the touristy/family-oriented nature of the town (made me feel lonely + broke). Shortened my stay with the keeper of the ryokan.

4. Dinner at a “furusato” restaurant - awesome experience with some old, smoking locals; away from the tourist hubbub; helped me order a plate of delicious sashimi

   a) quote Marilyn Ivy’s gibberish about phantasm

B. Exploring

1. Hiked up into the hills behind the town to look out over Matsushima’s islands from Saigyo Modoshi No Matsu Park (“the pine tree that caused Saigyo to go back home” - local legend that high priest Saigyo encountered a young monk under a large pine tree, debated about Zen principles, and Saigyo conceded to the youth’s amazing intellect. Left Matsushima and went home).
2. Looking out over the Pacific Ocean, I felt like I could see all the way to the California coast as Basho had once seen Sado off the coast of Niigata. But my family was really thousands of miles away... and yet mere inches in the grand scheme of things. I had never felt so confused about my size. Cicadas crying like a dial-up connection.

   a) ah, Matsushima, ya! / the melody of islands / and oyster burgers

3. Made more beautiful by its being a fleeting encounter - not being “milked.” On the second day there was pure sun for the first time in weeks, and I thought it better that I should not see the city in the rain afterwards.

4. Data Masamune’s vacation spot - moonviewing hut-

C. Oku-Matsushima

1. The point at which I realized the closer I stay to Basho’s path, the less I actually feel like I’m really following a road through “Oku” or on a journey at all. The path is certainly convenient and led to many interesting encounters, but the landmarks from the book have generally been transfigured into commercial assets and marketing tools - the most awesome moments have come from deviating from the path and heading to places not popularized by Basho’s “travel guide.”

2. It would normally be just 7 stops along the coastline to reach Nobiru Station, but the line was still under repair after tsunami damage, so I had to take a special JR bus.

3. Getting off the bus - the damage, station and nearby kombini (my paradigm of Japan’s cleanliness and efficiency) still in shambles

4. Walked an hour along the beach and sea breezes

   a) since the eleventh / seashells smashed on the levee / white fragments of time

5. To climb Otakamori Hill, which promised the best views of the islands in Matsushima’s Bay, but looked a bit gray in the rain. Striking difference from the photo guide posted at the top of the mountain (difference in weather, and also the island life - boats, hotels, houses - was greatly diminished after the tsunami) the juxtaposition of quick, drastic change and photography’s appeal to the eternal

6. Spotted a car just barely sticking out of a pond on my walk back to the station

   a) is that a car? / an edge appears / above the water line

D. Ishinomaki & Tashirojima

1. Caught a bus to get one station to the north, from there only 6 stops to Ishinomaki, which I had decided to visit on a whim

2. A somber, industrial town, brightened only by its proud displays of manga history

3. Walked through the city to reach the harbor; closer I got to the ocean, the more the damage from the tsunami was apparent, with entire neighborhoods abandoned

4. “Mermaid Ferry” to Cat Island - stood at the bow of the ship, cold wind whipping at my face with blue sky and shining sun spread across the surface of the ocean all around me

5. Island small and tropical, more cats than people, cat-shaped houses perched on green hills looking over the ocean, no humans around to “break the spell”

6. Walked a path through a bamboo forest peppered with flowers of every color to reach the port on the opposite side of the island. Ghost town - and businesses near the water all abandoned

VII. the Deep North

A. Hiraizumi
1. From Ishinomaki, 7 stops to Kogota, then 12 stops north on the Tohoku Main Line

2. Coming into town late at night with no plan of nowhere to sleep - felt like I was riding high on a wave of travel that I had caught off the coast of Matsushima, but with the risk of being tossed mercilessly down into the ocean deep...

3. Wake up: cicadas are louder than anywhere else, yet they don’t seem to be mocking me as I had suspected in the parks of Tokyo and the trees of Tashirojima

4. “Glory of three generations only lasted as long as a single nap” - 800 years ago this was a bustling capital of up to 100,000 people - my ancestors had yet to steal the continent on which they live now - today just scattered rocks that once supported not only palaces but entire political regimes... and gift shops

5. Quite, peaceful, felt very much in the “deep north”

6. View of the Kitagama River from up on Takadachi Hill where Yoshitsune was killed (as mentioned by Basho) - story of Kiyohira’s Oshu Fujiwara dynasty and its failed attempts to rule the rogue lands of the north for themselves

7. Motsuji Temple (Buddhist Pure Land/Jodo) & the Oizumigaike Pond (coastline of Japan)
   a) Rocky coastline, peninsula beach with little waves, winding feeder stream unearthed after 800 years (Gokusui no En poetry party still takes place in the spring)
      (1) writing poetry / by spring’s winding stream / sake cups float by
   b) Gokusui no En poetry party
   c) Sakuteiki guidelines on garden making published in the 11th century - all about placement of the stones
   d) Jodo-Teien Gardens: reproducing the Pure Land of the Amida Buddha (afterlife) on Earth
   e) Three ages followed the death of the Shakamuni Buddha: shōbō (correct method) was the age of true dharma, a Golden Age lasting 500-1000 years during which the teachings of Buddha were practiced diligently. Second age zōbō (“statue religion”) an age of inferior, imitative law when people would practice the way but could not attain enlightenment. The final age, mappō (“end religion”) was thought to coincide with the dawn of the Heian age and marked an age of lawlessness, decline, decadence, and depravity. In this context of apocalypse the Japanese rulers designed their Pure Land Gardens seeking freedom/dharma

8. If all the signs are to be believed, there are at least 5 restaurants in Hiraizumi that have been open since Basho’s time and he ate at all of them!!

9. Thinking about the past of Hiraizumi and wandered down the road to Joshua Tree (back into memory) a piece of my heart left back there in the desert -
   a) moonrise / the hills are on fire / for wandering boys

10. We scatter pieces as we walk down this road that we call life, leaving them with friends or tying them to dandelions and watching them float away in the wind. Perhaps I’ve been doing this as I travel through Japan - I surely left a bit of myself at Sumica. And while it would be nice to think that these deposits can be made endlessly, we should still be careful with them or at least double back sometimes to pick up ones strewn about in our wake, lest we have no more heart to give in the eternal present (Basho’s theory of “Fu-Eki Ryuoko”)

B. Aomori & Morioka

1. Aomori
   a) Took the train almost to the very tip of Honshu just because I could (rail pass)
   b) 6 stops north on the Tohoku Main Line 5 stops on the Shinkansen to Hachinohe, and then 2 more stops to the North
c) visited Kuonji, a random Zen temple that I had found online and sat zazen with the master (once again couldn’t get calm in this “institutionalized” sitting as much as on my own)

2. Morioka
   a) 2 stops back to Hachinohe, then 3 stops south on the shinkansen to Morioka
   b) Sansa Odori drum festival in da rain!! Never get sick of the repeating chant. Floats lit in neon remind me of growing rave scene
      (1) girls smile brightly as / summer rains on their parade / flowers in their hair
   c) Men, women, young, old, all mixed up without differentiation or hierarchy
   d) Pulled into drinking and eating under a canopy outside a local izakaya - Megumi the cute waitress, the only sarcastic Japanese person I met during my entire trip

VIII. Sendai again
   A. Hostel / Virtuality
      1. Night of the festival, caught the express shinkansen so it was only one stop to Sendai
      2. Next day got the computer back for free (warranty miracle)
      3. Met cool friends - one Japanese-American, the other Swiss and we talked in French
      4. Generally lived a sad and sedentary life at the hostel - “ventured back to America” by putting the IP address into my GPS and climbing over firewalls until I was back in my room, nestled among comfortable memories and dreams of home

IX. Yamagata
   A. Yamadera
      1. Finally broke out of my nostalgic slump when it came time to head east to Yamadera, 14 stops on the Senzan Line
         a) behind some town / green mountains cut the sky / whoosh, whir! train rolls on
      2. Earthquake on the way, nervous whispers of “jishin?”, train stopped for a few minutes
      3. Climbed the many stairs to pay my respects to a large Buddha at the top of Ryūshaku-ji
      4. Thanks to train delays, I watched a gorgeous sunset over the mountains from the station sitting in the middle of the valley

   B. Yamagata City
      1. 5 more stops to the dead end of the Senzan line in Yamagata City
      2. First night in a Western style hotel (many of them around all the stations) - striking loneliness of the room for the moment I walked in, somehow because it was more full...
      3. Wandered the streets in the rain at night watching people set up for the Hanagasa Parade

   C. Tendo (homestay)
1. Picked up from the station by car by a smiling older couple that immediately requested I call them “ojiisan” + “obaasan” (describe their eccentricities - “my English is broken”, yoisho, daily written schedules, etc)

2. Still pretty rainy, but I could make out the blue-gray shapes of mountains in the distance all around us, setting the backdrop for all that passed by my car window for the next week.

3. Visited Hojin no Ie, the border guard’s house where Basho slept next to a horse; today it’s a museum but the underside of the thatched roof is still blackened, and you could tell that it retains its old smells. All the visitors, young and old, sat around the fire in the irori (sunken hearth) sipping green tea and discussing Basho.

   a) where horses pissed / we share some green tea / by the fire

4. Trod the Natagiri Pass that Basho had been guided over; today, the road takes the tunnel right underneath those mountains in two minutes; but we got out of the car and walked a bit of the path nonetheless.

   a) where obaasan points / a leaf flutters down toward / Obanazawa

5. Ended up in the small town of Obanazawa where Basho visited and Leslie Downer wrote haiku poetry, went to yet another Basho museum where I had the realization (disoriented in general) that I had seen so many different statues portraying him in different ways that perhaps I could no longer recognize him so easily as I had in Tokyo. Led by a guide to Yosen-ji, the temple where Basho had slept, sitting atop a hill overlooking never-ending rice paddies.

6. Had been feeling a bit distant all day, but finally arrived “in the moment” in time for the Hangasa Parade at night.

   a) each parade / a river in the streets / flowing out to sea

7. Went to Sendai for a 3rd time on a day trip to see the Tanabata festival (my third of Tohoku’s 5 great summer festivals) mostly just decorations HOT and crowded - starting to really love Sendai, especially the futuristic walkways that extend over the streets for a few blocks surrounding the station... thousands of kusudama paper/ streamer balls in all kinds of shapes - some made out of cranes, others were Pokemon heads, even saw one styled as Oku no Hosomichi! Ojiisan picked me up from Yamadera and as we drove out of the valley, I could see the sun setting as a perfect, red circle thanks to a smattering of clouds softening its rays. But only for an instant - when I looked back, it was blazing again and burned its shape into my vision, leaving little spots everywhere I looked thereafter.

8. Traveling by car so much in Yamagata raised some interesting questions about experiencing place via automobile - so many beautiful things rushed by so quickly that I felt like I couldn’t really appreciate them, but would take countless mental snapshots and group them all together - sensory input on overload, so I develop a system to classify it rather than looking at each piece in detail - no wonder we love our Excel sheets and iPhones.

   a) our toy car / winds through green mountains / the game of life

9. Driven to Mogami Gawa to take a Basho-style cruise down a one hour stretch (beginning and ending at gift shops, and even stopping at one on the way). Happy that the boatmaster preserved some traditional Japanese songs and even sang a muddy English translation for me. Trains ambling by the road visible from the boat. At the end, Shiraito-no-Taki tumbling down to a torii gate. Lovely picnic overlooking the swift, brown river with ojiisan/obaasan. Went to an onsen in Tendo at night.

   a) blue cotton candy / hangs in the sky / dissolves on the tongue
10. Drove to Mt. Zhao and sat in gorgeous natural onsen. Felt other-worldly, like Soseki’s kusamakura. Bathing under trees and sitting on rocks covered by neon-green moss under the gently flowing, warm stream
   a) the world flipped / so we can bathe in warm sky / “very beautiful”

11. Last night: smaller obon festival in Tendo, helped hold the mioshi shrine (divine palanquin for carrying a kami inside)

X. Shonai

A. Tsuruoka
1. 3 changes and 20 stops to travel the 60 miles east to Tsuruoka, almost on the coast
2. Saw boats on the Mogami River from the train (as I had seen the train from the boat)
3. Met by a kind English teacher - yakitori dinner/drinks/discussions of Japanese literature, followed by first karaoke experience with a mix of locals and gaijin English teachers
4. Walking back in pouring rain - a strategic game of frogger as we jumped between a series of awnings during gaps in the rain

B. Dewa Sanzan hike
1. Completing the pilgrimage in traditional order - birth, death, rebirth - not my first “legendary trio”
2. Jeff drove me to Haguro-san to get started. Glad I went in the morning - quiet and empty, with a sense of the impending rush of visitors (a yapping tour group on my heels). Like being in another world when I approached the ancient pagoda (originally built as early as 931, rebuilt in 1372), thick shafts of sun streaming in between the trees around this wooden building that looked like it could be part of the woods. Exhausting climb up the many old and cracked stone steps - how many before me had done the same? Felt holy as I caught my breath underneath towering cedars, but ironically it dissipated once I passed through the torii at the mountaintop and actually visited the shrines - it just didn’t feel the same as being lost among the ancient woods
3. An old man speaking zuzu-ben (“zikan”) helped me find the gorgeous “Oku no Hosomichi” trail down Haguro to the foot of Gassan; very peaceful, empty trail, quiet and shady with a long row of stones marking the way through the mud from top to bottom... consideration of what it would be like to run into Basho on the road. Just as I often imagined that the 1920’s truly took place in black and white, I can only imagine his time in abstract brushstrokes and pastels. Cool to realize that he probably saw the very same things as me as he walked this path - but today it is parallel to a road, so there are occasional flashes of concrete or sounds of passing cars
4. Waited for the bus by a large, beautiful pond
   a) leaf-speckled pond / two dragonflies use one / for a marriage bed
5. Teased by fate with the passing motorcyclist who had lived in Pasadena just as I had to get on the bus
6. Despite the elevation, no good views from beginning of the hike due to a thick layer of cloud covering everything - looking out the window of the bus, I felt like the scenery had yet to be rendered, a blatant glitch in reality
7. Hiking in a cloud - other humans would pass in and out of existence rapidly - I could tell why Basho had compared Gassan to the moon; patches of glacial ice and snow, surrounded by ice; cold otherworldly atmosphere at summit contrasted with the summer heat of Shonai
8. Stayed at the summit hut - as the clouds cleared, I could see the lights of Yamagata City from my window in the FAR distance - saw stars for the first time !!!
9. Hiked down to Yudono the shrine of which I can’t speak - but undoubtedly deserving of the adjective “holy” again; very mystical/exotic/ceremonial - hiked down the mountain and out the torii gate and encountered the tour group again

C. Sakata
1. Driven north to Yuza at the foot of Chokai-san and straddling the border of Akita-ken
2. Looking out over the Sea of Japan for the first time, shimmering sunny sea
3. 16 Rokai carved into the coastline; Basho kuhi down the road
4. Host from Dublin, Ireland where I had once lived - out at a bar, we discussed the city’s changes in the 9 years since I had left - also discussed the ugliness of cities in Japan’s countryside (egregiously prominent power lines, rundown buildings, neglected public spaces, all abandoned in favor of shopping malls along the freeway)

XI. Niigata
A. Sado Island
1. 10 stops down the coast to Niigata Station, bus to the ferry port, and a 2.5 hour ferry ride to Sado Island - dozed off with the dreamy sensation that I could feel the ship’s heartbeat in the floor below me as we chugged along
2. Bus ride out of the port city and through the green island/along the sunset sea
3. Small local obon festival, then hopped the fence into the Ohashi bridge arching out to the sea, beautiful views of moonlight on the water (only a half-moon, but so very bright and golden that much was illuminated) I enjoy the feeling of tininess from looking out at the ocean or up at the night sky, and felt all my worries melt away as here I did both
   a) calm sea / stretching out from Sado Isle / a river of moonlight
4. Full day on the island: got up and wandered around the abandoned gold mines - menacing concrete structure, a hulking ode to the Meiji modernization efforts, today overtaken by grass (Gold Mountain is a costly name for Kinzan, paid for by the slaves)
5. Spent most of the day on the beach in a daze, lazily alternating between sunbathing and floating in the clear water over the pebbles. At nightfall I took a dip in the small cove down the road from the hostel. Moon-rich water lapped gently against the coastal rocks.

B. Niigata City
1. Sad bus trip back through the island to the busy port, ferry ride back to Niigata City
2. Met my host, a young but very hardworking TV director who made a series of business calls as I took shelter from the day’s heat in his apartment
3. Hustled over the Shinano River on foot to catch a train

C. Yahiko
1. Heading back over the same river I had just run across and then curving in from the coast, it was a total of 14 stops to reach Yahiko - nondescript urbanity melted away, turning to flat suburbs and eventually even flatter expanses of rice fields.
2. Niigata prefecture is not Yamagata - the skylines were dominated by the occasional vaulted net of a driving range rather than endless mountaintops... until I approached Yahiko Village, at the foot of a large mountain cutting it off from the coastline.

3. Yahiko shrine was elegant - polished, brown wood; wide grounds and “open” atmosphere with no entry fees - “chillin there” where the town meets its mountain backing.

4. Mountain trail had a really addictive smell of old wood and damp earth.

5. From the mountainside I could look out over the expanse of green paddies cut by the tracks of the “toy” train that had brought me to this place; tall red torii gate standing tall on the landscape at the entrance to Yahiko.

6. Sea of Japan gorgeous view from mountaintop, but Sado Island invisible in the haze. Endless blue on one side, endless green on the other. Strange cement platform that once held a statue (metal supports sticking out) but today standing as its own strange sculpture.

   a) horizon erased / so sea becomes sky: / island eclipsed
   b) egg-shaped moon / in a purple sky / over a purple town

XII. Kanazawa / Fukui

A. Kanazawa

1. Long train travel: 7 stops south to the closest bullet train hub; 12 stops on the shinkansen.

2. Ultra-modern 21st Century Center with the Turrell Room / skylight.

3. Kenrokuen gardens - large and surprisingly ostentatious for a Japanese garden; saw the oldest fountain in Japan operating by simple pressure differential, super hot.

   a) autumn winds / hurry, and put this sun / back in his place

4. Staying at Keiko’s with an Italian friend Barbara - our first night, eating guacamole, limoncello cookies, and Turkish shishah as we sipped Japanese beer.

5. Keiko told me about the car markers for old (red + yellow “momiji” leaves of autumn about to fall) and new (blue + green “wakaba” newly sprouted) drivers.

6. Driving the Super Rindo road winding through Mt. Hakusan, past a number of waterfalls and gorgeous mountain views, and eventually down to Shirakawa-go, which was nice, but felt fake (pursue/inject some scholarship about World Heritage here).

   a) indifferent to / summer rain, gray powerlines / climb the mountainside

7. Twentieth birthday - nomi/tabe-hodai with Barbara and Keiko, texts from home before I went to bed.

B. Natadera

1. 2 long stops to Kaga Onsen in the south.

2. Caught a bus to Natadera, a very ancient temple with sprawling, hallowed grounds. Entered the front hall that was just re-built in 2009 to find an emoromous and colorful statue of the thousand-armed Kannon Buddha shaped from some handsome, smooth material so that it had a degree of fantastical realism to it. The splayed hands each held a different object - a bell in one, a sword in another, and smaller Buddhas in two - with an array of heads crowning the main one. The most striking feature to me was the halo of sanskrit characters pulsating and changing colors in LED on the ceiling, casting a gentle and always shifting glow on the statue’s face.
3. Temple so integrated into its sprawling, natural grounds - I got lost in a forest of small Buddha statues and repeatedly tangled in a number of spider webs
4. Explored the old pagoda, a Basho kuhi, and an observation deck looking over the rock garden and the shrine caves. I entered the cave and lit a candle at a dark shrine and stopped to appreciate the Kannon once more before I left
5. Walked through the countryside for a couple of hours to reach my lodgings, heavy pack
6. The true night of my birth was blessed with a “particularly fine” nearly full moon over the fields as I wandered down the road from town back to the hotel
   a) outside / crickets call, / “join us in Enlightenment!”

C. Fukui

1. 8 stops south of Kaga Onsen to reach Fukui
2. Caught a bus to Eiheiji which ferried its passengers to the edge of the urban landscape, where just before some mountains it dissolves into the “quaint” touristy village that I have encountered so many times
3. Monastery was a very peaceful place, maintaining its dignity while remaining open to visitors. Clearly designed as a place of living and still in use, unlike so many temples I had seen previously. Saw a flood of young monks leaving the shodo and heading to the gathering hall, while one cheekily whispered to another
   a) silent monk / whispers to his friend / “willow leaves scatter”
4. Just as I had been considering how well the place had avoided the trappings of the tourism industry, I passed out of a long hallway of pretty photographs and into the gift shop... and then into the Hall of Bureaucracy, where robed monks typed away at desktop computers and send faxes
5. Bus back to Fukui. Walked from the station to see the remains of Fukui Castle, one of the most absurd intersections of past and present: atop the ancient rock foundations, surrounded by a moat, today sits a nondescript beige office building that houses the offices of the prefectural government. There are still traces of the base of a tower that once gave the island its power, and they are building a recreation of one of the bridges, but the office building dominates the space
   a) I appear before / the crowned grasshopper / true king of this isle
6. Walked to the apartment of my host the English teacher on the banks of the Asuwa River. Saw a gorgeous sunset over the river behind the mountains in the distance. Relaxed with a book for a while until she got back from work, at which point we went out for yaiktori dinner with her friends, a mix of Japanese and other Americans. We ended up a bar called “Bar Jake” where the bartender Shinji played me the musical inspiration “My Brother Jake”
7. Grace and I had a great late night chat - ichi-go, ichi-e (one time one meeting)

XIII. Ogaki / Otsu

A. Tsuruga

1. 11 stops south to Tsuruga on the Bay against a small peninsula jutting off the narrow “neck” of Japan, north of Lake Biwa
2. Had the same old industrialized Japanese town look
3. Visited Kehi Shrine which Basho had been to - upon seeing two teenage girls strolling across the grounds, I had the sudden realization that these shrines are “all Japan has left” in a sense - the last remaining physical proof that Japan has an identity underneath all that it has imported/copied from the West. As an Egg McMuffin digested in my stomach, I considered how the “holiness” of these spaces has protected them from the immense transformations that have occurred everywhere else in the country, and thus the holiness no longer derives from mysticism but from nostalgia - the last vestiges of an identity that once was, and may or may not still be. The priest chanting inside the main hall for two onlookers was muttering the spell that allows them to still be Japanese as they wear their jeans and text on their iPhones.

4. Unexpected Basho statue in the garden outside the temple

5. Walked a couple kilometers to the water to see the pine forest park (in Matsushima-cho neighborhood) which was really lovely. Thin, tall trees sticking out at every angle, with a spectacular panoramic vista of the mountains peninsula past the beach

a) coastal mountains / curving across the sea / through pines on pines

6. Followed the alleged “Oku no Hosomichi nature course” along the lip of the bay back toward the station, but all I found was more concrete, so I decided instead to walk along the Shuno River while it pours in from the sea and is spanned by a number of bridges

a) crane swoops low / casts a white silhouette / on the cement wall

B. Ogaki

1. In the same day, took 3 trains over 17 stops down to the east shores of Lake Biwa and then further east to the city of Ogaki

2. Perhaps my least favorite town in Japan. Awkwardly arranged, with a weird smell all over. Had been really looking forward to the mini Oku no Hosomichi path, imagining it a small analogue of my own journey (postmodern “mise en abime”/fractal mindset), and was kinda sad to find that it was in reality an uninspired collection of kuhi set next to trees, and strangely skewed toward the last few stops on the journey that I had just seen!

3. Still, enjoyed following the quaint and meandering canal through the city, which eventually led to the former site of the Funamachi Port which has been killed off by the introduction of railroads. Only a prop boat tethered by thin metal chains floats the river today. Arriving there still had a nice sense of finality

a) elegant lighthouse / has not a ship to beckon / on this summer night

C. Otsu

1. 15 stops to the west to the southern shores of Lake Biwa

2. Getting off the train, I bought my favorite Japanese treat, takoyaki, from a street vendor near the station. He gave me a stamp card hoping I would return. Ate it in the sprinkling rain, and then...

3. Basho’s grave at Gichu-ji. Very small and simple; squeezed into a suburban block with homes and air conditioning units peering over its walls. Temple was once open, peaceful with large grounds (as far as I could tell from the illustration of the ticket) as it must have been when Basho prescribed his burial here. But today the cramped quarters pose no restraints for such a wandering soul. I lit some incense and said a little prayer of remembrance at his small tombstone, and tried to write a haiku as the rain sprinkled down

a) turtle’s head / above the pond to hear / the sound of water

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4. Walked a few blocks north to the southern shores of the Lake, once again inducing that feeling of tininess from looking out over a large body of water. Looked out over a horizon bookended by towering mountains as a cheering boat sped by towing a wakeboarder. Then made my way back to the station, setting a course for Kyoto where I would catch a bus to see the “reconstruction” of Hiroshima

5. Fu-Eki Ryuko theory

6. “Loudest sound of all is silence” line

   a) **to end my zazen / somebody’s dog is barking / from iPhone speakers**