

Bashō at St. Andrews

Having broken my host's shower, I set off early at first light. In my bright yellow satchel I had with me a bottle of water, a black woolly hat, two manuscripts in need of revision, and a thin blue rainmac, for I had heard of the inclement climate of these parts.

I followed the muddy road down towards the farm. Across the firth I could see the beginnings of the Highlands.

Snow's on the fellside, look.

Horace, via Bunting

A cargo ship was anchored in the firth, perhaps to avoid harbour charges while waiting for new cargo.

Turning right along the river, I followed the farm wall, behind which a group of brownish cattle lay in the hay and mud. Just then a pheasant appeared.

A pheasant flew up in alarm
from over the farm fence.
Are you here for the festival too?

Along the track between the trees, I noticed the ivy on the trees and the moss on the rocks. The river ran slow, then fast, then slow again, with a sound like rustling leaves. Now and again on the path there were bark chippings, beside the path lay last year's dry leaves. There were occasional holly bushes, with their prickly reminders. But there were clusters of wild

snowdrops everywhere:

Snowdrops down the sides of the mound,
hailstones left after a storm.

I came to some ruins, cut stones covered with ivy, and a sign that said DANGER KEEP OUT. Minding my head and trying not to disturb any ghosts who might be around, I entered inside. Growing within the walls of what was once some family's living space was a tree, whose age indicated that this was no recent ruin. And outside again, I found a stone in the wall that read "1719". The final inhabitants, however, had not left behind any date of abandonment.

Up there on the rise by the field were white-washed houses. Down here, in the trees, the grey ruins. Some small animal moved and hid. I continued on, past the stumps of felled trees, some split logs, and the ends of two rusting water pipes.

I almost thought I heard a child
From the empty blue swing on the far bank.

And a little later

Nobody here
but a black Mazda
and a washing line of black jeans upside down

A huge tree-trunk had fallen across the river to make a difficult bridge. Its middle was like the arching back of an old man.

Old bridge across the river,
did you fall or were you felled?

Around the bend, the river began to scatter into the sea, stones and boulders spreading out as the freshwater met the salt water. A line of yellow buoys bobbed out to sea. The rocks in the water formed a series of natural breakwaters, airstrips for the squadrons of seabirds, huddled by species. Walking along the shoreline where the Norse had once come, I could see a warship far away on the horizon, moving.

The earth of the path was trodden and compressed. Now and again I would see a branch that looked like it might make a good walking stick. There was a sudden scattering of seashells across the path, like the rocks across the river, the remains of some marine population explosion.

I had noticed already along the river that the animals and birds of these parts were shy. Squirrels, ducks, sparrows, all fled quickly at my approach. The black-backed gulls on the shore, screeching and squealing like children, flew off when I was still fifty metres off. Indeed, I had met no one yet since setting out. Now to the landward side I saw a tractor driving up and down a field. I waved at its driver, who pretended not to see me. With the firth stretched out before me, I stopped for a quick slash.

Around me were the colours of the shore, the earthy brown of the ploughed fields, the grey rocks with the dirty white of the algae. Some of the rocks were black, as if scorched, others were grey and bare, eroded, fractured, heaped, rubbed, scored, poured, torn, snapped, piled, gouged, pock-marked, arranged, showing the swirls of metamorphic activity, forming natural

bridges and stepping stones. The yellow-green of the grass, the pale blue sea and the paler blue of the sky, with the grey clouds and the squall coming in off Dundee. The sudden ochre of a piece of crumbling stone on the path. The orange-yellow sand with the prints of people, dogs and birds, and the other colours of the beach. A pale-green plastic Sprite bottle. What was once a half-pint of semi-skimmed. Three blue 25-litre canisters of diesel engine oil. The purple curviness of a bottle of Fizzy Vimto. Red brick. White polystyrene. A wagtail hopped across the sand.

You worn-out containers,
who brought you here,
the people or the sea?

Among the flotsam was a bright red buoy torn away from its moorings, wedged between two rocks, showing in the gap two letters in black marker-pen that said NO. There was a rusty oil drum, the purple and white wrapper of Cadbury's Dairy Milk, and a scrap of sheep's wool.

A barbed wire fence lined the coastal path. I wondered who it was there to keep out, beside the sea. Behind me were fields ploughed by molehills. On one stood some sheep, shaped against the horizon, quite still, like neolithic stones. I walked along a part of the path before looking back and seeing that I had actually been walking along a thick wall of large cut stones, there to protect the ploughed field from the high tide, whose traces were the seaweed at the wall's foot. On the wet rocks, pools had accumulated like tarns, and I slipped on the kelp and seaweed.

Now and again, the sun broke through the great shifting pattern of the sky. The wind was around my ears, which sometimes heard the chirp of an

unknown bird. Some jet from RAF Leuchars scraped the clouds overhead, out of sight. I decided to keep on to the next village and find a tavern, till I remembered that I had not had time to change money or find a cashpoint. I had about enough money in my wallet for a half. I came to a sign that read FOLLOW SHORE UNTIL NEXT MARKER, at which point, I turned back.

*

The next day I set off late, having managed to avoid my host. An old man gave me directions to the coastal path, as he unloaded bottles at the bottle bank from his four-wheel drive.

I followed his directions along paths between fields, until I came to the sea and a sign that read COASTAL PATH INLAND AT THIS POINT. I walked down some steps to the sea again, and came to Buddo Rock:

As large as two double-deckers
parked in parallel
The face of a dinosaur in its swirls

From another side there seemed to be a face like one of the four Guardian Gods in Chinese temples, scrunched up in pain. Another side had an alcove with an upright arrangement of stones that made me think of Henry Moore, and how he would probably have done a Madonna and Child. Atop the whole, huge lump of rock was a thin layer of grass.

I walked down to the water:

My little finger in the North Sea:

Damn, that's cold.

I wasn't alone:

Shades. Hoody. Bobble hat.

Three students skimming pebbles.

Continuing along the coast, I crossed a stile in a stone wall, where a sign read BEWARE LIVESTOCK, but

I did not see the Thanes of Fife,
only a lone golfer preparing to putt.

Tall grass waved in the wind, there was heather with yellow blooms, and suddenly a cluster of purple marigolds. A sign appeared: BEWARE GOLF AHEAD.

Some bomber flies above me
A golf ball nearly ends this *haibun*.

I threw the white missile out to the fishes.

The rolling golf course ended at the broken coast. With its sloping roof and veranda, the lodge had something of a pagoda about it. The flags on the course were the Red Scottish Lion on a yellow background. As the voices of the golfers wafted over, I fancied there was not a Scot among them.

A bunker looks out to the North Sea
too late to stop the longships.

Something resembling an ivory tusk lay on the pebbles below. I passed what looked like a withered fig tree. There was a slight stench on the wind, and I came to a grisly orchard of short, spikey, moss-covered trees. Inside lay a decaying gull, its wings stretched out. The heather pricked against my jeans. A barbed wire fence ran down to the beach to a rock at the waterline, and I remembered that the Norse had also reached the Normandy beaches.

A little further on, a tiny brook ran straight into the sea. Gulls squealed and ducks laughed. Always just to my left, the fields and courses were mostly out of sight. But now a way ahead of me I could see the towers of St. Andrews, the cathedral and churches, the ruins of the castle and priory. I thought of how in Renaissance paintings, a town is so often visible in the background. When there is no car, or train, or plane, you see the town as you approach it.

The path rose again. At the top was another golf course, and a chance to relieve myself. I found an inscription:

CODE OF CONDUCT FOR WALKERS

The Fife Coast is noted for its many fine links courses.

To avoid disturbance to players, and help to ensure your own safety, please keep to the path and abide by the following guidelines.

If you see a player about to play a shot, it is safest to stand quietly by until the shot has been played.

Keep alert.

Keep dogs under control.

Keep to the path or shoreline if possible – keep off the greens and fairways.

Here there was a cartoon of a grumpy golfer with his bag of clubs ticking off a lady who had lain out her picnic on the golf course.

Keep noise levels down – especially when golf is in play.

Here there was a cartoon that showed a father with his hands cupped round the mouths of his two children.

I was unable to see a corresponding code of conduct for golfers on the other side of the fence, and continued on my way. Passing the sign that said MAIN ROAD A917, I saw caravans ahead, and walked into the town, late for the festival reception.

Alistair Noon