



This week we celebrate the 250th anniversary of Issa's birth. His poems, thoughts, and life have appeared in almost everything I have written. My friend Paul Monette was very accurate when he wrote that Issa was my "favorite poet" who taught me how to look through the broken window at the stars.

Who was Issa? It is hard to describe him in a few words. He wrote 20,000 poems about very aspect of ordinary life. My friend Cliff Ed-

wards in his biography *ISSA: THE STORY OF A POET –PRIEST* divides his wonderful book into; village, wandering, nests, snails, frogs, flies, mosquitoes, fireflies, birds, cats and dogs, little creatures, grass, flowers, lovers, grasshoppers — yep, that’s Issa!

Issa's mother died when he was two and his step-mother hated him. All his life he identified with the weak and helpless:

*Come,
you can play with me —
orphaned sparrow.*

He was an early advocate of the “Small is beautiful” of modern times. No matter how fragile the venture. It is mine!

*He who appears now
is the Lord Toad
of this thicket!*

In his twenties he committed himself to poetry and spirituality. He considered himself simple and ordinary, yet like every being, of some worth in the universe. He took the name “Issa”, which means “cup of tea.” He was often lonely, and it is often remarked that his poetry captures the spiritual isolation of the human condition.

*Distant mountains
reflect in the eyes
of the dragonfly.*

Issa was a lay-brother of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism and like other poets traveled on long journeys. When he was 50 the long struggle with his stepmother ended and he was able to return

to the village and the old farmhouse where he had been born.

*Here at my old house
I see the face of God
in the face of a snail.*

He married a young village woman. They wanted children badly. The first child died soon after birth. Then Sato was born. She became the center of Issa's universe. He wrote, "*She is moonlight from head to toe...*" But soon after her first birthday she became ill with smallpox until "*... as the morning glories closed their petals, she closed her eyes for ever.*" Issa's life experience had a big impact on Starcross as the AIDS pandemic engulfed us. My first AIDS memoir was entitled *Morning Glory Babies*. Emotional attachment was not encouraged in Issa's religious training. He had been taught not to invest his energy in worldly matters that disappear "*like dew on the grass.*" But religious doctrines do not withstand the personal experience of death. He wrote, "*I tried hard, but I could not break the bonds of human love.*" In my own life, and the lives of many of my friends one haiku of Issa became, and remains, very helpful.

*This world of dew
is nothing but a world of dew,
and yet ...
and yet ...*

I have found that I spend much of my life in that space of "*and yet...*"

Shortly before his death Issa's house burned down. Somehow it seems consistent with the rest of his life. He was moved into a shed

with holes in the roof where he could see the midwinter sky. This poem was found under his pillow after his death.

*Again, I give thanks —
the snow falling on the bed quilt,
it also comes from God.*

Cliff Edwards ends his biography with this haiku (Cliff's translation) which pretty much sums up Issa's life,

*Ask the grasshopper
To be keeper of my grave
After I have gone.*

Happy 250! Write a haiku!

Brother Toby

P. S. I ask you to help me commemorate Issa by sending me a haiku. Our Holly has offered to copy all the haiku into a book dedicated to Issa which will be put with our memorial books in the chapel "Issa@250". Put your name on it, or if you are shy don't! Use whatever approach to haiku you wish. If you are new to this there are some general guidelines on our website ([Haiku](#)).