Introduction

1

I stroll by the Open Air Theater in Regent's Park, London, and sit on a bench nearby to catch the poetry of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this hazy midsummer evening, in walking distance of the spot where Shakespeare's company first spoke these lines. It sounds as if the first scene of act 4 has now begun, and I imagine Titania's entrance with her attendants, Peas-blossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustard-seed, and all the other fairies. Droll Bottom, now an ass, coaxes one fairy to scratch his head, another to fetch a "red-hipp'd humble bee on the top of a thistle, and . . . the honey-bag." In Ass's Eden, Bottom, loved by all, loves all in return. Soon will come his rude awakening; restored to human shape he will have little in common with fays and fairy queens.

Suddenly I am aware of a companion. One of London's countless ragged wanderers sits happily beside me. He opens one of several bags, takes out a sandwich and, after a few chomps, begins sharing his fare with the gathering birds and a gray-tail squirrel. He chuckles as they frisk for scraps, and says he could now do with a good cup of tea. "Swig it morning, noon and night," he says, "while the rest of 'em swig from the bottle. Call me "Cuppa tea," they do—it's a fact." Off he goes, leaving me to the creatures still coveting traces of bread, and I'm caught up again in the sounds of the play.

Two hundred years after Shakespeare first enchanted London with the wonder and sympathy of his dream, another poet thousands of miles away was wetting his ink-stone and brushing poem on poem with wonder and sympathy for the world of creatures large and small, loved and despised:

> Watch out,
> young sparrows—
> Prince Horse trots close.

Children,
don't harm the fleas,
with children.

Silverfish escaping—
mothers,
fathers, children.

Among the four greatest haiku poets of Japan, Issa (1763–1827) differs from the others, Basho (1644–1694), Buson (1715–1783), and Shiki (1867–1902) in many ways. Perhaps what most distinguishes him are his tenderness and compassion. Issa is best read in a well-trodden backyard, midsummer, filled with flies, fireflies, wasps, mosquitoes *and* peas-blossoms, cobwebs, moths, and mustard-seeds. For it is here, with birds, cats, rabbits, dogs and squirrels nearby, he is most himself.

Issa is necessary to us because his values, which must become ours if we are to survive as humans, are those most severely threatened in our world. At a moment when summer-evening creatures are blasted with insect "zappers" and dizzied with the stench of poison, he reminds us, over and over, of the individual reality of each life destroyed. Yet—and it is this which gives his poems pathos—he is not above swatting a fly or mosquito, caught up in the small personal drama of survival. But at how great a cost! Some of his best pieces are elegies for creatures wantonly killed, some by himself:

Each time I swat
a fly, I squint
at the mountain.

First cicada:
life is
cruel, cruel, cruel.

2

Though he was as keen a traveler as his favorite Basho, forever the itinerant poet, in Issa's case journeys were undertaken because home was in the cruelest sense denied him. His birthplace, to which he was passionately attached, was the source of his finest lines. Like Basho and others he tried to establish himself in Edo (now Tokyo), but he was for the most part uneasy there, always at heart the country boy, his imagination kindled by nature.

Yataro Kobayashi, who took the pen-name Issa (Cup of Tea), was the first son of a farmer of Kashiwabara in the province of Shinano (now Nagano Prefecture). He was educated chiefly by a village teacher who wrote haiku under the pen-name Shimpo, exposing him at a very early age to the art. His mother died when he was three, and five years later his father remarried. The stepmother was insensitive to the child, and in 1777 he left home for Tokyo to find work, often forced to do most menial jobs. By 1787 he was studying haiku with Chikua, a poet of the Basho- inspired Katsushika group, and he began to distinguish himself. Following Chikua's death in 1790, he decided —very much in emulation of Basho—to live as a poet, and spent the next ten years journeying.

He visited fellow writers on his way, exchanging ideas on the art of haiku. On occasion he brought out a collection of his verse. In 1801, when his father died, he wrote *Diary of My Father's Death*. His father's wish was that he should settle in the old home in Kashiwabara, but problems with his stepmother and half-brother, who lived there, made this impossible, and he was unable to move back until 1813. In 1814 he married a woman named Kiku, and they had four children in quick succession. None survived. The birth and death of the second of these, his daughter Sato, inspired him to write *Spring of My Life* (1819), perhaps his best-known work: a *haibun* (haiku mixed with prose), it is an account of what was to him his most important year. He continued writing haiku, but his last years were saddened by the death of Kiku in 1823.

He married again in 1824, but was soon divorced. In 1827, his house burnt down, and in poverty and heartbroken, he died, survived by a third wife and unborn child.

In a life of countless misfortunes, perhaps the greatest was that as unwanted stepson after his beloved father's death, Issa was denied a place in his family home, which embittered his life for many years. Then the death of his children, one after the other, devastated his spirit. Things which other perhaps less emotional men might have taken in stride, he could not overcome, and in poem after poem we find him succumbing:

> Outliving
> them all, all—
> how cold.

How he must have envied Basho's Zen detachment, Buson's unruffled striving for perfection. There is nothing heroic about Issa, his art is never cold: to live, he discovered, is to suffer, to be poet is to record that suffering. Some who go to art for lives larger than their own may think Issa's poetry soft, sentimental, but one thing he can do better than anyone is stir us with the knowledge that a painful, impoverished life can have moments of generous warmth, even gaiety:

> I'm leaving—
> now you can make love,
> my flies.

3

Issa's output, when compared with others, was prodigious. He wrote scores of haiku, many more than Basho. Indeed he wrote compulsively, and those who have no taste for casual insights might think some pieces less than poems:

> One bath
> after another—
> how stupid.

Yet who would wish him silent at such moments, contrasting the ordinary so sharply with the profound:

> Where there are humans
> you'll find flies,
> and Buddhas.

And would a man's spirit be fully expressed if only the depths were revealed? He could not help the ever-rising lightness above misery, could not resist poking fun, chiefly at himself.

Issa was always ready to acknowledge a debt to Basho, and although like him he was to have disciples, he advised them not to follow his practice but emulate the master. He was at all times conscious of the difference between Basho and himself: Issa's art, never exalted, is bold in its use of common idiom and filled with ordinary details of everyday life. There is ever-present wit and constant personification, and though he clowns the laughter is never cruel. The poverty of his life, its many traumas, all with their sharp effect, led him to sympathize with all, neighbor and insect. He was after all a Shin-shu Buddhist, and like all the sect's practitioners took seriously the doctrine's faith in the sacredness of life, as expressed in the *Vinaya-pitaka* section of the *Tripitaka*, the Bible of Buddhism.

> How can you, foolish men, dig the ground . . . ? There are living things in the ground. How can you, foolish men, fell a tree? There are living things in the tree. Whatever man should intentionally deprive a breathing thing of life, there is an offence of expiation.

4

Haiku structure had become by Issa's time a profound orthodoxy: seventeen syllables arranged precisely 5–7–5, two elements divided by a break (*kireji*—cutting word—which in English is best rendered by punctuation): the first element, the object, condition or situation; the second, preceded by *kireji*, the vital perception. The desired effect was, and has remained, a moment in its crystallized state, a distillation of impressions, including seasonal, all related to transcendent unity. There is little doubt, therefore, that the poet is encouraged to seek totality of experience. Haiku is meant to snare life's keenest visions, one after another, high and low, fair and foul, strong and weak, manifesting the importance of each, taking care *not* to choose the "poetic" while at the same time valuing it.

Issa gives us perhaps the largest, most varied gamut of experience amongst all his fellow artists, not because he lived more or was a greater hand with words, but because he had the deepest need to clarify for himself the meaning of all that could be seen and felt. Although he did not train, as Basho did, under a Zen master, Buddhist he was, and as one of the elder poet's most devoted admirers, he could not help bringing to his work those attitudes unique to Zen. Indeed Basho, as modern haiku's virtual creator, assured the predominance in this art of the principles and aesthetic long associated with the ancient sect.

What are these principles and what is that aesthetic, as found in the poems of one not Zennist but living in a world permeated by its ideals? And, of equal importance, what have all works of art touched by Zen in common? What distinguishes them from works their equal yet not related? Here is the Rinzai Zen master Tenzan Yasuda's reply to just such questions, asked some years ago at his temple, the Joeiji, in Yamaguchi:

> What expresses cosmic truth in the most direct and concise way—that is the heart of Zen art. Please examine this picture ("Fisherman and Woodcutter" by Sesshu): of all the artist's pictures, this is my favorite. The boat at the fisherman's back tells us his occupation, the bundle of firewood behind the woodcutter tells his. The fisherman is drawn with only three strokes of the brush, the woodcutter with five. You couldn't ask for greater concision. And these two men, what are they talking about? In all probability, and this the atmosphere of the picture suggests, they are discussing something very important, something beneath the surface of daily life. How do I know? Why, every one of Sesshu's brush strokes tells me . . . . Western art has volume and richness when it is good. Yet to me it is too thickly encumbered by what is dispensable. It's as if the Western artist were trying to hide something, not reveal it.

Leaving aside the provocative conclusion of the master's comment, we are struck first by the high place given concision as aesthetic ideal—for Zennist, less is *truly* more. What becomes evident at once, and is most significant, is the desirability of participation in the work, the viewer's or reader's active penetration into the creative process. Suggestion, so essential to all arts associated with Zen, is central to haiku. Why this should be is hard to explain, but poems most appreciated are those proving most personal to the reader, a crumb of life discovered suddenly. Here is a piece by Boncho, who died fifty years before Issa's birth:

> Nightingale—
> my clogs
> stick in the mud.

That the poet, transfixed by bird-song, is deeply sensitive would be apparent to all practiced readers. One extra word would have spoiled the impression, proved intolerable. The poem which most fully invites involvement, all else equal, is bound to be most admired. Here is Basho:

Summer grasses,
all that remains
of soldiers' dreams.

Here Buson:

A sudden chill—
in our room my dead wife's
comb, underfoot.

And here Shiki:

Autumn wind:
gods, Buddha—
lies, lies, lies.

5

Perhaps responsible for the five centuries of haiku has been its capacity to inspire such very different sensibilities. Its first practitioners, Sogi (1421–1502), Sokan (1458–1546), and Moritake (1472–1549) had the task of establishing as legitimate form an element drawn from the reigning *tanka*, which was strictly structured as a pattern of 5–7–5–7–7 syllables. Along with the *choka* and *sedoka*, the *tanka* was prominent in the earliest collection of Japanese poetry, the eighth century *Manyoshu*. It must have taken daring of a sort, in a society so rule-bound, to break up ancient forms in hope of revitalization. If the haiku of its first makers, important as it was, had little appeal to Basho and his successors, they always spoke gratefully of it. From the very start, largely due to Basho, haiku at its best was seen as revelatory, possessing qualities in common with other arts based on an essentially Zen aesthetic: simplicity, directness, naturalness, profundity. And each poem had its dominant

mood, one of four subtly categorized: *sabi* (isolation), *wabi* (poverty), *aware* (impermanence), *yugen* (mystery). To haiku's finest artists its brevity was seen less as barrier than challenge to the imagination, demanding that however broad in implication the poem would have to be of single impact.

For Zennists like Basho the haiku event was realized in a state of near meditation, similar to the monastic practice of mind-pointing. In the earliest stage of training the disciple might be asked to point the mind at various objects, continuing until it stops wandering, associating, metaphorizing—in short, wobbling. The mind penetrates the object ever more deeply, until one with it; the state of *muga*, as such identification is known in Zen, is attained. Little in Issa's background as Shinshu Buddhist would have led to such ambition, let alone effort, for his sect, most liberal of all, in making altruistic social contact among its most important goals would have been inclined to discourage the necessary solitariness and abstemiousness of Zen. But Issa's inspiration was Basho, and the great poet's comments on the art of life and poetry, faithfully recorded by disciples, were held sacred. Thus his adoption of Zen attitudes was natural. If through deep human bondage he found it impossible to live freely as the unattached Basho, he could nevertheless approach the events of life with the hope of memorializing the most important of them.

Though Issa is considered the simplest of haiku's famous four, he too is capable of reaching depths, and is honored as being closest to the common man, sharing in the everyday world all know and suffer. It is chiefly for that he is most loved. And yet there are those who appear to regard him as excessivly soft. Such a puzzling attitude is by no means uncommon in Japan, even among Zennists, whose view is based on a principle rooted in doctrine: the need to achieve and thereafter constantly to practice non-attachment, of the kind which might help overcome serious mental problems beyond the numerous small difficulties of existing. Among the stigma categorized are the "stepson mentality," and "poverty complex," both of which are said to have possessed him.

Often one so possessed is encouraged to seek guidance of a Zen master, and if in such context one compares Issa's life and work with that of others, one must concede that he might indeed have been helped. But would we, then, have the poems?

Those who care most for art, East or West, would wish the artist a happy, carefree life, but often the tensions of a life are the very source of uniqueness. If Issa remained attached fatally to things "unworthy," it is that which lay behind his overwhelming compassion, which was not limited to fellow humans. He was the poet of the ignored, the despised, and his eye—keen as his heart was large—was capable of the subtlest gradations:

> Don't kill the fly—
> it wrings its hands,
> its feet.

Such poems have had lasting impact on Japanese literature as a whole, and it is not surprising to find modern poets such as the Zennist Shinkichi Takahashi acknowledging a debt to Issa. Here is Takahashi at his compassionate best, in "Camel":

> The camel's humps
> shifted with clouds.
>
> Such solitude beheads!
> My arms stretch
>
> beyond mountain peaks,
> flame in the desert.

6

Issa's range, as we have seen, was unlimited and unconventional, yet in poetic form he was altogether a traditionalist, more so than Basho, who was known to depart on occasion

from formal orthodoxy, even flaunting syllabic limitations. Indeed a contemporary haiku school, the Soun, offers Basho's example as justification for its practice of "free verse." Not only did Issa conform to established pattern, he took care to abide by all accepted norms of the art, including seasonal suggestion. As Basho's disciple he was aware of the well-nigh canonical stature given Basho's comments on haiku's desired qualities. Chief among these were use of colloquial language, symbolic expression leading to gravity of feeling, and above all else unity of tone. He seemed especially taken with Basho's elevation of the commonplace, ordinary things and events of everyday life. Anything could be lifted and refined, the lower the subject, the better.

Basho used highly suggestive terms to make points clear. Good poems possessed *karumi* (lightness of touch), *sabi* (dryness), *hosomi* (thinness), and with all that there had to be *shiori* (warmth of feeling). He was to state:

> You can learn about the pine only from the pine, about the bamboo only from the bamboo. Observing an object you must leave aside preoccupation with self, for if you do not, you impose yourself, hence do not learn from it. The object and you must become one, and from this oneness comes the poem.

Basho insisted on a highly conscious approach to composition, even to the extent of identifying essential elements, among them *utsuri* (color), *nioi* (smell), *hibiki* (tone) and *kurai* (grace). All, fused, were meant to assure harmony of feeling, without which there could not be true poetry. Throughout his life Issa listened to the master, and learned.

Basho's striving for poetic harmony is especially clear in his *haibun*, which match his verse in depth and imaginative flight. His *haibun* are essentially travel sketches, most having very suggestive titles: *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* (1684–5), *A Visit to Kashima Shrine* (1687), *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel* (1688) and, best-known of all, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689). Marvels of organic struc-

ture, they have been emulated by many, matched by none.

In spite of its great interest, Issa's *haibun, Oraga Haru (Spring of My Life)*, is, apart from its haiku—among his finest—a simple record, throughout 1819, of daily toils and turmoils, as the following excerpt reveals:

> At the height of joy, comes sorrow—thus goes the world. Like a small pine tree which hardly had half the joy of a thousand years, our daughter Sato with her second leaf just out, full of laughter, was seized by the cruel god of smallpox . . . . For awhile she seemed to recover, then she grew weaker and weaker . . . until finally, on the twenty-first day of the sixth month, she left the world with the bloom of a morning-glory. Her mother clasped her face and sobbed—who would have blamed her. But the child's time had come . . . the flowing water would not return, the fallen blossom would not return to its branch. We tried to resign ourselves . . . but could not stop thinking of her, our love was so strong.
>
> World of dew?
> Perhaps,
> and yet . . .

The poet's venture into *haibun* was surely important, and *Spring of My Life* does precisely what he had hoped, shoring up events that meant most to him. Though somewhat sketchy, the work adds greatly to his output. His *haibun*, as well as his poems, details his life moment by moment, giving a full day-to-day sense of his humanity. And if compared with his more austere company he sometimes, as result of intense attachments, loses control, we love him all the more.

7

Darkness has fallen over the bench where I sit. Words from the stage no longer drift my way. Actors and audience have left to Puck's soft words, which will follow into their sleep:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended, —
> That you have but slumbered here . . . .

Now the creatures, in the spirit of the night, reclaim their world. Somewhere far away, in time and space, a poet needs a friend:

> First firefly,
> why turn away—
> it's Issa.

1

Cherry blossoms?
In these parts
grass also blooms.

2

Owls are calling,
"Come, come,"
to the fireflies.

3

Listen,
all creeping things —
the bell of transience.

4

Don't weep, insects —
lovers, stars themselves,
must part.

5

Cuckoo sings
to me, to the mountain,
in turn.

6

Flies swarming –
what do they want of
these wrinkled hands?

7

Where there are humans
you'll find flies,
and Buddhas.

8

Farmer,
pointing the way
with a radish.

9

Short night –
scarlet flower
at vine's tip.

10

Buddha's Nirvana,
beyond flowers,
and money.

11

When plum
blooms –
a freeze in hell.

12

What a world,
where lotus flowers
are ploughed into a field.

13

Passing without
a glance –
first firefly.

14

I'm leaving –
now you can make love,
my flies.

15

Nightingale's song
this morning,
soaked with rain.

16

Children,
don't harm the flea,
with children.

17

Borrowing my house
from insects,
I slept.

18

Watch it – you'll bump
your heads
on that stone, fireflies.

19

From the bough
floating down river,
insect song.

20

First firefly,
why turn away –
it's Issa.

89

Clouds of mosquitoes –
it would be bare
without them.

90

At prayer,
bead-swinging
at mosquitoes.

91

Skylarks singing –
the farmer
makes a pillow of his hoe.

92

Shush, cicada –
old Whiskers
is about.

117

Somersaulting
through the flower-field,
our dog.

118

Such a moon –
even the turtle
tells the hour.

119

My girl's cheek
against melon-doll –
a dream.

120

Mosquitoes everywhere –
once more
an old man's world.

121

Morning glory –
whose face
is without fault?

122

Heaped oyster shells –
Fukagawa
aglow in moonlight.

123

How clear –
cicada over
sunset lake.

124

Puppy-eyed
morning-glories,
awake at the door.

125

Daybreak –
working as one,
two butterflies.

126

Snail – baring
shoulders
to the moon.

127

Heat waves –
cats worship
the God of Love.

128

Fireflies
entering my house,
don't despise it.

129

Into the house
before me,
fly on my hat.

130

Snail –
always
at home.

131

Rose of Sharon –
forgive me,
I must sleep.

132

Iris –
sharpened
by sun-beams.

178

Autumn wind,
the beggar looks
me over, sizing up.

179

Buddha Law,
shining
in leaf dew.

180

A good world,
dew-drops fall
by ones, by twos.

181

Let's take
the duckweed way
to clouds.

182

First cicada:
life is
cruel, cruel, cruel.

183

Autumn evening –
knees in arms,
like a saint.

184

Don't fly off, nightingale –
though your song's poor,
you're mine.

185

Five yen each:
a cup of tea,
the nightingale.

186

Autumn wind –
mountain's shadow
wavers.

187

My hut,
thatched
with morning glories.

188

Never forget:
we walk on hell,
gazing at flowers.

189

In this world
even butterflies
must earn their keep.

190

As we grow old,
what triumph
burning mosquitoes.

191

Cuckoo's crying –
nothing special to do,
nor has the burweed.

192

Be respectful,
sparrow,
of our old bedding.

193

Dew spread,
the seeds of hell
are sown.

194

Cries of wild geese,
rumors
spread about me.

195

Geese, fresh greens
wait for you
in that field.

196

Welcome,
wild geese –
now you are Japan's.

197

Evening swallow –
no hope for me
tomorrow.

269

Just by being,
I'm here –
in snow-fall.

270

Over paddies
at its foot,
smoke of Mt. Asama.

271

Changing clothes,
but not
the wanderer's lice.

272

Lost in bamboo,
but when moon lights –
my house.

273

One bath
after another –
how stupid.

274

Winter lull –
no talents,
thus no sins.

275

Kites shriek
together –
departure of the gods.

276

About the field
crow moves
as if he's tilling.

277

Outliving
them all, all –
how cold.

278

Worldly sky –
from now on
every year's a bonus.

279

Closer, closer
to paradise –
how cold.

280

Cool breeze,
twisting, winding –
here at last.

Come, let's go
snow-viewing
till we're buried.
BASHO

Come, see
real flowers
of this painful world.
BASHO

Smell of autumn—
heart longs
for the four-mat room.
BASHO

Skylark
sings all day,
and day not long enough.
BASHO

Melon
in morning dew—
mud-fresh.
BASHO

June rain,
hollyhocks turning
where sun should be.
BASHO

Dozing on horseback,
smoke from tea-fires
drifts to the moon.
BASHO

Crow's
abandoned nest,
a plum tree.
BASHO

Journey's end—
still alive,
this autumn evening.
BASHO

Wintry day,
on my horse
a frozen shadow.
BASHO

Shrieking plovers,
calling darkness
around Hoshizaki Cape.
BASHO

Withered grass,
under piling
heat waves.
BASHO

Autumn moon,
tide foams
to the very gate.
BASHO

Cedar umbrella,
off to Mount Yoshino
for the cherry blossoms.
BASHO

Autumn—
even the birds
and clouds look old.
BASHO

Year's end,
all corners
of this floating world, swept.
BASHO

Buddha's death-day—
old hands
clicking rosaries.
BASHO

To the capital—
snow-clouds forming,
half the sky to go.
BASHO

Old pond,
leap-splash—
a frog.
BASHO

Girl cat,
so thin
on love and barley.
BASHO

Moor:
point my horse
where birds sing.
BASHO

Fish shop—
how cold the lips
of the salted bream.
BASHO

Autumn wind,
blasting the stones
of Mount Asama.
BASHO

Sick on a journey—
over parched fields
dreams wander on.
BASHO