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## WRITING ON BASHŌ'S POND

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**Abstract:**

Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) is Japan's most well-known haiku poet; and Bashō's poem about the old pond, the jumping frog, and the sound of water is Bashō's best-known haiku. Indeed, this haiku, like Bashō himself, is known well beyond Japan, long ago attaining through its many translations a degree of international recognition. However, in Japan, awareness of Bashō, and of his frog haiku, reveals something more than simple recognition, having long ago absorbed itself into a broader and more complex form of remembrance and, with that absorption, a nearly reflexive response by many of those hearing it. Often, the mere mention of this haiku is all that is needed for it to be instantly evoked, for its lines to be conjured in the imagination of the Japanese listener. Translation of Bashō's frog haiku into English has itself taken many forms, with hundreds of versions existing. In this essay, I discuss these translations and what their sheer abundance reveals about the pursuit of that haiku. What, one wonders, is being translated here? I will also contrast the many translators' pursuit of the haiku with the often more immediate recognition of it by many Japanese, that involuntary memory manifested by its indigenous familiarity. Finally, I present my own recent [installation-translation](#) of this haiku, in Tokyo, a "writing on water / writing on air."

**Keywords:** haiku ♦ translation ♦ Japan ♦ memory ♦ installation art

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古池や 蛙飛び込む 水の音  
 ふるいけや かわずとびこむ みずのおと  
*furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto*  
*an old pond / a frog jumps in / the sound of water*

### Translating the Sound of Water

Matsuo Bashō is Japan's most well-known and well-respected haiku poet; and Bashō's poem about the old pond, the jumping frog, and the sound of water is perhaps Bashō's best-known haiku. Indeed, this haiku, like Bashō himself, is known well beyond Japan, long ago attaining through its many translations a degree of international recognition. It is as if, more than 300 years after the fact (the haiku was written in 1686), the distant sound of that haiku's water has somehow continued to radiate out from its now-distant source. The question arises, though, how the enduring resonance of Bashō's written haiku—the sound of those watery words so far away, so long ago—is still to be heard and, once heard (*if* heard), how have such distances been translated from the “there and then” (of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Edo Japan) into the more immediate “here and now” of here-and-now? Or, *can* such



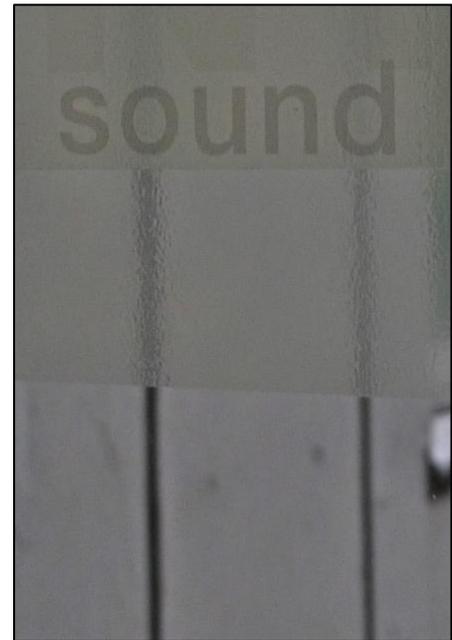
distances be translated—translated, that is, with language alone (that traditional tool of the translator)? Or might something more, something other, be needed to point us toward that imagined pond, to offer a fuller rendering of Bashō's haiku—of its past, its present—and of a setting and an event somehow more richly represented, more tangibly presented?

In Japan, awareness of Bashō, and of his frog haiku, goes well beyond simple recognition, having long ago absorbed itself into a broader and more complex form of remembrance and, with that absorption, a nearly reflexive response by many of those hearing it. Often, the mere mention of this haiku (even just the final five of its seventeen syllables, e.g. the phrase, “*mizu no oto*” | “sound of water”), is all that is needed for the remainder of the haiku to be—*madeleine*-like—instantly evoked, for its other parts (its remaining twelve syllables, e.g. the opening, “*furu ike ya / kawazu tobikomu*” | “an old pond / a frog jumps in”), to be quickly conjured in the imagination of many Japanese listeners. Such remembrance is, after all, a vital part of a haiku’s personal reception and cultural transmission, and this is especially true of so much of Bashō’s work. Stephen Addiss, the author of the recent book *The Art of Haiku*, notes that there is very often in haiku a “connection with memory, since putting a perception or an observation into words is already an act of memory taking place after the event, even if it is just a split second later. Imagination has its roots in memory [...where] words and images have associations that can add to (or sometimes distract from) the meaning of a haiku” (2014: 11). As such, a recollection of Bashō’s frog haiku is often so deep that just to hear the words “*mizu no oto*” (“sound of water”) is, for many, to hear, not the sound of water, *real water* (the H<sub>2</sub>O of which those words quite literally, materially speak), but to hear instead the added (and “sometimes distract[ing]”) sound of words, real words, those of Bashō’s famous haiku *about* the sound of water. Still, one might reasonably wonder how so little (from so little) can evoke so much (of so much), and how one person’s involuntary memory—of those final five syllables from Bashō’s haiku—can arise from or intersect with a more collective and culturally embedded remembrance, as if all were nibbling on the same *madeleine*?

Outside of Japan and outside of the Japanese language, translation of Bashō’s 333-year old haiku into English has taken many forms, with literally hundreds of versions existing (as can be seen in, for instance, Steve McCaffery’s *The Bashō Variations* and Hiroaki Sato’s *One Hundred Frogs*). It would seem, however, that the sheer abundance of these translations reveals something significant about the determined and willful pursuit of Bashō’s haiku? What, after all, of that old pond...that leaping frog...that sound of water...is being translated, and why have so many felt so compelled to undertake it? And how might the “outsider’s” pursuit of Bashō’s haiku—outside, that is, the cultural, linguistic and historical situation from which it arose—be thought about alongside the “insider’s” (the Japanese’s) often more immediate recognition of it, that involuntary memory manifested by its indigenous familiarity? “Western readings of haiku,” Ross Louis states in a recent essay on engagements with haiku outside of Japan, “contain a desire to transmit the present as a material encounter with nature, and thus negotiate the tension between direct experience and language as a system of representation” (2017: 36). But might such readings, as Louis goes on to assert, affirm the “present” of the haiku (and of that “material encounter with nature”) while overlooking and eliding those “system[s] of representation” that have inscriptionally memorialized that “present” to be *re*-presented at all, permitting what Louis later calls haiku’s “performance of

presence” (40)? In other words, how have words—a haiku’s words—been made to impress themselves upon the apparent present, to mediate those seeming immediacies of a material moment with a dematerialized memory of that moment, such as, for instance, the sound of water transparently translated into the sound of words? More on this idea of performance to come—and of a haiku’s “performance of presence”—in the second part of this essay.

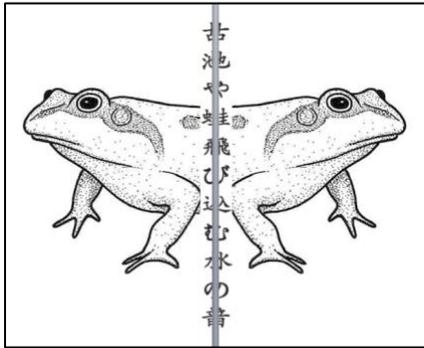
Haruo Shirane, a scholar of classical Japanese literature and an often provocative writer on the legacy of haiku, has studied extensively Bashō and his translated reception into the English-speaking world. And for all of his appreciation of what so many Western translators—ranging from the scholar Kenneth Yasuda to the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg—have done with Bashō’s haiku, he concludes that too many of them are largely (if innocently) missing the point of the poem. Or rather, they are missing *half* of the point, but an important half, that vital half of the haiku that is inextricably linked to Japanese history, the Japanese language and to what Shirane describes as “cultural memory,” a form of remembrance constituted by a localized familiarity and awareness. Shirane writes that in engaging Bashō’s haiku, “There [are] two key axes: one horizontal, the present, the contemporary world; and the other vertical, leading back into the past, to history, to other poems...[not] reject[ing] the past... [but] depend[ing] upon the past and on earlier texts and associations of [a poem’s] richness” (2000: 63–64). What Shirane detects in many of Bashō’s translations into English is evidence of the translator’s more single-minded embrace of a Zen-like engagement with “one’s own direct experience” (1998: 45), with an imagined “here and now,” neglecting in the translation the culturally initiating “there and then” of the haiku—the form and purpose of its emergence, its point and place in history.



Shirane believes that Bashō’s haiku is more richly read (and more richly translated) by applying a kind of doubled vision that takes into account the horizontally present of the immediate and the contemporary (yes, the “here and now”) *and*, equally, the vertically past, wherein one encounters what Shirane calls “the spirits of the dead” (182), those “ancient poets and spiritual figures [of Edo Japan] who came to embody the literary and historical tradition” (26). In addition, Shirane points out how many of Bashō’s haiku were actually written in a “communal situation in which participants gathered to link verses” (15); even his frog haiku appears to have emerged through such a collective gathering, where this haiku—so often interpreted in the West as representing a supremely solitary mode of stilled attention—can be read as “not only a poem about a frog, but

also an invitation to Bashō's partners" to write haiku of their own (1998: 16). One poet prompts another, building off of the other—imagination merging, enriching, enlarging...like frogs linguistically leaping—while “vertically” conjoining with those “ancient poets and spiritual figures” who embodied the haiku’s historical context and conditions, its textual and textural traditions.

In Stephen Addiss’ own study of Bashō’s frog haiku, he offers the disorienting reminder that “nouns in Japanese can be singular or plural, so there may have been more than one pond or more than one frog” (96). Such a seemingly fundamental distinction—just how many frogs and ponds are we talking about?—offers a striking example of a kind of translational aporia, or perhaps another instance of doubled vision. After all, English translators of this haiku have felt obliged to make a choice between the



singular and the plural (one *or* many), opting virtually always for that solitary pond and frog (a decision that reinforces Western stereotypes of the haiku’s imagined solitude and isolation). However, in Japanese, the haiku is to be read (or *can* be read) quite differently, sustained in between the two seemingly incompatible conditions, a reading

that structurally permits the nouns to remain as both one *and* many; as such, Bashō’s haiku might be (awkwardly) rendered as “the frog/s leap/s into pond/s,” with the situation and setting conjoined conceptually and pictorially in a fluctuating, non-binary space of imagination that the conventions of English simply prohibit.

Addiss also notes how in Bashō’s own calligraphic rendering of his haiku, on *tanzaku* (thin poem-card; seen adjacent), “he seems to have enjoyed using the more complex Chinese kanji (characters) for most of the nouns and verbs, and simpler Japanese syllabary for the rest.” Addiss goes on to describe how Bashō organizes and orchestrates the “space” of his calligraphic inscriptions, creating in the writings’ movements a “sense of flow down” the *tanzaku*, its thicker and thinner lines “adding rhythm to the work” (96). Bashō even includes, as Addiss points out, a blue wave pattern at the top of the *tanzaku*, one that is suggestive of water washing upon a shore, with the haiku etched delicately below (as if written into sand). Might that wave of water above the writing be destined, with time, to flow over the words, to wash the haiku entirely away?



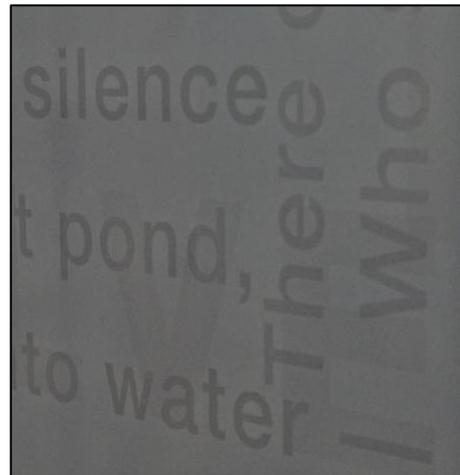


Seeing Bashō's own graphic translation of his haiku into such rich and varied calligraphic form, one might certainly wonder how any translator of the haiku into English could capture all of *that!* How, after all, is one to impart not only the sustained indeterminacy of frog / frogs and pond / ponds, but also to render something of the poet's own graphically shifting script, the feeling of "flow" and "rhythm" represented in the liquid ink of the poet's calligraphic, choreographic motions (not to mention that wave of water hanging evocatively above it all)?

It is, finally, the leavening density of such cultural and historical understandings (and underpinnings) of Bashō's haiku that many English translators inevitably ignore or elide in their translations. Try as they might, it is in large part what Shirane calls the "spirits of the dead," those "vertically" embedded ghosts in the machinery of the haiku, that often go largely undetected, unrepresented by translators. And it isn't simply a question of whether Bashō's frog—singular or plural—"leaps" or "jumps" or "plunges," or if his pond is described as "lonely" or "old" or "ancient" (as various translations have rendered them), it would seem instead that *whichever* English word is selected, it remains nevertheless a word apart—a world apart—from the words and worlds of Bashō.

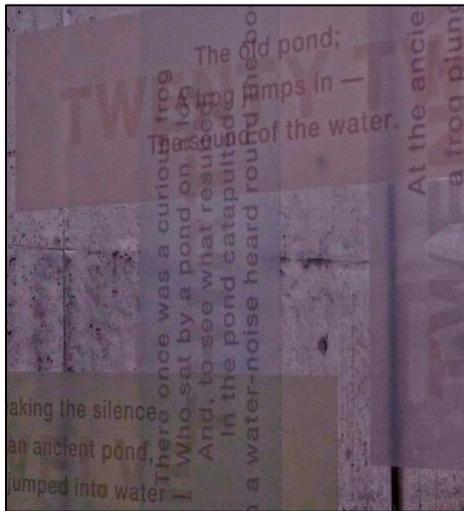
### **On the Other Hand (or, the Sound of the Other Hand Clapping)**

Might we nonetheless now imagine that the many English translators of Bashō's haiku, precisely because of their being a world apart—outside of Japan and outside of the Japanese language—are pointing inadvertently to larger linguistic complications? After all, by opening up and exposing the ever-elusive, ever-receding "here and now" of Bashō's Edo-era haiku, have we perhaps been positioned, as if by default, to think about the history of that moment's—or *any* moment's—transmission through language? And might this haiku's many English translations, through their very abundance, now be seen to manifest something of the way in which words—*any* words (translated or not)—hide what they so often strive to show, functioning at best as tentative signposts that simultaneously point to and away from an already vanished event? Pointing, that is, to a frog...a pond...to the sound of water...as the translated words move entropically in time, across space, generating ephemeral syllables of sound and sense that float upon the pond and the page, appearing and disappearing in an instant (like



waves of water that, at any moment, will wash those words away)? As Maurice Blanchot speaks of our accustomed relation to the “illusion” of words, “Language has within itself the moment that hides it [...] communicating to us the illusion of immediacy when in fact it gives us only the habitual [...] making the immediate appear as the pleasant reassurance of natural harmonies or the familiarity of a native habitat” (1992: 40–41).

However, such a *hiding* of the moment inside of language might surreptitiously take many forms, with the habituated sound of water lost over time in the habituated sound of words. If, for instance, for the many Western translators of Bashō's haiku the problem is one of an over-reliance on Shirane's contemporaneous “horizontal,” the seeming immediacy of the “here and now,” for many Japanese, the problem might be found on the other side of that same foreign coin. For there is often, as a consequence of this haiku's very over-exposure in Japan—as a variation of Blanchot's over-familiarity “of a native habitat”—another kind of interference to hearing Bashō's celebrated haiku as anything *other than* in its “vertically” cultural, historical context. Indeed, with the haiku's widespread absorption in Japan into an intersubjective, collective “cultural memory,” there may incur a kind of deafening to the contemporary, another kind of *hiding*, a silencing toward “one's own direct experience,” as if hearing in the haiku *only* its historical ghosts, those “spirits of the dead” that constitute Shirane's “vertical” past-tensed resonance. Drowned out by its own delimiting familiarity with the poem are those “horizontal” echoes of that other axes, and of a sensitivity to a more immediate material moment—with that “old pond” *as* a new pond; the



jumping frog *as* a frog still jumping; and the “sound of water” *as* water's sound. Perhaps with something of this missing (of moments) in mind, the Zen priest Ryōkan evocatively responded, more than a century after the fact of Bashō's haiku, with a poem of his own, “The new pond— / not so much as the sound of— / a frog jumping in.” Here, the frog—that seasonal signifier of spring—has vanished from the scene, been silenced from its familiar setting, as if to both open and close the moment in upon itself, as if the pond and the poem, its words and its water, had sunk beneath (or dissipated into) their densely inscribed surface.

“Languages do not have the reality they express,” Blanchot continues, “for they are foreign to the reality of things, foreign to obscure natural profundity, and belong to that fictive reality which is the human world, detached from being and a tool for beings” (40). Is it conceivable, though, that the foreign-ness of language might somehow be inadvertently breached by the foreign-ner, by those foreign translations of Bashō's haiku, moving the poem not just from Japanese into English, but from Japanese into Japanese? Might one somehow reawaken something of that haiku's

“obscure natural profundity” from its hidden historical slumber, its cultural absorption—where it is, in a sense, loved to death—by diving back into its living language, as if back into the water, as if “the spirits of the dead” were now (in place of that leaping frog) the ones jumping into the pond—and finally to hear the sound of *that*?

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飛こんで古歌洗う蛙かな  
*tobikonde furu-uta arau kawazu kana*  
*Jumping in / washing an old poem clean— / a frog*  
 —Buson (1716-1784)

### An Installation Translation

It seems that the Japanese poet Buson, not that long after Bashō's own haiku was written, already felt compelled to wash “clean” Bashō's haiku, as if the pond and its poem had been covered over by some kind of proliferating algae of mediating memories, leaving no place for the frog to jump, for the sound to be heard. How else, though, might such a cleansing of Bashō's haiku be undertaken, its words awakened, its sounds made to re-sound, to be re-heard?



In the summer of 2015, I was invited to design a “writing on water / writing on air” poetry installation on the campus of Tama Art University, in Tokyo, Japan. Having created such site-specific environmental installations at various locations around the world for a number of years, I wanted for this project to engage and interact with—in a kind of performed translation—many of the issues suggested above as they relate to Bashō, to “cultural memory,” to those “spirits of the dead” and the sound of the sound of water, of “here and now.”

For the “writing on air” component of this project, I took thirty different existing translations of Bashō's frog haiku (by translators ranging from Lafcadio Hearn to Kenneth Rexroth, Donald Keene to Cid Corman) and, working with a team of art students at Tama Art University, had these translations printed onto variously tinted transparencies that were then placed and arranged on two sets of windows; these windows, facing each other across a rocky courtyard, were inside the Design Building of the university. The thirty translations, with fifteen on each set of windows, were conspicuously numbered and often made to overlap and interfere with each other's formation and legibility. In their vertical and horizontal arrangement, these many translations displayed

something of the noisy abundance of the translators' efforts to transport Bashō's haiku from one language into another, with, for instance, that final phrase "*mizu no oto*" variously represented as "the sound of water"; a "water's noise"; a "deep resonance"; a "water-note"; a "water's echo"; a "silence"; a "splash"; a "plop"; a "kerplunk"—all of them getting it wrong; all of them getting it right; all of them pointing to (and away) from an old poem about an old pond, a pond on a page, and to words on water that float, flow and evaporate into thin air.

Alongside these various English translations, Bashō's haiku was also affixed vertically to the sets of windows, printed in the two Japanese scripts by which it is locally known: on one set, the haiku was written using *kanji* (Chinese characters) and *hiragana* (the Japanese syllabary); on the other set of windows, the haiku was presented in *hiragana* alone. However, each Japanese version of the haiku was presented split down the middle on each side of the windows' structural column, thereby disrupting the flow of the poem, the look of the language (though I was later told that, even with only the left or right side of the *hiragana* or *kanji* in place, with the other unseen, the haiku was still entirely readable to the Japanese, with the other half of the script—like a phantom limb—instantly imagined). Once the thirty colorfully-tinted English translations, alongside their two divided Japanese equivalents, had been placed onto the windows, all was then read and seen as if suspended like a cloud, as if written on air.

For the "writing on water" part of this project, accompanying the thirty translations on the windows, I then planned what



I intended as a site-specific 31<sup>st</sup> translation of Bashō's haiku. Using a nearby series of pools that were part of a fountain near the entrance to the university, I reduced the haiku from its seventeen syllables down to its final five, to that single line alone of “*mizu no oto*,” placing those large Romanized letters (*rōmaji*)—each of them at around 4 x 4 feet, cut out from sheets of bubble wrap, directly onto the water (the letters attached to a nearly invisible row of fishing line that was strung from one end of the pool to another). As described earlier, I understood that, for many Japanese, all that was needed to evoke Bashō's haiku was the line “*mizu no oto*” (with its remainder—like spirits arising—subliminally conjured, not unlike those split *hiragana* and *kanji* on the nearby windows, read fully formed either half or whole).

However, with the existing architectural layout of the various pools in mind, I also decided to repeat and turn around the reading of this haiku's final line, so that first, in moving along the sidewalk adjacent to the pools, you would read “*mizu no oto*,” and then, after the structural division of a stairway between the pools, the line would be mirrored, or echoed, read in reverse as “*oto no mizu*” (moving, in the shift, from the “sound of water” to something that can be variously translated as “sound's water,” “water of sound,” or “water that is sound”).

The Latin script *rōmaji* is, by the way, an odd and anomalous alphabet in Japan, one that might be described as, in many ways, falling between languages; for *rōmaji* looks Western, but it's not, or it's not quite; and it seems (or sounds) Japanese, but it's not, or again, it's not quite. Japanese schools have, since World War II, taught students to read *romaji*, primarily for studying English and other foreign languages (its origins go back, though, to the Portuguese



Catholic missionaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century for whom, according to historian David Chibbett (1977), it was created so that they could preach without having to learn the complex and indigenous linguistic symbols of *hiragana* or *kanji*). Occasionally *rōmaji* might be seen in a Japanese text for a foreign word or name, but the Latin script is rarely if ever used for writing. In other words, *rōmaji* can be read by the Japanese, but there is a degree of cognitive, cultural disorientation built into the script (not to mention the ghosts of its colonial history) that slows the reading, estranging it if only for a moment. One might say that, for the Japanese, *rōmaji* lacks something of the spirit of their language while haltingly (hauntingly) maintaining its basic message.

Transcribing Bashō's haiku into *rōmaji*, I intended for the familiar line of "*mizu no oto*" to be alienated *just enough* to cause a degree of hesitation and self-awareness in the Japanese reader. As if translating the Japanese *into* Japanese by writing with the *rōmaji* script, the use of this foreign but still readable alphabet was written on the water to stall the immediacy of the reading, to short-circuit its cultural, historical, "vertical" recognition. In other words, the language of Bashō's haiku was to be made, by this interruption, momentarily material, "horizontally" present, as floating there, like bubbles on water, in the "here and now," upon the pool's smooth surface.

Along with the unusual scale of the words on the water, another alienating factor in the reading of the installation involved its site-specific, spatial and temporal dimensions. For each of the six large words was placed in its own separate pool, with each of them twelve-to-fifteen feet from the other; as a consequence of these separations and distances, to read and make sense of Bashō's disjointed line, one had to in a sense perform the poem, to walk alongside the haiku's progressively revealed words as seen from the adjacent sidewalk, connecting and synthesizing them as you read in time, in motion: "*mizu.....no..... oto..... || ..... oto..... no .....mizu.*"

Finally, and acoustically crucial, the pools of the fountain upon which the haiku's bubble-wrapped words were floating were originally designed in such a way for the water to move gently from one pool to the next. As a result, walking alongside the words, you could hear, at its various stages, the



gentle sound of water falling from one pool into the next, creating the simultaneous synesthetic effect of reading what you are hearing (and hearing what you are reading). Liquified, liquidated, the language of the haiku was thus made to perform something of its very presence, its watery words flowing alongside and into their material message.

♦ ♦ ♦

*The Zen monk Hakuin always talked about the sound of one hand clapping.  
The sound of water in Bashō's haiku is also like that: it is there and it is not there.*  
—Shinten-ō Nobutane (author of *Oi no soko* [1795])

The questions arises, though—a final question—how this ephemeral, site-specific translation of Bashō's haiku was actually encountered by those seeing it, by those (mostly Japanese) walking alongside the series of pools at Tama Art University in Tokyo, looking at those large and slightly alien words written upon the water. For there was, after all, in this 31<sup>st</sup> translation, a designed and concerted effort to reconcile, or conceptually bridge in some manner, Shirane's "horizontal" and "vertical" divide, to bring something of the fluid immediacy of "one's direct experience" of the setting, of the "here and now," to those cultural, historical layerings from which the haiku's words had been made to float suspended upon the pools, the water moving beneath them. For, by evoking "the spirits of the dead" in the watery (Romanized) words of Bashō's haiku, might the haiku's own various ghosts—"there and...not there"—have been heard somehow jumping into that water, with



the listener positioned to hear contemporaneously / historically the there-and-then of the here-and-now?

“Words, we know, have the power to make things disappear,” Blanchot writes, “to make them appear as things that have vanished” (42). And something of that power of disappearance may have finally unfolded with the words of this Tokyo project. For, after remaining in place for two weeks, the installation concluded one sunny afternoon with the project’s de-installation, and the quite literal floating away of the poem, as the thin fishing line to which the words had been invisibly attached was unceremoniously cut and set loose. Immediately, the gentle movement of the water then carried the language slowly along, the individual words sliding from one pool to the next, joining together at the end of the stream, at which point all that remained of the installation was an illegible jumble of letters...and the sound of water flowing over them.



### Author’s Note:

A link to a three-minute video of the installation, and its de-installation, is available [here](#).

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