Poetic Entomology: 
Insects in Japanese Haiku

R. R. Dunn

Recently was told a story about my two-year-old cousin Ryan following ants down the steps of his house, through the lawn, and back to their colony. He watched them and offered them sugar because “they were hungry.” I am willing to bet, if allowed, he would have soon, with a stick or his finger, tried to look inside this new world. I suspect that for most of us it was an experience like this, early travels down the trails of small lives, that led us to science and to our questions of how and why. From these same encounters there is, however, another direction of study. Although we busily count antennal segments with microscopes, the poet, with words, can bring a moment’s smallest details into focus. Japanese haiku poets in particular seem to have had a special and lasting fondness for insects. In literally thousands of haiku, we find glimpses of insects illuminated by the careful observations of these poets.

Japan has had four great forefathers of haiku; Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), Yosa Buson (1716-1783), Kobayashi Issa (1762-1826), and Shiki (1867-1902), all of whom wrote often about insects. Most of the insect poems of Bashō, Buson, and Shiki were about the culturally significant singing insects; cicadas, crickets, grasshoppers, and fireflies (singing with their light) as well as the showy butterflies and dragonflies.

Autumn come-
cicada husk,

-crackling.

-Shiki (Translated by L. Stryk)

Kobayashi Issa (whose penname, Issa, means cup of tea) also wrote about these revered insects.

Autumn cicada-
flat on his back,

-chirps his last song.

- Issa (All translated by L. Stryk)

In addition, however, Issa also wrote about many other types of arthropods, especially those without a voice—in life or in poetry. In doing so, he infused the bestiary of Japanese haiku with new lives.

Even with insects
some can sing,

-some can’t.

- Issa (Translated by R. Hass)

Issa was as happy to discover these creatures hanging in the dark corners of his bedroom as in the natural settings more typical of haiku.

Don’t worry, spiders,
1 keep house
casually.

Insects
on a bough,
floating downriver
still singing.

-Issa (Both translated by R. Hass)
We can picture the insects in the latter poem on a branch, and our minds are quick to imagine what might lie downstream. We as entomologists first might want to identify these insects or hypothesize about their destination. Issa lured these animals into his cages of language to be watched. Each of them is frozen here within the poems, specimens collected in the alcohol of words. Although this haiku was written over a hundred and sixty years ago, we can still hear the insects' songs. As we read this poem again and again, we attach meaning to this drift and hopeful singing in much the same way Issa did on some summer day long ago.

Issa wandered the countryside for much of his life, traveling from town to town, writing thousands of poems. In these peregrinations, he composed more than 500 haiku about arthropods alone. One hundred and fifty of these haiku were about flies, and there were dozens of poems about fleas and mosquitoes. Under-appreciated vertebrates, such as mice and sparrows, also were among his favorite subjects. Issa published his haiku along with his haibun (a combination of haiku and prose) in a number of books, two of which, The Year of My Life and Journal of My Father's Last Days, have been translated into English since his death.

In my house
mice and fireflies
get along.

Shush, cicada-
old Whiskers
is about.

Swarms of mosquitoes
but without them
it's a little lonely.
-Issa (Last two poems translated by L. Stryk)

In Issa's writing, there is a compassion and humor uncommon in the work of his peers. In the third poem above, Issa is painfully grateful for the presence of mosquitoes. He admits that while not always pleasant, they are as welcome, miserable but loved. For him, these animals are as individually complex as they are wonderful. From moment to moment, he finds in these small creatures, empathetic souls, companions, and even small worshipers.

This stupid world-
skinny mosquitoes, skinny fleas, skinny children.
(Translated by R. Hass)

Mosquito larvae,
dancing a Buddhist chant
in the water by the grave

Crescent moon
enticing
new mosquitoes
-Issa (Last two poems translated by L. Stryk)

Despite his slightly unorthodox subject matter and style, most of the poems that Issa wrote follow the traditional haiku form.

The flies in the temple,
imitate the hands
of the people with prayer beads.
-Issa (Translated by R. Hass)

In the above, one of Issa's most famous poems, the original Japanese version of the haiku contains the traditional number of Japanese syllables, a five-syllable unit followed by a seven-syllable unit and another five-syllable unit. In the original Japanese, this poem, like most haiku, also contains a kireji or cutting-word. Cutting-words usually are found at the end of the first five-syllable unit or after the seven-syllable unit. The cutting-word indicates both a pause and a turn in subject. In English translations of haiku, punctuation, in this case a comma, often is substituted for the cutting-word.

In many haiku, tension is created between the subjects before and after the cutting word. It is from this tension that the meaning of the haiku emerges. The two aspects of the poem develop a special significance relative to each other, which lead the reader from a concrete image to a more profound abstraction. In the above poem, the smallness of the flies and their movement are set against the seriousness, the holiness, of the praying people. As in many of Issa's poems, a religious scene forms the backdrop for an everyday event. Without using an explicit metaphor, Issa compares the flies to the praying monks. By placing these images side by side, he simultaneously elevates the insects by comparing them to something religious and pokes fun at the religious figures by comparing them to insects. As with many early Japanese poets, Issa was a Buddhist monk but of a more liberal sect than Bashō or many of his contemporaries. This more liberal attitude toward religion, combined with his hard life, may account for the playful tone toward religion we find in some of his poems.

Don't kill that fly!
Look—it's wringing its hands,
wringing its feet.
-Issa (Translated by R. Hass)

In the above haiku, Issa suggests that because the flies wring their hand and feet (pray) they are holy, and because they pray with two hands and four feet they are more holy than we are. As we read the second two lines, we are made to reexamine the first in a new way.

Grasshopper,
with his foot upon the temple bell.
-Issa (Translated by R. Hass)

In this grasshopper poem, Issa again plays the smallness of an insect against a religious symbol, the temple bell. Here, the grasshopper's foot is immensely light and ephemeral against the large, dark, bell. As we read the poem, the grasshopper seems to become even lighter. The dramatic turn between the grasshopper and the temple bell makes us think about our own lightness, our ephemeral bodies set against the bell of our universe. For the Japanese reader, this sense would be amplified because the presence of the grasshopper indicates it was autumn, the fall of the year, the fading of lives.

In haiku, insects like the grasshopper are often season-words. Traditionally, every haiku contains a season-word or kigo. These words could be direct references to the season such as "spring" or "autumn" or words that implied a season such as animals, plants, constellations, or daily events associated with a particular time of year. These words allow the reader to know much more about the setting than the poem literally says. During Issa's lifetime, there were books listing appropriate season-words. We know the following poems take place in fall because of the insects they contain:

Crickets
chirping
in a scarecrow's belly.
(Translated by R. Hass)

Silk-worm spilling
a cocoon
in Buddha's lap.
(Translated by L. Stryk)

Autumn cicada-
flat on his back,
chirps his last song.
-Issa (Translated by L. Stryk)

In addition to the insect names, the presence of the word, "scarecrow" indicates the first poem takes place in fall (as obviously does the word "autumn" in the third poem). For a Japanese reader familiar with the local natural history and literary history, these season-words contain symbolism and cultural importance, which can be lost in translation. Table 1 is a short list of some of the invertebrate season-words and their respective seasons.
Most early haiku strove to capture a moment, in its season, with complete objectivity (see the poems by Bashô, Buson, and Shiki at the beginning of this article). Issa's poems, however, are often relatively subjective. We see Issa's world through Issa's eyes and, in some poems, he even addresses explicitly his relationship with what he is observing. In the poem below, Issa wishes to allow the flies their happy wildness, but he can only do so by leaving.

I'm going out, flies, so relax
make love.
Issa (Translated by R. Hass)

There is a playful tone to this poem, but Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest, Issa returns to this subject more seriously in other haikus. Walking through the forest.

Borrowing my house from insects,
I slept.

First firefly why turn away-it's Issa.

A poor quarter:
flies, fleas, mosquitoes
live forever.
Issa (All translated by L. Stryk)

It has been said that Issa was drawn to flies, fleas, and mosquitoes out of sympathy for their plight as fallen pests. His life was plagued by tragedy after tragedy, and in some poems he certainly finds tragedy and sadness in these animals' lives.

For you fleas too,
The nights must be long,
they must be lonely.
(Translated by R. Hass)

Earthworm pops up—how quick
the ants.
(Translated by L. Stryk)

Don't weep insects-lovers, stars themselves
must part.
-Issa (Translated by L. Stryk)

At their best though, Issa's poems reveal to us what my young cousin found in his mound of ants—a wonder and a respect for these animals, wonder and respect that made them worthy of any gift they could be given:

Come flies!
Have some rice!
May you too
Enjoy a rich harvest!
Issa (Translated by N. Yuasa)

When Issa's poems rediscover the awe in the "Dragonfly, Sizing up Mount Fuji," and the "Garden Kidnap" as a "butterfly slips off with another," he is not just experiencing these moments; he is offering them to us. With his pen, he stokes the embers of wonder, like spotfires in the fields of everyday life. So let us fan those fires, because as Edward Abbey wrote in The Journey Home ... "any scientist must be something of a poet, must possess the ability to communicate to the rest of us his sense of love and wonder at what his work discovers."

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Table 1. Invertebrate names that are used as season-words

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Gold bug</td>
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2 As is often the case, the original number of syllables was not maintained in the English translations of these poems.

3 The Japanese syllable onji often is much shorter than an English syllable. Consequently, many poets advocate the use of lines of three, four, and three syllables, respectively, when writing haiku in English. This corresponds more directly in length to the Japanese 5:7:5. See The Haiku Handbook, W. J. Higginson, 1985, Kodansha International, Japan, for a more thorough discussion of this topic as well as and as a wonderful introduction to writing and reading haiku.

4 This poem probably was influenced by the earlier and very famous Buson poem at the beginning of this article.


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