

WHERE LIGHT
BEGINS
H A I K U

Gabriel Rosenstock

Edited by
MÍCHEÁL Ó HAODHA



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Gach ceart ar cosnamh. Ní ceadmhach aon chuid den fhoilseachán seo a atáirgeadh, a chur i gcomhad athfhála nó a tharchur in aon mhodh ná slí, bíodh sin leictreonach, meicniúil, bunaithe ar fhótachóipeáil, ar thaifeadadh nó eile, gan cead a fháil roimh ré ón bhfoilsitheoir.

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Some of these haiku originally appeared in the author's selected haiku in Irish, *Géaga Trí Thine* (Comhar 2006) and in various poetry and haiku journals including *Sirena*, *World Haiku Review*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Moonset*, *Lá*, *Simply Haiku*, *Lishanu*, *Feasta*, *Haiku Scotland*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Cordite*, *Montage* (Red Moon Press 2010), *THE SHOP*, and in his two books on haiku as a way of life, *Haiku Enlightenment* and *Haiku, the Gentle Art of Disappearing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

ZEN-HAIKU MASTER J W HACKETT:

A wonderful collection by this renowned Irish poet. Haiku humour alternates with profundity – due to his remarkably keen observation and understanding of the genre. Best of all, the sense of identity between poet and subject adds a quality that distinguishes great haiku poetry.

there must be light
where they came from –
chestnut blossoms

sickle moon -

reaping

emptiness

fish-vendor testing

the knife's edge –

seagulls cry

outside the Guggenheim

the shape

of real trees

church bells –

where are they all going?

swarms of ants

knowing its name:

the lungwort

springs up in every cranny

a magpie
sipping beakfuls
of its latest image

where's the hedgehog tonight
has she found leaves -
finally, a resting place?

foghorn ...
little by little
the world disappears

was its spirit released?
flaming limbs
of an old tree

flea market in Valparaiso
a German helmet
eaten by rust

sun shower -
flowers, weeds, stones
drenched in enlightenment

three stabs at nothing!
the heron shakes its head
in disbelief

the seal's pupil
brimming over –
gleams from a lighthouse

island post box
the empty thud
of a letter

in blackest night
what does the hedgehog dream -
does she dream in colour?

matching the moss
it explores: green
on the pigeon's neck

drizzly morning ...
a pigeon savours
a drunk's vomit

Bombay,
rags on a pavement
a body stirs in them

dark morning
a crow
looks down a chimney pot

all day ... and every day
unseen rays
streaming from the sunflower

our daughter
two hearts beating in her now
how strange

the wild duck
slows down
almost to the pace of the stream

grey November strand

lugworms burrow

for secrets

frosty morning
a robin bares his breast
to the whole world

creeping ever closer
to the frozen birdbath
morning sunshine

blossomless
but not unloved
the old magnolia

how relaxed
the seaweed-covered boulder
massaged by waves

two magpies
in flight: one
the soul of the other

standing up
to the morning haar –
seldom-blooming magnolia

not that we had forgotten!
yellow furze
again

with his one good hand
a scarecrow
points to the moon

a pigeon coos to itself
until it no longer
has a self

baby frog! who was your mother
where is she now
this autumn day

bathroom spider
sent out into the great wide world ...
chill of tiles

there! wiggling in the light –
but what are they in shade?
crazy tadpoles ...

honeysuckle!
lift high your chalice now
for all sentient beings

was that your ghost
softly among fallen leaves
dead hedgehog

their first full moon –
all the tadpoles
eerily quiet

pale yellow sound -
putting out the candle
a second moth spared

leaping back into the pond
what only yesterday
was a tadpole

watering the magnolia –
ah, that's where you're hiding!
pesky midges

sheep-droppings
a baker's dozen
each one the same

ah! mounting each other
with such gentleness
August evening clouds

faces
in the flaming coals
these, too, will change

flowers in a vase
a cat prowls
the bare garden

passing a laundrette
becoming still

this spinning world ...

flicking their tails
out of habit
cows in the chill of autumn

empty
circus field
one
lonesome
elephant
turd

did her eyes watch
that little danse macabre?
decapitated hen

slipping over morning fields
a sunray
catches the hare's urine

Achill island
oyster catchers
gawping at tourists

wolf-whistle!
the unintended girl
turns her head

all that's left of the night
two crows
on a branch

past and future lives
in the unblinking eyes
of a king cobra

sun over the Himalayas
my mule drinks
from the Ganges

nothing left
but the gates -
temple of air

news of a death
a fruit-bat suspended
in slumber

an egret stands in a lagoon
the sound of clothes
washed on stones

harvest moon –
burying the short-lived hedgehog
where she snuffled for worms

the pigeon's mate has flown

still he struts

chest puffed out

how noble!
the horse on a coin
no longer in use

the March air
tendrils escaping
from a broken pot

the foot of the Cross -
a blood-stained snail
becomes a buddha

nipple-pink
the unripe
raspberries—

beer
left out for snails
tomorrow's buddhas

shield and sword intact
the grinning Viking raider
never made it home

evening sunshine –
graveyard midges
Christ, how they bite!

dying notes of a bagpipe –
singly and in groups
swallows disappear

from what unknowable universe
beyond Hubble –
the cat's green stare

frosty morning ...
the dead cat's paw
reaches to the sun

bleak February morning
a white cat declares itself
in silence

about to vanish
in the morning sky
orphaned moon

Allah-o akbar!
first light over Kochi
trembling waves

criss-crossing the sky
the way to nowhere –
swallows vanish

fierce lightning –
for split seconds night is day
what buddha's eyes are opening?

a while ago
sleek swallows
now fixed stars

scraping a parsnip
still not as white
as Bashō's chrysanthemum

emerging

from a dream

the crackling dawn

a pity the crow is black
and cannot reflect
this morning light

planting tulip bulbs
their future colour
in this evening's sky

crows over Clonmacnoise
their wing-beats
bringing the darkness down

faint sunlight
injecting the veins
of a falling leaf

into the fireside crevice
with all his legs
big black spider

slanting rain
the seagull flying
at an angle

lemon tree
in the shade –
not really!

roasting
a pear in embers
sizzling rain

full moon
filling the eye
fully

pale yellow urine
on dark green weeds ...
remembering Santōka

illusion of bloom
silvery sun
on all the magnolia buds

rarely still
zebra bamboo
mid February

a glimpse of a god
in the eyes of the cat
following a moth

frail evening cloud
losing its shape -
calls it a day

the light
from the prison
how it burns

rain cloud, pass by!
the last of the leaves
are shivering

Connemara ...
throwing a dead cat over the ditch
stars

green green green
the pines
seconds before snow

the cat – curled into herself –
infinite night ...
her eyes

when will they scurry
through endless days?
unformed tadpoles

two seagulls
up high
vanish into brightness

a heron has just golloped
a load of my tadpoles –
my my my my

a flurry of fennel
and the voice of the lark
is watery green

a bone on the beach
that once had flesh
and copulated

a crow calls
the bamboo rustles
evening is born

twilight
a rose paints itself
a deeper red by the hour

barking dogs
are they heard somewhere
in the Milky Way?

over the wall
and gone; but – for a second –
the fox's tail

stuck to the wall
daddy long leg's
zazen

will they see each other tonight?
polished beach pebble
the moon

their duties all ended
six ants
in the robin's beak

sickle moon –
the gondolier is singing
to himself

Kerala Rensaku

A sequence from Southern India

inedible green fruit

its flowers

distant stars

lull in conversation

a shrivelled leaf

crackles on the terrace

heat shimmers

an old cyclist

rides into infinity

scrawny dogs

on the road before dawn

going nowhere

dawn figures
drifting to work ...
crows too

the flying foxes
are stilled
creaking of golden bamboo

a cooling breeze
and once again
cackle of guinea fowl

the sky
is cleared of crows
first star

spreading their wings
taunting the whiteness of egrets
little cormorants

somewhere deep
within the universe
the crow's voice is formed

sky of infinite blue -
bursting out of themselves
green jackfruit

one crow alone
higher than all the rest
ancient seeker

was it a kingfisher?
a splash turns blue
into silver

from concentrated stillness
a hawk

s
w
o
o
p
s
on invisible prey

ants ants ants ants ants
antsantsantsantsantsantsants
ants ants ants ants ants

lotus! revealing pure nakedness
to the waters
again, again

the cormorant
a mere bystander
kingfisher morning

to fully explore
a rustic rose
the frantic bee disappears

countless suns ...
rowan berries burst
into autumn

a dizzy moth flies

and fades

fireworks implode

into nothingness

the moon brighter than ever

into the dancer's light

April Rensaku

A sequence from Farrera in the Catalanian Pyrenees

dying winds

faint mountain path

to a disused church

surrounded

by so many buttercups

how sober – the horse

with each call

the cuckoo

melts the snow

somewhere in the fog

a little bell

around the horse's neck

feeding time
the old man
sings to the rabbits

one crisp sound -
voices of sparrows
dripping of melting snow

this thin mountain air
everywhere: rock crevices
empty walnut shell

snow-capped hills
the foal's mouth
flecked with mare's milk

the squirrel
(on a tree I do not know)
has a brother in my land

dark clouds leaving
for the next valley
aroma of strong coffee

chilly morning -
an eagle's talon
nailed to the door

Rensaku in Bangaram,

Lakshadweep Islands, December 06

yet another piece of coral,
look, it moves –
hermit crab

silence –
the moon silvers the sand
covering all the turtle eggs

cloudless sky –
off on his marches again
hermit crab

the blood-red moon
changing colour –
puts all the stars to flight

the shape
of this coral : shape
of a distant galaxy

islands coming
and going: is this
how the world was made?

even the butterfly
takes a rest
on the hammock

a glimpse of a turtle
his eyes:
and what they have seen

imprint of a bird's feet
pointing, pointing
towards infinite sands

into a hole in the sand
something too quick
to be named

sea grass
turtles eat it –
apart from that, who knows?

how penetrating!
speed of light, almost:
cock crow

a leg hangs out –
the fly is too big
for the gecko's mouth

painting
the dawn sky –
a cock's flaming voice

Empty Moors

A bilingual rensaku
West Highlands of Scotland, September 07

préachán ar choca féir
ag breathnú uaidh
ar an bhfómhar

*a crow on a haystack
surveying
the harvest*

leathann broigheall
a sciatháin
fáiltíonn roimh sholas an tráthnóna

spreading its wings

a cormorant

welcomes the evening light

raithneach ...
fraoch
is gan Críostaí beo sa choill

*fern ...
heather
and not a living soul in the woods*

loch –
léiceann na gcrann
domhan airgid

*lake –
lichen on trees
silvery world*

tost ...
is lú ná muisiriúin iad
na caoirigh

*silence ...
smaller than mushrooms
the sheep*

Alltan Dubh
búiríl
sa chiúnas

*Alltan Dubh river
roars
in silence*

monabhar
na gcrann:
minicíocht an-íseal

*murmur
of trees:
very low frequency*

báisteach gan stad
róbhuí ar fad é
an buachalán

*relentless rain
too yellow by far
the ragwort*

sliabh lom
gan giorria
fiú amháin

*bare moor
not even
a hare*

Ulapul: faoileán aonair
níl gíoscán
ó na báid

*Ullapool: a lone seagull
no creaking
from the boats*

bád meirgeach
a sciob a dhath
ón sliabh

*a rusty boat
stole its colour
from the moor*

Coire Shalach
a hainm á ghlanadh
ag an eas

*Coire Shalach: Ugly Hollow
the waterfall
clears its name*

clamhán
ina lanstad
stopann an t-am

*a buzzard
hangs in mid-air
time ceases*

Gearloch:
i nGáidhlic
a labhair na tonnta

*Gairloch:
the waves spoke
in Gaelic*

November Rensaku

A sequence from North Wales, 2006

sheep answering sheep
the mist
scatters

a cow looks over
Caernarfon Bay
without knowing why

misty valley
trees sprout
one at a time

the moaning of cows
darkens the waters
of Caernarfon Bay

chewing the universe
mountain sheep
in mist

so still
growing out of a crag
a sheep

out of the fog
more fog
rising

sheep disappear

stars come out

the voice of a waterfall

a raven comes out of the woods

to look at the world

and returns

a low sun ...

shadows flee

across battlefields

suddenly

toadstools

unobserved –

a wood in Anglesey

the universe expands

a tree that fell

and didn't fall

another supporting it

wild geese honking

Rensaku In Morroco

May 2009

I Marrakech

ar strae
i ndomhan mór bláthanna
snáthaid mhór

lost
in a big world of flowers
a dragonfly

féileacán bán
chomh bán sin...
cén chuma a bheadh ar a thaibhse?

so white!
the butterfly –
how might its ghost appear?

seilidí ina gcuid anraith
agus fáinleoga
ag damhsa san fhirnimint

snails in their soup
and swallows dancing –
dancing in the firmament

drumadóirí *gnoaua* –
oráistí carntha
in aghaidh spéir an tráthnóna

gnoaua drummers –
oranges piled up
against the evening sky

sairdíní
ina sraith
glaoch chun paidreacha

sardines
side by side
call to prayer

busáras –
níl an seandíoltóir péitseog
ag dul aon áit

bus station –
the old peach seller
isn't going anywhere

II Essaouira

faoileán aonair
ag iomaíocht
leis an muezzin

a lone seagull
competing
with the muezzin

Essaouira
an ghrian ag éag
timpeallaithe ag faoileáin

Essaouira
the dying sun
surrounded by gulls

faoileáin airgid
ag tumadh go ciúin
i bhfarraige airgeadúil

silver seagulls
plunging silently
into a silvery sea

Rensaku In Egypt

May 2010

díríd ar ár bhfoinse –
ar ár dtriall
pirimidí

pointing to where we've come from
where we're going
pyramids

Gleann na Ríthe
buidéil phlaisteacha a mhairfidh
míle bliain

Valley of the Kings
plastic bottles that will last
a thousand years

fear bréige
i ngort –
seargán beo!

a scarecrow
in a field –
a mummy come to life!

is é ag siúl thar reilig
luascann an t-asal
a eireaball

walking past the graveyard
a donkey
swishes his tail

ag teacht
is ag imeacht i gcéin –
meabhalscáil

coming and going
in the distance –
a mirage

An Níl um thráthnóna
cíúnas na gcrogall
nach bhfuil ann níos mó

The Nile in the evening
the silence of extinct
crocodiles

réalta an thráthnóna
ar léir di ón mball seo í?
Cléópátra

evening star
did she spy it from this spot?
Cleopatra

iairigliff ar an uisce
startha amach anseo
ag leá

hieroglyphs on the water
future histories
vanishing

AFTERWORD

loiteog ag bláthú
san uisce is fós
sa chroí

a lotus blossoming
in the water
and in the heart

Susumu Takiguchi,
Chairman, The World Haiku Club

sickle moon -

reaping

emptiness

Rosenstock has done it again! Here we have another haiku volume of originality and newness. Why is it that if lesser hands try the same sort of haiku theirs would become shallow and literally empty while in the hands of this poet profundity and lightness show up in an exquisite balance?

Rosenstock is one of the few non-Japanese poets who have a feel for haiku almost instinctively but, more importantly, who have not lost it by the study or practice of writing haiku. Not all his haiku are good, needless to say, which also applies to even the best haiku poets in the world, but the important thing is that if, like plants, the haiku root is fundamentally correct then what sprouts or flowers would also be more often than not fine, sometimes brilliant. This is vindicated in the following haiku:

outside the Guggenheim
the shape
of real trees

I read this haiku as follows. Guggenheim represents one of the heights of modern human creativity. However, it cannot surpass nature's creativity after all. Rosenstock appreciates what is shown at the famous museum as well as the museum building itself but outside he sees nature which makes him appreciate more profoundly both it and the works of art he has just seen inside. It is not negation of one in preference of the other but celebration of both, leaning towards man's modesty in the face of nature. In other words, his love for human creativity is only possible if man is humble enough to respect the creativity of nature (not necessarily 'of God', or 'of gods').

foghorn ...
 little by little
 the world disappears

was its spirit released?
flaming limbs
of an old tree

Two more examples which show Rosenstock's basic perception of the relationship between man and nature. For him the relationship is so close that man and nature are not mutually exclusive:

sun shower -
flowers, weeds, stones
drenched in enlightenment

A bit dangerous this territory in which such an abstract notion as 'enlightenment' is treated with some of the most concrete phenomena of nature, making the haiku not only non-pedantic but also convincing.

drizzly morning ...
 a pigeon savours
 a drunk's vomit

For animals and birds food is food whatever it is. They have gone through the evolution whereby their body, especially the digestive system, has been adapted to take in so many different things for survival. Humans, on the other hand, have become a bit too fussy about food, among other things. Is this what makes us human?

frosty morning
 a robin bares his breast
 to the whole world

In an art class if you are asked to interpret an apple on the table in pictorial language you paint in a certain way. If you are asked to depict a robin by way of haiku this one would be a good answer.

how relaxed
the seaweed-covered boulder
massaged by waves

Who decided that anthropomorphism in haiku is bad and should be avoided? While there is an element of truth in it, such a rule would kill a lot of potentially good haiku. This haiku should be presented as court evidence in such an unreasonable haiku tribunal.

with his one good hand
a scarecrow
points to the moon

Rosenstock adores Issa. However, he does not imitate the great haiku poet. The spirit is in line with Basho's teaching not to follow the past masters but to follow what they sought.

a pigeon cooing to itself
until it no longer
has a self

How about this? Is it going too far? Maybe. However, it has a strong appeal because it is saying something. All too often tutored and sanitised haiku poems are so tutored and sanitised that they end up in having nothing to say, at least nothing new to say. By comparison, this haiku has a lot to say and whether or not anthropomorphism has gone mad is totally immaterial.

leaping back into the pond
what only yesterday
was a tadpole

Some brave or foolish poets have tried to write haiku after Basho's old pond haiku. Rosenstock's is one of the few which succeed in such an impossible mission. Nothing about the philosophical quietude nor about the sound of water. However, one feels acutely that this haiku somehow belongs to Basho's world.

full moon
filling the eye
fully

Play on words or some Western poetic tools such as alliteration can sometimes be effective in haiku but usually difficult to achieve merit or height. This one is a rare success and enjoyable without being trivial or facetious. It is also a rare success as a minimalist haiku. Not a lot of haiku have expressed the fullness of the full moon so well.

a glimpse of a god
in the eyes of a cat
following a moth

Many poets must have sought to express the same sentiment in haiku or longer poems, or even by other means such as aphorism, as is expressed in Hamlet: 'There's a special providence in the

fall of a sparrow, echoing Matthew 10.29. This piece can be said to be haiku's answer to Hamlet's remark. Rosenstock's religious position apart, there is no doubt at all about his respect for what is larger than us, what is not yet known to us by science, what is unintelligible through human words, or whatever may be there, all-pervasive and omnipotent.

THE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT OF ISSA Gabriel Rosenstock

*The most beautiful thing we
can experience in life is the
mysterious.*
Albert Einstein

Picking up a book called *Writing and Enjoying Haiku* by Jane Reichhold (Kodansha International, 2002) one notices dozens of references to Bashō in the Index and not one reference to Issa. It's as if Issa has been stuck with the 'country bumpkin' label instead of being acknowledged as one of the three pillars of the haiku world.

In Makoto Ueda's *Dew on the Grass: The Life and Poetry of Kobayashi Issa* (Brill, 2004) we read: 'His poetry is lacking in the viewpoint that transcends time and space.' I fail to see the truth of this statement. I am constantly drawn to Issa precisely because he transcends, over and over again, the particularities of his own time and space and gloriously so in the following haiku:

*óm chroíse
a thiteann
sneachta Shinano*

falling from my heart
the snows
of Shinano

When I receive the *Daily Issa* service from David Lanoue, I gaelicise those haiku that hit the spot, that transcend time and space for me. This is my spontaneous personal response to the burst of light which Issa releases for me. Then I often do a back translation, that is to say I translate my Irish into English, and this delightful activity keeps me out of pubs and prisons.

The snows in the above haiku are as universal as *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and deserve to be as famous as the snows of that short story or any other snows you care to mention. The above snow-haiku is a miraculous encapsulation of that most desired quality in haiku, and in life, interpenetration. This is not something you can fake. This is not something you can manufacture. It's a gift. Issa had it. His gift was great. There is more than interpenetration at work here. This is pure non-duality, the internal world and the external world fused as one. This is, manifestly, a transcendence of time and space. It is the stopping of time. The snows are falling from Issa's heart. They will do so forever. Universally.

*a ghé, a ghé fhiáin
cén tús
a bhí le d'aistear?*

goose, wild goose
what was the beginning
of your journey?

Here we see the child-like universal quality of wonder which characterises great haiku and great art across many genres. But it expresses more than idle wistfulness, of course. Issa, it seems to me, had the great gift of cosmic intelligence. He may not have had as much education or sophisticated insights of a Buson or a Bashō; nevertheless, he instinctively knew what all the great writers of the world, writers of immense stature such as Shakespeare or Goethe, were constantly seeking to plumb, the very nature and meaning of existence itself. What was the beginning of your journey, he asks. But this endearing naivety hides a tremendous, a frightening profundity. What Issa is really doing in this great haiku is looking at the Self. He is engaging in what Advaita asks us to do, Self-Enquiry, in meditating the Self, in abiding in the Self, in knowing that in fact the Self is beginningless and therefore endless. Yeats said, 'I am looking for the face I had before the world was made.' Precisely. And Osho's epitaph? 'Osho, never born, never died.' And we have it here in Issa, in his contemplation of the goose and it is utterly, utterly wonderful! He manages to do it, quite simply, because his heart is open – to the goose and to himself. This is the key. He could easily have closed his heart. By keeping it open, haiku flowed.

Issa knew what he was doing. He was a conscious poet, dedicated to the life of a poet. No other life was possible for him and even when weakened by a stroke there was a palanquin there for him from which he could observe the world. He says in his journal, 'A wandering poet can't help being what he is any more than can a wave that breaks on the shore. His time is short, like foam

that disappears in a minute.’ Thus the name he gave himself, Issa – the feathery foam in a cup of tea. Blink and it’s gone. And the haiku moment, how fleeting it is.

*glacann colainn
an Bhúda léi –
báisteach an gheimhridh*

the body of the Buddha
accepts it –
winter rain

We see the cosmic mind at work again in this sobering haiku, the universal in the particular. I would argue that Issa’s prolific output is due to one thing and one thing only, namely that he was charged with a cosmic battery, that he was in tune with the infinite, that all things were alive and full of grace and majesty to him, even the lowliest forms of life – especially the lowliest forms of life.

*a pháistí
ná ciapaigí an dreancaid sin
tá clann uirthi*

children
don’t torment that flea!
she has offspring

Were children to recite this haiku everyday, bullying might disappear. Once bullying disappears, you never know... wars might become unacceptable!

Let’s get back to the Buddha and the rain. The body of the Buddha accepts the winter rain. Of course it does. It accepts everything. The Buddha became enlightened not for me or you but for everybody and everything. And, subtly, Issa gives the initiated reader a hint that says: so with the Buddha, so with Issa. He, too, accepts the winter rain. He does not argue with it. How can he? Chilling though the winter rain may be, it is charged with divine energy, divine grace. It is rain, a universal gift and a necessity for life. *Uisce na spéire* it’s sometimes called in Irish, sky-water. Haiku is a blessed bridge between heaven and earth, between stillness and movement.

Rain and now snow:

*anoir, aniar,
aneas, aduaidh ...
caidhleabh sneachta*

from the east, from the west,
from the south, from the north,
driving snow

Issa sees through the driving snow, he sees it coming from all directions, because our country bumpkin has a vantage point, the vantage point of cosmic intelligence. The evidence for this is

insurmountable but we may not have seen what was there before our eyes. We may have been fooled into thinking that Issa wrote nothing other than charming, amusing and sometimes sentimental haiku, much appreciated by children. Lucky children to have such a Master! Issa is a Master like none other. It is not that I am extrapolating layers of meaning that are not really there. They are there, most assuredly, to the sympathetic eye.

*dúnann an doras
is titeann dá chodladh ...
slimide*

he closes the door
and goes to sleep ...
a snail

What is he saying here, that he too switches off sometimes? No, it seems to me that an enlightened master is always awake and the more I absorb Issa the more it strikes me that he was, in fact, an enlightened master. For all his travails and hardships, his spirit was free:

*croí éadrom
ag eitilt tríd an saol seo...
féileacán bánghorm*

a light heart
floating through this world ...
a pale blue butterfly

Many such haiku could be said to form part of a spiritual autobiography. Look at the interpenetration we have in the following haiku:

*stánann sí idir an dá shúil
ar an bhfear –
gé ag imeacht*

she looks at him
straight in the eye –
departing goose

What a moment in time, captured forever. The universality of this haiku is in its

grasping the reality of time, of change, of movement, of seasonality; but as the Indian non-dualist sage, Papaji, once said, ‘We do not seize Reality; Reality seizes us.’ (I have quoted this before and it’s worth quoting again). Time and time again, Reality seizes Issa and he tells us what it’s like, this hair-raising confrontation with what is real, with what it feels like to be awake, to be looked straight in the eye by a goose that’s about to depart. It’s full of mystery as well. There is something ineffable about this strange encounter between man and bird, yet wonderfully real for all that.

Reading Issa, we get a strong feeling of an awakened one, of someone who doesn’t wish to drift off into fanciful worlds:

*tabhair slogadh na lachan
do thaibhreamh seo bhreacadh an lae
a chuaichín*

gobble up
my dawn dream
cuckoo

His pure response to the pure call of the cuckoo is that the bird might, as it were, gobble up all his fantasies, dreams and illusions and leave him only with the purity of the beginner's mind.

*leánn uaim
ina chearnóg fhoirfe
sneachta an gheata*

in a perfect square
the snow on the gate
disappearing

The endless coming and going of phenomena, the appearance and the disappearance of generation after generation, of civilisation after civilisation. It's all in Issa if you look. He tells it as it is. The snow. And the melting of the snow. We don't get one without the other. Issa wants us to have a full picture. The picture given above, 'in a perfect square the snow on the gate disappearing' would, I think have been appreciated by Dutch artist and Theosophist, Piet Mondrian.

*an chéad bhrat sneachta
ina scifle ...
préacháin*

the first blanket of snow
all in rags ...
crows

Nothing sentimental about that, is there? It's not quite nature 'red in tooth and claw' but hints at it nicely. In English poetry, such as *London Snow* by Robert Bridges, we often find a picture-postcard view of nature:

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town...

A different sensibility is at work in the haiku of the Japanese master. We do not necessarily have to prefer one to the other. Each has its special qualities. What Bridges tries to achieve is something similar to Walter de la Mare's poem, *Snow*:

No breath of wind,
No gleam of sun,
Still the white snow
Whirls softly down
Twig and bough

And blade and thorn
All in an icy
Quiet, forlorn...

But I could not read Bridges or Walter de la Mare repeatedly, over a lifetime. Issa I can. The best of his haiku never get stale, not for me at any rate, and it is because his haiku emerge not from some imaginative, atmosphere-building fiction but from the depths (or heights) of Reality itself.

Furthermore, each glimpse of Reality is as real as the next:

*an ráib faoi bhláth –
agus nuair a fhéachaim siar
Teampall Zenko*

flowering rape –
and looking west
Zenko Temple

*gealach an fhómhair –
agus nuair a fhéachaim siar
Teampall Zenko*

harvest moon –
and looking west
Zenko Temple

Such close similarity between two poems would be intolerable to poetry lovers. Mainstream poetry would, rightly, see it as a

form of self-plagiarism. Not so in haiku. Because it is Reality that matters. And nothing is as universal as Reality, Reality that reflects nature, the spirit of nature, human nature, animal nature:

*ag imeacht san áit
ar gann iad na sealgairí éan -
an sionnach*

he sneaks off
to where fowlers are scarce –
the fox

Issa's sympathy is with the fox, of course, but in a way it's with everything and everybody, even the bird hunters. What I like about this haiku is its connectedness to the earth, to landscape, to the ways of the land. One of the problems we encounter in the haiku world today is that city haikuists often bend over backwards to argue for the validity of urban haiku. Urban haiku existed in Issa's time but he reminds us that in the area of the old capital, Edo, even the scarecrows are crooked! So be warned!

There may be a sneaking admiration in the above haiku for the wily old fox; after all, Issa was not the best at handling his worldly affairs. But even the fox doesn't always get his own way:

*imithe le gealaigh
ag na clocha sneachta –
sionnach*

hail stones
driving him crackers –
the fox

Poets such as Robert Bridges and Walter de la Mare rely on stock devices – rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia and so on – devices which the haiku usually shuns. Avoiding these imaginative layers of beguiling ornamentation and suggestion, dispensing even with a title, the haiku relies solely on the pure shock of Reality.

We must talk now about fleas: they too are part of Reality, of the scheme of things. Let's revisit the flea haiku above:

children
don't torment that flea!
she has offspring

This is not, I would argue, an example of anthropomorphism. Off course a flea has offspring, otherwise how do fleas come into being? Rabindranath Tagore says there is no higher religion than that of sympathy for all that lives. And Einstein says, 'Until he extends his circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.' Issa's sympathy for fleas, frogs and baby sparrows is often interpreted as simply amusing or touching. It

is much, much greater than that. The flea-haiku is a statement of universal compassion. Only someone who was taunted or excluded, or witnessed exclusion, could write such an effective haiku which is nothing short of a plea from the heart for all cruelty, mindlessness and aggression to end.

Issa's enlightenment is found in the balance of rest and activity:

*ag socrú síos arís
sa chiúnas séimh
géanna na ngort ríse*

settling down again
in gentle stillness
geese in the rice fields

Sublime! It's almost a call to meditation. It is universal in the sense that rest and activity is the lot of all beings. The scene is described on the cusp of serenity, so to speak. The geese are settling down again, which is not the same as some seconds earlier when all is commotion, or some seconds later when the geese are reposing: we actually catch a glimpse of them in motion, settling down to motionlessness. This is superb interpenetration, the spirit, the inner eye following the dynamics of a fleeting moment, becoming that fleeting moment itself and the stillness thereafter.

Actually, we might say that its fleetingness is precisely what demands spontaneous alacrity from the *haijin*, a response which is more than perception, or mere observation, and it is this which creates the haiku moment.

Certainly Issa had his sorrows and travails but throughout his body of haiku great joy issues forth as from a fountain:

*na raidisí fíú
ag bláthú sa ghort ...
an fhaiseog ag ceiliúradh*

even the radishes
in the field blooming...
the lark singing!

This is the spontaneous often unexpected ecstasy experienced by poets and mystics universally and it can visit any of us, at any time, when we are at one with Creation. There is nothing to be sought, to be desired; listen to the delicious sermon of the radishes, that's all, and the heavens will open in song.

And even in a more sombre mood, Issa is saying... what can be added? This is enough beauty, enough happiness for any man:

*ag breathnú ar an sliabh
ag breathnú ar an muir ...
tráthnóna fómhair*

looking at the mountain
looking at the sea...
autumn evening

The gaze, the untroubled gaze, stretching into infinity, at one with the nature of the Self and the universe. The simplicity of it all. I'm sure it unnerves quite a lot of people! It's strange how people react differently to a handful of syllables. Some enter the mood immediately. It's more than a mood, of course. Others are untouched, unmoved.

I find myself being transformed by reading favourite haiku. It's not easy to describe. As I said above, it's more than a mood. It's not like being injected with a mood-altering substance. It is really an awakening. Something of the quality of dreams colours our perceptions and a good haiku is like a splash of water from a cool mountain stream that wakes us up from our doze. *Looking at the mountain/looking at the sea .../autumn evening*. A universal experience, timeless, and ever new. The act of making a haiku is a celebration of pure consciousness. Thousands of millions of people have gazed at a mountain, have gazed at the sea. But with what degree of consciousness, of awareness, of perception and interpenetration? The haiku opens up all our channels of perception to take in the mystery of mountain and sea, the soul of the mountain and sea; the haiku act is an act of interpenetration, a kind of celibate eroticism!

And from vast vistas back to minutiae again:

*báisteach earraigh
ar dhuille an bhambú
á lí ag luch*

licking spring rain
from a bamboo leaf...
mouse

In the last line of the Irish version, *á lí ag luch*, you can actually hear the little tongue lapping up the droplets of rain as the 'l' sounds imitate the action of the tongue. And this is the great gift of haiku, and Issa's wonderful gift to us. He shares with us his blessed witnessing of the unfolding of life in a myriad ways; most of these revelations are quite ordinary and reveal how extraordinary the ordinary is. We are there with the mouse. It is the mouse, not a pop star or president, that is centre stage, for a few seconds. That little mouse has been immortalized by Issa in a manner which may well outlive Mickey Mouse.

Issa's boundless creativity is such that he is naturally in tune with the thousand and one creations and recreations that are going on all around him all of the time, from season to season, year in, year out, and he never tires of these daily miracles:

*castáin bheaga
ar mhún an capall orthu...
ag glioscarnach, úrnua*

little chestnuts
pissed on by the horse...
shiny new

This is a strikingly fresh metaphor for what is going on inside Issa himself. His seeing the world through haiku-vision means that he, too, is being subtly altered and refined by all that he sees and hears, all that he smells, touches and feels. He is walking the haiku path, ceaselessly, living and expressing the haiku creed

which is nothing but life itself in its neverending game of decay and renewal. Indeed, Issa saw not only change around him but metamorphosis. He says in his journal (*Oraga Haru*):

'No sooner has the snow of last year disappeared in summer than the first frosts of autumn have come. All the trees not native to this place but brought in from better climates undergo some changes. The mandarin orange tree shrinks to half its natural size ...'

I love this observation... the shrinking tree; it's almost a metaphor for haiku itself.

*beatha an tseilmide
téann a luí agus éiríonn
díreach mar atá sé*

the life of a snail
he goes to bed and gets up
just the way he is

This is priceless! Haiku's compactness makes it wonderfully suitable to handling small things. Not that haiku couldn't handle a herd of elephants, of course it could. But there's something exquisitely charming about those haiku of his that deal with frogs, fireflies, fleas and snails. 'The life of a snail/he goes to bed and gets up/ just the way he is'. Just the way he is, that's great. As if he could be any other way. And Issa says that the way he is cannot but be perfectly fine. 100%. Just the way he is! And so it is...

This identification with snails and the like is also a form of self-effacement. The sage with the Chinese name (whose father was High Sheriff of Armagh, God help us!), Wei Wu Wei, observed that a saint is someone who disciplines the ego and a sage is one who drops it.

*tús an earraigh –
gealbhain ag an ngeata
gona n-aghaidheanna beaga*

beginning of Spring –
sparrows at the gate
with their little faces

Issa observes the sparrows at the gate and then his heart goes out to them on seeing their little faces. It is the heart that sees. He might have had his head in the clouds a lot of the time but Saint Exupéry got it right when he said something very similar: 'It's only with the heart that one sees rightly.' Issa saw with the heart, the universal heart of man. Paternal-maternal. He saw with the heart like none other. But it is not the way of the world, alas, to see with the heart. And that is why Issa's world stature is not as great as it should be.

Let's go back to Zenko Temple:

*is cosúil go rabhadar
i dTeampall Zenko
aghaidheanna na mionghealbhan*

faces looking like
they've been to Zenko Temple
baby sparrows

Read this haiku with the purity of mind in which it was composed and we, too, become visitors to Zenko Temple; we, too, acquire the face of a baby sparrow, the Eternal innocence of our inherent Buddha nature. The Self cannot be defiled. The mind and the body can know defilement but not the Self. Issa's immortal haiku spring from his immortal Self. (Not all of his haiku, of course. He could indulge in trivia as well).

*an broigheall is gile liomsa
é siúd a thagann aníos
is a ghob folamh!*

my favourite cormorant
the one who surfaces
with nothing

In parts of the East, they still fish with cormorants, their necks ringed so that they don't swallow the catch, and Issa's favourite is the one that comes up with nothing.

In a world obsessed with success, Issa teaches us to love a loser. If there isn't a Love a Loser Day, let's have one! 'My favourite cormorant/the one who surfaces/with nothing'. Perfect!

The nothing is also something, of course. As a Buddhist, Issa would have contemplated nothing, emptiness, the Void. Nothing is essential! Without nothing there can't be anything. And the Void, *sunyata*, is universal. *The Heart Sutra* tells us form is emptiness, emptiness form. This understanding adds an extra flavour to the cormorant- haiku.

Issa's Buddhism can be expressed in pious, traditional terms or equally with a touch of humour. In this haiku we overhear the tea-harvesters:

*“Molaimis an Búda!
Molaimis an Búda!”
ag piocadh duilleoga tae*

“Praise Buddha
praise Buddha!”
picking tea-leaves

The lowliest tasks become impregnated with a celestial flavour. And in the next, an awesome statue of the Buddha makes us smile:

*ar shrón oirirc
an Bhúda oirirc –
bior seaca*

from the esteemed nose
of the esteemed Buddha –
an icicle

Has the serene beauty of the statue been lessened by the icicle, and caused us to fall from the sublime to the ridiculous? No. The statue is made of stone. The icicle on the other hand is a living thing. Zen-haiku Master J. W. Hackett says: 'Remember that lifefulness, not beauty, is the real quality of haiku.' Lifefulness! Issa is not lacking in that respect.

*nuair a lonnaíonn
an filiméala sa ghiúis –
guth na giúise*

when the nightingale
settles in the pine –
the voice of the pine

We keep returning to interpenetration. Einstein talked about extending our circle of compassion to all living things. We have concluded that we can do this perfectly by seeing with the heart. We have seen Issa to excel in this field, perhaps above all other *haijin*. Look at this:

*a chastána beaga
nach mion minic
a shatlaítear oraibh!*

little chestnuts
how often
you are trampled upon

My Romanian grandson, Seán, visited us recently and I introduced him to all my friends, including a dog turd. Flies had gathered. ‘Say hello to my friends, the poo-flies!’ I said to him. He was somewhat astounded by my circle of friends but I think he got the message.

Issa’s chestnut-haiku is seeing with a very big heart indeed, into the living heart of the universe:

*oíche shambráidh –
tá na réaltaí fiú
ag cogarnaíl lena chéile.*

In Robert Hass’s translation:
summer night –
even the stars
are whispering to one another!

This is the gift of haiku, of course. It gives a hint, just a hint, but an unmistakable hint nonetheless, of immensity. To have written such a haiku, there must have been an immensity in Issa himself. Whether he was conscious of this immensity or took it for granted is not the central point. His was a great soul, a mahatma, a universal spirit.

The best description I have read concerning the opening of the heart, seeing with the heart and how this might influence our endeavours (artistic and otherwise) came from a Sufi source:

‘As one can see when the eyes are open, so one can understand when the heart is open.’ (Hazrat Inayat Khan).

Now let us look at a commentary on that by Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan:

Every name and every form speaks constantly, constantly makes signs for you to hear, for you to respond to, for you to interpret, that you may become a friend of God.’

So far so good as to linking these words with the haiku path, namely, every name and every form constantly speaking, constantly making signs for us to hear, to respond to and to interpret...’ This challenge, which needn’t be arduous at all, gives meaning to life. Let’s read on:

‘How can we grow to read and understand the message that life speaks through all its names and forms? The answer is that, as by the opening of the eyes you can see things, so by the opening of the heart you can understand things. As long as the heart is closed you cannot understand things. The secret is that, when the ears and eyes of the heart are open, all planes of the world are open, all names are open, all secrets, all mysteries are unfolded.’

It must be fairly obvious how this wonderful insight into life can be applied to haiku, to Issa’s haiku and to the best haiku that came before and after him. Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan then goes on to ask us how is it done? How do we open the heart, how do we see and understand with the heart?

For the haikuist, for most artists, and for most people, this is the most important question of all, I would suggest:

‘The way to it is a natural life, the life of the child, smiling with the smiling one, praying with the praying one, ready to learn from everyone, ready to love. The child has enmity against no

one, he has no hatred, no malice, his heart is open. It is in the child that you can see the smiles of angels; he can see through life. When the grown-up person is made ready, when he has acquired the attributes of the child, then he creates heaven within himself, he understands. The child with his innocence does not understand, but when a man with understanding develops the childlike loving tendency, the purity of heart of the child with the desire to be friendly to all -- that is the opening of the heart ...’

All this applies to Issa. The seeing heart of Issa saw the cosmos as *leela*, play, and what else was Issa to do but enter into this cosmic play with child-like delight. And the result?

‘Everything becomes spiritual once this door of the chamber of the heart is open. If a man is a musician, then his music is celestial. If he is a poet, then his poetry is spiritual. If he is an artist, then his art is a spiritual work. Whatever he may do in life that divine spirit manifests. He need not be a religious person, he need not be a philosopher, he need not be a mystic. It is simply that what was hidden in him and thereby was keeping his life incomplete begins to manifest to view, and that makes his life perfect.’

*sneachta ag léa
is an sráidbhaile ag cur thar maoil ...
le leanaí*

snow’s melting!
and the village overflows ...
with children

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Colum McCann

<http://www.colummccann.com/about.htm>

and

Gabriel Rosenstock.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Rosenstock

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with his one
good hand
the
scarecrow
points
to
the
moon



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