



# Not One Thing

*Following Matsuo Basho's  
Narrow Road to the Interior*

Carolyn Locke

## PRAISE FOR *Not One Thing*

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What a delight to travel with Carolyn Locke as she follows Basho's "Narrow Road to the Interior" with her open heart, notebook and camera, and hat with lavender in the hatband. She encounters a landscape rich with thousands of years of ghosts, mists, forests, fields, rain, and "ancient stories forever rising." These stories rise into her heart, "finding the unchanging within the changing," "following paths the gods passed over."

Loosened from this life, and wandering, "we enter the flow of the universe"—and the universe changes, and Carolyn's understanding of the universe changes, as she follows Basho into the Interior.

Using Basho as a guide, a mapmaker, a mentor, Carolyn follows his poems "as a diary of the heart"—writing her own poems, letting us read her heart, sharing her own journey. She tells us, "We are in search of history, but I am focussed on the old man harvesting potatoes and the woman cutting cabbage, on birdsong in the fields and the magenta phlox that makes me long for home."

Basho says, "Every day is a journey and the journey is home."

Carolyn says,

“Even walking on  
this narrow road, I long for  
this narrow road.”

Carolyn takes us on a journey to the Interior, to the heart, a journey home.

—GARY LAWLESS, author of *Caribouddhism*, *In Ruins*, *Nanao or Never*, and *Two Owls*



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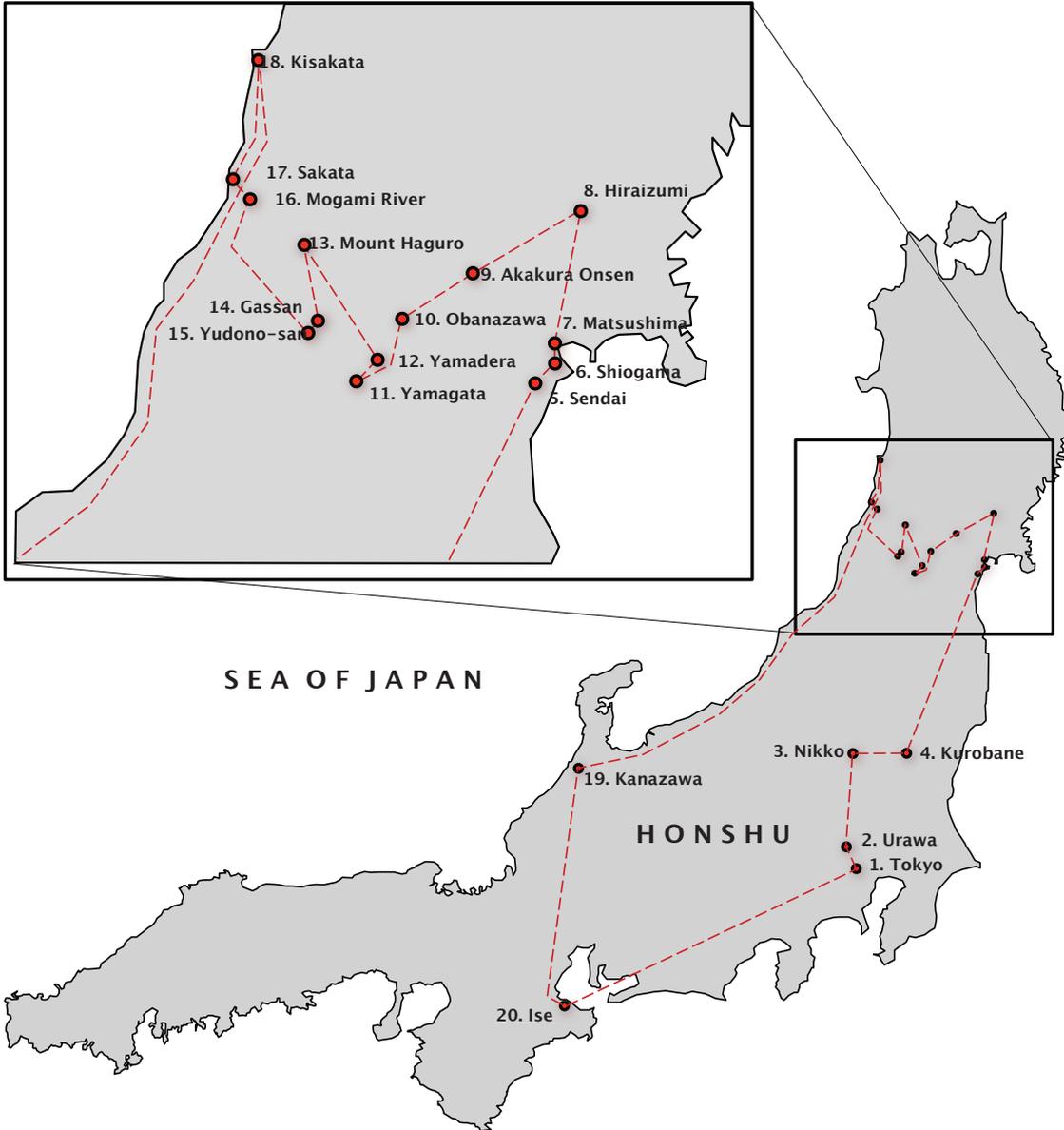
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*Our Journey  
Following  
Okunohosomichi  
in 2009*

JUNE 24, 2009

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How to mark the beginning of this journey? Where to break into the flow of time and say, “Yes. This is where it all began”?

Perhaps it was on July 4, 2002 at the Century Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo, when I first read Basho’s journal and imagined following his journey. Or maybe it began as far back as the moment Basho set foot on the road north in 1689. Could it even reach back to the twelfth century journeys of the poet Saigyō, one of Basho’s literary heroes, or before that to...? How startling to realize that my footsteps are about to merge with many others on this journey that I will carry with me into the future. Where will my footsteps take me? How will this journey change my view of the world? How will it change me?

JUNE 25, 2009

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This morning, three days before my travels begin, I am reading Earl Miner’s translation of Basho’s *The Narrow Road Through the Provinces*:

...my heart was burdened by the thought of the many miles stretching ahead, and my tears fell over

such parting on the illusory path of this world. (158)  
I knew that the sufferings of travel are said to bring a fall of frost to one’s head...still, there were places I had heard of but had not seen. (158)

These thoughts echo through my mind during my final preparations for the trip.



*Blue sandal straps  
bind my feet—elusive birds  
longing for mountain clouds.*



JULY 6, 2009

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The first morning birds, joining voices one by one, call me back.

*Outside the window  
a red roof, slick with misty  
mountain tears.*

Before breakfast, I return alone to the Jizo along the river. Who dressed them and why? Where are those women now?



*Jizo caps—red flames  
lit by lonely hands along  
the flowing river.*

I think of the baby I lost over thirty years ago.

*Somewhere in mountain  
mists, a quiet heart follows  
my fading footsteps.*

When I return to the inn, I am glad to have the company of the group. We spend the morning climbing

up to Urami-no-taki, where Basho wrote his now famous poem about standing inside the waterfall.

Stopped awhile  
inside a waterfall—  
summer retreat begins.

(as translated in Hamill, 6)

Two intrepid members of our group brave the slippery wet slope to stand where Basho once did, cleansing themselves in the water's spray. I watch, envious of their lighthearted bravery, yet unable to ignore the heavy weight of water crashing below.

*Rushing falls tumble  
over steep cliffs, pooling deep  
in these trembling bones.*

I opt out of an afternoon trip back to Toshogu and instead wander alone along the Daiya River and through Nikko National Park.

*Black and white—unnameable  
bird on a rain-worn stone:  
softness!*

Old Shinto shrines are tucked in among cryptomeria trees whose trunks are so large that it would take several people joining hands to reach around their circumference.

*These trunks reaching  
skyward—how far their  
roots must spread beneath us.*



*White prayers quiver  
above trickling waters—fingers  
washing the worn cup.*

I am keenly aware of the people living in the valley and the history that towers over them as we head toward the site of Benkei's and Yoshitsune's deaths in 1189.

*Climbing the steps, layer  
upon layer of years pressed  
beneath our tired feet.*



*Bracelet of clover  
woven in the fields below  
graces an old stone.*

Basho writes that he was moved to tears at the site of Yoshitsune's death: "When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains and rivers and on a ruined castle in spring only grasses thrive." (Yuasa, 118) He quickly follows this with a passage about "the wonders of Chuson Temple" and the glow of its gold chapel, which is our next stop.

On our trek up to Chuson-ji, we pass one souvenir shop after another, each with glittering charms, prayer plaques, and fluttering banners. Sunday visitors swarm the paths, and it's difficult to feel any spirituality here. All the glitter and even the gold in the chapel leave me untouched, but I am moved by the scent of lilies at the foot of a guardian Jizo, by the lotus blooming in the pond, and by the hint of lavender on my Matsushima hat, to which I have added a pink wildflower from the field below.

By midafternoon, exhausted from walking and feeling filled to the brim with sensations, I almost skip Motsuji Temple and Jodo, the Heian gardens begun by Lord Fujiwara-no-Motohira at the very edge of the "civilized world" in 1105. However, the entire complex was meant to re-create Buddhism's Western Paradise on earth, and because of that enticing description, I rally. Walking the grounds, I thoroughly enjoy the iris gardens, the reflecting pond complete with islands and dragons, and the stream where a Floating Poetry Festival took place in 1986 to

commemorate the 800th anniversary of the death of the third Fujiwara Lord Hidehira.

*Wandering the stream's  
edge—bellflowers and hosta  
waiting to set sail.*

JULY 14, 2009

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Time to move on again. I spend my last few moments at Osawa Onsen Ryokan looking out at the garden.

*Open shoji—  
pink rhododendron resting  
beside turning maples.*

A gentle rain returns, and I leave the ryokan, dreaming of scarlet leaves in autumn.

We travel a little south and west, arriving at Naruko Onsen Station at 10:05, where we are greeted by three men dressed in traditional mountain garb: coats and hats made of woven rice grass, split-toed white socks called tabi, and straw sandals.

Oba-san, a tiny, wiry man of eighty-two, appears to be the leader, and his two companions, both muscular



and much younger, defer to him with great respect as they communicate with us. We are headed for a hike past the Shitomae Barrier and into the Dewa Sanzan area. At first, we think it just a coincidence that these three are planning to do the same. Eventually, we learn that they have heard of our trip (probably through the Okunohosomichi Network) and have volunteered to guide us on our two days of hiking here. Unfortunately, the weather is not cooperating.



*Shitomae rains—  
even the crescent lantern  
has surrendered its light.*

Nevertheless, we persist in sloshing our way through the town, following a largely overgrown path through the Tori gate beyond the remains of the Barrier, and then climbing up the steps to a small mountain shrine. It is so dark under the trees that I am unable to capture an image with my camera. Oba-san does not join us on the rest of the hike, but waves his good wishes to us and his two companions as he is whisked away in a white van.

Shoes squishing with mud and rain, we head for Naruko Gorge, walking past an abandoned ski area where the clock has stopped at 7:45 for what could be eternity. The mists swirl around the mountaintops and we follow these men deeper and deeper into the mountains.

