Kobayashi Issa (1763 - 1827)

Kobayashi Nobuyuki (Issa) was born in Kashiwabara, Shinano province, to a farming family and began writing in his childhood, which was marred by misfortune and sadness, his mother died and his father remarried resulting in torment at the hands of his step mother and step brother.

In 1777 he was despatched to Tokyo to study the Haiku form under such masters as Sogan and Chikua. He was forced to support himself by taking menial jobs before gaining entry into the Kasushika poetry school. At the age of 28 he was to be given a teaching post at the school but lasted just a year after it became clear that his modern style of haiku did not suit the clerical confines that were expected of him.

For the next two years Kabayashi wandered the provinces of Japan where he found a patron in the form of Seibi Natsume, during this period he took the pen name (Issa). upon his return to Tokyo he was to publish his first collection Tabishui 1795 Issa was to visit most of the prominent Japanese cities of the day over the next few years, publishing the following collections to recount his travels.

Chichi No Shuen Nikki 1801

Kyowakujo 1803

Shichiban-Nikki 1810

Waga Harushu 1811.

In 1812 he returned to his native Kashiwabara and was to resume the feud with his Step family who had dishonoured his father's will. He also married at this time but again misfortune struck with his four children dying in infancy, and his wife later in 1823.

During this period he gained his reputation as the leader of the Haiku form in the shinano province, with his style being open and natural his verse was read by many as being relevant to everyday life. Three collections were published during this period:

Hachiban-Nikki 1818
Oragaharu 1819 tr: The year of my life.

Kuban Nikki 1822.

Kobayashi was to marry again and was blessed with a daughter born just after his death in 1827. He was seen as a re-juvinating influence on the Haiku form and has left a legacy of over 20,000 haikus, describing nature, life in everyday terms and sympathetic vulnerability.

his collections are translated and sold to this day.
A Bath When You're Born

His death poem:

    A bath when you're born,
    a bath when you die,
    how stupid.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
A Cuckoo Sings

A cuckoo sings
to me, to the mountain,
   to me, to the mountain.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
A Huge Frog And I

A huge frog and I,
staring at each other,
neither of us moves.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
A World Of Dew

The world of dew is, yes,
a world of dew,
but even so

Kobayashi Issa
All The Time I Pray To Buddha

All the time I pray to Buddha
I keep on
killing mosquitoes.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Asked How Old He Was

Asked how old he was,
the boy in the new kimono
stretched out all five fingers.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Blossoms At Night

Blossoms at night,
and the faces of people
moved by music.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Brilliant moon

brilliant moon
is it true that you too
must pass in a hurry?

Kobayashi Issa
Children Imitating Cormorants

Children imitating cormorants
are even more wonderful
than cormorants.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Don't Kill That Fly!

Look, don't kill that fly!
It is making a prayer to you
By rubbing its hands and feet.

Kobayashi Issa
Don't Know About The People

Approaching my village:

Don't know about the people,
but all the scarecrows
are crooked.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Don't worry, spiders,
I keep house
casually.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Ducks Bobbing On The Water

Ducks bobbing on the water--
are they also, tonight,
hoping to get lucky?

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Even on the smallest islands,
they are tilling the fields,
skylarks singing.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Even With Insects

Even with insects--
some can sing,
some can't.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Face Of The Spring Moon

Face of the spring moon--
about twelve years old,
I'd say.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Having Slept, The Cat Gets Up

Having slept, the cat gets up,
yawns, goes out
to make love.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Hey, Sparrow!

Hey, sparrow!
out of the way,
    Horse is coming.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
How Much

How much
are you enjoying yourself,
tiger moth?

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
I'M Going Out

I'm going out,
flies, so relax,
make love.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
In Spring Rain

In spring rain
a pretty girl
  yawning.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
In The Thicket's Shade

In the thicket's shade
a woman by herself
singing the rice-planting song.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
In These Latter-Day

In these latter-day,
Degenerate times,
   Cherry-blossoms everywhere!

Translated by R.H. Blyth

Kobayashi Issa
In This World

In this world
we walk on the roof of hell,
gazing at flowers.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
It Once Happened

It once happened
that a child was spared punishment
through earnest solicitation.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Last Time, I Think

Last time, I think,
I'll brush the flies
from my father's face.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Napped Half The Day

Napped half the day;
no one
punished me!

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Napping At Midday

Napping at midday
I hear the song of rice planters
and feel ashamed of myself.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
New Year's Day

New Year's Day--
everything is in blossom!
I feel about average.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
New Year's Morning

New Year's morning:
the ducks on the pond
quack and quack.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
No Doubt About It

No doubt about it,  
the mountain cuckoo  
is a crybaby.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Not Knowing

Not knowing
it's a tub they're in
the fish cooling at the gate.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Not Very Anxious

Not very anxious
to bloom,
my plum tree.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Pissing In The Snow

Pissing in the snow
outside my door--
it makes a very straight hole.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Seen

through a telescope:
ten cents worth of fog.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Summer Night

Summer night--
even the stars
are whispering to each other.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
That Pretty Girl

That pretty girl--
munching and rustling
the wrapped-up rice cake.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
That Wren

That wren--
looking here, looking there.
You lose something?

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Crow

The crow
walks along there
as if it were tilling the field.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Man Pulling Radishes

The man pulling radishes
pointed my way
with a radish.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Moon Tonight

The moon tonight--
I even miss
her grumbling.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Pheasant Cries

The pheasant cries
as if it just noticed
the mountain.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Toad! It Looks Like

The toad! It looks like
it could belch
a cloud.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
The Wren

The wren
Earns his living
Noiselessly.

Kobayashi Issa
These Sea Slugs

These sea slugs,  
they just don’t seem  
Japanese.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
This Moth Saw Brightness

This moth saw brightness
in a woman's chamber--
burnt to a crisp.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Under My House

Under my house
an inchworm
measuring the joists.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Under The Image Of Buddha

Under the image of Buddha
all these spring flowers
seem a little tiresome.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Visiting The Graves

Visiting the graves,
the old dog
leads the way.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
What A Strange Thing

What a strange thing!
to be alive
beneath cherry blossoms.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Windy Fall

At my daughter's grave, thirty days
after her death:

Windy fall--
these are the scarlet flowers
she liked to pick.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Winter Seclusion

Winter seclusion -
Listening, that evening,
To the rain in the mountain.

Kobayashi Issa
With My Father

With my father
I would watch dawn
over green fields.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa
Writing Shit About New Snow

Writing shit about new snow
for the rich
is not art.

Translated by Robert Hass

Kobayashi Issa