

WHAT ISN'T THERE

Four Poets and the Art of Absence

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*Undue significance a starving man attaches
To food
Far off; he sighs, and therefore hopeless,
And therefore good.*

*Partaken, it relieves indeed, but proves us
That spices fly
In the receipt. It was the distance
Was savory.*

- Emily Dickinson

1.

Basho is not interested in the extraneous. "Following the example of the ancient priest who is said to have traveled thousands of miles caring naught for his provisions", begins his *Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, "I left my broken house on the River Sumida in August of the first year of Jyōkyō among the wails of the autumn wind."¹

For the fifteenth-century Japanese poet, quotidian life oppresses by virtue of its excess. Things, places, and people are positioned to distract, dull, or delude. Truth and beauty must be uncovered, un-mired, disentangled from their banal trappings. It is natural, then, that the core of Basho's work demands an intentional shedding of unnecessary accoutrements.

This minimalist core is constructed as a lack of wants, a lack comprised of happy lacks: for Basho, it is the absence of distracting material concerns which clears a path towards psychic calm. One must willingly lose (*enter into a lack of*) provisions, possessions, and superfluous company in order to redress the injustices of everyday existence. Here, peace means the presence of absence.

Basho has no patience for those who are "distracted from distraction by distraction".² Rather than beat around the bush, he names the ill and wants it gone. Apprehension of this theme is easy enough—Basho tells it to us straight. But the poet's central concern is housed within a conceptual and compositional framework more complex than it may seem.

Acts of departure or divorce dominate the first portion of *Records*.

I left my master's house
In Fukagawa,
Leaving the Basho tree
In the care of Mount Fuji

reads the third verse of the text.³ Here as before, it is a literal lack that makes itself known. The poet and his companion Churi take physical steps away from a physical space, a place they've called by the name of home.

¹ Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (New York, New York: Penguin, 2010), 51.

² T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Mariner, 1971), 17.

³ Basho, *Narrow Road*, 52.

Likewise for the work's fourth poem, a laconic piece couched within a block of prose that describes an arresting scene. Basho has found a child "crying pitifully on the bank [of the River Fuji], obviously abandoned by his parents."⁴ The child receives sympathy and food from the poet and his companion, but the central absence of the moment is not filled. "If [fate] is so, child," Basho writes, "you must raise your voice to heaven, and I must pass on, leaving you behind."⁵

It is here that Basho's examination gains an angle. The child lacks a home—against his will. The poets have just left theirs—with intent, as though departure were an imperative. Basho and Churi, choosing, leave the child to the vagaries of fate. But for the poet, these divergent happenings have a common core.

Basho's rationalization or integration of these disparate events relies on the presence of divine decision. On page fifty-two of *Records*, the poet states that such things have been "caused by something [great and massive]—what one might call the irresistible will of heaven".⁶ Lack, Basho tells us, is enforced by fate: it is both melancholy and necessary, unpredictable and unavoidable. We arrive here at a vantage that betrays more than the physical or practical: from this passage onward, absence has a philosophy.

For the poet, lack is dictated by the 'will of heaven'. Basho leaves his home and the child loses his life alike on account of destiny. But this dark formulation of affairs can obscure the psychological *liberation* that Basho associates with absence. Absence need not belong only to an unreasoned realm of loss; Basho's shedding of possessions makes that clear. A question, then, presents itself for view: Must *fate* be tragic? Or, from another angle: is tragedy always and only bitter?

Halfway through his journey, the poet reaches his native village. He finds himself displaced anew, this time by forces which act against his will, and grows despondent. He arrives in September, but cannot "find a single trace of the herbs [his] mother used to grow in front of her room".⁷ Nothing is the same; even the faces of his brothers have "changed, with wrinkles and white hair". Upon his arrival, Basho's brother takes out an amulet bag and begins to speak: "See

⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ibid., 52.

your mother's frosty hairs. You are like Urashima whose hair turned white upon his opening a miracle box."

The mood is somber, the moment dark. Basho "remain[s] in tears for a few moments, then writes:

Should I hold them in my hand
They will disappear
In the warmth of my tears,
Icy strings of frost.⁸

This lack feels tragic indeed—more so than the fate of the abandoned child. It is not a loss to be sought, not a loss of the superfluous. But however paralyzing its nature may be, it does not have the feel of a poisoned occurrence. It is not raw, though the poet seems only just to have learned of his mother's death. Indeed, there is something sublime to the texture of the *haiku*. In the form through which we are permitted to view it, the poet's grief has been transfigured into a work of grace. It is an honest representation—no hyperbole or deception is to be noticed or noted—but it has the quality of something refined. In Basho's contrasting of warmth (tears) and ice (the mother's hair) is birthed something new. This is an absence which proves beauty.

In light of this passage, it is of no great surprise that Basho is not cowed by the facts of human mortality. His search for true presence is of such an intense nature that the ultimate sort of absence—death—would be, for him, a reasonable price. This formulation appears on the very first page of *Records*: "[d]etermined to fall / A weather-exposed skeleton", he begins, "I cannot help the sore wind / Blowing through my heart".⁹ Basho wants to go home or to die trying. "After ten autumns / In Edo", his mind "[p]oints back to it / As [his] native place".¹⁰ And when he arrives at the end of his travels, his mood is one of bemusement. "Indeed I have come a long way since I left my house in Musashino", he wonders.

Still alive I am
At the end of a long dream

⁸ Ibid., 55. Cf. Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), 43: "In the Dark Ages, in Macedonia, in the last guttering light from classical antiquity, a man copied out bits from old books for his young son, whose name was Septimius; so we have one sentence from *The Loves of Achilles*. Love, said Sophocles, is like the ice held in the hand by children. A piece of ice held fast in the fist."

⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

On my journey,
Fall of an autumn day. ¹¹

We are left with a not unpleasant sense of surprise.

Basho's use of lack can be deceptive. *Records'* account of the abandoned child seems cruel and unreasoned, perfectly positioned to contradict and counteract the humorous profundity of our poet's take on his own mortality. But it is also true that the lost child episode could—if one were generous—be thought to provide an emotional and philosophical foil to the sublimity of the work's other elements. The episode's ugliness (its *lack* of reason, charm) acts to outline and accentuate the emotional release lent by *Records'* moments of tenderness. The ethical undergirding of such an interpretation is certainly suspect, but in a purely literary sense the old adage applies as well as ever. Without night, can there be day? To quote the bard: "If after every tempest come such calms, / May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!"

This arrangement of ideas also applies to the structural features of Basho's poetry. The role of absence in the potency of what *is* present within the work is directly reflected in the poet's verbal style. Thus far, our exploration has focused on the physical, psychological, and conceptual facets of lack evident throughout the pages of *Records*, but something more basic cannot be missed: Basho's favored compositional technique hinges on literary brevity. Through his use of the laconic, evocative *haiku* form, Basho enlivens his writing. The negative space left by what *isn't* said lends power to what is.

"In the utter darkness / of a moonless night", begins *Records'* ninth verse, "A powerful wind embraces / The cedar trees". ¹² And that is it. We are given just fifteen words (in translation), and yet the poem's imagery is as vivid—more vivid—than it would be if fifty pages were its length. For Basho, a picture is not worth a thousand words: it's worth fifteen. What is not present in his verse acts like an electric current, outlining what is. The blank space that surrounds the words of his work sharpens the text—and sharpens *us*. Absence highlights what does exist, demands more of the words that remain, and asks more of the reader who reads them. To successfully animate a *haiku* of Basho, our imaginations must be fully engaged, our sense perceptions heightened. Here, absence forces presence.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54.

Basho's games with syntax mirror and are mirrored by his work's content. That the spiritual, conceptual side of absence explored in his eschewing of material surplus (and in the fate of the lost child, in the death of the mother, and in the select company the poet chooses) is communicated in language which makes intentional use of lack is a fact which serves to enrich Basho's interaction with negative space. Of course, this idea-web of absence is explored from many angles; an exhaustive analysis of the work's every facet would be impossible. But before the object of our inquiry changes focus, one last avenue of exploration awaits inspection. Basho's interaction with the natural world betrays another, perhaps even more critical aspect of his oeuvre.

Records' concern with nature and nature's cycles makes itself known through two primary routes. In the first, we might scry echoes of the conceptual pattern established via Basho's description of the lost child and the dead mother: the seasons' ephemeral nature (their brutality, their inevitability) lends an exquisite sweetness to nature's cyclical flourishing. Basho's second path of inquiry has to do with the communication of lack: the poet's attention is directed towards the *feel* of the space left by absence, which is translated into words with the help of grasses, forests, and fields. It is this part of the poet's work which enters into full discussion with the bittersweetness of nostalgia.

Basho's wanderings are a kind of compound pilgrimage. The poet seeks many places. But his journeys are not straightforward treks towards uniform splendor—there is more nuance to be found within the pages of *Records* than such a proposition might suggest.

The middle portion of Basho's account begins with a strange sort of arrival. Here, his approach to one of his anticipated destinations, the gate of Fuwa, is marked by what could seem to be disappointment:

Thickets, fields,
And all else that is,
Were once the gate of Fuwa—
The autumn wind blows.¹³

But there is more to the matter. Out of absence or anticlimax, Basho wrests a more potent presence. The text's focus lies not on absent grandeur, but on its replacement. What doesn't exist

¹³ Ibid., 58.

serves to tell us what does: the absence of a stone structure is replaced by the presence of thickets, rushes, and 'all else that *is*.' That these grasses and growths are the finite and perishable replacements of an ancient monument seems not to bother Basho. Why venerate bygone glory to the exclusion of transient beauty? In the poet's own words:

Early dawn,
Young white fish
Shining in ephemeral white,
Hardly an inch long.¹⁴

This pattern of arrival and re-evaluation re-occurs towards the end of *Records*. The bard travels to see the storied Atsuta shrine and finds that its walls "had crumbled" and that "dry grasses were standing among the fallen blocks. There were ropes, here and there, showing the sites of extinct shrines, and stone engraved with the gods once enshrined therein."¹⁵ Here, absence is made known by means of a partial presence: that of remnants, ruins. But the bitterness of having missed something in its prime does not dominate the mood of the moment. There is something sweet, sad and sweet, to the scene: the weeds give Basho "an impression not altogether pleasing but strangely lasting."

Likewise with us. The impression is lasting, not because it is happy—Basho is clear in locating its power far from pure pleasure—but because it is not. Time's vagaries are visible: ruins. Lifespans are evident: dry grasses, fallen blocks, and sage-brush. Even the "weedy reminiscences / Are dead."¹⁶ The only presence is of has-beens—and yet the image sticks. What is this power, and why are we drawn to it? What sweetness is there to *this*, which does not even feature true presence, however fleeting? There are no live grasses here—only weeds. There is no hint of a beloved. There are no young white fish shining in ephemeral white. There are no strings of frost waiting to melt, no butterflies poised on tender orchids.¹⁷ In place, person, possession, company, and construction, Basho pursues negation. So why do we linger?

¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

It would be naive indeed to presume that there are easy answers to be found within the pages of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. The incommunicability of its core concern, the 'Way', is communicated perhaps more often than any other matter, lesson, or precept contained within the slim volume. "The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way", the sixth-century thinker tells us over and over. "The name that can be named / Is not the constant name."¹⁸ Light and dark, birth and death, are "called mysteries, / Mystery upon mystery— / The gateway of the manifold secrets."¹⁹ For the *Tao*, the presence of an inadequate descriptor chases away the presence of the thing itself. Too much presence enforces absence.

As is true of Basho's work, the philosophical stance of the *Tao* is mirrored by its compositional structure. To take but one example: a phrase which begins "Thus Something and Nothing produce each other" has an immediate logical reading (presence requires absence, action demands inaction, what isn't there makes sense of what is) but its argument does not rely on logic alone.²⁰ The point of the passage is bolstered by the structure of the writing itself. The line's laconic, enigmatic brevity acts as a form of proof; its Nothing (blank space, unused words) produces Something (evidence in favor of its claim).²¹

The dense, obscure, often difficult style of expression favored by Lao Tzu to communicate the *Tao*'s political and philosophical insights does no favors for facile comprehension, but the core of the matter is clear. What isn't there in the *Tao* lends power to what is. The "way is empty, / yet use will not drain it", reads chapter IV, and the words themselves mirror their content. Blank space, negative space, unused adjectives and rejected qualifiers serve to define the Way more faithfully than any enumeration of positive qualities ever could. For Basho, ten words were worth a picture; for the *Tao*, a thousand words *not used* are worth a philosophy entire. "Much speech", it counsels, "leads inevitably to silence. / Better to hold fast to the void".²² And so it does.

It can be tempting to mine the *Tao*'s historical context to provide fodder for a pragmatic interpretation of the text, but such an approach seems to me to be inherently bad-faith—as

¹⁸ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (New York, New York: Penguin, 1989), 5.

¹⁹ Lao Tzu, *Tao*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

²¹ This sentence practices what it preaches.

²² *Ibid.*, 61.

though the reader simply cannot brook the difficulty of the document and is unwilling to take the text on its own terms, as its own entity. Indeed, such an approach indicates an unwillingness to follow the advice expounded by the *Tao* itself. Rather than gaining knowledge by effort and exertion, we are called to "adapt the nothing therein to the use at hand".²³ The observation that one needs empty space to construct (say) a building may appear obvious or prosaic at first glance, but only if one insists upon a painfully literal interpretation, or refuses to view the *Tao* through anything but the lens of some mechanistic analytical machine. In credo and in structure, the *Tao* advocates for absence; context is useless without an understanding of that central lack. After all, a room without absences is a dark and dreary one indeed. But if we "cut out doors and windows"—if we engineer negative space—what we get is "something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that it can be put to use."²⁴

Despite their intellectual allure, these didactic precepts never quite reach the degree of poignance that is so evident in Basho's writings. The absences of the *Tao* are practical, theoretical, pragmatic, philosophical. What is absent isn't communicated by virtue of memory, or imagery, or anything like the many metaphors that we find so frequently throughout Basho's body of work. Like the *Records of a Travel-worn Satchel*, the *Tao Te Ching* employs absence as both a structural, stylistic element and as a conceptual tool—but there is little explicit emotion to be found within its pages. The blank space of the *Tao* doesn't cleave to us in quite the same way as do the *haiku* of Basho. As a cognitive challenge the *Tao* lacks no profundity, no intellectual reward. But as a document of humanity, its lacks are lacking.

"What cannot be seen is called evanescent", it tells us. "What cannot be heard is called rarefied; / What cannot be touched is called minute."²⁵ But in fathoming the unfathomable we scry little sympathy. Basho uses imagery to hint at what once was present; Lao Tzu's lack is so central and so overwhelming that the most we are told is that, "Dimly visible, [the Way] cannot be named / And returns to that which is without substance."²⁶ This is "called the shape that has no shape; / The image that is without substance".²⁷ The Way of the *Tao* is only "indistinct and shadowy";

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.

²⁵ Ibid., 70.

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 76.

being everything, it cannot be the negative image of something. But for us, the beauty of what isn't there must be conveyed, if only in fragments, by what *is*.

And yet: there is a stark sort of beauty to the book. It is indeed inhuman, but in its inhumanity inheres a certain sort of dignity. Why should we expect the Way (or any force, idea, or god) to look or feel or smell anything like us? Glaciers have no sympathy and no empathy; they are incapable of kindness and regret and remorse. But they are majestic in their own icy sort of way. We can destroy them, but we cannot create them. Likewise with the Way: we have the power to stray from the proper path, but we cannot create it. For if we are to believe the *Tao*, it created us.

Perhaps, if we combine the pathos of Basho with the advice of the *Tao*, a fragment of something useful might be revealed. If we "do [our] utmost to attain emptiness", if we "hold firmly to stillness" and keep a keen eye out for the traces of what sentiment once was present, we'll catch a glimpse of a more profound piece of nothing.²⁸

3.

If the *Tao* is paradox sans sentiment, Sappho is contradiction and pathos combined, humming away at the highest of calibers.

In the fragment of her work which is sometimes titled 'Seizure', the archaic Greek observes two figures: one, a man; another, a beloved. These three individuals within the poem—stranger, poet, beloved—form a triangle with a gap at its core. Sappho's web-like construction of desire and absence has been mined thoroughly by thinkers both ancient and modern, but there is much left to examine. How is one to understand her use of lack in light of the efforts of Basho and Lao Tzu? How does nostalgia fit into the picture? How does sorrow?

To Sappho "he seems like a god / the man who sits facing [the beloved], / and hears [her] speak softly and laugh".²⁹ Sappho *observes*; the man *has*. The poet cannot touch the object of her passion, but the man can—and he does, calmly, without batting an eye. Sappho merely watches and is overcome. As she gazes upon her beloved gazing at somebody else, her "tongue cracks

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁹ Alike Barnstone, *The Shambhala Anthology of Women's Spiritual Poetry* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 13.

and slender fire is quick / under [her] skin." Her "eyes are dead to light", her "ears pound, and sweat pours over her".³⁰ One who can *sit* beside Sappho's love must be a god: how else is such proximity to be withstood? And yet—with closeness comes familiarity, and with familiarity comfort (and perhaps calm). Does the intensity of Sappho's love, like the wonder of Basho's wanderings, require distance? Sappho seeks but must not find. For her life and the life of her desire, absence is as necessary as it is for Lao Tzu. And yet—to strive is to contravene the core of the Way. Or is the primary function of Sappho's search to *preserve* the absence it requires?

Lack is torture in our second object of examination. "Your lovely face / When absent, / [slings upon me] the pain of unpleasant winter", it reads.³¹ Return, Sappho beseeches her beloved. "Each time I see your gown / I am made weak and happy". But if we are to believe "Seizure", sight is not without its peril, and space heightens sentiment.

For Sappho, unlike Basho or Lao Tzu, absence is not compositional (in the sense of syntax) but emotional. Its core is not focused on relics or ruins, not philosophy nor abstraction. If Sappho has a Way, it is a Way of desire; if her work speaks of blossoms, they are those of Eros—or perhaps of Aphrodite. For in Aphrodite's temple, "ice water bubbles through apple branches / and roses leave shadows on the ground / and bright shaking leaves pour down profound sleep".³² Love and love's object are the thrust of Sappho's lack, and her verse does not toy with the minimalism of Basho's poems or the enigma of the *Tao*. Her puzzle is one of longing, a maze she uses as many words as she'd like to explore.

At the edge of her work, though, is something that tantalizes in a different manner. It is something more melancholy and perhaps more mature than her electric take on Eros.

Fragment 18—

Like the sweet apple that reddens on the highest bough,
high on the highest bow, and the apple gatherers have
forgotten it—
no, they have not forgotten it completely, but they could not reach it—

³⁰ Sappho, *Spirituality*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

—captures Sappho's trick.³³ What is sought (animal, vegetable) recedes as it grows near. From afar, the apple is on the highest bough; two steps closer and it is revealed to be *high* on the highest bough; with more proximity, the distance increases. By the final line, the apple is unreachable.³⁴ The closer Zeno's arrow gets, the more obvious the gap becomes. Sappho needs no trappings, no excuses: she celebrates paradox itself. But it is a game not without its risks.

Grief enters the picture with Fragment 105. "Like the hyacinth which shepherds on the hillside / trample underfoot," it begins, "and on the ground the crimson / flower . . .".³⁵ A lack engendered by human loss is evident here, and is evident on its own: this is not a sensation which requires acquired desire. It demands no triangulation, no deception, no engineering of absence. It is sharp and enduring, and it persists without effort. But there is a stinging sort of beauty to it. A crushed flower cannot help but stand out among its living sisters.³⁶

At the heart of Sappho's work, then, is either a cultivation or valuation of absence. If she were inclined to more laconic formulations of thought, she may have described her thesis thus: "It might be lonelier / Without the Loneliness".³⁷ For the apple to be sought, it must be just out of reach. For the company to be properly missed, it cannot be present.³⁸ Sappho and Dickinson (she of the loneliness) alike prolong the chase. Lack is the pursuit of the impossible, a state which is both bitter and sweet. Without a missing piece, the core of a quest is gone.

4.

The poetry of negative space takes on a very different character in the work of Pablo Neruda. What was for Basho, Lao Tzu, and Sappho a wistful but important emotion, a philosophical conceit, or a fundamental human imperative is, in the opening cantos of the Chilean poet's *Macchu Picchu*, deadly. Modern man is besieged by "smoke", "windy streets", clusters of "faces

³³ Andrew M. Miller, *Greek Lyric: an Anthology in Translation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Company, 1996), 61.

³⁴ Gratitude for this interpretation is owed to Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton, NJ: Dalkey Archive, 2015), 27.

³⁵ Sappho, *Greek Lyric*, 61.

³⁶ Cf. *Aeneid* 11.80 (279): "Like a flower plucked by a young girl, / A tender violet or drooping hyacinth, / Still glowing and beautiful, but no more / Does Mother Earth sustain its life."

³⁷ Alike Barnstone (Emily Dickinson), *The Shambhala Anthology of Women's Spiritual Poetry* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 120.

³⁸ And for the company that is unwillingly and irrevocably lost, the act of *missing* is its own sort of retrieval.

or masks", "scarecrow clothes", "shops and sirens".³⁹ Like Basho, Neruda reviles the trappings of everyday existence; like a "blind man", he traces these atomized images of decay and decrepitude to find the "jasmine of our exhausted human spring".⁴⁰ He (and we) are drained by the bland mixture of malaise and overstimulation that characterizes *Macchu Picchu's* imagined present.

Layers of civilizational sludge impress their presence upon Neruda's reader. All the oxygen in cantos 1-5 is consumed by the poet's exercises in literary whiplash: yellow history husks to ivory, small breasts, and late snows; waves of blood collide with a rabid autumn, stunted trees, and all are "drenched in the mire of suburbs".⁴¹ What humanity remains is assaulted by a "brief and daily" decline: each person's "ominous dwindling each day / was like a black cup they trembled while they drained".⁴²

Echoes of Basho's solitary impulse are visible in *Macchu Picchu's* early lines. *Get me out of here!*, Neruda seems to shout. In light of cantos 1-5, the image of a Chilean poet wandering the quiet Japanese wilderness is not entirely unimaginable. But Basho's lack is positive, meditative, and often based on memory, whereas Neruda's is as hostile and present-tense as can be. *Where is man?*, he asks. "In what layer of his humdrum conversation, / among his shops and sirens—in which of his metallic movements live[s] on imperishably the quality of life?"⁴³ In the panicked present, all is false and futile, "sans earth, sans depths".⁴⁴

Sappho sought and lamented the bitterness of alienation from a lover; Basho captured the texture of nostalgia; Lao Tzu reveled in logical contradiction and philosophical puzzles. But for Neruda, lack is only a "death without a requiem, / bare bone or [a] fading church bell dying from within." There is nothing in *Macchu Picchu's* first half to warm the "cold interstices" of the soul.⁴⁵ Even mortality itself is diminished—the personified 'death' of cantos 1-5 is little, weak, a small sort of beast with 'fat black' wings.⁴⁶ Basho would be horrified.

³⁹ Pablo Neruda and Nathaniel Tarn, *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) 3, 9.

⁴⁰ Neruda, *Macchu Picchu*, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

It is lucky, then, that *Macchu Picchu* is more than the sum of its parts. Cantos 1-5 are not the measure of the matter: Neruda's negative space contains more sublimity than one might expect. In fact, if we are canny, we might see the seeds of such a thing in the work's early lines. For the poem's great opening question—what is man, and *where* is humanity to be found—becomes the driving concern of the work.

Neruda's journey to the site of the titular Macchu Picchu occupies cantos ten through twenty two. As the poem progresses, the clinging and cloying trappings of modern city life are pulled back to reveal a halcyon view. The renewal brought about by Basho's departure from his dwelling on the River Sumida is reflected in this moment, albeit imbued with a much greater sense of grandeur (the ruins of Macchu Picchu are admittedly more awe-inspiring than the remnants of Atsuta shrine). The dust and smog of the industrial age are not to be touched, felt, or seen high up on the slopes of the Andes.

It is here that a twofold image of absence appears. The principal lack of the poem's first half (purpose, vitality) is counterbalanced by a new absence, that of the lack of smoke, smog, and stultifying banalities. Unlike Basho and Lao Tzu, Neruda avoids the compositional play which would add a third layer of abstraction to our analysis,⁴⁷ but the second half of his work reveals a structure more multivalent than it might seem. What is absent in *Macchu Picchu's* first five cantos is fully clarified by the loss of the *cause* of that lack in the poem's latter portion. The lack of life is replaced by a newfound absence of what *engendered* the poem's early ennui. Absence doubles back and illuminates the core of Neruda's search.

If we are to believe canto 12, this effort coheres around a pursuit of unity across time: the poet's aim is a sort of trans-temporal congress of humankind. Amid the "High reef of human dawn", the "spade buried in primordial sand" lies his self-proclaimed goal.⁴⁸ *Rise to birth with me*, he asks the dead who built Macchu Picchu.⁴⁹ "Give me your hand out of the depths / sown by your sorrows", he cries.⁵⁰ Come "quickly to my veins and to my mouth."

⁴⁷ Neruda doesn't skimp on description. There's certainly no linguistic negative space here! Cf *ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

There is something suggestive of Sappho in these lines, for the goal of the text is never quite met. The poem ends before anything is found, settled or resolved. "Give me silence, give me water, hope", asks Neruda of his imagined Mayans—and there the poem ends.⁵¹ In its closing stanzas the work locks on to a quest, not an achievement. What is found is not a thing itself, but an *understanding of the lack* of a thing, and a comprehension of the nature of the journey towards it.

Why, then, is the reader so fortified? What is profound about incompleteness? Is it not the case that the foregrounding of an unreachable goal can only remind its audience of the futile, recursive scuffle for subsistence that occupies so much of *Macchu Picchu's* early lines? Is the end of the poem not merely the continuation of a continuous slog, couched in the trappings of high diction and emotive verse?

Why, for that matter, does Basho immortalize ruins? Why does Sappho revel in absence, Dickinson prolong hunger, Lao Tzu cling to the void? *Come quickly*, Neruda beseeches the dead of *Macchu Picchu*: "[s]peak through my speech, and through my blood."⁵² But will they? Do they?

The unfinished nature of the poem's journey does not, however, serve no function at all. In ending without finality, the world of *Macchu Picchu* is left open: Neruda gives us a door. Like Sappho's apples, it may recede before our touch. Indeed, it could lie at the close of an impossible quest. But is the end or the absence—the goal or the search—what *we* seek?

5.

I always wake the same age. There is light coming from my left, warm and filtered through amber-paned windows. I am in my grandmother's house. I am eight. In a half an hour, my sister and I will make our way up the smooth wooden stairs from our basement quarters to the sunlit living room. My mother may be with us, or she may not. Her father may be with us, or he may not. My grandmother is always there.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Ibid., 71.

I am not dreaming, though this is no reality. My people cannot see me, and I am not certain they would know me if they could. If it's summer, the bay shines; if it's winter, the boughs of great Douglas firs whip about above our heads; if it's cold, my sister and I stay indoors to play on the steps to the rooms above, sticking our legs out into darkness below.

My indulgence of memory does not and cannot capture the precise nature of its subject. It is, inevitably, incomplete. Like the Atsuta shrine, it is only a reminder—an abstracted representation of what once was there. It has no power over the present: I could not re-enter that place and that time however hard I tried.

But though my recollection fits within no single category and fulfils no single function, it abides in many spaces. Though its contents no longer exist, it is not a pale vision of a faded sort of past. It is melancholy, but it is also bright: a proof both of the absence and possibility of something entirely untarnished. It is the mistletoe that *blooms with strange leafage / On a tree not its own*.⁵³

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise.*

⁵³ Virgil and Stanley Lombardo, *Aeneid* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, 2005), 137.

- *T.S. Eliot*, East Coker

You only miss what isn't there.

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Did you think you would never arrive where you never ceased going?

-Michel de Montaigne, That to philosophize is to learn to die