

## How I Met the Master

### *Como eu encontrei o Mestre*

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**Abstract:** Recreating a Japanese atmosphere, between the chaotic urban world and the lyricism of Eastern philosophy, Robert Siegel narrates a existentialist search for lightness: “the lightness that Basho compared to looking through a shallow river to the sandy bottom underneath, as if the perfect haiku were translucent and empty, a ray of light in a glass bowl”. Therefore, this text tells the experience of Kimura Akiko – a young woman going from Japan’s countryside to Tokyo – in search of the Master and his haiku school, symbolizing the writer’s education and the confrontation of her own fears and traumas from the past, and the outcome is an almost daydream experience in which words must be perfumed by themselves and poetic images, emerging one after another, created by a sensibility beyond common sense and everyday look, must flow into a natural compass, as if some king of breath.

**Keywords:** Haiku, Japan, Poetry.

**Resumo:** Recriando uma atmosfera japonesa, entre o mundo urbano caótico e o lirismo da filosofia oriental, Robert Siegel narra uma busca existencial pela leveza, leveza que Basho comparou com o olhar para o leito arenoso através das águas de um rio raso, como se o haiku perfeito fosse translúcido e vazio, um raio de luz em uma tigela de vidro. Neste sentido, o texto conta a experiência de Kimura Akiko – jovem indo do interior do Japão para a capital Tóquio – à procura do Mestre e sua escola de haiku, simbolizando a formação do escritor e o confronto com seus próprios medos e traumas do passado, e o resultado é uma experiência quase onírica na qual as palavras devem ser perfumadas por si mesmas e as imagens poéticas, surgindo uma após a outra, criadas por uma sensibilidade que ultrapassa o senso comum e o olhar cotidiano, devem fluir em um compasso natural, como uma espécie de respiração.

**Palavras-chave:** Haiku, Japão, Poesia.

*There is another world,  
but it is inside this one.*

(Paul Eluard)

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The train to Tokyo took all night, and since I couldn't sleep, I spent the time writing letters to just about everyone: my mom, my dad, my grandma, Ando, Kawaguchi, some of my other classmates from the emotionally violent, lowbrow high school I had now ceased to attend. All of these letters were really just variations on one basic letter in which I explained that having a talent implied a responsibility to develop that talent, and so I was leaving to apprentice myself to the Master, who carried on Basho's work even in these philistine end times, when the poetic spirit was trampled by vulgarity, and no one wanted to hear the truth about themselves – especially not Ando and Kawaguchi. But I was going to speak that truth, scream it if I had to, until the whole world plugged its ears and begged me to stop, and even then I was going to scream and scream and scream, and my screaming was going to become as beautiful as a song, a *haikai-no-renga* of a hundred million-trillion-zillion verses, so exquisite that everyone would have to pull their fingers out of their ears and listen, and when they did, the ugly truth would slip in, and they would be forced to look at themselves and feel ashamed.

By the time we pulled into Tokyo Station it was nearly dawn. I had a sudden, confused sense that I was fucked in some complex manner I couldn't yet comprehend, but the way back was already gone, and so I walked the long concrete platform, my mom's suitcase with the broken wheel bumping behind me. My plan was to pay my respects to Basho right away, and then contact the Master later, when I was settled and ready. I threw the letters I'd written in the garbage – they were always meant for the garbage – and then stashed the suitcase in a coin locker and went searching for the

subway to Fukagawa, where Basho had lived by the river in a thatched hut with a banana tree in the garden four centuries before. It was all gone, of course, replaced with a plaque, so I leaned on the rail and watched the water as the sun rose, then walked to the shrine a couple of blocks away. I climbed the stairs through a series of *torii* and prayed before the inner shrine: I've come, I told him, I'm here, now tell me what you are going to do with me. With my eyes closed I could feel him walking circles around me, silent and ravenous, the way a poet circles a word. I opened my eyes and hunted between the trees and in the shadows, as if he might be hunkering somewhere, visible – he felt *that* real, a tingling in my stomach. I found a bamboo fence with some prayer slips wedged between the slats, leftover wishes of other worshipers, now curled by the weather, darkened, forgotten. I plucked one out and unfolded it as if reading a stranger's mail: *Make me more original*, it said. And then one by one, I pulled them all:

*Help me develop my capacity for  
childlike wonder  
Save me from writer's block  
If you don't make me famous I'll kill  
myself  
Why won't they publish my book?  
I need money  
Why did my wife leave me?  
Why won't they take my ku?  
It's time to say goodbye  
Why is my father angry at me?  
Why won't my daughter listen?  
How much longer is this going to take?*

A fistfull of them. I couldn't just throw them on the ground, so I stuffed them in my pocketbook and carried them with me.

I found a room in a *gesshuku* not far away: four mats with a window on the

alley and a sliding door that closed with a padlock. I got a job as a cashier in a grocery, and another waitressing at a coffee shop, and then set about learning all the little tricks of living in the City: how to use the force of the crowd behind me to push my way into a packed subway car, how to stand in the aisle wedged between other commuters so I didn't fall, how to turn my body just enough so the stranger's palm could not travel up my thigh. Wherever I went I was surrounded by bodies, and yet I felt so lonely that my skin ached. It was like being in love but not knowing who with. At night I reread all of the Master's books, reread all of Basho's, and everything by the Ten Disciples, the *Kyoraisho* and the *Sanzoshi* and *Uda no Hoshi* and *Recollections of the Great Master* and *Outer Mirror of Haikai* and *Inner Mirror* and *The Cuckoo's Secret Call*. I read them like they were sutras, for the sound alone, never hoping to understand the words themselves, but feeling the presence of the thing to which they pointed, the thing beyond the page, out of sight.

Once a day I pulled the *kotatsu* over to the window and sat with a notebook open in front of me, biting my nails and feeling sluggish and stupid as I tried to listen for the *ku* that floated just beneath the surface, invisible. It might have been about the oak leaves scattered in the alley, or the cats that traveled the cinderblock wall as if it were a highway to some place only cats know – I never got far enough to find out. My thoughts drifted to the past. I saw myself walking about my dingy concrete town, making a big show of staring at sparrows in the park and then scribbling in my notebook, all the time aware that Ando and Kawaguchi were somewhere nearby, in the bushes by the pond, hoping to run into

them, to shame them, not realizing that it was my own humiliation I wanted to taste again. And then I thought about the future, how I was going to meet the Master and how he was going to call me a genius and arrange for my *ku* to appear somewhere right away, maybe in the *Asahi Sunday Haiku Corner*, where my father would see them on his way to the sports page. And then, with that image of my father in my mind, I picked up the phone and dialed.

"International Society for Haiku," the woman on the other end of the line said. I squeezed the phone to my ear, already breathing too hard to speak.

"Hello?" she said.

Of course I couldn't speak. It would take just a sentence or two for me to fall into dialect, which is what happens whenever I get nervous, and then I would sound like my grandmother: an old woman with a bent back and gold teeth standing with a basket in the market, selling mushrooms gathered in the forest.

"Hello?" said the woman on the other end. "Who is this?"

If I spoke she would hear that I was a high school drop-out; that I came from a town in the north where nobody knew anything, where books seemed to accuse us of stupidity and so we avoided them, where the local music was karaoke and the natural literary medium was the sext message.

"Hello? Hello?"

Afternoons after the emotionally violent low brow high school we sat in solemn groups of twos and threes in houses all over town, watching porn on our laptops like scientists studying an alien race through its great works of art: bondage, wax torture, nipple clamps, autoerotic hanging, bukkake. Sometimes we switched to horror

movies, biker movies, slasher movies, anything that allowed us to taste the danger inside ourselves and then hide it away again. Side by side on separate benches by the river, Ando, Kawaguchi and I would sit in a sort of reverie of mutual aloneness we mistook for companionship, texting each other instead of talking.

“Hello? Are you the person who keeps calling?”

At night we went home and huddled with our families in front of the TV to watch game shows in which the contestants were even greedier and stupider than we were, thus relieving us of the shame of being those things. The setups were a lot like bondage videos, except the goal was money instead of sex. Contestants dived into vats of honey to retrieve ping pong balls containing prizes, ran across a floor of loose marbles in teams of two, tied face to face, a balloon filled with milk squeezed between them, bowls of whipped cream balanced on their heads, blindfolds over their eyes. My mother and father sat with their legs in the *kotatsu*, my father impassively smoking. In the blue light their eyes were flat black buttons. They watched as if learning something important about themselves, something that would explain the past and predict the future. Outside, unobserved, the mountains that surrounded the town turned black and cold and flat, the walls of a dream.

“Listen, this is a haiku school. We’re very busy.”

We believed in everything, UFO’s, astrology, magnets that cure cancer. We believed that Basho had walked among us, when the town was just a jumble of thatched wooden houses the color of tea. The evidence was in the little gift shop by the hotel: a tourist pamphlet, a bobble-head figurine of a man dressed as a Buddhist

priest, with an oversized writing brush in his hand. Basho had come to see an old *hajjin* who lived in town, one of his many correspondents, but on the way up he was overtaken by a storm. It grew dark, he took shelter in an abandoned hut, lay down on the floor, tried to sleep, but in the middle of the night woke up thirsty and found a cup of water right by his bed. The cup was wonderful, made of black lacquer, with a design of gold leaf, and the water was fresh, and he went right back to sleep and only woke in the dawn. And what he saw was that he was not in a hut but a crypt, surrounded by skeletons, and the glass he had drunk from was a skull, full of filthy rain water that had poured down from the ceiling.

We were told this story in the emotionally violent low brow middle school, told how Basho’s idea of *karumi*, clarity, came out the night he spent on our mountain. It didn’t matter to anyone that the story is not in *Narrow Road to the Interior*, Basho’s account of his travels in our region, or that the closest he could have come to us would have been the Three Sacred Mountains, many kilometers away. No one in our town read *Narrow Road*. We read the pamphlet.

“Whoever you are, stop calling here, or I’ll contact the police.”

I hung up through the fall and winter, but in the spring I went out and bought some sheets of Japanese paper, thick, with gold leaf at the edges, and on them I copied out my haiku. It took me two hours to get dressed after that, clothes exploded everywhere like bodies after an orgy, like discarded selves. Standing in the wreckage, I drank down a full glass of *shochu*, just as I’d seen my father drink it, fast and angry. It felt like I’d swallowed fire and then cracked my head against the wall, but I stumbled to

the station in my high heels and miniskirt and smoked half a pack of cigarettes on the platform while letting train after train go by – until suddenly I was sitting in a window seat, my notebook open on my lap, a pen in my hand, trembling, even my knees trembling. We took off into darkness, and then up into light, and then climbed above the streets, cutting through Tokyo toward the Master. The windows we passed were like a series of aquariums: man in a hat, woman in a leotard, shoe store, travel agency, fitness studio, doctor’s office. Someone was going to France, someone was dying of cancer, but the light from the afternoon sun turned them all golden. Below us, crowds surged into the crosswalk. The City was a *haikai-no-renga*, a linked verse poem of thousands and thousands of links, dissolving, changing, unfinished, unauthored, but always whole. On the blank pages of my notebook I scribbled: I am not afraid not afraid not afraid not afraid.

Once there, I stood a long time outside the building, unable to make myself enter. Instead, I watched the disciples walk in, somber, serious people with the mark of great learning in their faces: two beautiful old women in dark kimono, identical twins; a silver haired blind man in a suit and dark glasses, guided by his elegant wife; a young man with a cane who looked like he had been in a terrible car wreck and known great suffering. Each of them chiseled out of stone, burning with an inner light. I could see by the way they walked that they understood all the central precepts, *sabi* and *wabi* and most importantly *karumi*, the lightness that Basho compared to looking through a shallow river to the sandy bottom underneath, as if the perfect haiku were translucent and empty, a ray of light in a glass bowl.

I stood there, dazed, and when I finally turned from the door and saw him, he was just a step away, looking exactly as he did on the cover of *Haiku Dawn*: his narrow craggy face, his silver hair, and the bushy eyebrows like wings over his big black glasses. He wore a beret, smoked a cigarette in a long holder. “Cosmetology school’s on five,” he said, moved up the front steps, stopped, turned and then looked at me again. “Not looking for the haiku school, are you?” My eyes must have bulged. He took a puff of his cigarette, and then pointed with it to the folder in my hands. “Are those *ku*?” He took them from me and leafed through as we stood there. “What’s your name?”

“Kimura Akiko.”

He handed back the folder. “Why don’t you come upstairs?”

I bowed deeply, followed into the hallway and then into the silver elevator, which was no bigger than a phone booth. We rode up face to face, the Master puffing his cigarette, watching me as if I were a caterpillar on a leaf, something interesting to store away for a poem. “You realize that your haiku are trash, don’t you?” he asked.

Trash? I would have run into a burning building to rescue those four sheets of paper, would have jumped in front of a train. But I could hardly speak, let alone disagree. “Yes,” I murmured.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

He smiled as if he knew I was lying – I was 17, almost 18 – and then he looked me up and down, as if I were something he might wear out to a party. “You have an interesting quality about you, Kimura Akiko. The right teacher could build on it.”

“You mean?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

It felt like I'd been healed with the cut of a knife. I swayed, almost fell into him, just as the silver door opened and he stepped out into the dark hall.

How do I describe that filthy little office, except to say that it was exactly right in every detail? The dirty walls, the gray carpet, the rusty stains on the ceiling tiles, the disciples sitting on busted couches or folding chairs, turning the pages of haiku magazines, smoking and drinking cups of tea in the most nonchalant way, but nevertheless looking like skydivers waiting to jump into the air, to float, to soar.

"We have a guest tonight," the Master said to them.

They stopped to look at me, even the blind man with his dark glasses, raised their eyebrows ever so slightly, blinked. I knew they could read me down to my mother's gossip magazines, which she stole from the neighbors' trash, and my father's Pick-Three cards, which he scratched off in private moments to remind himself that people like us never win. They could read the one gray afternoon I stood outside Ando's bedroom window, watching Kawaguchi dance to the stereo in her underwear. And of course they could read my clothes, the high heels and miniskirt, the pink sweater with the little fake-fur collar: cheap and trashy. But none of that mattered now, because the Master had done something to me – I could feel it rising inside my body, filling the empty spaces as I put my hands to my knees. "Kimura Akiko," I said, and bowed as long and as low as I could, lower than I had ever gone in my life. "I humbly beseech your favor."

Not a single one of them moved, not until the Master gave them each a dark look, and then they stood and bowed, slowly, reluctantly, as if he were forcing their

heads down with his hand. He stubbed out his cigarette in a big silver ashtray, crushed it, as if he could do that to any of them, too, whenever he felt like it, and then peered at them over his glasses. "Okay then," he said, "let's go write some haiku."

We traveled in a line down the narrow stairs, out onto the sidewalk, and then turned down a side street. The Master walked a few feet ahead, seemingly oblivious to the rest of us. I walked a little bit behind, slowly piecing together the facts: that my outfit was stupid, that the folder of *ku* I still gripped to my chest was nothing but garbage, that the disciples despised me, and that I wasn't even finished for the day: I would now have to write something for the Master. What could possibly come of that? I was lame, a loser from a long line of losers, born in a town of morons. I thought about slipping into a store or disappearing down an alley, but it was already too late, because we had come to a shabby little neighborhood temple of the kind you see everywhere in Tokyo, hunched and dark, older than anything else around it. We passed through a side gate into a cemetery no wider than a house. Inside, the place felt bigger than was possible: a web of paths between statuary and gravestones doubling back and looping forward, as intricate as a maze in a dream. It was dusk and the stone Buddhas glowed in the last of the light. The moss on the ground was a wet black.

The Master gathered us around a small pine tree. "Our theme tonight is the spring moon," he said, and for the first time I looked up and saw that there was indeed a full moon, a big white globe that seemed to be sailing toward us, growing bigger and whiter without getting any

closer. “Whatever you do,” said the Master, “don’t actually put it in. Leave it out and let it perfume the words”.

Leave it out? Why not put it in if it was the point? The disciples seemed to know exactly what he meant. They scattered over the grounds, running their hands over the gravestones, sniffing the bark of the trees, scribbling in their notebooks like detectives taking down eyewitness testimony. The blind man aimed his dark glasses up at the purpling sky. His elegant wife stood beside him, speaking in a tiny voice I couldn’t make out. He listened to her like she was music on the radio, nodding slightly, and then he said something and she led him over to one of the Buddhas, and he ran his hands over its pocked limbs, put his nose to its round ancient baby face and breathed deeply, as if smelling a flower.

Ando, Kawaguchi and I had been like that, walking through the park in the afternoon after school, figuring out the riddle of our futures, how we would leave town together and find jobs in the city—not Tokyo, which we had never been to, but Tochigi-shi or maybe Sendai. Ando was going to be a club host catering to rich, bored women, and Kawaguchi and I were going to be hostesses, entertaining sad businessmen who would want to buy us jewels and cars and sleep with us. We earnestly discussed what we would wear, what we would say in this case or that, offering refinements to each other as we circled the pond, the gray mountain sky pressing down on us, making us suffocatingly claustrophobic and safe.

Six months of loneliness wandered around inside me like a cat searching for the way out. I wanted to step out of myself like dirty clothes, wanted to be like the disciples, who were never alone because they had haiku. I got my notebook from

my purse and flipped the pages, reading the scrawl from the train trip: not afraid not afraid not afraid not afraid. My heart began to thump to that rhythm, and then I noticed the Master beside me. “Nothing yet?” He frowned, puffed his cigarette. “Come with me.” He led me to the other end of the graveyard, where a sickly plum tree was in weak flower – the white of the blossoms glowing in the dark. The Master touched one with the tip of his finger. “This is your assignment. Look, what do you see?”

“A plum blossom.”

“Is that all?”

“The moon?”

“Don’t be stupid. I want you to look again, really look, and keep on looking until you forget you are looking.”

“Won’t that take a long time?”

“Forget about the time.”

“But the others?”

“Forget about them, too.”

I chose a single wounded blossom, brown at the edges, and began looking, if looking were the same as staring until your eyes burned and your sight blurred. I had to remind myself to blink. Time passed. Sometimes my mind wandered to the Master, who was a patch of darkness on the edge of my vision. I hoped he would go away, but I was glad that he stayed. Sometimes I listened to the noise in my head, the same noise that appeared whenever I sat down in my room to write, the shreds of dialogue that said terrible, unforgivable things over and over again in an overlapping mix of voices: Ando’s, Kawaguchi’s, my mother’s, my father’s. But in time the talk moved from the front of my head to the back, as if someone had turned down the volume on a radio. I became aware of other things: sirens on another street, a dog barking. My legs went numb and then came back to life.

I felt like I must be dreaming, that my body wasn't my body, the Master not really the Master, the graveyard not a real place but a location inside me. "I'm going to give you the first image, you give me the second," said the Master. "Just tell me whatever

comes into your mind." And then he did, and I did. The words slipped back and forth between us, like breath.

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