

THE LITERATURE OF HAIKU

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694)

by Brother Toby McCarroll

Basho is the most famous name in haiku. He began writing poetry when he was nine years old. When he was twenty-two he commenced his instruction in the spiritual discipline of Buddhism at the monastery of Koyasan. At thirty-five he wrote a new style of his own making. For Basho all art started in the simple cradle of nature.

*The beginning of Culture:
in the center of the country
a rice-planting-song.*

There was a unity in what he saw and wrote. The most famous haiku ever written came spontaneously. He was sitting quietly in his garden when he heard a splash. To him, it was all one thing, a "frog-jump-in-water-sound."

*"Old pond" equals –
a-frog-jump-in-water-sound.*

Basho took literally to the spiritual path. Much of his life was spent in simple walking journeys. Some of these were of great distance. He began the first of these trips when he was forty. Traveling was often difficult and precarious. Yet these journeys were necessary to Basho in his attempt to detach from self-centeredness and to merge with the totality of life. No matter how high he traveled he was searching for a simple life.

*On the mountain path,
what is this special thing?
A simple violet.*



His quiet travels were part of the spiritual discipline which helped Basho be there at those quick moments when life unfurls.

*On the mountain road
first the scent of plums,
then suddenly –the sunrise!*

Basho's roads were both an outer and inner experience. They are roads we all vaguely recognize.

*This road
with no one walking on it.
Autumn nightfall.*

Here we find that special loneliness which the Japanese term *sabi* combined with a poverty of expression and symbol (*wabi*) that, rather than taking a panoramic view, goes deep, like a root, into everyday life. It is this sharp focusing on the simple which seems to produce Basho's unique spiritual restfulness. Basho died on a trip, among his friends and disciples. This was his final poem.

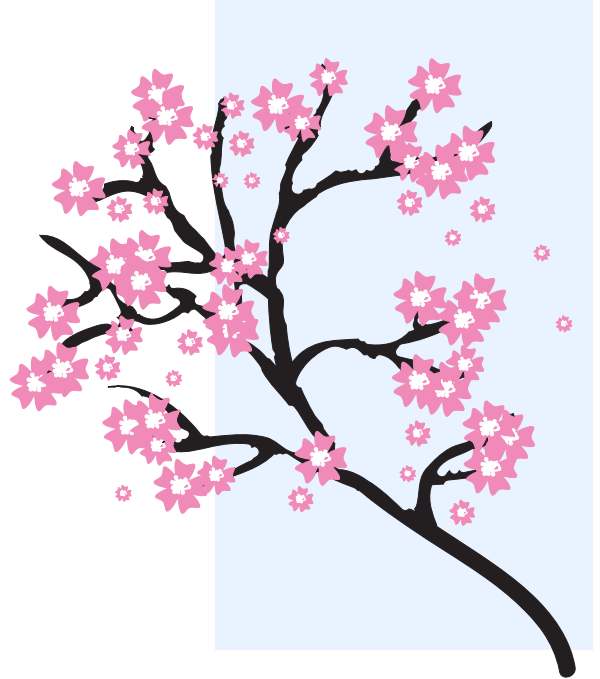
*Taken ill on a journey
but still my dreams roam
over the dried up fields.*

THE LITERATURE OF HAIKU

Taniguchi Buson (1715-1783)

by Brother Toby McCarroll

Buson followed close behind Basho in time and talent. He was also a well-known painter. Buson's outlook on life was more secular than Basho's path. Yet, he did not so closely identify himself with the human condition as did Issa who followed him. Buson weaves his words into poems with excellent craftsmanship. He stepped back a bit and became a brilliant observer of life. He rarely exhibited the personal intensity of Basho or Issa.



*Morning haze –
like a painting of a dream,
people pass by.*

Buson felt that working too hard at things got in the way of poetry and living. Most of his fellow poets approached spring blossoms as a challenge to their talents, but not Buson.

*I come to the blossoms
and go to sleep under the tree –free time!*

Yet, sometimes the whole world is contained in the sharp eye of this painter-poet.

*The spring rains fall
and on the roof being soaked
is a cloth hand-ball!*

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Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902)

by Brother Toby McCarroll

Life and haiku became fairly artificial in nineteenth century Japan. It was hard for a brilliant and restless young man like Shiki to find anything in which to believe. Everything rang false. In his poems we feel the deep awareness of a poet preoccupied with hypocrisy.

I fully appreciate Shiki's skepticism. I was certainly in that place as a young man, but for me the cynicism morphed into a spiritual attitude which is closer to Issa's —a viewpoint which continues to be very real and alive for me. Even so, I value Shiki's essential contribution to haiku and to my own world view.

Shiki was something of an iconoclast. When still a young poet he attacked the cult of Basho. He demanded a hard rationalism. Yet, it was not a comfort to him.

*In the autumn wind
I find no gods
and no Buddhas.*

He gave voice to the concerns facing humanity in a rapidly changing world. It is neither old nor new, real nor unreal. Many paths present themselves. Decisions are not easy.

*In the moonlight
the wild geese fly low
over the railroad tracks.*

Not all that is new lives, and not all that is old is dead.

*In a forgotten pot
a flower blooms –
Spring day!*



Shiki was a sharp critic of those who attempted to reduce haiku and life to rules and prizes. His main advice was to forget the rules and be natural.

*The skylark school
and the frog school –
argue over singing.*

Shiki died from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-five. He had great pain and spent much of his last years in bed. Life had a bitter-sweet quality for this poet.

*People go home
after the fireworks.
How dark it is!*

*The light in the next room
also goes out:
the night is cold!!*

THE LITERATURE OF HAIKU

Issa (1763-1826)

by Brother Toby McCarroll

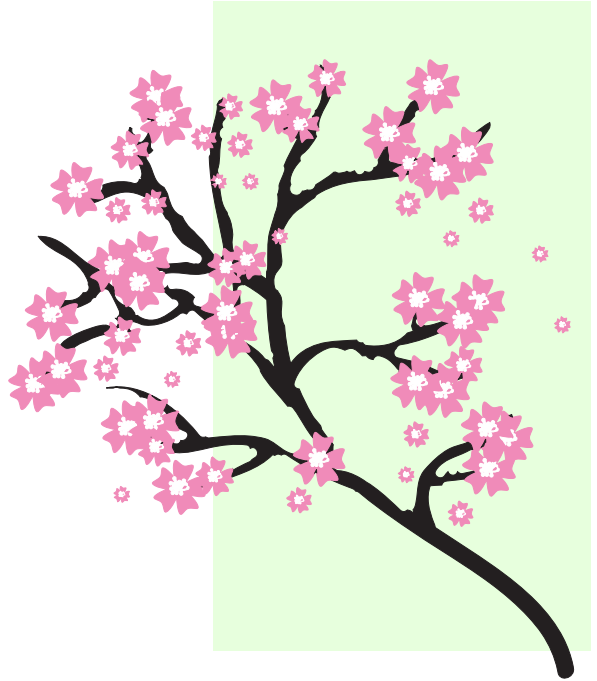
Re-Discovering the Milky Way I would have liked to have taken long and frequent walks with this poet. He found God everywhere.

*Here at my old house
I see the face of God
in the face of the snail.*

But there is much more to my love of this man. It was during, for me, the worst days of the AIDS pandemic that I increasingly leaned on Issa's work and life. I became aware of this when my friend Paul Monette (1945-1995), the writer and AIDS activist, began referring to Issa as "Toby's beloved poet." He was right.

Adjusting to the destruction of a world we knew and loved is very difficult. But it is not hopeless. Just after the horrors of the First World War, my mother completed a cross-stitch piece of needlework that said, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal." It now hangs in the hall outside my bedroom. I have never been able to survive a great loss on my own. I have had the support of heaven and the wisdom of gentle people.

For me Issa is one of the great masters of the art of living with loss, whom I have cited in most of my writings. I deeply respect Issa, not only the haiku poems but the man himself. He had a troubled life in which he was always search-ing for grace. One poignant poem contains only a few words in the original Japanese: "loveliness," "rip/shoji screen," "milky way." This is what it says to me:



*How lovely it is
To look through the broken window
And discover the Milky Way.*

Finding the Milky Way after a great loss is not easy, but we should try. Whatever- beauty, peace, and harmony Issa found was in the midst of sickness and decay.

Born Yataro Kobayashi, he was two years old when his mother died. Five years later, his father remarried. The new wife disliked and mistreated him. All his life he was to identify with the weak and helpless, be they children, flies, or sparrows.

*Come,
you can play with me –
orphaned sparrow.*

*Melting snow
makes the village brim-full:
of children!*

Of all the animals and insects with whom Issa identified, toads and frogs seemed to be the closest to his heart.

*He who appears now
is Lord Toad
of this thicket!*

Whatever its failing, it is his thicket!

When Issa was thirteen he went to Tokyo and studied poetry. In his twenties, he committed himself to religion and poetry. It was then he chose the name "Issa," which means a "cup of tea." Like the tea, he saw himself as simple and ordinary. The poetry of this lonely man captured the spiritual isolation of the human condition.

*Distant mountains
reflect in the jeweled eyes
of the dragonfly!*

Issa was a priest of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism, which was much less austere than Zen. It emulated Buddha Amida who refused to enter Nirvana until his merit was so great that those who would call upon his name would also be able to enter "The Pure Land" (Jodo).

For ten years Issa traveled on long journeys. Like Basho as he traveled he became more liberated from his attachment to self and worldly things.

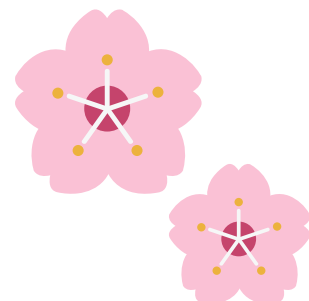
*A sudden shower, equals
being naked
on a naked horse.*

A forty-year-old struggle with his stepmother ended when Issa was fifty. Happy, but in ill health, he was able to return to the village and the old farmhouse where he had been born. He married Kiku, a twenty-seven-year-old village woman. They wanted children badly. Their first child, a boy, died soon after birth. Then, on a day in May, Sato was born. Issa was fifty-seven.

"Sato" means "wisdom." It was a good name. Her first year brought much joy. The child was the center of Issa's universe. He rejoiced in every little ordinary but miracu-lous event of her active life. "She is " he wrote "moonlight from head to toe" To live in the presence of such vitality was to experience again the freshness of his life. "Watching her I forget my years and my corrupt past." On his daughter's first birthday Issa contrasted his "meaningless endeavors" with the peace, grace, and joy in Sato's life. "I am ashamed to admit that my little child of one year is closer to genuineness than I am."

Just after Sato's first birthday, Issa took to the road as was the custom for Japanese poets. But a foreboding soon brought him home again. He found Sato seriously ill. A variola virus had attacked and her immune system was collapsing. She had a very high fever. The frightening signs of smallpox were beginning. Ulcers were covering her beautiful young body. On her recent birthday, Issa had mused that in time she would learn to dance and "her dancing will be lovelier than celestial music!" The little dancer was now struck low. Issa cried out:

*My child is dying. Why? She has just begun
to taste life and ought to be as fresh and
green as the new needles on the everlasting
pine. Why must she lie here on her
deathbed, with festering lesions, caught in
the vile grip of the god of pox? I am her
father and can hardly bear to watch her fade
away, a little more each day, like a pure
blossom in a rain storm.*



That lethal virus was known as early as 1122 B.C. and not eradicated until 1980. Smallpox plagues claimed millions of victims over three thousand years. Each statistic was the destruction of a unique universe of human experiences. So it was with Sato.

She grew weaker until on June 21, as the morning glories closed their petals, she closed her eyes forever. Her mother held the cold body and cried out in unremitting pain.

Emotional attachment was not encouraged in Issa's spiritual tradition. He had been taught not to invest his energy in worldly matters that disappear like dew on the grass. But religious doctrines do not withstand the personal experience of death: "I tried hard, but I could not break the bonds of human love." About his loss he wrote:

*This world of dew
Is nothing but a world of dew,
and yet . . .
and yet . . .*

No matter what a person's religious or psychological principles may be, a death adds

*and yet . . .
and yet . . .*

In 1820, another son was born to Issa and Kiku but he died after four months. Two years later a third son was born. The next year Kiku died in May and the boy in December. On November 19, 1827 Issa himself died. He was sixty-four. Shortly before his death his house burned down. He spent his last days in a storage shed without windows and with holes in the roof. He could see the mid-winter sky. His final poem, found under his pillow, summed up his spiritual quest:

*Again, I give thanks –
the snow falling on the bed quilt,
it also comes from God.*

Would it have been easier on Issa if Sato and his other children had not been born? Sometimes I hear people suggest things like that. Issa saw it differently. One autumn he wrote:

*Deep in my heart
I give thanks to my children,
as the night grows cold.*

I have sometimes felt I was stumbling down a path where Issa once walked. Certainly as a writer or spiritual seeker, there can be no comparison. But he was also a father to a little girl. My daughter Tina died in 1991. She was the same age as Sato. Tina died of AIDS. Her little body also was given over to a vile pox. Like Issa, when I was near sixty, I lived under the shadow of a killer virus. And we both walked with a child into the heart of God. It was not an easy journey for either of us.

Issa knew there would have to be a special year in his life after the death of Sato. Soon he resumed his journey. When he returned home again, he wrote Oraga Haru or The Year of My Life. I was also to have an unparalleled year after Tina's death, but I was not aware of the year, or even of the need for it, until it was over. That seems to be the way it happens to many, if not all, of us. It is, with God's help, a great gift from someone we love. Again,

*How lovely it is
To look through the broken window
And discover the Milky Way.*

