

Renga

By

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The brushwood gate closes
An empty road
The hagi blooms.

1656

That spring was like the young man's dreams. It was a time when anything could happen. The crows circling and cawing were the spirits of great generals, and omens of the marvelous. Listen to us, they said, learn our wisdom. And the graceful heron, the one that was standing in the shadow, there by that rock in the stream, was the quiet soul of a great priest poet. To know those things and to be a young man, a young samurai in Iga Province was to be like the bamboo shoot in a spring rain.

Matsuo Munefusa was twelve. He had studied and practiced as his father had taught him. And on his twelfth birthday his father gave him a sword.

"Matsuo, I have a surprise," he grinned, seeing the excitement in his son's eyes.

They had finished the tea ceremony. Birdsong filled the air with music and the taste of tea was still green on his tongue. Matsuo nodded.

"I have obtained a position for you as retainer for young lord Todo Yoshitada."

Matsuo almost gasped, but the young samurai fought to remain calm. This was the hope of all such young men, and Yoshitada was destined to be a great lord. "Thank you father," he whispered.

Late spring in Iga Province, was sticky hot. The rains came each afternoon. It was late morning, as Matsuo walked towards the castle. He had left the day before from his home in Ueno. As he stood looking at the castle gate, his heart beat fast like the thunder of the approaching storm.

Todo Yoshitada was fourteen. He was tall and thin, handsome as befits a young lord. He was composing a haiku when he was told that Matsuo had arrived. Most of his retainers were older, and despite their deference to him none were the companion he desired. "Show him in."

Matsuo's knees tried not to shake, as he bowed to his new lord.

"Please," Yoshitada said, pointing to a spot in front of his writing desk.

They sat together, Yoshitada confident with his station, Matsuo nervous but proud.

"Do you compose haiku?" Yoshitada asked.

Matsuo knew that this was one of the skills a samurai must possess, but his father had spent more time training him in martial arts and playing go, than he had in the skill of poetry. Matsuo blushed.

“You will learn,” Yoshitada said. And picking up his brush, he wrote,

Green shoots
Spring damp soil
A warrior walks.

For eight years, they were friends. Matsuo trained in the morning with the old kendo master. He read during the early hours after noon, and then he spent the rest of his time before dinner with Yoshitada. They talked of the great war their grandfathers had fought for Leyasu Tokugawa. They talked about the young women in the area. And they composed linking poems, called renga.

Matsuo accompanied Yoshitada on the business of the young lord, and he was Yoshitada’s confidant in matters that concerned the lord’s family.

1664

The black crows circle
The bamboo bends in the wind
A man stands at the temple gate.

In the early summer, Yoshitada was summoned to attend a clan meeting with his uncle in Kyoto. But illness made travel impossible. “Matsuo, you must go and represent me.”

“My lord,” now formal at the thought of such responsibility, “it is your family.”

“It is business,” Yoshitada coughed. “You must.”

Matsuo bowed.

With six samurai accompanying him, Matsuo left for Kyoto. He was Yoshitada’s surrogate, and they treated him as their lord. They didn’t joke with Matsuo, as they normally would have. They didn’t talk with him, unless he spoke first.

On their second day, they were riding through the mountains that ring Iga Province. “There is an inn about an hour from here,” one of them men said quietly to Matsuo. “Perhaps we should stay there for the night.”

Matsuo agreed. They could have ridden another few hours, but shelter from the summer storms was chancy. They crossed a cedar bridge, as the sun was low against the mountains, and went into the small inn.

His men were sitting apart from him, drinking saki and talking quietly. Matsuo sat with a piece of paper and a brush. He wanted to describe his lonely pride, now apart from the men around him.

A board creaked and the crickets stopped. Suddenly men burst into the room. They were bandits, quick, quiet, and stealthy. Matsuo's men jumped to their feet and yelled for Matsuo to not fight.

Matsuo instinctively grabbed his sword. He was samurai, and he could not hide from a fight. But his men stood between him and the bandits.

A man rushed at Matsuo from behind, and the inn became silent. The fighting froze in that instant. And Matsuo, twenty years old, trained for that moment, saw his right arm appear before him, his sword - his father's sword - descending in a graceful arc. The blade's silver edge, patterned with rolling waves, caught the red light of the setting sun through the open window. There was no resistance as it cut through the air. There was no resistance as it sliced through his attacker's arm. It was only then, as hot red blood showered Matsuo that he heard.

The man shrieked as his life emptied through his waving stump. Matsuo lunged forward and thrust his sword into the man's chest.

Later, Matsuo composed his report for Yoshitada, which one of his men, wounded from the battle, was to take back to the castle. It said only,

Clouds break the red sky
Heron cries
Cedar wood bridge.

1666

Autumn leaves dusted the road. Yoshitada died that summer, he had never recovered from his illness. Matsuo walked north from the castle. He walked without his sword.

Snow will fall
It is cold
The caw of one crow.

He never forgot that journey to Kyoto. Often his haiku hinted at his loss, and he began signing them "Basho." His students said this was after the basho tree that grew beside his hut, but the basho was Yoshitada's favorite tree.