



The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson and Issa

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The Essential Haiku brings together Robert Hass's beautifully fresh translations of the three great masters of the Japanese haiku tradition: Matsuo Basho (1644-94), the ascetic and seeker, and the haiku poet most familiar to English readers; Yosa Buson (1716-83), the artist, a painter renowned for his visually expressive poetry; and Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), the humanist, whose haiku are known for their poignant or ironic wit. Each haiku master's section of the book is prefaced with an eloquent and informative introduction by Robert Hass, followed by a selection of over 100 poems and then by other poetry or prose by the poet, including journals and nature writing. Opening with Hass's superb introductory essay on haiku, the book concludes with a section devoted to Basho's writings and conversations on poetry. The seventeen-syllable haiku form is rooted in a Japanese tradition of close observation of nature, of making poetry from subtle suggestion. Each haiku is a meditation, a centring, a crystalline moment of realisation. Reading them has a way of bringing about calm and peace within the reader. The symbolism of the seasons and the Japanese habit of mind blend together in these poems to create an alchemy of reflection that is unsurpassed in literature. Infused by its great practitioners with the spirit of Zen Buddhism, the haiku served as an example of the power of direct observation to the first generation of American modernist poets like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams as well as an example of spontaneity and Zen alertness to the new poets of post-war America and Britain. Universal in its appeal, Robert Hass's *The Essential Haiku* is the definitive introduction to haiku and its greatest poets, and has been a bestseller in America for twenty years. 'I know that for years I didn't see how deeply personal these poems were or, to say it another way, how much they have the flavour - Basho might have said "the scent" - of particular human life, because I had been told and wanted to believe that haiku were never subjective. I think it was D.H. Lawrence who said the soul can get to heaven in one leap but that, if it does, it leaves a demon in its place. Better to sink down through the level of these poems - their attention to the year, their ideas about it, the particular human consciousness the poems reflect, Basho's profound loneliness and sense of suffering, Buson's evenness of temper, his love for the materials of art and for the colour and shape of things, Issa's pathos and comedy and anger' - Robert Hass.

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