

... continued  
from Chapter 1

The priest was deeply moved by the message and wept until his sleeves were soaked in tears.

This story may well strike you as being rather odd, for certainly no ordinary person would choose to greet the New Year, his sleeves wet with weeping—his eyes flowing tears that he himself had deliberately provoked. Yet, I can imagine no better way for a priest—whose primary duty is to teach the word of Buddha to his people—to celebrate the festival of New Year's Day. My own way of celebrating the first of the year is somewhat different, since the dust of the world still clings to me. Yet I am like him still in this:—I, too, forbear to use the commonplace congratulations of the season. The words “crane” and “tortoise” ring hollow on my ear, like the greetings of the begging actors.\* Nor will I set the customary pine beside my door, nor sweep the dust out of my house, for I live in a tiny cottage that might be swept away at any moment by a blast from the wild north wind. I will leave all to Buddha, and though the path ahead be difficult and steep, like a snow-covered road winding through the mountains, I welcome the New Year—even as I am.

Only  
Moderately happy  
Is my spring  
My New Year.

\* On New Year's Eve poor actors went from door to door, wishing a prosperous year and accepting a small amount of money in return for the little performance they presented.

My little daughter was born just last May, but I give her a grownup's portion of *zōni* for her New Year's breakfast:

Crawl, laugh,  
Do as you wish—  
For you are two years old  
This morning.\*

On the first of January, in the Second Year of Bunsei [1819].

I have no servant to draw the first water of the New Year:

But look! A crow comes  
In his stead  
To bathe in the water  
On New Year's Day.

A lake in spring:

Beneath this calm  
Spring moon  
Even a turtle  
Can tell the season.

\* According to the traditional Japanese belief, we become a year older at every return of New Year's Day. *Zōni*, rice cake boiled with vegetables, is the most important part of the menu for New Year's breakfast. *Wakamizu*, or the first water drawn on the morning of New Year's Day, is also important, for it is believed to have the magical power to maintain health and prolong life.

這へ笑へ  
二つになるぞ  
けさからは  
hae warae  
futatsu ni naru zo  
kesa kara wa  
\*Issa's first born,  
a son, died a few  
months after  
birth. This is his  
second child, a  
girl.

山の月  
花盗人を  
てらし給ふ  
yama no tsuki  
hana nusubito o  
terashi-tamō  
\*The verb “to  
shine” is given  
an honorific  
verb ending.

Bashō writes:  
しばらくは  
花の上なる  
月夜かな  
shibaraku wa  
hana no ue naru  
tsukiyo kana

For a little while,  
above cherries  
in full bloom  
the night moon!

The spring moon  
Shines Godlike  
Upon a flower thief  
At work on a hill.

In front of Zenkōji temple on a festival day:

A branch of willow  
Gray as a gray cat  
Passes for a flower  
This festival day.

So famous  
And so beloved  
Was this cherry tree  
When it was young.

With feeble steps  
The old man  
Totters by—  
To look at flowers.

さくらさくらと  
唄はれし  
老木哉  
sakura sakura to  
utawareshi  
oi-ki kana

“Cherry blossoms!  
Cherry blossoms!”  
they once sung.  
Old cherry tree!

Composed on the festival day of Inari—the celebrated  
fox god:

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Amidst all the flowers  
Totally without regard—  
I hear poor foxes  
Raise their cries.

The second of February,  
The cat and I  
Burn wormwood together  
In my quiet house.\*

Forth  
From the bush  
Beautiful and bright—  
A butterfly!

A distant view of Ueno hill:

Above curses,  
The rich white walls  
Sit at their ease  
In the misty air.

\* The soft fibers of the leaves of the Chinese wormwood (*Artemisia moxa*; Japanese, *mogusa*) are used as a cautery by burning the material and applying it to the skin. This is a common practice and considered a panacea for all bodily ills.

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## Chapter Two

One balmy day in March a young priest named Takamaru from Myōsenji temple—a mere boy of eleven years—set out with a strapping priest named Kanryō for Araizaka to pick spring herbs and flowers. Now it happened that Takamaru slipped while crossing a bridge and fell into the waters of a raging river fed by freshets of melting snow from Mount Iizuna. Kanryō heard the boy's scream and rushed to help—but all his efforts proved in vain. At first he could see Takamaru's head rising above the water, and then a hand. But his cries grew ever fainter, till soon his voice sounded no louder than the shrilling of summer mosquitoes. Alas! The young priest disappeared in the swirling torrent, and left nothing but his image—stamped on the eyes of Kanryō. Later, the people searched up and down the river for Takamaru with lighted torches. At last they found him—wedged between two rocks. It was too late, and there was none who could bring him back to life again. Even the sleeves of those unused to weep were wet with tears when they discovered in his pocket a few blossoms of butterbur—just picked—perchance intended as a happy present for his parents, had it not been for his untimely death. They carried him home on a litter, a little past eight in the evening. His parents ran up to the body and wept bitterly, in full view of all the world.

It is true that they were priests, and used to preach indifference to life's vicissitudes. But who can blame them? It is only human that their hearts should be deeply oppressed by their unbreakable attachment for the child. This boy had been alive and fresh when he left home that morning. And now it was evening, and he lay still and dead. His body was cremated two days later. As I went to join the procession, I wrote:

I never thought to throw  
The fresh buds of spring  
Into this smoke—  
And see it rising  
Pale into the sky.

Surely the flowers, too—no less than Takamaru's parents—must weep to be cut down and cast into the flames in the course of a single day, just as they are lifting their faces to the spring after a long winter's snow. For flowers, too, have life, and will not they, as well as we, pass to Nirvana in the end?

Silent meditation:

A giant frog and I  
Glare at each other  
Sitting face to face  
In silence.

おれとしてにらみくらする蛙哉

ore toshite / niramikurasuru / kawazu kana

\*Niramikurasu, translated at "sitting face to face in silence" is the staring game where you see who will blink first.

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## Chapter Six

The children of this province play a strange game. They take a live frog and bury him, and they cover his grave with leaves of plantain grass, singing the following song as they work. And then they run away.

Hey ho! The frog is dead!  
Hey ho! The frog is dead!  
Come, let us bury him,  
Come, let us bury him,  
Under plantain leaves!  
Under plantain leaves!

In *Honzō-Kōmoku*, a Chinese treatise on plants, we find that plantain grass is called “frog’s skin,” whereas in the dialect of this province, it is called “frog’s leaf.” This correspondence between the Chinese and Japanese popular names can hardly be a coincidence. There must have been some special meaning in this children’s game when it was first created years ago.

Bending over  
The frog’s grave,  
A deutzia tree drops  
Pure white tears.

卯の花もほろりほろりや墓の塚  
unohana mo / horori-horori ya / hiki no tsuka  
\*Hiki is, more properly, a toad.



“Cheer up, owl ...”



Unohana



## Chapter Nine

There was once a little girl who was a stepchild, and she was not allowed to eat out of a certain clay pot used for storing rice, although the rest of the children were free to help themselves. One day she heard a bush warbler crying outside the window, and she wrote:

Warbler in the bush,  
Why do you cry?  
Is it milk you want?  
Or a clay pot?—  
Or your own mother?

THE DAUGHTER  
OF LORD TSURAYUKI

## Chapter Ten

When I was little, I kept to myself, and stayed away from the children of the village because they used to make fun of me, by singing:

A motherless child  
Is known everywhere—  
He stands all alone  
At the front door  
And sucks his thumb  
From biting hunger.

So I used to retreat to the back yard and spend my day by the woodpile, or grieving in a dark corner. I felt so wretched that I wrote:

Come here,  
Motherless sparrows,  
And play  
With me.

YATARŌ  
*Six years old*

## Chapter Fourteen

It is a commonplace of life that the greatest pleasure issues ultimately in the greatest grief. Yet why—why is it that this child of mine, who has not tasted half the pleasures that the world has to offer, who ought, by rights, to be as fresh and green as the vigorous young needles on the everlasting pine—why must she lie here on her deathbed, swollen with blisters, caught in the loathsome clutches of the vile god of pox? Being, as I am, her father, I can scarcely bear to watch her withering away—a little more each day—like some pure, untainted blossom that is ravished by the sudden onslaught of mud and rain.

After two or three days, however, her blisters dried up and the scabs began to fall away—like a hard crust of dirt that has been softened by the melting snow. In our joy we made a boat with fresh straw, and pouring hot wine ceremoniously over it, sent it down the river with the god of smallpox on it. Yet our hopes proved all in vain. She grew weaker and weaker, and finally on the twenty-first of June, as the morning-glories were just closing their flowers, she closed her eyes forever. Her mother embraced the cold body and cried bitterly. For myself—I knew well it was no use to cry, that water once flown past the bridge does not return, and blos-



soms that are scattered are gone beyond recall. Yet try  
as I would, I could not, simply could not cut the  
binding cord of human love.

The world of dew  
Is the world of dew,  
And yet . . .  
And yet . . .

As I remarked above, I had left my home on the sixteenth of April, bound for the far north. However, I had journeyed no farther than Zenkōji temple, when something happened which caused me to turn back. As I reflect upon it now, I cannot help but feel it was the kindness and the consideration of the God of Travelers that brought me home.

I collected some poems on similar themes.

After the death of a child:

If I knew a face  
Resembling my child's,  
I would go and seek it  
Among the little dancers.

RAKUGO

A poem of sympathy, written for a child who lost his mother:

104 露の世はつゆの世ながらさりながら  
tsuyu no yo wa / tsuyu no yo nagara / sari nagara  
Literally:  
The world of dew,  
while it is the world of dew,  
while it is that ...

He sits by himself  
At the dinner table  
On a glorious but solitary  
Autumn evening.

SHŌHAKU

On the night my daughter was buried:

Cranes cry in vain  
In the dark of night,  
For no blanket can ever  
Cover the sod.

KIKAKU

Written on March 3—the first Girls' Day after the  
death of my daughter:

The dolls I wanted  
To put behind me,  
But out of the house,  
Peach blossoms met me.\*

ENSUI

\* Dolls and peach blossoms are traditional decorations for Girls' Day. Hence the poet is reminded of his dead daughter both by the dolls and the peach blossoms.

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子を思ふ闇やかはゆいかはゆいと  
声を鳥の鳴あかすらん

ko o omou / yami ya kawayui / kawayui to /

koe o karasu no / naki akasu ramu

\*This is a tanka, not a haiku: 5-7-5-7-7.

To catch some of  
the word play:

"The darkness  
where mother  
loves child,  
"caw! caw!"

a voice gone dry—  
The crow,  
it seems,  
has called  
all night for  
her baby."

## Chapter Fifteen

Not far from the village of Murasaki someone caught a baby crow—no bigger than a lump of coal—and put it in a cage in front of his house. That night I heard the mother flying back and forth above the house, crying over and over again in the darkness. It was so pitiful, I wrote:

Blind as the night  
For her child's love,  
A mother crow kept up  
Her pitiful moans,  
Till dawn lent her light.

Written in sympathy for a thief, captured in his own village:

In a fitful shower,  
A bird in disgrace  
Circles the snare—  
His own village!

A poem written in sympathy for the innocent birds





Talking loudly  
Mushroom hunters  
Descend the hill—  
All empty-handed.

Beside my daughter's grave—thirty days after her  
death:

Here is the red flower  
You wanted to pick—  
Coming to bloom  
In the autumn wind.

A blossom or two  
Of flowering clover  
Drop fluttering  
From the deer's mouth.

My chrysanthemums,  
What a sleep we had,  
To feel so fresh  
In the morning!

Tonight was made  
For all idlers—  
Just cool enough  
For rambling.

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A little child  
Picked with his fingers  
A drop of dew—  
And lo, it vanished!

露の玉つまんで見たるわらは哉  
tsuyu no tama / tsumande mitaru / warawa kana  
\*This child need not be a male.

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We had a walk  
Through the garden  
Of chrysanthemums,  
Wine cups in our hands.

Our host lectures  
On his chrysanthemums  
Using his stick,  
Like a wandering priest.

A huge, bold man  
Labors in the garden  
Amid chrysanthemums,  
A towel about his head.

The chrysanthemums  
Are wonderful,  
But unfortunately  
Our host does not drink.

I dreamed of the smiling face of my daughter:

Only in the dream  
My daughter takes  
A ripe musk melon  
Up to her soft cheek.

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頬ぺたにあてなどしたる眞瓜かな  
hohobeta ni / ate nado shitaru / mauri kana  
\*The first line of this poem has been  
added by the translator; the rest is  
right on target.

Driven away by men,  
The migrating birds  
Follow their course  
Through this village.

Through twigs and leaves,  
As through hoops,  
A swarm of titmice leap,  
Flaunting their tricks.

The shrike screams  
From the top of his tree.  
His stock of patience  
Must have run out.

A skinny mantis,  
Less than an inch long,  
Bravely battled—  
Body and soul together.

Standing on a hill in the village of Takaino:

In the autumn wind,  
The compass points  
Of its own accord  
To my village home.

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## Chapter Twenty

On December 27—a fine day:

My wife rose early in the morning and prepared a hot breakfast. As this was the day on which our neighbor, Sonoemon, customarily made his rice cakes, we expected he might send us some fresh baked, as he had in former years. If he should, we thought, we might as well have them with our usual breakfast while they were still warm. We waited and waited, but alas—the cakes did not come. When we finally decided to eat—our breakfast had grown cold.

Just seemingly  
Our neighbor's rice cakes  
Came to my gate  
As in former years.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Those who insist on salvation by faith and devote their minds to nothing else, are bound all the more firmly by their singlemindedness, and fall into the hell of attachment to their own salvation. Again, those who are passive and stand to one side waiting to be saved, consider that they are already perfect and rely rather on Buddha than on themselves to purify their hearts—these, too, have failed to find the secret of genuine salvation. The question then remains—how do we find it? But the answer, fortunately, is not difficult.

We should do far better to put this vexing problem of salvation out of our minds altogether and place our reliance neither on faith nor on personal virtue, but surrender ourselves completely to the will of Buddha. Let him do as he will with us—be it to carry us to heaven, or to hell. Herein lies the secret.

Once we have determined on this course, we need care nothing for ourselves. We need no longer ape the busy spider by stretching the web of our desire across the earth, nor emulate the greedy farmer by taking extra water into our own fields at the expense of our neighbors. Moreover, since our minds will be at peace, we need not always be saying our prayers with hollow

voice, for we shall be entirely under the benevolent direction of Buddha.

This is the salvation—this the peace of mind we teach in our religion. Blessed be the name of Buddha.

Trusting to Buddha  
Good and bad,  
I bid farewell  
To the departing year.

Written on this twenty-ninth day of December, in the Second Year of Bunsei [1819], at the age of fifty-seven.

THE END

## Postscript I

This book was written by Issa, priest of Haikaiji temple, in Shinano, and though it seems to be written very casually, it is in reality a thick and flourishing grove of poetry. Not a single poem in this book is intended merely for a joke. All in some way touch the high and holy world of priests and temples. The style employed in this work is Issa's own. It is not an imitation of Kenkō, Ikkyū, or Hakuin. And yet Issa follows faithfully Bashō's principle of *hosomi* (slenderness). He intentionally keeps one foot planted in the dust of the world, and the range of his human sympathies is far greater than can adequately be described. Indeed, what more need be said?

On the day of the Spring Equinox  
In the Fourth Year of Kaei [1851]  
HYŌKAI SHISANJIN

Cherry blossoms  
Are likewise in full bloom  
On the other shore  
Of the life's stream.

かの岸もさくら咲日となりにけり  
ka no kishi mo / sakura saku / to narinikeri  
\*It is OK to add a first line such as:  
"It is said that"  
\*The other shore, ka no kishi (that shore)  
is a Buddhist term referring to life after death.