

ON A JOURNEY

By Nancy Martz 9-3-12

Catching something astir in his peripheral vision, he turned stiffly with his whole body, to see them bouncing on air drifts, alighting on yellowing bamboo leaves and lifting off silently. Butterflies: orange, yellow, blue, to others, but for him, faded to sepia now by the many years he had travelled this path to the sea. One foot down to the earth in hesitation, then the other touching it softly to avoid causing needless death below--streams of ants and a beetle towing bung.

A familiar banyan tree ahead, flowing on and on, up from the ground. He whispered to the wood swallow on a low branch, and it called back, "Who, who," twisting its smooth head to see him, then turning back to snatch a dragonfly halted in midair.

Plop! Plop! Two fat frogs jumped into the pond from a log where he thought he might sit awhile. Reaching it, he took his knotted cane in both hands and let it slide into the mud a few inches so that he could lower himself gently down onto the log. The students following him at a discrete distance came to his side now, asking for a poem. "I'm out of poems," he told them, and they, too, jumped into the pond and swam out of sight. To the butterflies and frogs, he murmured Basho's death haiku:

On a journey ill,
and over fields all withered,

dreams go wandering still.

Ripples from the pond and faint whirring from the air applauded.

He felt a tickling as if by a feather under his arms and began rising from the log, in sweet recognition that he could float with the butterflies. Higher and higher on the breeze to the top of a black bamboo tree. Now he could see his students below, looking everywhere for him along the shore of the pond. He called to them, but they didn't hear. He felt himself falling and landed on a long silvery green leaf of the bamboo where he folded his butterfly wings and sat watching. Soon he let his wings open and sailed quietly down to the log. The students left to go back to the town, assuming that's where their sensei had gone.

He sat there until a long sticky tongue pulled him onto a rock in the pond and into a cavern that clamped down, crushing his ethereal wings. Now he was walking with his gnarled cane through a huge cave, carefully examining the encrustation of shells along the path. Crystals of blue and green and pink rose and fell throughout the grotto. He walked until he felt his bare feet sinking into cool mud and the cane disappeared. Quiescent, he felt the sunlight dislodge his body and the sea ferry him to the far shore.

There he lay wondering, "Am I a man dreaming I am a butterfly? Or a butterfly dreaming I am a man?"*

*Chuang Tzu, a 4th century BCE Chinese Taoist philosopher.