

“Misreading Famous Verses from the Edo Period” (*Edo jidai no meiku no godoku* 江戸時代の名句の誤読) – Professor Nagashima Hiroaki 長島弘明, The University of Tokyo

25 January 2016, East Asian Seminar Series
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge
Translated for supertitles by Matthew W. Shores

The most famous haiku poets of the *kinsei* (early modern, 1600-1868) era almost need no introduction. They are Matsuo Bashō (松尾芭蕉 1644-94), Yosa Buson (与謝蕪村 1716-83), and Kobayashi Issa (小林一茶 1763-1827). It is almost a given that the poems these men wrote are included in junior high and high school textbooks, and it is probably safe to say that there is not a single Japanese person who does not know at least one haiku (*hokku*) by Bashō, Buson, or Issa. The famous poems by these three men are well known by the Japanese population, word for word. Without fail, their poems have been printed in every classical Japanese literature anthology to date. For the poems we all know, it might be taken for granted that anybody can comprehend them. Yet, that’s not exactly the case. After all, it is a possibility that, as a group, we are all misreading these poems. Even if we do not go so far to say we are ‘misreading’ them, common interpretations fail to see important points.

The following is a poem by Bashō:

An old pond!
A frog jumps in,
The sound of water¹

古池や蛙飛こむ水のおと
Furuike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto.

¹ Note from translator: most poem translations in this transcript are not my own. I have taken them from a number of English sources.

This poem appeared in the third month of the intercalary year 1686 in the haikai book titled “Frog Competition” (*Kawazu awase* 蛙合). Exceptionally famous among Bashō’s poems, this is the verse said to establish the celebrated “Bashō style” (*Shōfū* 蕉風). It is one that certainly everyone in Japan knows. It is commonly thought that Bashō composed this poem in the spring of 1686, when he was forty-three years old. There are theories that he wrote it before this, but I will not go into details now about the year it was written.

In 1692, while Bashō was still living, his pupil Shikō (支考) published a treatise on haiku titled “Kuzu Pine Fields” (*Kuzu no matsubara* 葛の松原) and he had the following to say about his poem:

“It must have been around the end of the third month when he heard in the distance a frog dropping into the water. It made him sense some kind of unexplainable beauty and, immediately, he composed the lines of seven and five: ‘A frog jumps in, the sound of water’ (*kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*). Kikaku [another Bashō pupil] went to the old master’s side and presented the five syllables “*yamabuki ya*” (a kerria! [*Kerria japonica*]), to be used as the first line. Kikaku asked what he thought of it and pretended to be clever as he recommended it, but in the end Bashō went with ‘an old pond’ (*furuike ya*). The word *yamabuki* is elegant and flowery, but “an old pond” is both simple and substantial. Poetry’s unwavering reason of old past down to this day – this is the stuff of substance. Yet, it seems as though poetry’s ‘flower’ and truth is something that lives in the passing moment. ... Master Bashō’s idea to throw out “*yamabuki ya*” in favor of “*furuike ya*” was extremely profound.”

So, the middle verse (a frog jumps in) and the last verse (the sound of water) were composed first, and it appears as though Bashō, for a time, had difficulty coming up with the opening line. Although Kikaku was at Bashō’s side recommending the line “a kerria!” in the end Bashō decided to go with “an old pond.” Bashō’s pupil Shikō writes that Kikaku suggested the opening line “*yamabuki ya*” and that Bashō did not go

for it, but, the following poem was published six years after Bashō's death in the 1700 publication titled, "Collection of Rhododendron Hybrids" (*Gyōzanshū* 暁山集):

A kerria!
A frog jumps in,
The sound of water.

山吹や蛙飛こむ水のおと
Yamabuki ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto.

Should we say that the editor of "Collection of Rhododendron Hybrids," was simply being careless with the first part of Bashō's poem? Or, is there is a possibility that Bashō *did* originally go with "Yamabuki ya" for the first line?

This poem by Bashō is popularly interpreted to be rich with deep meaning, a sketch-like portrayal of the sound of water momentarily disrupting the silence of an old pond, the silence at last returning, and that the old pond's silence embodies the loneliness in human existence. Let us look at just one interpretation that assesses the poem along these lines:

"In this poem, it is a quiet spring day. There is not a ripple on the surface of the stagnate old pond. It is still, and nothing makes a sound. Then, all the suddenly, *plop!* the sound of a frog jumping into the water. The silence of that single moment is broken. Yet, after that, the silence quietly returns. With a frog jumping in and making a sound, the poem captures movement in the world of silence, and then the delicate state once the original silence is returned to. The poem takes up the image of calmness and contains none of the humor, wit, or jokes found in the poetry of the Teimon or Danrin schools. Rather it represents the subtle worlds of movement in silence, and silence in movement. The soul of this short haiku is that it is able to show all of this in such a short space. It is difficult to say beyond a doubt that it was this poem that established the "Bashō style," but it is one of his early poems that is worthy of attention for its literary poetics."

-- Iwata Kurō, *Bashō haiku taisei* (Bashō Haiku Compendium, Meiji Shoin 1967)

This interpretation is mistaken. For those who might consider it too much to call it “mistaken,” let us say that Iwata’s interpretation overlooks important parts of the poem, and it is a bit too contemporary. As just cited, Iwata says that the poem, “contains none of the humor, wit, or jokes found in the poetry of the Teimon or Danrin schools.” This is incorrect. Quite the opposite, this is a verse that one has to sense the humor in. It is not a poem meant to have people doing belly laughs, but it should make them smile for a moment. This is the kind of verse it is. With its “old pond,” “frog,” “jumping in,” and “sound of water,” there is not one difficult word in the poem. Yet, there’s not a single word that invites one to laugh. Why is it humorous then?

The genre of *haikai* (俳諧), short for *haikai no renga* (playful linked verse, 俳諧の連歌), is a combination of opening verses (*hokku* 発句) and linked verses (*renku* 連句). Originally, the word *haikai* meant “comical.” In contrast to its poetry precursors *waka* and *renga*, *haikai* was from the start a poetry of parody. *Haikai* takes the scenery of *waka* and *renga*, their “true intentions” and “true heart” (*hon’i*, *honjō* 本意, 本情), then parodies and dismantles them in an attempt to draw laughter and simultaneously discover a new poetic spirit.

Now, let us think about what the “true intentions” and “true heart” for frogs (*kawazu* 蛙) were. We will start by looking at some *waka* poems found in Imperial anthologies.

Kerria flowers
Lie scattered now at Ide
Where singing frogs call.
Had I known, I would have come
To see the height of their bloom (Kokinshū 古今集)

蛙なく井出の山吹散りにけり花の盛りにあはましものを
Kawazu naku ide no yamabuki chiri ni keru hana no sakari ni awamashi mono o.

Unable to endure
The frog cries out
Not knowing
Even that which it hold dear
The kerria flower fades (Gosenshū 後撰集)

しのびかね鳴きて蛙のをしむをも知らずうつろふ山吹の花
Shinobikane nakite kawazu no oshimu o mo shirazu utsurou yamabuki no hana.

In the swamp water
The frogs are croaking,
The reflected image
Of the kerria flowers
Must be visible to them down below (Shūishū 拾遺集)

沢水に蛙鳴くなり山吹のうつろふ影やそこに見ゆらむ
Sawamizu ni kawazu naku nari yamabuki no utsurou kage ya soko ni miyuramu.

Kerria flowers
Are they in bloom yet?
Their shadows falling
On the waters of the river Kannabi
Where frogs croak. (Shinkokinshū 新古今集)

蛙鳴く神南備川に影見えていまか咲くらむ山吹の花
Kawazu naku Kannabigawa ni kage miete ima ka sakuramu yamabuki no hana.

With a glance at these poems, we can say the following: frogs are mentioned in waka poetry, but they cannot be seen. This sounds a bit like a Zen dialogue, so I will put it in easier terms. In waka poetry, the frog itself – its form – is not given any mention. It is only the frog's croaking that gets depicted. To put it yet another way, frogs in waka only live in our sense of hearing. This means that frogs that do *not* croak simply are not part of the world of waka. Of course, actual frogs are not limited to rivers – they also live around other bodies of fresh water, such as lakes and paddies. However, in waka

poetry, as we could see in the previous selections, a frog only croaks ‘correctly’ if it croaks near a clear stream, in late spring, and in the shade of kerria flowers. Of course, a real frog will reveal itself, and it will croak wherever it wants to. And though it would seem that there is no use in arguing about whether a frog is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, this is not the case. The “true intention” and “true heart” of things are products of the waka tradition. It is in this tradition that they are selected, refined, and kept. Waka is a process of selectively choosing certain things and sceneries to depict in their most beautiful state. Thus, in waka it is a given that frogs hide and croak under kerrias that are past their prime, just as one stays up through the night in hope of hearing the call of the little cuckoo (*hototogisu*) – and the moment when one finally hears that one cry represents the ultimate meeting. In the previously mentioned haikai treatise “Kuzu Pine Fields” (*Kuzu no matsubara*) it is written that Kikaku suggested kerria for Bashō’s poem, and this was precisely because Kikaku was aware that the waka tradition has it that frogs and kerrias are tied to one another. Even if one is to criticize waka – that poetry founded on “true intentions” and “true heart” – for using worn-out expressions and crushing to death originality and actual feeling, such a claim would be completely misdirected. Shunning unrestricted and crude originality, and adopting refined patterns based on a collaborative sensitivity, this is precisely the essence of waka poetry. Remaining conscious that the moon is a recurring seasonal topic/word, and that a specific famous places are mentioned repeatedly with certain sceneries and associated poetic words (*utamakura* 歌枕), allows one to remain aware of “true intentions” and “true heart.” Originality of expression is permitted only within the context of “true

intentions” and “true heart.” The moment one disregards these, even if the poet intends to create something modern, it cannot be considered waka or haikai.

Bashō was basically following the rules of waka in that he depicted a frog for *hearing*. The frog does not croak, but it jumps into the water and makes a *plop*.

Considering the “true intention” of frogs in waka, what could Bashō’s poem be if not parody? Well, let’s take the opportunity to smile and think about it...

A kerria!
A frog jumps in,
The sound of water.

山吹や蛙飛こむ水のおと
Yamabuki ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto.

I said earlier that it is possible that this was Bashō’s first consideration for his poem. If it is indeed the case that he used “a kerria” for the opening line, he was first transmitting the “true intention” of waka’s frog to readers; then, with the second and third lines, he was skillfully turning it on its head.

We also see the following poem in “Hermitage Cherry Tree” (*Iozakura* 庵桜), published the same year as the haikai book “Frog Competition” (*Kawazu awase*, 1686):

An old pond!
A frog jumped,
The sound of water.

古池や蛙飛ンだる水の音
Furuike ya kawazu tondaru mizu no oto.

“Hermitage Cherry Tree” was a haikai book edited by Saigin, who was from the Kamigata (modern Kansai) region and a pupil of Nishiyama Sōin (1605-82). This work came out a month before (i.e., the second month of the intercalary year) “Frog

Competition,” the book that Bashō’s pupil Senka edited and Bashō himself had surely seen. This means that “Hermitage Cherry Tree” was the first book with the line “an old pond.” One could rightly argue that the poem was altered due to carelessness on the part of the editor, but there is also sufficient reason to believe that the poem went through a process of refinement. If this was the case, the refinement began with “a frog jumped” (*kawazu tondaru*), which emphasizes the instant of the jump. Perhaps because they cut such an unsightly figure, frogs had never been portrayed in waka poetry in such a way – in a way that so clearly renders the image of a frog. Here too, it is plain to see Bashō’s deliberate humor and wit – in other words haikai consciousness, or parody consciousness – in regards to the atmosphere of waka.

However, parody does not become superior poetry just like that. Bashō actually toned down the level of parody in this poem by changing “a kerria” to “an old pond,” and “jumped” to “jumps in.” Putting aside the matter of whether the frog poem was the piece that established “Bashō style,” we can at least say the spirit of the poem was achieved when, as shown in various sources, “a kerria” was changed to “an old pond.” There are not many examples of the word “old pond” in waka, but it is said to have association with words such as “hermit” (*inja* 隠者) and “croaking frog” (*meia* 鳴蛙) in Chinese poetry. The nuance of “old pond” is suitable for the calm areas that Bashō (who lived in quiet Fukagawa) was drawn to. Yet, on one hand, an old pond is not something necessarily separate from signs of human activity and the smell of life. It is an exquisite word that is not vulgar like the word “rice paddy,” which evokes human body odor; and not elegant like the poetic word “clear stream,” which casts off the smell of life.

Different from waka, Bashō's frog poem takes up a subject grounded in everyday experience. In the selection of "an old pond" (*furuike ya*), we can see at work the philosophy of "Bashō style," which distances itself from the vulgar/low (*zoku* 俗). For this reason, it may not be mistaken to think of the "old pond" poem as one that established "Bashō style."

This appears to be another poem with simple but refined meaning, but if we go through some annotative formalities, we can see that, at its roots, the poem is full of intention and light humor. This is not to deny that the poem evokes a faint feeling of loneliness and has deep meaning. The point that we need not forget is that the feeling of loneliness is juxtaposed with the frog's sound when it hits the water. This invites laughter. Humor holds up the silence and makes it more profound.

While it might seem that we are belaboring the issue, Edo period (1600-1868) haikai poetry is no simple matter. While we may not be conscious of institutional thought and sensitivities – thought and sensitivities peculiar to the present era and place – they always bind us. How can we free ourselves of the limitations of our own space and time and gain other rich(er) interpretations? How can we [train ourselves to] think in the context of different times and spaces? The answer to this is to go through the formalities of annotation (i.e., we need to read poetry as it was originally intended to be read).

Next, let us look at the poetry of Buson. Take the following poem:

Cicadas cry out
Time for the head priest
To take his bath.

蝉啼や僧正坊のゆあみ時
Semi naku ya sōjōbō no yuami doki.

The commentary in “Buson’s Complete Works” vol.1, written by the renowned scholars Ogata Tsutomu and Morita Ran, provides a better annotation than any other work on Buson to date. Their work corrected numerous previous misunderstandings and it is thanks to their commentaries I was able to correct a number of my own misinterpretations. But, even for the best scholars, it is difficult to ascertain how people in earlier eras gained knowledge of things. Even if you read classics, such as “Record of Yoshitsune” (*Gikeiki*), Tales of the Heike (*Heike monogatari*), or “Rise and the Fall of the Minamoto and Taira” (*Genpei jōsuiki*), you will not find anybody therein referred to as *shōjōbō*. Yet, if you look to Edo-period performing arts, books for general readers, and practical guides, this is a name that appears with some frequency. In a letter to Kafu (霞夫) dated the 27th day of the sixth month (lunar calendar) 1777, Buson included six poems, with his *shōjōbō* bath poem at the top. He made the following note:

“The poems above are ones I myself cannot consider to be great. I recalled trying to recite one hundred haiku (*hokku*) in a single go, and ended up writing some of my poems down. Of them, I feel I have to some degree captured the true nature of cicadas in the ‘Shōjōbō’s bath time’ verse.”

As we can see, compared to the other poems he wrote in the letter, Buson felt most confident about the ‘Shōjōbō’ composition. Truth be told, this poem is about a legendary *tengu* (lit. celestial dog; mountain sprites with beaks or long bulbous noses) — with the innovation of putting him in a bath. It is a fanciful poem, but I would like to point out that it is said to capture an “authentic cicada landscape.” This authentic landscape does not refer to some monotonous sketch of reality, but something that

positively affirms deliberate innovation and assortment: a place called Kurama, a scene in late afternoon, the humorous surprise of a tengu taking a bath. The arrangement of each of these elements serves to highlight the “true intention” and “true heart” of cicadas. Of course, this is not a poem about having actually seen a tengu bathing before one’s eyes. It is a piece about inferring that it must be around that time of day. “Time” (時, meaning the bath time) presents a distinct image that stands out in this poem, and we can say it is a skillful expression that does not spoil the “authentic cicada landscape.”

Let us look at one more poem by Buson:

When one speaks of
Being dyed by the first autumn leaves:
Mt Tatsuta

初もみぢお染といはゞたつた山
Hatsu momiji osome to iwaba tatsuta yama.

This poem appeared in “Collection of Recent Chats” (*Shin sōdan shū* 新雑談集, 1785), published two years after Buson’s death, but it is not certain when the poem was written. This poem comes with a prefatory note:

“A certain woman asked Maruyama Ōkyo [1733-1795] to paint a picture of a monkey, then asked Buson to write a poem to go with it, which he did, imitating the tone of the haikai poet Nonoguchi Ryūho [1595-1669].”

Maruyama Ōkyo is known as a naturalist painter, and he was an acquaintance of Buson’s. Nonoguchi Ryūho was a member of the Teimon school of haikai. The poem of his that Buson imitated was likely the following:

When she is old
She'll probably be called a mountain hag
The Lady of Tatsuta

山姫とつひには名にや立田姫

Yamanba to tsui ni na ni ya tatsuta hime.

In “Buson’s Complete Works,” the following annotation is given for Buson’s poem:

“Ryūho is a haikai poet. Last name Nonoguchi. Died in 1669. 75 years old. The poem “When she is old she’ll probably called a mountain hag; the Lady of Tatsuta” is found in “Selections of Timeworn Haikai” (*Haikai kosen*). *Osome* refers to leaves coloring the surroundings, and alludes to *Osome*, a female character in the kabuki play “Love Suicide at Mt Toribe” (*Toribeyama shinjū*). Mt Tatsuta, famous for its autumn foliage, is a mountain in Nara’s Ikoma district.”

Here is further interpretation:

“This poem, imitating the tone of Ryūho, is written next to Ōkyo’s painting of a ruddy-faced monkey. *Osome* and her lover Hankurō committed suicide at Mt Toribe, but [it is suggested] Mt Tatsuta would have been more suitable for taking in the first autumn leaves of the year.”

This is a rather painful interpretation. The problem is that the *osome* in the poem could not be the woman *Osome*. The kabuki play “Love Suicide at Mt Toribe” was staged in 1685, 1686, and 1706 in Kyoto and Osaka. The source for the play was “A True Tale” (*Jitsugoto tan* 実事譚), cited in the manuscript titled “Seeing, Hearing, Cognition, and Knowing” (*Kenmon kakuchi*, 見聞覚知). According to this text, the man was called Kikuchi Hankurō, and the woman *Osome* was a courtesan from the Gion pleasure district. Hankurō had traveled from Edo to Kyoto to serve a building magistrate at Nijō Castle and it was at this time that he became close with *Osome*. It is said that they were lamenting their imminent separation and, on the 27th day of the ninth month, they made their way to Mt Toribe, historically noted for its cremation grounds and cemeteries, and committed suicide together (source: Kanazawa Yasutaka, *Kabuki meisaku jiten*, 1976). “Love Suicide at Mt Toribe” was not an extremely popular kabuki

play that was staged over and over again. Rather, it is Okamoto Kidō's 1915 production of a play with the same title (not influenced by the Edo-period version) that is more widely known today. Of the other Edo-period materials that treat this double suicide, it is perhaps the Kamigata song "*Toribeyama*," – also said to be written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon – that is best known. In later years this song was included in kabuki and puppet plays on a number of occasions.

Returning to Buson's poem, the monkey painting mentioned in the prefatory note to the poem shows a monkey trained to perform tricks (i.e., *saru hiki*, *saru mawashi*, *saru shibai*). *Osome* in the poem actually refers to the *Osome* of the kabuki play "*Osome and Hisamatsu*" (*Osome Hisamatsu*). *Osome* was the daughter of an Osaka oil merchant and Hisamatsu was an apprentice in her family's shop. Their love impermissible, they carried out a double suicide and it was soon being sung about in popular ballads. Their story was put on stage in the puppet theater in plays such as "[*Osome's*] White Tie-Died Sleeves" (*Tamoto no shirashibori*), "*Dyed Pattern Lovers New Year Pine*" (*Somemoyō imose no kadomatsu*), "*The Strolling Minstrel's Songbook*" (*Shinpan utazaemon*), then adapted for kabuki. As for the trained monkeys, their repertoire used to include performing humorous renditions of this suicide play – essentially a play within a monkey play. In the play "*Recent Extracts from the Tabloids*" (*Chikagoro kawara no tatehiki*), there is a scene where monkeys perform Ohatsu and Tokubei's wedding pledges, exchanged over *sake* cups – the Kamigata song "*Toribeyama*" is performed in this play too! Most important for us, this 'monkey business' found its way into *Osome and Hisamatsu* plays. Years later, the Tsuruya Nanboku play "*Osome, Hisamatsu, and*

the News of Their Love” (*Osome Hisamatsu ukina no yomiuri*) also had monkeys performing a bit from an Osome-Hisamatsu play. The Osome-Hisamatsu play that Buson watched must have featured performing monkeys too. The monkey trainer says the lines, “There was a girl by the name of Osome, daughter of an oil merchant in Osaka’s Kawaramachi,” then begins chanting, “There now, when I say Osome, you stand up!” To this cue, a monkey stands up and begins carrying itself in the fashion of Osome. It would appear, then, that Buson took the line for his poem directly from the line in the kabuki play. He was making a play on Mt Tatsuta (*Tatsutayama* 竜田山) with the word “stand” (*tatsu* 立つ).

If this indeed is the case, the meaning of the poem should be understood as one with a play is being made on Mt Tatsuta with the monkey trainer’s line, “when I say Osome, you stand up!” Also as one with a play on the season, with its trees red like a monkey’s face. Finally, it is suggested that the most beautiful place to see the world dyed crimson is Mt Tatsuta. This poem contains somewhat dated humor, but this [humor] is yet another aspect of Buson’s poetry.

This is something of a digression, but, after Buson died, Maruyama Ōkyō’s pupil Watanabe Nangaku (1767-1813) painted a picture of a performing monkey, which features a comic poem (*kyōka* 狂歌) by Buson’s younger friend Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) and a comic Chinese poem (*kyōshi* 狂詩) by Ota Nanpo (1749-1823). This is Akinari’s poem:

‘Hey there Osome’
If one was to say
The face of the monkey
Even redder than that place made famous

By red autumn leaves, Mt Tatsuta superb!

それそこでお染といはゞたつ田山つらは紅葉にまさる目出たさ
Sore soko de Osome to iwaba Tatsuta yama tsura momiji ni masaru medetasa.

Perhaps Akinari composed this when his deceased friend Buson came to mind.

Finally, with an eye on the time, I would like to present a few poems by Issa, and give the most basic explanations. The first comes with the following prefatory note:

“I went to watch a frog battle (*kawazu gassen* 蛙合戦). It was held on the 20th day of the fourth month.”

And the poem:

Skinny frog
Don't give up the fight
Issa is here!

瘦蛙まけるな一茶是にあり
Yasegaeru makeru na Issa kore ni ari.

This poem is from an 1816 entry in Issa's "Seventh Diary" (*Nanaban nikki*). The season word (*kigo* 季語) is frog (*kawazu*), which signifies spring. The regular interpretation is that Issa, watching a frog fight, is cheering for a scrawny frog, and that the poem makes readers aware of Issa's affection for things that are weak. Now, is this the correct interpretation?

In the poem's prefatory note, we see the word "frog fight" (*kawazu tatakai* 蛙たゝかひ). This is essentially a "group marriage" (i.e., group breeding). The frog battle refers to the violent competition male frogs were made to wage against each other in order to get to the females, the total number of frogs being in the thousands or tens of thousands. According to the preface of a different book that this poem is found in, Issa went to watch the Takenozuka Frog Battle, which took place in what is now Tokyo's Adachi

district. Issa did not manage to marry until he was an older man. At age 52 he married a 28 year-old woman by the name of Kiku. He had three sons and one daughter with Kiku, but, one by one, each of his children died. After ten years of marriage, Kiku also died. His second marriage failed; he fell sick; a fire took his house just when he married his third wife,; finally, in his storehouse that survived the fire, he died of paralysis brought on by chronic illness. When trying to have children, Issa even wrote in his diary the number of times he had intercourse with his wife. To overstate it a bit, creating an heir was like the frog battle for Issa. It was a serious matter of life and death. Thus, is it correct to evaluate the poem he wrote after watching frogs fighting to copulate merely as one that reveals his sympathy for things that are weak? Also deserving of attention is the line “Issa is here!” (*Issa kore ni ari* 一茶是にあり). *Kore ni ari* is a line that Issa took from old war tales – it is something that warriors yelled out when announcing themselves in battle.

Baby sparrow
Make way, make way!
Mr. Horse is coming through.

雀の子そこのけそこのけ御馬が通る
Suzume no ko soko noke soko noke ouma ga tōru.

This is a poem found in both “My Spring” (*Ora ga haru* おらが春) and an 1819 entry in “Eighth Diary” (*Hachiban nikki* 八番日記). It is commonly interpreted as Issa’s depiction of a little sparrow playing in the middle of a road and somebody saying, “there’s a horse coming this way; it’s dangerous, so get out of the way.” This poem, too, is said to look warmly on the weak. Perhaps this is not a poem about an actual horse, though, but a child playing on stilts (lit. bamboo horse, *takeuma* 竹馬) who shouts to the

baby sparrow, “make way, make way, there’s a horse coming through (pay attention or you’re going to be squashed)!” “Make way, make way” (*soko noke, soko noke*) is what *daimyō* (feudal lord) processions would yell to clear roads as they passed through. As the literary scholar Ebara Taizō (1884-1948) pointed out in “Famous Poems Annotated” (*Meiku hyōshaku* 名句評釈), there is a similar line delivered in the kabuki play “Bleak Reflections of Brothel Lives” (*Sato kotoba awase kagami*). when playing “ark shell horses” (*akagai no uma* 赤貝の馬, played by running string through ark shells and wearing them as hooves): “Horse coming through! Here, here, here! Clear the way, clear the way!” In the “yellow cover” book (*kibyōshi*) “Children’s Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers” (*Kodomoshū chūshingura*), too, the following line is said when keeping rhythm while playing on stilts: “Horse coming through! Get out, get out, of the way!”

Oh, don’t strike!
The fly wrings its hands
Wrings its feet

やれ打つな蠅が手をすり足をする
Yare utsuna hae ga te o suri ashi o suru.

This poem appears in an 1821 entry in Issa’s “Eighth Diary.” Even that tiny, and moreover, irritating and dirty fly that humans hate seems to be rubbing its hands together as though it were a beggar. Due to this, the common interpretation is that the fly is pleading not to be swatted and killed. It is correct that the sight of a fly rubbing its hands and feet together is being used to suggest that it is begging for its life, but it is not the fly that is telling the attacker to not swat it. It is more likely that the attacker speaking to himself as he is about to strike, reasoning, “this too is a life, so let’s not take that away.”