



Haiku in English, much of which appeared originally in Irish from the author of the much-praised twin volumes of musings on haiku as a way of life, *Haiku Enlightenment* and *Haiku, the Gentle Art of Disappearing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing). With an Afterword by Susumu Takiguchi, Chairman World Haiku Club. This book also contains Rosenstock's ground-breaking essay on Issa.



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WHERE LIGHT BEGINS HAIKU

Gabriel Rosenstock

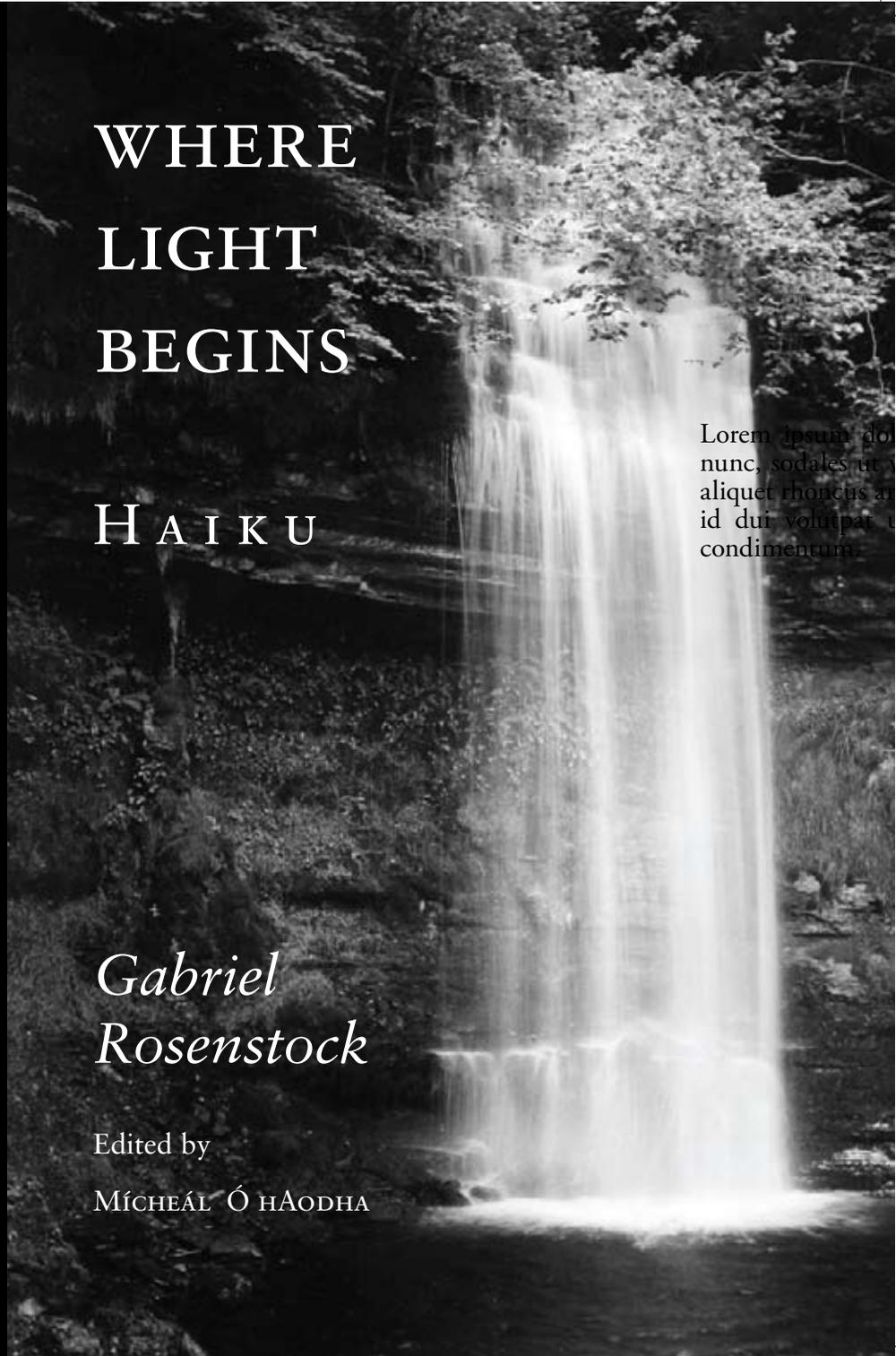
# WHERE LIGHT BEGINS

## HAIKU

*Gabriel  
Rosenstock*

Edited by

MÍCHEÁL Ó HAODHA



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BEGINS  
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ORIGINAL WRITING

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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



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. Of 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 fhuisseog 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 mhúin 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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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel\\_Rosenstock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Rosenstock)

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