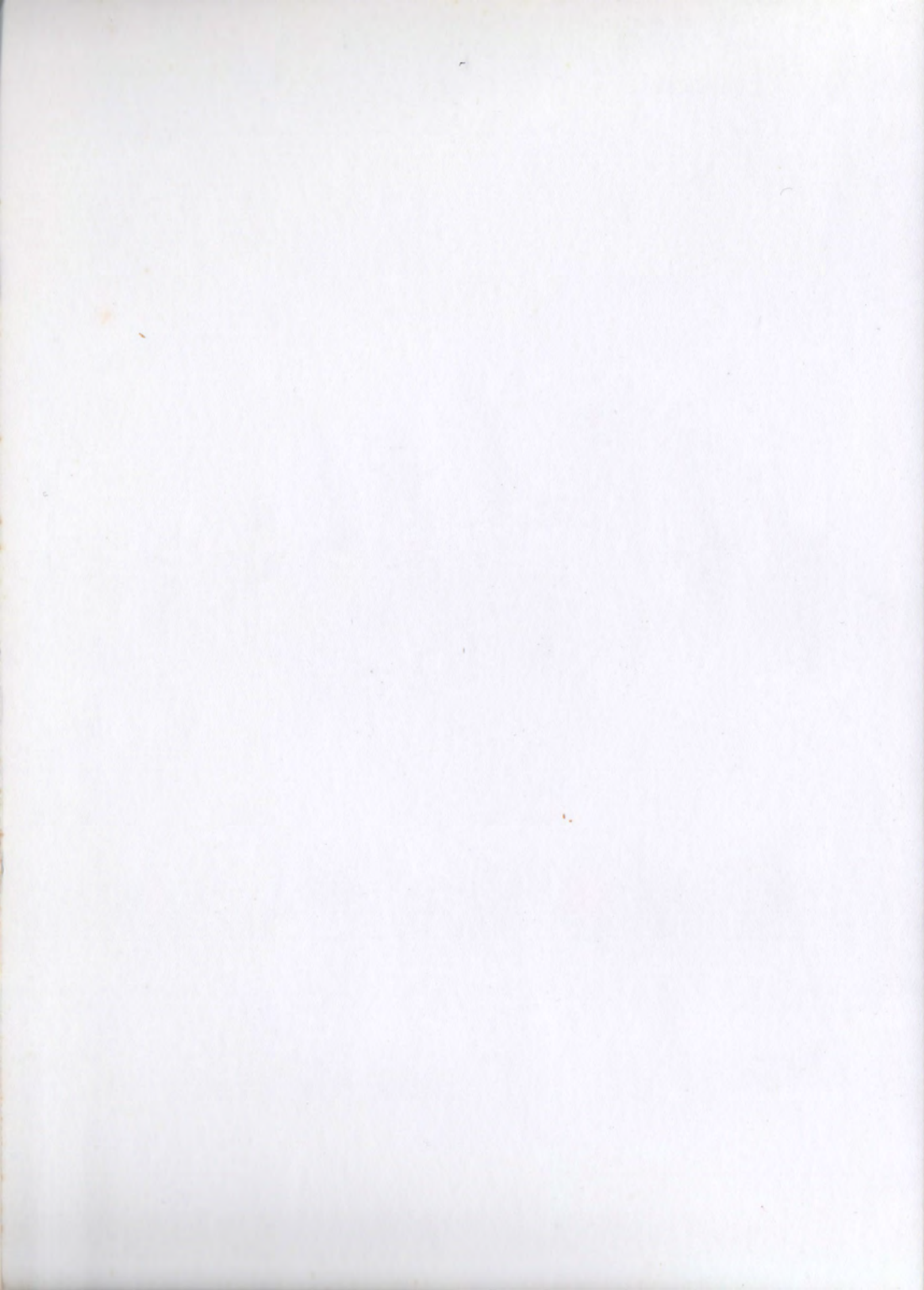


STONE CIRCLES

Haiku and Haiku Prose



NORAGH JONES



Stone Circles

Haiku and Haiku Prose

Pilgrim Press

2004

Other books by Noragh Jones

Living in Rural Wales

Power of Raven, Wisdom of Serpent

In Search of Home

Some of these poems have previously been published in
Blithe Spirit, Brushwood, Contemporary Haibun, Urthona:
Buddhism and the Arts, and Womanspirit Wales

CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Published by | 1 |
| Pilgrim Press | 1 |
| Trond Rind Schøn | 2 |
| Shant-Gwenethal Aberystwyth | 2 |
| SY23 3NB, Wales | 2 |
| White Island | 6 |
| 2004 closed | 6 |
| The Cathedral | 8 |
| The Stone | 10 |
| Stone | 12 |
| Merlin's | 14 |

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| | | |
|------|---|----|
| Four | Spring and Summer Haiku | 27 |
| | A catalogue record for this book is available | |
| Five | Haibun - Season | 45 |
| | from the British Library | |
| | Zen in the | 46 |
| | Age old to | 48 |
| | and | 49 |
| | and | 50 |
| | Printed at | 51 |
| | Printed, Rivers | 52 |
| | Subington, Ca | 53 |

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| | Introduction | 1 |
| <i>One</i> | <i>Haibun - Stone Circles in the Celtic Lands</i> | 5 |
| | White Island People | 6 |
| | The Callanish Stones | 8 |
| | The Stone Family of Glen Lyon | 10 |
| | Stone Wedding Party | 12 |
| | Merlin's Tomb | 14 |
| | At the Grave Rock | 16 |
| | A Life Turned to Stone | 17 |
| <i>Two</i> | <i>Love Haiku</i> | 19 |
| <i>Three</i> | <i>Haibun - Celtic Pilgrim Paths</i> | 25 |
| | Pilgrimage to Hag Rock | 26 |
| | Pilgrimage to Iona | 30 |
| | Pilgrimage to St Melangell's Healing Centre | 34 |
| <i>Four</i> | <i>Spring and Summer Haiku</i> | 39 |
| <i>Five</i> | <i>Haibun - Songs of Old Age</i> | 45 |
| | Zen in the old people's home | 46 |
| | Five Songs of Old Age | 48 |
| | The memory game | 64 |
| | Anglo-Irish | 68 |
| <i>Six</i> | <i>Autumn and Winter Haiku</i> | 71 |

CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----|---------------|--------------|
| 1 | Introduction | Published by |
| 2 | One | Printed by |
| 6 | Two | Printed by |
| 8 | Three | Printed by |
| 10 | Four | Printed by |
| 12 | Five | Printed by |
| 14 | Six | Printed by |
| 16 | Seven | Printed by |
| 18 | Eight | Printed by |
| 20 | Nine | Printed by |
| 22 | Ten | Printed by |
| 24 | Eleven | Printed by |
| 26 | Twelve | Printed by |
| 28 | Thirteen | Printed by |
| 30 | Fourteen | Printed by |
| 32 | Fifteen | Printed by |
| 34 | Sixteen | Printed by |
| 36 | Seventeen | Printed by |
| 38 | Eighteen | Printed by |
| 40 | Nineteen | Printed by |
| 42 | Twenty | Printed by |
| 44 | Twenty-one | Printed by |
| 46 | Twenty-two | Printed by |
| 48 | Twenty-three | Printed by |
| 50 | Twenty-four | Printed by |
| 52 | Twenty-five | Printed by |
| 54 | Twenty-six | Printed by |
| 56 | Twenty-seven | Printed by |
| 58 | Twenty-eight | Printed by |
| 60 | Twenty-nine | Printed by |
| 62 | Thirty | Printed by |
| 64 | Thirty-one | Printed by |
| 66 | Thirty-two | Printed by |
| 68 | Thirty-three | Printed by |
| 70 | Thirty-four | Printed by |
| 72 | Thirty-five | Printed by |
| 74 | Thirty-six | Printed by |
| 76 | Thirty-seven | Printed by |
| 78 | Thirty-eight | Printed by |
| 80 | Thirty-nine | Printed by |
| 82 | Forty | Printed by |
| 84 | Forty-one | Printed by |
| 86 | Forty-two | Printed by |
| 88 | Forty-three | Printed by |
| 90 | Forty-four | Printed by |
| 92 | Forty-five | Printed by |
| 94 | Forty-six | Printed by |
| 96 | Forty-seven | Printed by |
| 98 | Forty-eight | Printed by |
| 100 | Forty-nine | Printed by |
| 102 | Fifty | Printed by |
| 104 | Fifty-one | Printed by |
| 106 | Fifty-two | Printed by |
| 108 | Fifty-three | Printed by |
| 110 | Fifty-four | Printed by |
| 112 | Fifty-five | Printed by |
| 114 | Fifty-six | Printed by |
| 116 | Fifty-seven | Printed by |
| 118 | Fifty-eight | Printed by |
| 120 | Fifty-nine | Printed by |
| 122 | Sixty | Printed by |
| 124 | Sixty-one | Printed by |
| 126 | Sixty-two | Printed by |
| 128 | Sixty-three | Printed by |
| 130 | Sixty-four | Printed by |
| 132 | Sixty-five | Printed by |
| 134 | Sixty-six | Printed by |
| 136 | Sixty-seven | Printed by |
| 138 | Sixty-eight | Printed by |
| 140 | Sixty-nine | Printed by |
| 142 | Seventy | Printed by |
| 144 | Seventy-one | Printed by |
| 146 | Seventy-two | Printed by |
| 148 | Seventy-three | Printed by |
| 150 | Seventy-four | Printed by |
| 152 | Seventy-five | Printed by |
| 154 | Seventy-six | Printed by |
| 156 | Seventy-seven | Printed by |
| 158 | Seventy-eight | Printed by |
| 160 | Seventy-nine | Printed by |
| 162 | Eighty | Printed by |
| 164 | Eighty-one | Printed by |
| 166 | Eighty-two | Printed by |
| 168 | Eighty-three | Printed by |
| 170 | Eighty-four | Printed by |
| 172 | Eighty-five | Printed by |
| 174 | Eighty-six | Printed by |
| 176 | Eighty-seven | Printed by |
| 178 | Eighty-eight | Printed by |
| 180 | Eighty-nine | Printed by |
| 182 | Ninety | Printed by |
| 184 | Ninety-one | Printed by |
| 186 | Ninety-two | Printed by |
| 188 | Ninety-three | Printed by |
| 190 | Ninety-four | Printed by |
| 192 | Ninety-five | Printed by |
| 194 | Ninety-six | Printed by |
| 196 | Ninety-seven | Printed by |
| 198 | Ninety-eight | Printed by |
| 200 | Ninety-nine | Printed by |
| 202 | Hundred | Printed by |

Introduction

Two converging streams, from Japan in the east and the Celtic lands in the west, have flowed together to shape the writing of *Stone Circles*. As I explored the Japanese haiku tradition through the poems of Basho and his successors, I discovered surface ripples and then deeper currents that reminded me of the early Irish and Welsh nature poetry composed in the ninth to the twelfth centuries.

*this leaf driven by the wind
alas for its fate –
old the year it was born*

(Wales, eleventh century)

*wind crying in the branchy wood
under grey cloud
white water river – swan song –
the sounds of wonder*

(Ireland, ninth century)

Behind the loving attention given to nature is an accepting awareness of impermanence and fragility that curiously helps rather than hinders us in celebrating our loves and lives. The same spirit prevails in the poems of Basho:

*over the darkened sea
the cry of a wild duck
faintly white*

(Japan, seventeenth century)

What do these poems have in common, and what do they have to do with me, a western woman in the twenty first century?

They give me, in my highs and lows, a fine reminder of what really matters in living out our little lives. Then I try (once more with feeling) to be more aware and live (for a while) a little deeper than the speedy surface. The Irish poets call it 'listening to the music of the world'. Basho expresses it by celebrating everyday places and people he meets on his life journey. Both traditions urge us to be spontaneous but emotionally subtle, to respond to 'whatever there is' – in the world of people as well as in the world of nature.

Love the world and do what you will? Easy to say, difficult to do, without trying for the ascetic love that grew out of Christian discipline in early Celtic spirituality, and out of Buddhism's Middle Way in Japan.

How do we modern people begin to practice this ascetic love that might enable us to attend better to 'the music of the world'? Are we up for this deeper love that might open and expand the vision, rather than the serial love that's so exciting but usually closes us in and narrows the vision? By following the old ways of the early Celtic and Japanese poets to see what happens? Here are some of the ways I have explored while writing the haiku and haiku prose in *Stone Circles*.

- Going on walking pilgrimages to special places
- Responding personally and imaginatively to what is around us every day
- Celebrating people and places by seeing with the inner eye and expressing our insights sincerely but with subtle resonance
- Reviving season awareness and the sense of time's cycles in our personal lives and in the wider world

- Being alone and meditating on the ambiguities of oneness – loneliness or creative solitude?

It's no use willing poems to come. All we can do is practice awareness, wait on the spirit, and let haiku find us. When the poems do come we need to watch out in case our western rationality and wordiness get the better of spontaneous and direct instincts. It helps, I find, to cling to the early Celtic view of poetry as magic – of seeing with the inner eye that tells resonant truths and transforms the everyday.

*sleeping ducks rise and fall
on the night waves
this breathing dark*

DEFINITIONS

HAIKU - a breath length poem characterized by concrete images, a heightened sense awareness, and connectedness with a deeper consciousness than our surface mode of being

HAIBUN – a poetic prose narrative interspersed with haiku and permeated with haiku characteristics - heightened awareness, concrete imagery and resonance. Basho's haibun in 'Narrow Road to the Deep North', his journals of travels or pilgrimages, are resonant with a sense of place, past and present, with nature's moods, and with affection for humanity.

ONE

STONE CIRCLES IN THE CELTIC LANDS

White Island People

On an overcast June morning I row across the grey waters of Lough Erne to White Island. The hum of insects gathers as I step on shore. I make a way through the brambles and dew-soaked weeds till there at last I set eyes on the stone people who have stood here for a thousand years.

*backs to broken walls
knowing all, knowing nothing
the stone people stare*

‘Christ the Warrior’ they call this curly-headed one standing squat with sword and shield. More like Cuchulainn the champion of Ulster’s Red Branch Knights. Next to him is the ‘Christ with two Griffins’.

*half lion, half eagle
King Beast of heaven
hunter of souls*

In the long grass David the singer of psalms raises a stone hand to his stone mouth. Fossil speech that once had the power of saving God’s people from their enemies. And in case words won’t work he carries a bag of stones at his belt to sling at the Sons of Evil down the centuries – the giant Goliath, the pagan Druids, the Viking raiders and the ever-warring tribesmen of Ulster.

*distant gun fire
on the misty isle
a rose petal falls*

But look at this! Taking the mickey out of male might (human and divine) is the one and only stone female on White Island. Naked except for a cropped top, her hands spreading open her wide thighs, this grinning lady outfaces God's Warriors. What's she doing here?

Is she *lascivia*, lust - a warning to medieval monks to shun the temptations of the flesh?

Is she a seductress in heaven, glorying in the eternal delights of the body?

Is she a goddess of fertility, one of the *sheela-na-gigs* who display their life-giving vaginas on the towers of early Celtic churches?

*Lady of Life -
a silver snail trail
on her stone vagina*

The Callanish Stones

On the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides an old woman tells me tales of the Callanish Stones dancing on Midsummer Eve. In the white nights of the far north the great circle of stone beings awakes and honours the ancestors entombed in these red moss bogs. As midnight nears the giant stones shift and stir for one short night of celebration. Before dawn they are back in their ancient places, for on Midsummer Day they guide the rising sun down their stone road to light up the innermost heart of the stone circle.

*watched by mild-eyed cows
the lurching stones
do their highland fling*

*

*

*

A fine drizzle is falling. In the midsummer glow that is neither sunlight nor moonlight I enter the stone circle and walk around aimlessly, wondering where to take my place and wait for the witching hour. I watch myself keeping to the edge and avoiding the tall centre stone. Tribal memories of human sacrifice? In the end I prop myself against what I hope is an unassuming stone outside the main circle. I drink coffee from my Thermos flask. I take deep breaths and try to meditate, but the pull of the wakening stones is too strong. I look skywards. A lively south westerly has risen and is chasing clouds across the darkened moon.

*shifting shadows
stone beings hunkered
on the black bog*

Five minutes to midnight. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling. Soon I'm shivering all over. The stone ones don't want me here on this night of all nights. And I don't want to be here either. If I will myself to stay I'll be a madwoman by dawn? Well, maybe only the hair turning white overnight? Who knows?

Fingers numb, I pack my rucksack and make for the road. My feet sink in the gripping bog. The wind tears at me, forcing me back with every step forward. The light that is neither day nor night deceives me. Are the stones really dancing there across the red moss? And what if I joined them? Teeth chattering, I drag my puny self away from the power of the circle, till I am more or less an ordinary human being again.

Such loss, such gain...

When I look back from the safety of the tarmac the familiar moor has already gone. And in its place?

*reeling planets
the dancing stones
are juggling sun and moon*

The Stone Family of Glen Lyon

The stone people's house is hard to find. It lies east of the bare mountains that form the Wall of Rannoch. Not far from the well-beaten track that long distance hill walkers use on the crossing from Glen Lyon to Loch Tulla. But far enough to get lost in the looking. Once there was an arrow of stones pointing the way, but that has gone.

In the old crofting days there was no need of directions. At the beginning of May the MacGregors of Breadalbane moved up to their summer shielings in the high glens with their families and flocks. Every beast and every human knew the way. Now nobody knows, or if they do they're not telling...

*stumbling by chance
on the stone people's house -
all you need is luck*

On the cropped grass by the burn is a miniature stone bothy, roofed with grassy turves and crowned with white quartz stones. The stone people are still here. They're outside, standing in front of the door – the *cailleach* (old woman), the *bodach* (old man) and their five stone children.

*shaped in winter floods
worn by endless work -
how short their summers*

Someone who respects the old ways opens the little house at *Bealtaine* (Celtic Mayday) and brings the stone family out for the summer. At *Samhain* (Halloween) they go back inside and their house is shut against the winter rain and gales. So in the old days the crofters shut up the summer shielings and

returned with their families and their animals to the sheltered
glens below. As the Gaelic poem has it:

*roruad rath
ro cleth crut
ro gab gnath
giugrann guth*

*bracken shapeless
turned rust red
the wild goose
has raised its cry*

We sit with the stone people and eat our picnic. They feel
solid and companionable, but what do we know? We make
them an offering of apples and gingerbread.

A fierce summer shower tears down *Gleann na Caillighe*,
bending the long grasses to the ground. The *Cailleach* (the
divine Hag) is out on her broomstick sweeping strangers from
her glen. But she relents and the black whirlwind soon passes.
A cool northern sun comes out. We sit in silence with the
stone family and I begin to see the distant hill passes through
their eyes.

*rooted here
through all the clearances
grey stone people
glowing in grey shade*

Stone Wedding Party

*stones on a withered moor
all that's left
of marriage dreams*

In the Monts d'Arrée, high above blue bays and white sails, the tawny grasses shiver in the wind. Across the moor straggles a line of standing stones, now tumbled and half buried. The old people who speak Breton call it *Eured Ven*, the stone wedding.

Once, they say, a wild wedding party was returning to a remote farmstead, when they came across a priest riding through the night to take the last sacrament to a dying woman.

Were they out of their minds with home-brewed cider, or filled with devious lusts as they danced the bride and groom over the moor to their wedding bed? Was it just a joke gone too far, or was the Devil himself out that night?

Whatever it was, the bold Yann grabs the halter of the priest's horse and the rest of them gather round to block his way. They sing him lewd songs, they mock his celibate state, they hold an inquisition into the sexual charms of his housekeeper. The bride herself tries to pull him off his horse for 'free hugs and kisses to bring a smile to that sour face of yours'. The groom gives her a jealous slap on the bottom and in turn she slaps the priest in the face for not responding to her charms (and she in her bridal finery, too).

The dancers press tighter round the priest, stamping and shouting out their wedding songs in the old Breton tongue. Their groping hands clutch at him from every side. Infernal music from their bagpipes and bombards is deafening him.

His head is turning inside out, and with it goes every ounce of charity he ever had.

Raising his hand to the midnight sky in anger and despair, the priest makes his tortured sign of the cross over the wedding party. His shadow grows huge and terrible. With the help of God or Devil he turns every one of them to stone for all eternity.

But that wasn't the end of it. Tonight I'm taking a short cut across the moor and wish I hadn't. For I sense they're still here and stirring, the stone wedding party.

*moaning wind
flickering shadows
the stones are dancing still*

Merlin's Tomb

A summer noon in the Forest of Broceliande. I drive into the last space in the car park for LE TOMBEAU DE MERLIN, and set off on foot with hundreds of other pilgrims and pagans to visit the tomb of the eternal enchanter.

It's in a small clearing, shadowed by oaks and holly and fairy thorn. Prehistoric standing stones in a circle of earth rubbed bare by centuries of passing feet. The hollow between the stones is stuffed with new and old scraps of paper petitioning the Sorcerer for love and health and happiness. Fresh and faded bouquets of flowers lean on the stone circle to honour Merlin, the One who never Dies, the Spirit of the Forest.

A visitor's dog lifts a leg and pees on a bunch of plastic daisies. A trio of modern witches, black-clothed and white-faced, approach and leave their offering of seven times knotted woollen threads.

*ladies of the forest
exchanging sly smiles
new warmth in the blood*

*

*

*

At the Chateau of Comper there's a medieval fete going on. A striped booth houses the latest Merlin. A modern alchemist in brown woollen robe, with coloured potions in glass jars behind him. He keeps a white dove in a wooden cage. Who was she? A lady of the lake defeated in magic contest? He conjures a stream of coins from the ears and nose of a rash volunteer boy perched on a three-legged stool.

A *demoiselle* in long velvet dress and lacy *coiffe* teaches the kids sword fighting according to the rules of chivalry. They're spell-bound for five minutes.

The courtyard resounds with the music of Breton bagpipes and bombards. What century is it anyway? I look out over the shining waters of the lake. This is where Merlin built a crystal palace under the waves for his beloved enchantress Vivian. But nothing was ever enough for her. The Lady of the Lake wanted it all. She finally got him to share his ultimate secret, and used the power to enslave him.

*shut in a hollow oak
the enchanter enchanted
his knotted limbs*

* * *

Val sans Retour, the Valley of No Return. Here stands the latest bit of magic, an *Arbre d'Or*, a Tree of Gold sprouting within a ring of blackened stumps. Ten years ago the forest burned for five days. The disaster area has been replanted and flourishes once again. The artist Francois Davin created the *Arbre d'Or* in homage to Merlin's eternal forest which we are eroding and destroying.

*silent birds
perched on gold leaf antlers -
Merlin's severed head*

At the Grave Rock

The wind is rising. Cupping my hands I light a candle and keep it upright on the grave rock with drops of melted wax. It keeps blowing out, and I try again. I find a mossy niche on the sheltered side of the rock and watch the tiny flame burn steadily.

Astride a fallen tree I listen to the night creatures stirring.

whispers in the grass
all around me
the hunters and the hunted

I remember Buson saying *'on the whole it is a bother to keep up relationships with people in this world'*.

Funny old sage, I know just what you mean, but what else is there to do in the end? I can only sit for so long like this, living with the dead.

out of his stone cairn
a holly bush sprouts
splintering the moon

A Life Turned to Stone

She can't bear to clear away his things after he is gone. She can't bear to have them around her either.

*in the fossil house
empty clothes, buried words
a life turned to stone*

Everybody says she should leave everything and get away for a while. She decides to be sensible and follows their advice. She has a holiday (if you could call it that) in a quiet hotel by Lake Ullswater. She takes long walks alone on the fells. But these are paths they had walked together for more than twenty summers.

muddy boot prints
only hearing what you said
after you have gone

Back home (if you could call it that) she starts sorting out his books and files, his clothes and shoes, his tapes and CDs. Sorting has always soothed her, ever since she was a little girl and her mother passed on her domestic mania for sorting drawers and tidying cupboards.

But this sorting is different. This is clearing all traces of him from the world they created together. This is exorcizing his ghost. But she needs his ghost to hang about and go on talking to her.

lost lover
finding his chess board
endgame unfinished

Sitting at the computer one afternoon, she tries to stem the flow of e mails still coming in for him. How do you stop people writing to the dead?

unanswered messages
for ever circling
the air waves of the world

Eating supper in front of the telly, she watches *Eastenders* and envies the drama of their made-up lives. Nothing to do, and another long evening stretching ahead. Switching off the telly she faces the silence that is no longer peaceful. It creeps closer. The air feels too heavy to breathe. She goes to bed at nine and passes the night in the company of the BBC World Service.

lying awake
listening for the board that used to creak
on his way to the loo

TWO

LOVE HAIKU

walking wind-combed sands
our quavering words
blow away in the storm
after
ginger and lemon tea
scenting our language

sleeping late
under the winter daisy
his warm breath meeting mine
oh, will our roses
ever bloom together
till we're in our grave?

like-warm winter stove
nipples stiff with cold
before we make love

familiar strangers
perfumed with Christmas gift scents
sweet old love

hugging her in the kitchen
will she pause for love
and let the soufflé fall?

*highland cottage
Applecross comes and goes in mist
while we're making love*

*walking wind-combed sands
our quarrelling words
blow away in the storm*

*sleeping late
under the winter duvet
his warm breath meeting mine*

*luke-warm winter stove
nipples stiff with cold
before we make love*

*hugging her in the kitchen
will she pause for love
and let the soufflé fall?*

*alone by the river
thinking of him
she skims stones on the water*

*after love-making
ginger and lemon tea
scenting our languor*

*ah, will our roses
ever bloom together
till we're in our grave?*

*familiar strangers
perfumed with Christmas gift scents
renewing old love*

in the audience

*I hear his words of wisdom –
my husband from Mars*

*at the laundrette
getting sheets in a tangle
we joke about divorce*

old couple arm in arm

visiting the crematorium

to see what it'll be like

Wedding Anniversary Disaster

A Haiku Sequence

*the Apricot Suite
looks out over the water meadows
to a town that keeps its distance*

*beyond the haha
a pheasant struts
among the lambs*

*four lounges where solitary couples
defend their privacy
with tea and carrot cake*

*an unloved library
ghost stories and mildewed romances
left on the shelf*

*in the lounge bar
a grinning cheese plant
lies in wait*

*dining in the Winter Garden
above the buzz of small talk
a bluebottle trapped on glass*

*still playing with words
an old couple linked
by a lifetime of scrabble*

THREE

CELTIC PILGRIM PATHS

Pilgrimage to Hag Rock

The Hag Rock stands near the tip of the Beara Peninsula in West Cork. Geologists call it a metamorphic rock, and are puzzled because it is the only rock of its kind around here. That's no surprise to the people of Beara, for in local lore this rock is the shape-shifting *Cailleach Bhearra*, the wise old hag who has lived through endless ages:

*I have seen the seal-haunted rock of Skerryvore,
which is now out in the midst of the ocean, when it
was a high mountain with good fields around it. I saw
the ploughing of those fields and the grain that grew
on them was sharp and juicy. I have seen yon loch
when it was a piddling spring.**

The days, the months, the years, the centuries pass over her. Storms batter her. On this wild coast the thatch soon falls in and houses trickle into ruins. Blow-ins from Dublin come for a while and put up new bungalows with a sea view. The far-sighted Hag sees through them all. 'Look', she says, 'I am every age of woman, and I am still here for those who want to know'.

*new millennium
pagans bring silver coins
to fill her lichenized slits*

Inland from the Hag Rock lie the ruins of St Catherine's church, the site of an early Celtic nunnery where the good sisters tended the sick and the dying. One story tells how Christian saint chased pagan Hag to the cliff edge and turned her to stone for not converting to the new faith. Or was it that

the curious Hag stole Catherine's holy book to see what was in it, and her Otherworld soul was turned to stone by this faith of crucifixions and bleeding hearts? Or maybe, as one old local says, 'sure didn't she turn herself to stone, so there would always be a Hag in Beara. For isn't she the one that keeps you going, no matter what?'

The first time I went to the Hag Rock there were storm clouds bringing a deluge in from the Atlantic. I took shelter in St Catherine's churchyard, leaning in the lee of a tall cross. I ended up soaked to the skin, in ignorant intimacy with this cold stone geometry.

*soul's maze carved in stone
an early Celtic cross -
dripping fourfold rain*

Next morning the world was new and the sun was warm. I went back to sit for an hour at Hag Rock. Mist was clearing from the sea. The horizon was expanding.

*at home with the Hag
learning the rudiments
in her house of fresh air*

Finally I left to continue my journey clockwise round the coast. In a mile or two I came to the colour washed houses of Eyeries – every one its own shade of yellow, rose, ochre or sky blue. Freshly painted on a high gable is the story of *An Chailleach Bhearra*. Her pagan triptych cheekily standing across the road from the Church of Our Lady. It's noon, so I buy a snack in the village grocers and sit down in front of the mural. I remember bits of the ninth century poem in old Irish called *The Lament of the Old Woman of Beara* - a monk's tale

of the Hag's conversion from Mother Goddess to Christian nun:

*The Old Woman of Beara am I
Who once was beautiful
Now all I know is how to die
I'll do it well.*

In me, the cold...

*The cold. Yet still a seed
Burns there.
Women love only money now.
But when I loved
I loved prime men
Whose horses galloped
On many an open plain
Beating lightning from the ground –
I loved them well...*

As the afternoon wears on I complete my circle round the Beara Peninsula. Climbing Hungry Hill to explore the old copper mines, I meet up with other Hag pilgrims. The wind is getting up, so we shelter between broken walls and hold a wind-viewing party in honour of the Hag. It turns out She is different for each of us. The Irish Americans say the Hag is their Wildwoman role model. The Irish women see her more as a stirrer of storms ('to shake you up a bit when you need it') or a maker of new landscapes ('she drops rocks from her apron to make hills and islands whenever she feels like it – so maybe we can change the shape of our lives when they get really terrible?')

We climb up to the top of Hungry Hill and make up this poem to leave in the summit cairn:

*An old woman with an apronful of stones
Who knows what she's up to?*

I return to the hostel at the Buddhist Monastery of Dzogchen Beara. That evening we sit in the meditation hall on the cliff edge, and watch a video of Sogyal Rinpoche giving his teaching on death and dying.

*Hag Day ends
I listen moon-faced -
the Atlantic roars*

* In Gaelic folklore there is a tale that, when asked her age, the Cailleach gave this as her answer. (See Eleanor Hull, *Legends and traditions of the Cailleach*, in *Folklore* 38 1927 225 - 254)

Pilgrimage to Iona

Columba's isle shapes itself out of the mist as the ferry boat crosses the sound between Mull and Iona. Before landfall we pass *Eilean nam Ban*, the Island of Women. A saintly man in many ways, Columba liked to keep women (and cows) at a safe distance. He forbade them entry to Iona and ordered their perpetual exile to this rocky outcrop. In vain, of course.

*strident shag
recalling Columba
the hot-headed saint*

The odour of sanctity has attracted good and bad alike to Columba's Isle over the centuries. From the eighth to tenth centuries Norse longships pulled in to Iona's sandy bays for bloody bouts of killing and looting. To the Norsemen the monasteries were material hoards of silver and gold. Columba's 'men of peace' made easy pickings. The monks could only pray, some for moral courage and some for bad weather to hold up their tormentors. An Irish chronicler wrote of one golden dawn in the year 825:

See, the savage cursed mob came rushing through the open abbey, threatening cruel attacks on the blessed men; and after slaughtering in crazed frenzy the rest of the community, they came up to the holy abbot to force him to give up the casket holding the holy bones of Columba. But the monks had buried the shrine in the earth...the saint stayed firm...trained to confront the enemy, to face the fight, and unused to give in...So he was torn limb from limb...

Their God looked on in his mysterious way, and turned a blind eye to the mayhem.

But in the thirteenth century God relents and gives them a hand. The barbarian invaders convert to Christianity and chisel Christ as well as Odin on their tombstones.

The women teach their bright blond babies to speak Gaelic instead of Norse, and the old language of the saints is saved for posterity.

A party of tough and tender Augustinian sisters sail over the sound and set up a nunnery. Their mission is *imitatio Christi*. They nurse the sick and grow food for the starving. They sit up all night with the dying and pray.

For a while life and death are as good as they get. Only proud tramps and stubborn hermits must suffer and die alone.

#

*

*

On this dappled June morning we modern pilgrims are standing in the roofless ruins of the nunnery. High walls shelter us from the winds that forever sweep Columba's isle.

pink thrift on fallen stone
starlings mock
the nuns' stout laughter

Our group moves on round the island in a great wave, for this is Wednesday and it's the weekly Iona Pilgrimage Walk.

There's a back-up van for the frail who cannot go the whole distance. At noon another van draws up on the western *machair* and distributes packed lunches and hot drinks. Modern pilgrimage is a cushy number – if you can still the

hubbub of eternity. In the abandoned marble quarry we sit and listen.

*on slippery rocks
God's words
ebb and flow with the tides*

The rocks we sit on are dull and rough, a world away from the green-veined white marble of the font in the Abbey. The local fishermen used to carry a hunk of the holy marble in their boats to save them from shipwreck. So fathers and sons chipped away at 'Columba's altar' till there was nothing left. The abbey fell into ruins for the second time.

Now the abbey is rebuilt and the crowds of pilgrims are back. Here we all are, with our unravelling lives and shaky consciences, hoping for miracles or something.

It's a comfort to hear that Columba landed up here with a bad conscience too. He had been exiled from Ulster (for causing a tribal war – what else?) and buried his coracle under the sands of *Port a' Churaich* to stop himself going back.

On top of his boat's burial mound he laid the first stone of the Cairn of Sin. Thereafter he taught his monks to come here and lay a penance stone for every sin of commission and omission. Modern pilgrims do the same.

I hurl a pebble into the sea to renounce a prick upon my conscience. I select a sea-smooth stone of different hue to mark a fresh start – though I haven't a clue yet what it is. How many of us have? Some of us exchange rueful smiles as we stroll back across unfenced sheep pastures in a fine drizzle. Chatting casually of other people's sins, the pilgrim party tramples the daisies.

We finish at the foot of St Martin's Cross. A cross inside a ring of stone. It means salvation, they say, within the circle of life. On the shaft is a twisting vine whose end is its beginning. Only connect and all will be well, maybe?

Here on Columba's Isle people have gathered for over a thousand years, hoping to find faith or forgiveness or just security in bad times.

What's in it for us moderns, then?

*a power of stillness -
stone tree
in a cloud of midges*

Pilgrimage to St Melangell's Healing Centre

It's a drizzly May morning when I leave home on the three day walk to Melangell's shrine. My route climbs steeply out of our valley and skirts Plynlimon, the bare mountain that gives birth to three rivers – the Wye, the Severn and the Rheidol. I trudge the sheep-grazed moorland, hour after hour, without sight or sound of habitation. Is this what pilgrimage is – just boring? Not filling but emptying?

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>yn cerdded trwy'r dydd</i> | <i>(walking the whole day alone</i> |
| <i>ddim yn cwrdd a neb -</i> | <i>meeting no-one</i> |
| <i>dim ond fy hunan</i> | <i>but myself)</i> |

Noon in the ruins of *Bugeilyn*. The stone walls are thick, and I sit in one of the windowless windows, half in and half out of the rain.

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>brechdanau gwlyb</i> | <i>(damp sandwiches</i> |
| <i>yn hen fwthyn y bugail-</i> | <i>in the shepherd's house</i> |
| <i>'sdim to nawr</i> | <i>the roof fallen in)</i> |

After lunch I get up speed walking a landrover track through the heather to the blue-green lake of Glaslyn. The rain edges off to the east, and with it goes the emptiness I'm beginning to like:

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>yn torri'r tawelwch</i> | <i>(breaking the silence</i> |
| <i>ar draws y rhos -</i> | <i>across the moor -</i> |
| <i>hedyddion a beics</i> | <i>larks and motorbikes)</i> |

I reach Glaslyn Nature Reserve, and face my first test - a pilgrim fallen among motorists. They're picnicking on the lake shore, indulging themselves from lush lunch baskets.

*nid llu o saint
xy'n ymptydio 'ma
ar eu gwelyau cerrig*

*(no host of saints here
fasting
on their beds of stone)*

I pick my way along the water's edge, saying Hi to the strangers, till suddenly I have winged company - a pair of mergansers soaring and settling.

* * *

On the second day I pack my rucksack and leave the guesthouse before the other visitors appear. Last night I had enough questions about being 'a woman who walks by herself'. 'Is it safe?' 'Are you not afraid?' I wonder about this as I climb up onto a plateau of unfenced hill farms. What is there to be afraid of up here on the lark-filled heights?

*dim ond Crist y Ffermwr
xy'n bwydo'r pum mil
oddi ar ei quad bike*

*(only Christ the Farmer
feeding the five thousand
from his quad bike)*

Mid afternoon I stop to rest on the steps of an empty holiday cottage. A cloud of bluebottles gathers and a sickening stench drifts across the rank grass. Dead fox crept in here to die? I move on fast to escape the whiff of mortality, but there's more death waiting at the next farm. An indifferent teenager is sprinkling diesel on a smouldering cattle carcass that is too liquid-rotten to burn.

*pla du dan yr haul
taranau'r haf -
rydw i'n cario ymlaen*

*(black death under the sun
summer thunder -
I carry on)*

Till dusk I follow the banks of the *Afon Gam* in *Nant yr Eira* – the Crooked River in the Valley of Snows. I feel in my bones what Basho is talking about when he says:

the loneliness here's superior to Suma, autumn on the beach

*cymuned glos
oes 'na bobl sy'n fodlon
siarad ag estron?*

*(close-knit community
is there anybody here
has a word for a stranger?)*

*

*

*

Third day – arriving at Melangell's shrine and Cancer Help Centre, nestling at the head of a green valley. The church stands in a pre-christian circular enclosure. There was a healing well nearby, but now it's been fenced off and privatised by a new owner.

This is the end of my solitary pilgrimage. I meet friends and talk too much the way you do when you've been alone. Then we catch ourselves out and sit quietly in the church for an hour – praying or not praying according to our lights.

On the oak rood screen Melangell is saving a hare from the Prince of Powys's hunting party. All round the church are carvings of happy hares finding sanctuary under the saint's cloak. (The locals call hares *wyn bach Melangell* – Melangell's lambs).

I read in the visitors' book a moving record of hundreds of pilgrims who have come here and found the help they needed - to go on with living or to face dying. I am lost for words. I go and sit in silence at Melangell's shrine.

*ar ei allor
hen gath yn eistedd
ac yn canu grwndi*

*(on her shrine
an ancient cat sits
purring)*

Later we go out into the churchyard. The yew trees they say
are two thousand years old. Their broken trunks bleed red sap.
But they go on offering shelter to whoever comes - faith or no
faith.

*cym ni'n cymryd ein tro
profi tragwyddoldeb
yn yr ywen gau*

*(we take it in turns
trying on eternity
in the hollow yew)*

Till dusk I follow
the Crooked X
what Bashe is talking

the loneliness here's
yes they say
gas has been broken
no to this - someone comes -
cymon's gas
oes 'ad hobi n' follen
stard as stard?

stard as stard?
trying on stard
(the hollow view)

Third day - arriving at Melangell's shrine and
Centre, nestled at the head of a green valley.
stands in a pre-Christian circular enclosure. There
healing well nearby, but now it's been fenced off and
privatised by a new owner.

This is the end of my solitary pilgrimage. I must
talk too much the way you do when you've been alone.
we catch ourselves out and sit quietly in the chair for an
hour - praying or not praying according to our

On the oak door screen Melangell is saving a hare for
Prince of Powys's hunting party. All round the church
carvings of happy hares finding sanctuary under the
clock. (The locals call hares *ym buch Melangell* -
Melangell's lambs).

I read in the visitors' book a moving record of many
pilgrims who have come here and faced the help
- to go on with living or to face dying. I am here
go and sit in silence at Melangell's shrine.

FOUR

SPRING AND SUMMER HAIKU

May Day morning

plum of hailstones

even the frogspawn jumps

is it the same swallow

back from Africa

to our old cowshed?
after you flying wife

a deafening silence

new suburb stills

forming their way up

through the bottomless bucket

the meeps' eyes light up

in the car headlights

polling geraniums

measuring a fat pink woman

I can understand you

and that's no insult

visiting different worlds

Spring in Cwm Rheidol

*opening the door
on early morning rain
closing it again*

*is it the same swallows
back from Africa
to our old cowshed?*

*new rhubarb stalks
forcing their way up
through the bottomless bucket*

*potting geraniums
unearthing a fat pink worm
robin's beady eye*

*unploughed pasture
leaping the ancient ant hills
this year's lambs*

*May Day morning
splatter of hailstones
even the frogspawn jumps*

*after the low flying jet
a deafening silence*

*coming home late
the sheep's eyes light up
in the car headlamps*

*my neighbour and I
leaning on a field gate
viewing different worlds*

Summer Vacations

*George Sand at Le Chatre -
under the peeling plane trees
stone lady with stone book*

*Musée George Sand
faded lovers under glass
and Chopin polonaises*

*Breton poet hunting words
poised above his desk
the stuffed raven*

*dandelion clock
the country child blows hard
and time flies*

*Scots baronial hotel
tai chi on the lawns
shadowed by granite peaks*

*misty lochside
the same old midges
waiting by the gate*

*even the stone stumps
of the deserted village
warm in the June sun*

*old grey seal and I
flopping on neighbouring rocks
our splashy silence*

*highland summer
thigh deep in a bog hole
squelch!*

*after the shower
scent of June diesel
from the narrow gauge railway*

*a single sail
ferryman crossing the sound –
the coffin lashed down*

Summer Vacation

many a day
the same old things
waiting for the sun

George Sand at Le Champs
under the peeling plane trees
stone lady with stone back

even the stone things
of the deserted village
warm in the June sun

Muse George Sand
judged towers under glass
and Chopin polonaises

old grey seal and I
flopping on neighbouring rocks
our splashy silence

Breton poet hunting words
paired above his own
the stuffed river

highland summer
high deep in a bog hole
speech

dandelion clock
the country child blows hard
and time flies

after the shower
scum of June diesel
from the narrow gauge railway

Scotts baronial hotel
fai chi on the lawn
shadowed by granite peaks

a single soil
fisherman crossing the sound -
the coffin lashed down

FIVE

SONGS OF OLD AGE

Zen in the Old People's Home

*forgetting who I am
I smell a scentless tulip
hear spiders weaving*

*arthritic fingers
knit one, purl one, knit three together
this eternal scarf*

*out every morning
filling my handbag with gravel
busier than ever*

*glimpsing the cosmos
neighbour woman shouts 'Jesus!'
and twitches the net curtain*

*ex-housewife dreaming
leaving her skinny body
she dusts the stars*

*bad breath from gaping mouths
the sleep of reason
suddenly an angelic smile*

*lost for words
beyond thinking, past doing
turnip head or Buddha?*

*for a moment there
I slid out of my skin
into the slanting sun*

*who are they
the people who keep coming
and think they know me?*

*so many strangers
spattering me with words
shitting in the void*

*no longer hoping –
at last the walls slide open
I ride the big black mare*

Songs of Old Age, 1

I can't go on but I'm going on I'm going on in spite of myself
or is it to spite this creaky old self that isn't me but has taken
me over somehow this self of crumbling bones and everything
going bit by bit - osteoporosis that's the word I was trying to
get strange how the worst words come easy as pie while the
good words run away and I can't get a grip on them any more

here I am then living in dribs and drabs dozing and waking
every five minutes tears of memory oozing down my cheek
what was it anyway I can't remember I only feel the sadness
not the reason for it reasons are no help anyway never were
much help

I have to go on somewhere I can't go back there's only this
here and now I'm stuck in and no moving one way or another
I'm all seized up inside and out the only thing that keeps me
going is the odd messages coming in from time to time like
the telephone speaking clock only it can't be that because I
never use the telephone now I'm too deaf and my hands shake
there's a message coming in now I must be ready for it
whatever that means it's not just listening more like a bird
flying in a skinny swallow all the way from Africa ah the pull
of faraway spaces and tides

the messages come breaking into the endless talking to myself
that I do to pass the time when the time drags and the hours
and minutes last forever I don't know where the messages are
coming from or who's speaking here's the latest anyway for
better or for worse mostly I feel better not worse after the
messages so maybe it's what we were once taught to call the
Good God who's sending them I haven't been in touch with
Him for centuries but isn't he supposed to keep a merciful eye

on things even if he can't interfere due to freewill is that it or
am I confusing Him with the counselling lady who said I had
to make my own decisions she could only listen what good is
that I asked but got no answer from the Woman who could
only Listen and not pull you out of the mire whatever the mire
is the mire keeps changing I know that you get bogged down
over and over again the longer life goes on the more chance of
blundering into unknown bogs with no-one to pull you out
only yourself and you can't because your strength is going

what was I saying o yes the message this is it yes at least I
hope it is but I can't be sure of anything these days the words
slip and twist like eels - bright and dark and shiny - rose and
yellow and eau de nil I can't explain the colours of thought
everything is leaking away into the void or is it the other way
round maybe the messages come from the void?

*going astray
on my one legged horse
the void claps hands*

*words into water
thoughts into stones
a huge stillness smiles*

I don't know what that is about I don't suppose it is about
anything though it might be the thing I'm looking for now the
message under the skin it's about nothing after all and nothing
is what I need to know now not about it but what it is for I am
getting closer to nothing every day and I don't know what to
do about it is it funny or sad or what? Silly questions

I need a new way of asking and there's no outside help
nobody is interested when you're as old as I am people treat
you like a nobody or a nothing you need to have your own
nothingness to keep going sometimes I can't go on I don't
know how to go on then one of the messages comes through
and I'll go on I know nothing that's why I can go on I have to
unknow everything and let it all go the rubbish the endless
rubbish of my life stuffing up the space till I can hardly
breathe knowing too much remembering too much making up
too much all the lies I tell myself about what I did and didn't
do loving people and letting them down stabbing bleeding
hearts loving and hating my mother and daughter and husband
off and on and my cats and never sure of anything how can
you be till you get past it into the country behind the mirror
where the messages come from

there's another one coming I know when they're coming now
it's when I know least of all and give up trying to be
something it's too late for that I go on yes but I'm only the
dust of the world only I say but that's the point isn't it or the
pointlessness who knows I don't anyway this new message is
the next thing or the next nothing it flows along the arteries of
my thinning blood and the trick is not to try to make sense of
it just swallow it down like the handfuls of coloured pills they
give me only the pills dull me but the message opens out
inside like one of those paper flowers that bloom in water for
a while anyway before they rot and die oops don't use that
word it's too big a question it's the biggest nothing and
nowhere of all better just stick with the messages till I'm
better able to face the next thing

*moss on ancient firewood
an empty rocker rocking
my last snowdrops*

Songs of Old Age, 2

I can't go on but I'm going on the morning is so huge and empty it makes me dizzy am I falling off the world at last no it's only nature having the laugh on me again well I'll laugh back even if they think I'm mad it's the only answer to the big emptiness I'm stuck in I don't know how I get through the mornings the afternoons as well and then there's the nights I lie awake tired out why is it you get less and less sleep when you're old just dozing on and off though you're so weary the days become nights and the nights days is it worry about the nothingness to come or just the worry about the nothingness now still I do get through what with one thing or another

*old grey cat and I
sharing a can of sardines
he winks I wink back*

I used to think the nothingness cut me off from the world and that was the worst thing for a hard-working woman who once had a lively love life and went on peace marches and liked a good laugh but the messages keep telling me nothingness is the One Big Thing do they think I'm daft or what I can tell the difference between nothing and everything even though the brain cells are dropping away at a great rate the oily fish are no help in the end no matter what the diet merchants say they're just trying to sell more cod liver oil capsules

excuse me if I ramble on a bit you know how it is or you will one day for growing old or trying not to is the next big thing and we'll all be there one day making light of our rickety selves or turning worrying into an art form I used to feel I was the world's expert on ageing I knew all about keeping myself

going with healthy food and keeping fit and exorcising ghost fears though maybe not so ghostly when you hear the crime figures bandied about with relish among the old muggings and break-ins and if those worries aren't enough there's always plastic knees and hip replacements to worry about or worse still not getting hip replacements or getting the hospital appointment for the day you die

with all that going on you can imagine what a relief it was when the messages on emptiness started a mixed relief mind you I soon found I'd won a lottery with topsy turvy rules – the more you lose the more you win Jesus I thought I've never been a loser and I'm not starting now just because I'm old and sick and lonely but I couldn't stop the messages coming like it or not you can't turn off the emptiness with a remote control like the telly I tell you pottering is no longer possible when the big smiling void starts nudging and making announcements like a railway station loudspeaker you can't make out till you stop trying and even then you're lucky to get the half of it and that might be too much for you

I'm not sure when it started maybe it was that time down at the Day Centre I used to go off and on to play old tunes on the piano and get the denizens to sing along it was going slow and sluggish as usual when suddenly the lady biology professor with alzheimers got up and started waltzing like she was a finalist on the Come Dancing competition I kept going with the Blue Danube and the Gold and Silver and she kept going the poky place and the mean afternoon opened out the emptiness filled the nothingness blossomed

*dusty sunlight
circling the old ones' heads
their shadows touch*

when I got past playing the piano there was a new nothingness to face I remembered what they used to say in my home town of Belfast 'whatever you say - say nothing' the messages put a new twist on it NOTHING IS THE NEW EVERYTHING that suits me down to the ground these days five minutes with anybody is enough I always hated show off talk and telly movies with everybody saying I love you and I love you too if you don't show it what's the good of saying it? Mind you there was a time I'd try to have a few words with someone anyone the postman once a day or once a week but the less you speak the less you bother the words fall away into the emptiness till one day you open your mouth and can't get a word out in the beginning was the word in the ending is the silence the messages are always on about the silence the silence is the next thing better than most of the talk that's left that carer saying Fuck you you old Bitch when I won't get out of bed for a forced breakfast or those young ones I'm supposed to know saying A Nice Outing Where would She Like to go?

*going nowhere
her full moon mind
mirrors emptiness*

Songs of Old Age, 3

I can't go on I'm going on somehow only I'm not telling the story any more the story's telling me I don't know the ending I only know what's happening now I'm forgetting things all the time different doors are opening I don't recognise the rooms in this house they say is mine everything looks new and strange the furniture too where is my favourite chair it doesn't matter any more I can't get any proper rest I'm tired out

oh yes I know I'm going to die this month next month not long to go now but what good is it knowing that what are you supposed to do about it pray or feel sorry for yourself or be glad of the relief or look forward to a toyland eternity there must be another way the way of uncertainty maybe like that ancient Zen poem by Fumon I found on a calendar and cut out for no reason:

magnificent! magnificent!
no one knows the final word
the ocean bed's aflame
out of the void leap wooden lambs

I like that I'm a non-knower in my story now so why am I bothering why not just embrace the emptiness delight in the void not so easy I can't stop the words coming I can't get through to the unwords and the silence anyway emptiness is all very well in dreams but not much help when us oldies are supposed to be still competing in the Help Yourself to a Full Life Stakes?

*twilight in the garden
an old stone toad
snapping stone insects*

ah but the kindness of strangers my neighbour keeps an eye on me she says I should have a little holiday in the sun get away from it all for a month or so wintering abroad is the thing for senior citizens these days I laugh to myself I'm on my final journey as it is what is the point of rushing about the world on your last legs and dropping dead in Malaga airport or the Promenade des Anglais this old body's had enough of everything its been eighty years of longing for everything loving and hating everything learning and forgetting everything laughing and crying at everything surely it must be time for nothing now if ever but what kind of nothing that's the question?

letting go is easy so much just drops away anyway because your mind and body let you down that's what the floating world calls it AGE LETTING YOU DOWN but the messages don't see it like that I don't know but I think the messages are telling me this is the last chapter of my story telling itself the story is trying to tell me too it's trying to get me moving out of my lonely rickety old body into Big Body I don't have to bother the messages say just let the clinging things go get rid of the rubbish do my Autumn clear out and MAKE A SILENCE WHERE I CAN HEAR THE STORY ENDING

maybe that's what I'm trying to do these days I'm no good at it but I suppose I have to go on doing this kind of nothing to get to the end of the story mind you it's very hard to give up telling my own story and let it tell me instead that's not been my style me a working woman and star of my own destiny but no harm in giving it a chance besides I'm curious to know the end of the story that's not it I mean be there in the story till the end no choice anyway with mind and memory going to pieces and unreliable limbs letting me down with a jolt and a jar nothing for it but give myself over to the Big Storyteller in

the Sky or whatever it is that keeps me going on when I can't go on?

the days pass quietly enough maybe I'm getting into some rhythm of the unknowable it's easier now I've got rid of the certainties that you think you have when you are telling your own life now I'm letting life tell me I have more time for the geraniums and the sunshiny bursts of rain and the visits of the old grey cat and above all the nothingness I still have flurries of busyness mostly these days getting rid of things emptying out the ragbag of old thoughts and feelings and making space for the serene silence

*yellowed love letters
curling in the flames
my watering eyes*

ah postcards from lost countries photos of forgotten people on to the fire with them they're all gone and heaven knows who they are I can't remember the faces squinting into summer suns and captured on box Brownies I stir the flames as best I can with my white cane a good job done except it dawns on me that getting rid of things is still not the nothing I'm looking for there's something else only what is it?

going inside I absent-mindedly water the geraniums in the porch I water them far too often because I forget but this evening they don't mind they're flaming in such a sunset it's too much for me I go flabby and collapse into the nearest chair smiling for nothing

*this geranium -
so red, so real
I forget to be*

Songs of Old Age, 4

What's to be done? Getting up this morning and struggling to get dressed I get the same answer as usual. Nothing to be done. The answer's always nothing now. Too late for shallow laughter and girlish giggles – though some of them here go on giggling in spite of everything. Ancient wrinkled schoolgirls laughing at old age and death like they've laughed all their lives when things went wrong, laughed over the failures and the hurts, because what else can you do they ask with a merry smile? I never could laugh though. Maybe that's the trouble with me. Too serious by half. At school they called me 'Po Face' because I listened in class and got good marks and didn't giggle and chatter with Fran and the others. I WANTED TO KNOW WHY. I LONGED FOR REASON. I STUFFED UP THE EMPTINESS WITH LEARNING.

moon on torn pillow

a feather floats off

into the void

Reason's no help now, I can tell you. Here I am left with nothing at the end of it all – all that hard work and being reasonable (and even kind now and then). Life gets you nowhere and leaves you with nothing that's the trouble no matter what you do or don't do no matter how hard you try or don't try. We're all in the same boat doing nothing and going nowhere, it just happens I'm near the end now so I'm going on like this the way old people go on. I used to hate that now I see why they do it because I'm doing it myself. I have to do it. It's the only thing to do when you're face to face with nothing.

Mind you it's not all gloom and doom, don't run away with the idea that I'm just another crazy old woman with a grudge against the world because I'm past everything and can't bear to see others still able to enjoy themselves. I bet that's what some of you are thinking as you listen – IF you're listening – to my maunderings. To be honest I don't know what I am anymore so you might be right – maybe I am a crazy old woman and maybe that's the best thing to be when you're next to nothing. No matter – sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me...

I'll tell you one thing I've found out living from day to day in this mad house – YOU HAVE TO LAUGH OR YOU'RE DONE FOR. So let's see if we can have a bit of a laugh The laugh's on me, whether you get it or not. This NOTHING I'm stuck in is life's last joke, that's what I'm coming to believe, and if I don't have the laugh on it, it'll have the last laugh on me. Oh yes it's a battle to the end I'm not talking just about life and death there's nothing you can do about that. I'm talking about the war between good and bad jokes. I'm talking about taking the mickey out of the Big Nothing. I'm talking nonsense again, am n't I? Well, nonsense is the next best thing to a joke, and I can't always tell the difference, can you? So let the nonsense come and then one day – fine or otherwise, windy or serene – the Big Nothing will give you a friendly nudge and you'll find yourself laughing the cosmic laugh?

*clown in the mirror
grinning under her painted smile
laughing I crash through*

Mind you the nothing is never the same. It varies from day to day. Some days I wake up so tired I'm glad of the nothing. It's like an extra blanket I can pull over me and let everything

go. My good days are harder. That's when the nothing bites and pinches. I have to devise all sorts of little stratagems to keep the nothing at bay. Watering the spider plant and the geranium a dozen times a day. Blathering away to myself like I'm doing now – pretending there's somebody there to speak to, when they're all dead and gone years ago. I'm hoarse from not doing any live talking. I'd go mad if I didn't have the voices in my head. The odd thing is I get the feeling there's people out there listening, people I don't even know, people who want to hear me blathering on about nothing, because nothing's kept a dark secret and nobody tells you how to handle it though we all come to it sooner or later and have to know.

The voices keep me in touch. They're better than thoughts now. I'm past having thoughts. I did mind about that once, but it's a relief not jumping through the tired old hoops. Now and then a stray thought still floats into my space, but it's usually gone before I can get hold of it, and there's room for the voices to come back.

*out of reach at last
the puppet cuts her strings –
acrobat of the void*

Songs of Old Age, 5

I always used to say I can't go on but I'd go on anyway no matter what. Now it's different I can't get out of bed and I can't hear what they're saying – they come and stand round the bed and look at me like I was a rag doll yes somebody once gave me a floppy longlegged doll in satin pyjamas that couldn't sit up I never loved it was an alien that's how they treat me in this place I'm so far gone.

I can't see things clearly there's a mist creeping over everything it's blurring, thickening by the day or the hour or the minute what does it matter what's the good of chopping up time like that I know better now how night and day get mixed up and run into each other how the years flow forward and back with no rhyme or reason how the hours gather dust and drag me along with them when all I want is for this stupid time to stop and let me get away.

*what's there to cling to?
nudging the door to the dark
I long for nothing*

I know in my skinny old bones it's time to leave the time for everything to count or not count is over the time for seeing and speaking too. There's this other thing I get the odd glimpse of where the calculating stops I get away from the slow dead measuring of the days whatever it is it lets me off the hook and makes me glad to go – if only I could go but I'm still stuck here in my feeble old self. I long to be giving it all up. I'm sick of being useless and having to pass the endless empty time. I'm past the stage even of wondering what it's all for, this being here and wondering what on earth to do with yourself next...

I half remember a time when I was still trying to make myself useful but that didn't last long. They soon make you feel you're not needed – the worldly ones - or you end up doing all kinds of stupid things that have nothing to do with you so you can say to people 'Oh, I've never been busier in my life'. Or you do it just to get out and about now and then from the prison of the lovely house and garden (if you're lucky enough to have a lovely house and garden you're supposed to feel well off and no need to complain because there's always somebody worse off than you I've never found that any comfort strangely enough).

Anyway I couldn't keep up the being busy for long it wore me out and got me stuck in middle-aged people's stuff I was past all that I thought better the loneliness and the voices in your head telling you something different even if you haven't a clue what it is you get the odd inkling of a different way now and then something bigger than the fussy concerns they want you to spend your time on. The trouble is they begin to show concern – the worldly ones – when you show signs of turning into a recluse in your old age. According to them you should get out more, join in things or you'll sink into depression and maybe even go mad if you have the energy. It's not that you have to worry about I thought to myself. It's the killing kindness of the caring...

*under the cedars
a laughing madwoman's dance
the nuns look grave*

* * *

I don't know how much later it is I dozed off but nothing is still happening as usual. The sky's the same grey colour well

maybe a bit lighter or darker to be fair the rain's pissing down the way it always does in these western extremities. The silence is shocking when you turn off the telly but you have to turn off the telly sometimes because it makes a change listening to the silence and the rain lashing the window panes and the occasional creak of old bones and old floorboards. It's more than that though sometimes I get the feeling there are things going on in the nothingness that I need to keep tabs on and if I fill up every minute I might miss some message coming through. A message? Am I joking? Who or what is going to send me a message with all the answers about life and death in ticked boxes already filled in? Nobody and nothing that's for sure still you never know you have to keep your options open I suppose that's why I sometimes turn off the telly and just listen to the silence and look at the rain as if I'd never seen it before the wind too.

I don't like the wind worrying the house and nosing out its every weakness too like the invisible things that nose out my own weaknesses no I'm not giving myself away well why not it's too late to matter now I'm on the way out. Alright then I'll tell you my worst thing has always been finding the words. I can never bridge the gap between what's out there and what I know in here in myself. It's worse not better as you get older they think you're daft and listen even less. I used to worry about the right things to say to people I don't worry about that any more you can learn that it's only a habit. I'm talking about the gap between what you know in your bones and what they keep telling you - the politicians and the preachers, the do-gooders and the carers they're all at it spinning their old webs to tangle you in. Here I am trying to hear the other messages coming through the right ones the big ones and they're drowned in their garbage words

*sharpening their knives
to slice the rainbow -
life blood in the sands*

I'm losing the words now

the world is drifting away from me

or is it the other way round

maybe it's me drifting away from the world at last

the words are coming and going going off and on

anyway why miss the words

there's other things to know

*early bluebottle
on family photo shrine
a sunshine buzz*

The Memory Game

In the Victorian conservatory Alice Lestrangle (aged 96) dozes the morning away, haunted by the laughter of ghosts.

Her polished mind (what's left of it) no longer bothers to think. An unreliable kaleidoscope, it flashes broken patterns. She is not sure what is real and what is her imagining in this country of extreme old age. But memories – true or false -- keep jostling inside her bony old skull.

*prehistoric thoughts -
nothing left but cave paintings
scored on crumbling rock*

* * *

Nanny Jennings does not let Alice down from the breakfast table till she has finished her milky porridge and eaten the crusts on her bread and butter. Then a brief freedom before lessons. She is allowed to visit the bustling yard which the barred nursery windows look out on.

Mr Dyer the blacksmith hammers red-hot spirals for a gate into the walled garden.

Elsie the kitchen maid perches on a three-legged stool in the sun, plucking chickens for a dinner party, and chatting up the blushing young postman. For once he's glad he can't leave till the outgoing letters are ready on the hall table.

Awed by the ordinary, Young Miss sucks her thumb and takes it all in.

The servants tease her, and she doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

*

*

*

Laughter in the dark. Finishing school and losing her virginity in Paris.

Olive-skinned Antoine is her *maître d'amour*. He teaches her the language of the body, trains her in his advanced grammar of the senses. Taking her to undreamt of places – mornings in the Louvre, afternoons in his bed. '*l'art, c'est tout*', he always says. But by the end of that summer his ingenious erotics have become more science than art. She is bored with self-conscious *amour*, and wants Love. She longs to be back in her own country with the horses and the open parkland.

*tide gone out –
leftover bodies
beached on damp sand*

*

*

*

Inheritance, Ah, Inheritance! Her beloved Gerald and his inheritance. 'Ten thousand acres for making love in', he whispers to her the evening they get engaged. 'And a ring of emeralds from a Moghul court. My great grandfather brought it back and gave it to his bride on their wedding day. The envious muttered that it carried a curse, but so far, so good...' We kiss. We laugh. Young, in love and well connected, we don't believe in curses – yet.

But when the oldest child died? Was that when I lost my laughter and began to drink a little more than socially? Or was it when the other children stopped being bonny and turned

into terrifying spiky young people? All that grief over unsuitable lovers and collapsing marriages?

Or was it the tidal wave of history that threatened our sort after the War? The whole place running down because nobody wanted to be a servant any more. Dozens of musty bedrooms lying empty because everybody decent was working too hard for weekending. That Attlee person punishing us with death duties. The Labour Infection spreading to our tenant farmers who started asking for modern bathrooms and water laid on...

*my furred tongue tangled
in modern talk – groping for
another g & t*

*

*

*

Now where am I? I remember this place – the Chinese wallpaper in the hall, the squeaking floorboards on the ninth and thirteenth stairs. The portrait of Gerald's great grandfather hanging on the half landing. When I take the stairlift up to my room I see in a blur the faded squares on the walls where they brought in Sotheby's to clear the more marketable ancestors. I'm still here in the Blue Room, with its stone-mullioned windows facing East and South.

I made them swear they'd never send me off to a Home. I'm not sure of anything much any more, but I know there are strange people in the house, people I don't know. Laughing at me. I have a feeling they've turned our place into a Home and left me in it with these others. Clever children. Curse them.

Not much longer now, though. Every day I see less, hear less,
feel less. More and more I'm living in the past, and the
outside world is fading away, thank goodness.

They try to get me to eat, but I don't want to. Funny, I don't
even seem to care about drink these days. Nothing to laugh at
anymore and nobody left to laugh with. Time to go.

*nighthawk moth trapped
on too bright window pane –
who will let her out?*

Anglo-Irish

The Lady of the House, aged 83, is installed in the morning room after breakfast by her one last servant. She dozes off over the *Irish Times* obituaries, then jerks awake. The French clock on the marble fireplace is striking ten in delicate tones. It's enough to disturb her fragile daytime sleep.

She's alone, as usual, in her Palladian mansion. Another morning stretches ahead. Molly's out doing the shopping. And flirting with that thick fingered butcher she fancies? They think I'm a daft old woman, but I take it all in, every sorry bit of it...the loves and the hates going on around me.

*a stalled life
last orders - summoning the past
out of the dusty sunbeams*

I always fancied military men myself with their strong hands, scents of good tobacco and leather. And tickling moustaches. They always knew the right thing to do, no matter what. Had to be AMUSING, of course, and not go on about their dreadful wars – military BORES were the bane of the hunt balls in those days.

*framed in tortoiseshell
in pride of place on the Bechstein –
the Three Majors*

Husbands all gone now, ten thousand acres down to three hundred, and still not enough money for a new roof. Whenever the rain comes on at night she lies awake counting the plops falling into the jugs and buckets along the corridor. She and the house are going to rack and ruin together, and

nothing to be done about it. She laughs, but only on one side of her face - since the stroke.

The clock ticks on and she drowns off again, drifting back to that golden time when she danced and danced with the young officers, and none of them yet dreamt of the Great War.

*the walled garden
learning kissing in the yew walk -
her tight lips*

Visiting the stables after breakfast to see White Lady licking her new born foals Castor and Pollux...and Pollux turning out to be such a devil to ride that the First Major re-christened him Bollux.

*the horse cathedral
worshipping the thoroughbreds
in their gothic stalls*

Lunchtime. Her maid wakes her with a squeeze on the shoulder, and wheels her into the conservatory. She likes to follow the sun as it moves round the house. Molly brings her a crystal glass of *Tio Pepe* and a ham sandwich with the crusts cut off. She eats from a stainless steel tray that clips on to her wheel chair, and listens to the news from an alien century.

Afternoons are easy when you are in your eighties. A nap on the daybed in the old nursery, besieged by archaic toys.

*Edwardian rocking horse
winking at her - one eye
stuck open - like hers*

At four o'clock young Declan is home from school and comes up from the Lodge to push her around the garden. He whistles under his breath and doesn't talk. She likes that. She's past talking by now, and he hasn't a clue what to say to her. Too much land, too many centuries lie between them.

They take refuge in the gazebo from a sudden downpour, and memory stirs again.

*her governess teaching daisy stitch –
flowers kept taut
in a wooden frame*

Dressing for dinner – Molly brushes the old lady's thin hair in too fierce a fit of energy. She fastens a paisley shawl round her shoulders with the amber brooch that was a gift from the Second Major. 'There, now, you're as smart as you'll ever be in this world, God love you'. She wheels her into the dining room, where the ancestors gaze down, dusty and withdrawn. They've been here too long. They've seen too much. So has she.

With arthritic claws she unrolls her napkin from its silver ring.

*dining alone –
how long
the mahogany table*

SIX

AUTUMN AND WINTER HAIKU

*grey ghosts on Moelddolwen
hill fort lying empty
for two thousand years*

*at the local marts
the hill farmers' hoary heads
talking up their ewes*

*Cardigan Bay
over the leaden waves
only a stump of rainbow*

*Valley Party
all our children grown too old
for Santa*

*autumn rains
the dried-up spring
by the holiday cottage
flowing again*

*rolling oak drums down the track
our helpless laughter
as they take off*

*breaking news -
new gas-powered land rover
our proud neighbour*

*January sleet
the cat comes in with the dark -
stars on his fur*

*red sun sinking fast
turning my lead self to gold -
if only!*

*solstice gales
rocking this old house of stone
another sleep-wrecked night*

*winter power cut
I look at your face
softened by candlelight*

*lunch time in winter
keeping private with our books
slurping home-made soup*

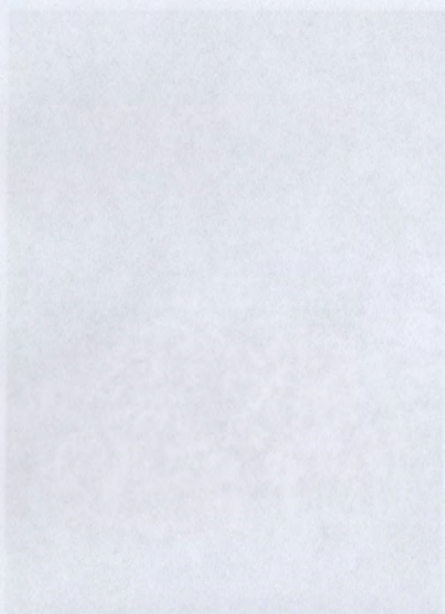
*jam-making time
shaking the old damson tree
stirring purple stones*

*slanting drizzle
on the valley sides
trees walking*

*shortest day of the year
sheep huddled by the thorn hedge
the stream bawling*

*rain riding the wind
young birches bowed to the ground
how long the night*

*New Year house cleaning
hoovering up
dead butterflies*



Noragh Jones is from the North of Ireland, and worked as a librarian in Belfast and in Trinity College Dublin, before leaving Ireland. She now lives in mid Wales, in an old farmhouse between woods and water, with her husband Ken Jones.

She has written books and done workshops on Celtic spirituality, women's spirituality, and the changing faces of rural living.

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STONE CIRCLES

Haiku and Haiku Prose

The poems and poetic prose in *Stone Circles* are the fruits of an inspired merging of Japanese *haiku* tradition and early Celtic nature poetry.

The cycle of the seasons is celebrated with spring, summer, autumn and winter haiku, set in Cwm Rheidol as we live now. The cycle of human life is celebrated with love haiku and with the moving *Songs of Old Age* (which won the Noboyuki Yuasa International Haibun Contest in 2003).

Ranging widely through Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany, where she has lived, worked and travelled, Noragh Jones visits ancient sites and retells old Celtic myths in modern terms. A Breton stone circle is a wedding party turned to stone. A rock on the Beara Peninsula in Ireland - studded with silver coins from modern pilgrims - is the Cailleach, or Sacred Hag, shaper of inner and outer landscapes.



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