

*Pivoting perspectives*

(Graduate English Commencement Oration by Jonathan Service)

*“Yuku haru ya, tori naki, uo no me ha namida.”*

That is a poem by Basho, one of Japan’s great haiku masters. When he composed it he was already known as one of the most dexterous manipulators of the Japanese tongue, and as a profound and subtle observer of human nature. He lived in a little hut in the suburbs of Edo, a great metropolis of a million people that grew to become present-day Tokyo. Disciples gathered from miles around to live at his side and to see life through his eyes.

But fame weighed heavily on his shoulders. He longed to escape, for Basho knew life to be a journey. Though the way was long and dangerous, he desired nothing more than to leave behind the cosmopolitan comforts of the city in order to discover the wilds of the north.

When he set out on his journey, well-wishers gathered at the outskirts of Edo. It was there that he composed this haiku: “*yuku haru ya*,” it is the spring of leaving, “*tori naki*,” the birds are crying, “*uo no me ha namida*,” and in the eyes of the fish, there are tears.

What an extraordinary vision: all of nature hushed and saddened, partaking in the scene of an old poet—too old for the road ahead—leaving his friends behind.

Gathered in Tercentenary Theater, with trees for columns and branches supporting the sky, I wonder whether there are not birds crying here as well. Perhaps the bell of Memorial Church is gazing down upon us, deciding which one of you to anoint with the task of bringing peace to this world, which to raise up to a Presidency or Prime Ministership, which to make a lawgiver to the nations, which to make a champion of the oppressed. Perhaps the bronze statue of John Harvard is sitting on his plinth thinking: I do not doubt that there is one among them who will make dead matter speak, another who will cure disease, an entrepreneur who will change the way we live, a scientist who will translate the wildest dreams of fiction into reality. Perhaps there is an old book in Widener whose pages you were the first to turn, whose words you were the first to read, that consoles itself, when it considers your departure, with the thought that you will feel things no-one has ever felt before, write things never thought of and say things often thought in new and brilliant ways. And perhaps all of them—bell, bronze and book—are thinking: well, if that is there calling, then let them go.

[Pause]

Yet, there is another meaning encoded in Basho's haiku, hidden in a homonym. "*Yuku haru ya*," spring is passing, "*tori naki*," the birds are crying, or because *naku* can also mean to squawk or chirp, they are simply doing what birds do when they open their beaks; "*uo no me ha namida*," and the fish have wet eyes—but of course they do: they live in water. Read this way, the fish and birds are shamelessly ignorant of the events above and below. They simply do not care.

Why am I introducing such an infelicitous idea on this most auspicious of occasions? Because Basho knew that the pathetic fallacy—the ascription of human emotion to the world around us— while it raises us up to abstract heights, tends to obscure the intimate, the concrete, the here and now of the people around us.

And so with this second reading in mind, allow me to offer the following. Make time today to look each member of your family in the eyes and tell them how much you have appreciated their love and support; shake hands with your adversaries and sparring partners for they have tempered you, shaped you and made you strong; thank your teachers and mentors for opening fresh vistas before you and showing you how to wend through them; hold your friends close and wish them safe travels for everything will change as of today.

When you have done that, pivot back to the exultant vision enabled by our first reading of Basho's haiku. Allow yourself to perceive all of nature conspiring to celebrate your achievement: every leaf whispering of the changes you will make, every bee buzzing the news, every lily trumpeting your great expectations, every ant lining up in salute, every brick baking red in the smoking-hot sun of your success, the very walls of this University pulling themselves up to their full height as they think of what you will do in the world out there.

*“Yuku haru ya, tori naki, uo no me ha namida.”* It is the spring of our leaving. The birds are crying and the eyes of the fish are wet with tears of pride, tears of sadness, tears of joy.