

---

## ESSAYS

---

### STORIES BEHIND THE HAIKU: CULTURAL MEMORY IN ISSA<sup>1</sup>

*David G. Lanoue*

Like most poets, Issa opens his senses and mind to myriad discoveries in the present moment: a wet mouse perched on a weed, cherry blossoms falling into a dog's bowl, mooing cows emerging from morning mist. Less widely known is his love for packing haiku about such moments with allusions to literary classics and folklore. He makes references in his one-breath verses to Chinese sources (for example, *I Ching*, Chuang-tzu, Tao Qian, and the Zhou Dynasty's lyrical anthology, *Shi Jing*), Japanese sources (*waka* by Yamanoue no Okura, *The Tale of Genji*, *The Tale of the Heike*, and the poetry of Saigyō and Bashō), and folklore. When Issa incorporates such allusions into his poetry, it is not with an intent to show off cleverness or erudition. He is simply looking both inward and outward, mingling memory with perception. Earlier cultural narratives infiltrate his consciousness and join with the immediate impressions of his five senses, producing haiku in which past stories and present situations seamlessly combine. Paying attention to this aspect of Issa can lead to an insight that might be helpful for haiku poets today: the immediate moment of a haiku can legitimately include cultural memories triggered in that moment. In a sense, such poetry exists in the interval between the past and now.

Issa follows long-established practice when he weaves allusions into his haiku. As William J. Higginson points out in *The Haiku Handbook*, literary allusions “formed one of the primary foundations of linking in the old renga,” and played a major role in the *renku* of Bashō's school

(195). Elsewhere in the *Handbook* Higginson notes the importance of allusions in haiku as well, though their meaning, he notes, “often eludes Western readers, or even modern Japanese, who may not have the literary background necessary to appreciate [them]” (122). He goes on to present examples of allusion in Japanese and English-language haiku, proposing that allusion is, as it always has been, a legitimate device in haiku craft.

Unfortunately, Higginson’s point did not sink very deeply into the consciousness of many poets, critics, or readers. Nearly two decades after his *Handbook*’s publication, in 2003–04, Higginson himself seems to have overlooked this point when he chaired a Definitions Committee for the Haiku Society of America that ultimately defined haiku as “a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition” (“Official Definitions”). This definition admittedly represents an improvement over the one that the HSA adopted in the seventies, which saw haiku as “an unrhymed Japanese poem recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived,” and which, incidentally, advocated writing English-language haiku using a pattern of five-seven-five syllables (“Official Definitions”). While it is no longer necessary for a haiku to record “the essence of a moment keenly perceived,” the new definition boldly states that haiku conveys “the essence of an experience.” Whose experience? Many people might think this question annoyingly naive and answer, “The poet’s experience, of course!” Indeed, though the Definitions Committee didn’t specify the “experiencer” in haiku composition, one might naturally assume they meant the poet. Other critics of haiku make this assumption explicitly. Faubion Bowers, for example, in his preface to a 1996 anthology, stresses the “What, Where and When” of haiku: the “what” being “the poet’s reaction to something affecting one or more of the senses,” the “where” including the location and all the associations that the location evokes, and the “when” situating the poem in the round of seasons (ix). By emphasizing the poet’s reaction to sensory experience, Bowers leaves out the remembered experience of earlier poems, plays and stories. More recently, Izak Bouwer and Angela Sumegi, in *Go to the Pine: Poetry in Japanese Style* (2009), speak of haiku arising from the activation of “a resonance between facets of observed nature and one’s own ‘Buddha

nature” (25). Again, the authors place emphasis on the poet’s immediate experience, leaving out the possible role of remembered literature. I, too, have neglected this possibility in the past. In my 1991 book, *Issa: Cup-of-Tea Poems*, I wrote, “A haiku is not so much an intellectual or cognitive poem as it is one of awareness, felt-depth, perception through the senses, of insight and intuition by the heart” (8). That book is long out of print, but were I to prepare a revised edition, I would feel compelled to add that the insights and intuitions that spawn haiku can involve inner as well as outer experience, including, potentially, the poet’s cultural and literary memories.

To illustrate how this process works in the haiku of Issa, let’s take a look at a poem written in Seventh Month, 1817. In the old Japanese calendar, Seventh Month was the beginning of autumn. Issa’s one-word preface, “Winter,” lets the reader know that he has chosen to write about a different season than the actual one at the time.

枯すすきむかし婆々鬼あつたとき  
*karesusuki mukashi baba oni atta to sa*

withered grassland —  
 once upon a time there was  
 a she-demon ...

As Noriko T. Reider explains in her book on Japanese demon lore, female *oni* were believed to live outside of the community in wild, uninhabited areas, which explains Issa’s association of a desolate, withered grassland with the story of a she-demon (67). The most famous of such demons, especially in Issa’s home province of Shinano (present-day Nagano Prefecture), was Yamauba, an *oni* who gave birth to a son with superhuman strength: Kintarō, a boy destined to grow up and become a Heian Era warrior hero, renamed Sakata no Kintoki (160). On Mount Kintoki in Shinano many caves exist in which Yamauba and her mighty son purportedly lived; several ponds, according to local legend, served as young Kintarō’s bathtubs (Yanagita qtd. in Reider 76). Stories of the Yamauba, an ugly old women who long ago resided in the wilderness and devoured

human flesh, abound in Japan; she is analogous to the evil witch in the Hansel and Gretel story as told by the Grimm Brothers (61). While Reider sees Yamauba and similar female *oni* as metaphorical representatives of marginalized “others” in Japanese society, particularly women who live outside the village’s system of gender normality in their refusal of traditional roles of mother or daughter (62–66), Issa’s allusion is more intuitive. He simply evokes a scary story with its concomitant feeling of dread, employing the “Once upon a time” formula in Japanese tale telling: *mukashi* (“long ago ...”). In his imagination, a she-demon might lurk amid the tall, withered, cold, windswept grasses. The “once upon a time-ness” of the haiku links the present moment to an archetypal past, imbuing it with a feeling of eerie excitement.

This next example alludes to a particular Japanese folktale, “The Tongue-Cut Sparrow.”

梅守に舌切らるるなむら雀  
*umemori ni shita kiraruru na murasuzume*

don’t let the plum blossom guard  
 cut your tongues ...  
 sparrows!

In the tale, a kind old man keeps a sparrow as a sort of surrogate child, since his wife has not borne children and has refused to allow him to adopt one—so he treats the sparrow with paternal kindness (Griffis 30). At one point his wife, a mean old woman, cuts the sparrow’s tongue with scissors just because he has pecked at some of her starch (31). She then tosses him into the air, and the poor bleeding sparrow flies away. Her husband later happens upon the home of this same sparrow, where he is welcomed and treated with politeness by the entire sparrow family for several days, eating wonderful food and (in one charming version of the story) playing games of *go*, a strategy board game, with the sparrows’ daughter (33). The sparrows even offer him a going-away present, allowing him to choose between two baskets: a light one and a heavy one. He politely picks the light basket, which turns out to be filled with money

and gems (Cavallaro 49). The old woman, greedy for her own gift, goes to visit the sparrows' house and demands to have one. Presented the same choice as her husband, she picks the heavy basket, thinking that it surely contains even more wealth than he received, but when she opens it, "a horrible cuttlefish rushe[s] at her, a skeleton poke[s] his bony fingers in her face, and finally a long, hairy serpent, with a big head and lolling tongue, [springs] out and coil[s] around her, cracking her bones, and squeezing out her breath, till she die[s]" (Griffis 36). According to Dani Cavallaro, the story shows an "unbending devotion to dramatic justice" while, at the same time, a Japanese "passion for the sudden eruption of grotesque and monstrous forms" (49). In the story's happy ending the long-suffering husband, free at last, adopts a son.

In Issa's haiku the person guarding plum blossoms is cast in the role of the wicked old woman of the tale. The tone is comic, sure to raise smiles among his Japanese readers, but by referring to a story in which a family of sparrows live in a house and follow all the conventions of Japanese etiquette, he also hints at an essential sameness between human and bird. In fact, compared to the avaricious old woman, these polite and generous sparrows appear *better* than people, or at least better than this particular individual. When he humorously warns the sparrows to beware the tongue-cutting blossom guard, Issa hints that the guard is a mean old grouch. The collective memory of "The Tongue-Cut Sparrow" shapes the present moment, reminding readers of the karmic consequences suffered by a brutish old woman once upon a time.

Issa also builds haiku around allusions to highbrow Chinese and Japanese literary works, as in this next example.

ちる花やほっとして居る太郎冠者  
*chiru hana ya hotto shite iru Tarōkaja*

cherry blossoms scatter —  
 the servant Tarō  
 is relieved

Here, he reminds readers of a comic play or *kyōgen*: *Hana-arasoī*, a quarrel farce of the Muromachi period, several centuries before Issa's time (Davis 137). Tarōkaja is the name of a stock character, Young Servant Tarō, featured in this particular *kyōgen*. Tarō quarrels with his master, a small landlord, over what to call cherry blossoms. The following plot summary comes courtesy of Saijo Takao on the *Hirota Kanshōkai* website.

On a pleasant spring day, the lord plans a flower-viewing excursion and invites Taro-kaja to accompany him. Taro-kaja gladly accepts the invitation, but protests that it ought to be phrased as cherry-blossom-viewing, the actual business being the appreciation of cherry blossoms, not flowers. A dispute breaks out over the accuracy of the term, the lord standing by "flower" and Taro-kaja by "cherry blossom." Each tries to defeat the other by reciting old *waka*-poems on "cherry" and "flower." After a long dispute, Taro-kaja inadvertently recites verses including "cherry" which, however, is immediately followed by "flower"; and he loses his ground, as is his wont.

Many readers of Japanese haiku are aware that the general term *hana* or "blossom" can sometimes be used to mean "cherry blossom"; whereas the specific term, *sakura*, always means "cherry blossom." This elasticity of *hana*'s meaning is put to good use in countless haiku, as it allows poets to refer to cherry blossoms with only two language units (*ha* + *na*) instead of with three (*sa* + *ku* + *ra*), thus vastly expanding possibilities within the five-seven-five template of Japanese haiku. In the *Hana-arasoī* farce, the servant Tarō and his master bicker vigorously over which term to apply to the flowers that they will be viewing. Issa evokes this absurd quarrel in a poem about cherry blossoms scattering. Tarōkaja feels relief at the sight, Issa writes, and then allows his readers to conclude for themselves the reason for the servant's relief: the source of contention, the blossoms, now fall from their branches, no longer something to argue about. This character from traditional drama visits the contemporary moment and reacts to his surroundings suitably, in Issa's haiku.

Murasaki Shikibu's eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) is a classic of Heian period literature, a courtly tale of a "shining prince"

and his adventures, mostly amorous. Eight centuries later, Issa references Prince Genji in a haiku about a mate-seeking cat.

恋猫の源氏めかする垣根哉 (1809)

*koi neko no genji mekasuru kakine kana*

the lover cat  
dandied up like Genji  
at the fence

Issa's original readers would have instantly recognized the scene in *The Tale of Genji* to which he alludes, either from reading the book or from having viewed popular woodblock prints of its key moments, such as those done in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Yamamoto Shunshō, reproduced in Edward G. Seidensticker's modern English translation. In Chapter 5, Prince Genji journeys into the northern hills in springtime, seeking a cure for his malaria in the cave of a wise healer. While in the neighborhood, he peers through a wattle fence and catches sight of ten-year old Murasaki, a pretty little girl who bears an uncanny resemblance to the woman that Genji most yearns for: the Lady Fujitsubo, with whom he has recently had "an illicit and profitless affair" (Murasaki 90). Genji soon learns that the girl happens to be a daughter of Fujitsubo's brother, Prince Hyōbu—the product of an affair that Hyōbu had with a lady who, thanks to Hyōbu's vindictive wife, was later driven to "a fatal decline" and death (90). Spying on the child, Genji decides instantly that he must "take her into his house and make her his ideal" (90)!

Even to eleventh century readers Genji's behavior must have seemed creepy and pedophilic, since he protests several times in the narrative that his intentions do not stem from "improper motives" (90); that he only wants to serve the best interest of the child by molding her into his perfect woman. Later that year, in autumn, after the death of Murasaki's nurse, Genji abducts the girl and brings her to the west wing of his palace. The next morning, he visits her in her new, opulent chamber only to find her sulking. "Young ladies should do as they are told," he admonishes, and the author adds, wryly, "And so the lessons began" (109).

In Issa's haiku a tomcat steps into the role of this most famous courtly lover of Japanese letters, appearing at a fence in glorious, full adornment: *mekasuru*. Of course, instead of silken, perfumed robes, the cat wears only fur that, perhaps, he has licked and combed for the occasion ... perhaps not. The haiku elevates the cat or else denigrates Genji—or both—depending on how one chooses to read it. On one hand, Issa suggests that cats, too, can experience on some level the lofty emotion that we humans call love. On the other hand, he implies that Prince Genji, despite all his riches and refinement, is in essence nothing more than a sexually excited animal, a predator. The present moment of a lover cat posing by a fence mingles in the haiku with the literary memory of Prince Genji spying, and mentally staking his claim, on little Murasaki. The long-ago story not only glosses the situation in present time (a cat at a fence), the situation in present time subtly critiques the long-ago story. Issa is doing more here than simply opening his senses to the present moment; he also attends to and raises questions about a cultural memory.

Literary recollections in Issa's haiku at times hearken back to classical China, as in this next example.

ゆうぜんとして山を見る蛙哉  
*yūzen to shite yama wo miru kawazu kana*

serene and still  
 the mountain-viewing  
 frog

The haiku originally appears without a note, but Issa recopies it six years later in his poetic journal of 1819, *Oraga haru* (“My Spring”), with this prose preface: “In the summer evening, spreading my straw mat, I call ‘Lucky! Lucky!’ and soon he comes crawling out from his nook in the thicket, enjoying the evening cool just like a person” (my translation; Issa 6.143). “Lucky” (*fuku*) is a colloquialism and a pet name for toads, suggesting that many of Issa's “frogs” (*kawazu*) might in fact be toads. In any case, the first and second phrases of the poem echo a well-known Chinese verse by Tao Qian (also known as Tao Yuanming), a poet of



the late fourth, early fifth century. His poem, “I Built My House Near Where Others Dwell,” has these lines (in William Acker’s translation): “I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,/ And gaze afar towards the southern mountains” (66). Issa signals his allusion by employing the same two Chinese characters, *yuran*, pronounced *yūzen* in Japanese, to describe his mountain-gazer; only, in his case, the gazer is a frog. In Issa’s Japanese this combination of characters denotes “calmly” or “composedly.” The Chinese poem depicts a hermit poet gazing at distant mountains and flying birds, sensing within these things an ineffable “hint of Truth” (66). However, Issa comically shatters Tao Qian’s serene and refined tone in the concluding phrase of his parody, substituting the famous hermit of classical tradition with a frog—a bait-and-switch joke that functions exactly like his using a cat as a stand-in for Genji at the fence. In both cases, the joke is not *simply* a joke. Just as Issa’s lover cat implies, on a deeper level, a critique of Genji and perhaps of romantic love in general, the mountain-gazing frog evinces the poet’s egalitarian Pure Land Buddhist vision of reality: this meditating frog, too, is on his way to enlightenment. Again, Issa blends a present moment—the sight of a frog looking in the direction of a mountain or mountains—with a literary moment that educated Japanese readers of his time would have remembered.

The next example contains an allusion that even illiterate people of the Edo period, especially those living in the poet’s home province, would have instantly recognized. As with “The Tongue-Cut Sparrow,” its source is oral tradition.

婆々どのも牛に引かれて桜かな  
*baba dono mo ushi ni hikarete sakura kana*

granny comes too  
 led by a cow ...  
 cherry blossoms

The image of an old woman being led by a cow recalls a popular tale set in Issa’s province of Shinano. A sinful woman left a piece of cloth to dry in the garden behind her house, but a passing cow snagged it with a

horn and trotted off. The woman followed the beast to the great temple Zenkōji, where it disappeared and she found herself standing before the image of Amida Buddha. From that point on, she became pious (Blyth 2.422–23). In this case, granny follows the cow into the temple of Nature, where she encounters gloriously blooming cherry blossoms. Issa wrote the haiku in 1822 as a variation in a series of poems that invite the reality of this ancient story to fuse with present moments. In earlier installments of 1803 and 1811 he follows the story more literally, having the cow lead a person to Zenkōji.

しぐるるや牛に引かれて善光寺  
*shigururu ya ushi ni hikarete zenkōji*

winter rain —  
 led by a cow  
 to Zenkō Temple

春風や牛に引かれて善光寺  
*haru kaze ya ushi ni hikarete zenkōji*

spring breeze —  
 a cow leads the way  
 to Zenkō Temple

Issa's original readers would have needed no footnote to inform them that long ago a cow led an old, sinful woman to the image of Amida Buddha, a famous bronze statue flanked by statues of two bodhisattvas—a spiritually powerful icon that, in Issa's time, was displayed approximately once every year (McCallum 169). In all of these variants the poet pays tribute to the tenets of True Teaching Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdoshinshū) to which he devoted himself throughout his life. According to Jōdoshinshū's founder, Shinran, enlightenment is a gift that comes from beyond the ego's calculations. The woman in the tale takes her first steps toward enlightenment without thinking about it—simply by following a cow: the embodiment of Amida's saving power. Issa, too, follows cows to Zenkōji

(and enlightenment) in his imagination. Perceptive readers who know the background story will follow it there too. In 1815, he substitutes a butterfly for the cow.

此方が善光寺とや蝶のとぶ  
*kono kata ga zenkōji to ya chō no tobu*

“Follow me to Zenkō Temple!”  
 a butterfly  
 flies

The religious message remains the same: animals can show people the way to Buddha’s Pure Land. In my opinion, the most interesting haiku of the series is our first example, the poem of 1822 in which the cow leads granny to blooming cherry trees. Issa hints here that Nature itself is a temple, especially this scene of lovely, fragile cherry blossoms that palpably signify Buddha’s principle of transience. By alluding to the earlier cultural narrative, he imbues all of these haiku with profound spiritual resonance.

In the course of translating haiku for my online archive, I discovered scores of similar examples in Issa that mingle present images with cultural memories, and I suspect that there are many more examples that I simply haven’t yet recognized. Issa does not approach moments of Nature with a clean slate. Often, he views and appreciates them in terms of earlier stories, poems, and plays. Perhaps his example will help free the imaginations of some of today’s poets. We have the license to join past and present, memory and perception, in our haiku. Issa would support the 2004 HSA definition of haiku as conveying the “essence of an experience,” only so long as we understand that this experience is not always exclusively that of an individual poet in the here and now but can also include collectively shared recollections of earlier stories and literature.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> This essay was originally presented as a paper at the Haiku North America conference, Los Angeles, August 17, 2013.

## WORKS CITED

- R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*. Reset paperback edition. (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1949–1952; rpt. 1981–1982), 4 vols. Print.
- Izak Bouwer and Angela Sumegi. *Go to the Pine: Poetry in Japanese Style* (Ottawa: Buschek Books, 2009).
- Faubion Bowers, ed. *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1996).
- Dani Cavallaro. *The Fairy Tale and Anime: Traditional Themes, Images and Symbols at Play on Screen* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011).
- Jessica Milner Davis, ed. *Understanding Humor in Japan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).
- William Elliot Griffis. *Japanese Fairy World: Stories from the Wonder-Lore of Japan* (Schenectady, NY: James H. Barhyte, 1880).
- William J. Higginson with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (Tokyo/New York/London: Kodansha International, 1989).
- Issa Kobayashi. *Issa zenshū*. Kobayashi Keiichirō, ed. 9 vols (Nagano: Shinano Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1976-79).
- David G. Lanoue, trans. *Issa, Cup-of-Tea Poems; Selected Haiku of Kobayashi Issa* (Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).
- Donald F. McCallum. *Zenkōji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).
- Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Tran. Edward G. Seidensticker. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
- “Official Definitions of Haiku and Related Terms.” Haiku Society of America. Accessed 10 May, 2013. [http://hsa-haiku.org/archives/HSA\\_Definitions\\_2004.html](http://hsa-haiku.org/archives/HSA_Definitions_2004.html)
- Noriko T. Reider. *Japanese Demon Lore, Oni from Ancient Times to the*

---

*Present* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010).

Saijo Takao. "Hana-arasoï (Dispute over 'flower' versus 'cherry blossom')." Hirota Kanshōkai. Accessed 6 April 2013. Web.

Tao Qian. *T'ao the Hermit, Sixty Poems by T'ao Chi'en* (365–427). Trans. William Acker (London & New York: Thames and Hudson, 1952).