

KEN JONES



ARROW
OF
STONES

Arrow of Stones: Haibun by Ken Jones

--with Japanese translation by Nobuyuki Yuasa and Akiko Sakaguchi"

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Comprises eleven haibun of which six are reproduced below.

The Spirit Level

Dedicated to fellow haikin John Crook, who died of cancer 16 April 2001

In this life
we walk on the roof of hell
and view the flowers
-- Kobayashi Issa

"Next Wednesday – we'll phone the results to you between 4 and 5. Do you understand?"

After the biopsy, sweet coffee in a styroform cup. Driving home the familiar sunny hills are restless now with my unease. Five days to go. Five days to finish the summer house. Wednesday dawns fine.

Coiling and drifting
smoke
from a new-lit fir
sunbright blue

Just enough worn old bricks to build the steps. I watch myself loading the barrow with slow deliberation. Cement, buckets, the clatter of this and that. And the long bright spirit level. The mortar mix – not too stiff, not too sloppy. This trowelling of mortar is balm to the spirit. I lay the level across the finished slabs. The spirit bubble sits dead centre, between its two hair lines. How could it be otherwise? it says.

She has set out our lunch with care. Two polished glasses filled with sunlight; two white napkins rather unnerving. 3 o'clock. I potter at my desk. Outside, she listens to a neighbour who has been touched by Jesus. The dark green phone waits, silent in its cradle and unbelievable when it rings.

So sorry. It's cancer --

I go wring out the washing
hang it out to dry

Back to the summer house, trying not to disturb the new steps. Lock the door.
Listen to the wind.

From west to east we flee together. To where the sun rises up from the sea
instead of sinking into it. To where the world shrinks to a thin line between sky
and fen. At Southwold, pints of Adnam's "Broadside" bitter. A jar of white honey
from the Walberswick hives. Matins at Ely; evensong at Norwich.

Blackened niche
last year's nest
where a saint once stood

Home for more tests. The radiology unit has an air of carnival. What shall we play
for you?

Bone scan
the length
of a Brandenburg Concerto

Judgement Day, at 11.30am. Yama, the bug-eyed Lord of Death, turns out to be a
breezy fellow, an old school tie bright against his white coat. Obsequies seriously
postponed. They can "help me live" at least until the end of the decade. I could
even end up dying of something better. We celebrate at the Owl & Pussycat Tea-
room. Sipping Earl Grey, I number the hairs of my head.

Returning home, we find visitors...

Into the sadness
a pair of mating ducks
alighting on our pond

Enchantments

The Great Worm
arching and curving
into the summer ocean

Worm's Head. From the Norse, meaning a sea serpent. Its head a tilted limestone block. A grass covered ridge arches its back. Its tail, covered at high water, is a causeway of black ribbed rocks.

At the day's end we lie on the rocks behind the head and watch the seals playing in the clear green water. In Celtic legend they are men and women who have fallen under enchantment. Only at full moon can they briefly regain their human form, and dance upon the strand. Noragh sings softly to them and they draw closer.

Che sera, sera
Whatever will be will be
The future's not ours to see
Che sera, sera

Little pointed heads break the surface, spellbound with delight.

In the wake of the setting sun we scramble and balance over huge boulders, hastening back before the rising tide. Looking behind us

Under "The Devil's Arch"
tiny man
caught in a flaming disk

Crossing the causeway our boots grip the limpet covered rocks and crunch through beds of broken cockle shells.

Drifts of snow
the long rock pools
in falling light

The Visitation

With its dark oak walls and conical thatched roof our summer house is now over a century old. Inside are a few garden tools, a bamboo table and chair, an old panama hat on a peg, and a souvenir from the Black Forest long ago.

The cuckoo's dead
one hand is still
but the carved buttercup keeps swinging

One morning early this summer I was sitting there in a cloud of incense, halfway between reverie and meditation. And then –

Flutter of wings
Pre-Raphaelite angel
with its knowing smile

It is perched on the iron pine cone which hangs on a chain below the clock. What surprises me is not being as surprised as I ought to have been. At first sight it is like a very large escaped budgie or a bat. But in fact it is just what you'd expect a Pre-Raphaelite angel to look like – golden hair, perfect little hands and feet, flowing white gown, and those lovely folded wings. It is lit up by sunshine, except that little ordinary sunshine comes through those dusty leaded panes.

At first I was coarse and curious. Glad to note that it appeared to have no gender – which removed one possible complication. I thought of dusting off the gilded parrot cage up in the attic. And what about identifying it? I already have a recognition manual for fairies, goblins and the like. Artist's impression in colour on one page. On the facing page habitat and habits, average height and weight in centimetres and grams, and, most important, degree of good and evil. Surely there must be something similar for hierarchical things like angels. Was it just a seraphim, or maybe even an archangel? I try to speak to it but it puts its finger to its lips.

By midsummer I have grown used to its presence. If it lives anywhere it is up in the cobwebbed interior of the summerhouse roof, though it is always immaculately turned out. I love to watch it fluttering and soaring, or sitting with

folded wings. No, there's no such thing as angel shit. They live on ambrosia or something like that. My angel just comes and hangs out with me, charging up the whole room. Most of all I love that strange quizzical smile which draws out the man I'm usually afraid to be.

Tea time annunciation –
there is no fear!
only gooseberry jam

An angel's gift, and rare.

When first it visited the angel seemed substantial as flesh and blood. Now, in late summer, it has become as iridescent as a sunbeam. I know that by the end of the season, mission completed, it will vanish altogether.

Iron key
how smoothly it turns
in the summer house lock

Cork Oak

Pointing the way
through the haunted wood
an arrow of heaped stones

"El Alcornoque de las Animas." Dead souls. Propped on an abandoned wood stack is the bleached skull of a horse. A faint path trails off into the cork wood, which rises gently towards limestone hills, dazzling white in the Andalusian sun.

Every nine years the cork bark is stripped from the oaks. And so they spread their grey branches above trunks of dark blood. Each stands flayed and apart from the others. In the clearings are strange pallid flowers. Silence hangs heavy in the air.

At last the wood thins out. Our spirits lighten. The way through the boundary fence has been marked with bright red shot gun cartridges. But ahead we enter a chaos of weird limestone crags. Dark holly oaks sprout from every crevice. Another landscape of nightmare.

The Path
this trickle of red dust
maybe imagined, maybe there

And see, that stone upon a stone! A cairn set up by man, or just another accident of nature?

Dipping steeply away to the left is a green bowl, a dingle half encircled by a cliff.

Beside a red stone door
transparent garments
hanging out to dry

Behind the "door" there surely lives a Moor. And are not these the garments of a Christian princess whom he holds in thrall? When later, through this wilderness of stones, a sleek vixen leaps across our path – is not this the maiden, released for one day every hundred years

At last a great green campo, dotted here and there with twisted olive trees. A large matrimonial bed frame serves as a gate. It bears a warning in an elegant script:- "PRECAUCIÓN – TORO BRAVO!" We stride out, surprised by our bravery and humming the toreador song from Bizet. On our left lies a refuge of dense thicket.

One long scream...
a vixen devours a kid
the bull lifts his horns

Without a word we make haste across the campo. An hour later and out at last through a stately gate in the middle of nowhere: "FINCA JARASTEPA".

At day's end we reach La Casa Piedras, an old hunting lodge. The dinner plates are embellished with some ancient family crest.

After the venison
the glass eye
of the stag

But oh, that goat's cheese with quince jelly, washed down with the easy wine of Prado del Rey!

And what of the Moor and the Lady? We hear the truth from a shepherd next day. 1938. The last of the Republicans were trapped in that green dell. Shot down to a man. El Hoyo de los Muertos, they call the place -- Dead Men's Gulch.

Ships in the Night

Slack water
between rip tides
the buoy
briefly upright

A waking dream. "As beasts crying sadly from hill to hill." Some German philosopher, on the lowing of fog horns. At the foot of her bed, the picture window frames the oil terminal and a procession of moon-lit tankers. Engines throb, and hundreds of tiny lights sparkle on the Haven. And all night long that rusty dredger clanks and groans.

Into the depths
a hanging chain
and the screams of gulls

Still she sleeps, with a slight snore. The sex was considerate rather than passionate. But, oh yes, the velveteen mousetrap. "You're the first man I've slept with who hasn't got a marine pilot's licence." It can get lonely bringing up three kids on your own. She found my small ad. in *The New Statesman & Nation*: music, walking and existential philosophy. Plucky, that -- makes me feel quite fond of her. I might have been a sex maniac or something. In fact, we're both Bruckner fans.

A mutual mistake, mutually honoured. I'll fetch her breakfast in bed and later fix a few things about the house. Mustn't overstay my welcome.

Ebb tide
on each new sandbank
a solitary gull

Ships that pass in the night. They sound their sirens one to one. "Green to green and red to red, perfect safety go ahead."

In the sky above the marshes are the first streaks of a new day.

Punt gun
and decoy pond
and the beat of wild ducks' wings

“There is no time. What is memory ?” *

It stands on the edge of Mynydd Bach, a desolate upland. Rocky hillocks rise among the ginger bogs. Here and there a few storm-wrecked trees around a pile of stones mark the site of a ty un-nos. A hovel built in a night. Dawn smoke from its chimney gave legal title.

Summer evening long ago...
rusty horse rake
tall rushes through its spokes

And there it is -- I remember the slate slab. TALFRYN and a lively pointing hand. Walking up its track, somehow you can sense when the life has gone out of a house.

Sagging bench
facing out towards the western sea
how many sunsets?

We met the couple ten years ago, in the summertime, calling in -- as now -- for a cup of tea. They were `sixties homesteaders, with only ghosts for neighbours. Cheerful and resourceful, tough and gentle. They made things of delight, indoors and out. And anything that had stopped, they seemed to be able to make it go again.

We peer through cobwebbed windows. In the parlour two chairs are pulled up comfortably around the wood-burner.

Tarnished brass pendulum
holding the time
at half past three

Just popped out for a five year stroll.

And over there, in the shadows of the entrance hall –

Rail of well-worn clothes
there they hang
left entirely to themselves

The garden is now growing back into the wild hillside. A tombstone makes a bridge across the little stream: words and moss. We peer into his well-ordered workshop.

Chisels upright in their rack
cutting edge of rust

Beehives overturned and broken. The greenhouse wrecked. Little rusty two-strokes locked forever solid. In the summer house her mildewed straw hat, idly cast one day onto the table where once we had taken tea. Filaments of spider webs deck the bakelite wireless.

Draped across
an easy chair
Devil's Ivy

Now is only rain drenched stone and a north-east wind. Our storyteller is gone, and the past with him. Our dreamer has disappeared, and the future with her.

Last year's bird nest
inside so soft and smooth
crumbles at a touch

* Inscription over a Chinese temple arch, Lantau Island, Hong Kong.