

Handmade Boats

Poems by H.K. Hummel

Published by *Whale Sound*

November 2010

CONTENTS

Fog, Water, Ice	3
On Edward Hopper's Automat	4
The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island	5
The Bartender	6
The Migrations of Women	7
At the Edge of the Jungle	9
Unfencing the Neighborhood	10
Fear, then Oblivion	11
Not Touching, Touching	13
When One Animal	14
Inventory of the Trousseau	15
Icicle Moss	16
Acknowledgments	17

*This PDF download is a companion to the original online audio chapbook publication of **Handmade Boats**, available at <http://wschap1.wordpress.com>, copyright H.K. Hummel 2010.*

Fog, Water, Ice

Stay. Talk to me of Alcatraz,
of the impediments of water,
of guards on the ramparts and
jellyfish electrifying the brine.

Talk to me of Andromeda,
of shame first learnt
grating against crag and icewater.
Frigid-making breakers: did they break her?

Daedalus and Icarus locked in a father-son labyrinth,
coupled their wills to invent and undo all at once.
We create our mechanisms of flight; we catapult ourselves
at sundogs, we swerve into the crash.

For each our own prison of misprisions.
In solitary confinement, we palm the walls,
we take on the task of radical uncharting.
Stay. Allow the stays to open.

Fog soak slakes the redwoods.
Night herons hunt the florescent shoals.
Light pillars flare on the horizon
when the sun is low and the ice is right.

On Edward Hopper's Automat

Removing a single kid leather glove,
she cups the brief heat of a demitasse,
rests without disguising: she is loitering.

Girls don't choose to idle gloom-time alone;
mothers' warnings leaden the marrow:
other's desires wedge in and split like trick ice.

Beyond the fence of floodlight,
fears circle and snarl like Transylvanian wolves.
One can suffer night terrors

fully awake. Sitting in the bright, tiny automat,
she is on a derelict raft, surrounded by a hundred
flares of alligator eyeshine.

Mother night, your Keres are busy scavenging.
Daughter doom and daughter sleep are adamantine
moons satelliting a magnetic body.

Oh, pity the bare-legged, full-cheeked one
protected only by a hat brim and a clutch of coins.
Someone come walk the girl home, see her safely to her door.

The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island

We wear as amulets the things that scare us
to protect ourselves from the other
things that scare us: loneliness, weakness,

and that dark shape-shifting cloud, the unknown.
The lone woman of San Nicolas Island
wore a dress of cormorant hewn with whale sinew.

She could have sewn clothes of soft gold, otter;
she chose green-eyed black birds, eerie as gargoyles,
wings spread, looming from rocky outcroppings.

Living on urchins and abalone,
she sang of contentment and danced on the empty shore.
The horizon was a sealed oyster shell.

Wild dogs howled and barked, circling and scattering like wind.
When the boat finally came, she sang and danced
for the cluster of sailors on the sand.

She sang and danced for everyone
who came to see her at the captain's mainland home.
But no one spoke her language;

she chattered on untranslated,
then died, an island woman
isolated by a narrow, narrow sea.

The Bartender

has pockets full of this town's worries.
Each shift feels like biting down
on grit, and tastes of burnt orange.
At night he appeases the gorgons, the leviathans--
the monstrous apparitions of despair.
Pouring each glass, he measures the shots
by counting his breath and listens
with the entirety of his body.
He gives what is asked for, what is required
then orchestrates the circuit of taxis crossing town
knowing the loneliness of Charon ferrying the river Styx.

The Migrations of Women

I.

A man sprints through wet woods.
Red-winged blackbirds warble through a curtain
of water.

The bagpiper sets down his tomato sandwich and blows
a tremulous lament, a blustery release of mist, whiskey,
an ocean of repentance and hunger.

No need for a fugue; shrill piping sets our tune.
An elderly woman deadheads the rosebushes;
her white cat bullies under the rhododendrons.

A wife steps out into the rain; she leaves
a space, sucking round and inward like a funnel
in the shape of a woman.

II.

Isabel, unanchored, drifts
after a divorce in Southern India,
dreams of becoming a chocolatier.

She goes to the symphony
with her mother whose husband
lately ran off.

Rapt, they listen in the balcony
of a hundred-year-old theater
that is quietly being devoured by termites.

They know all the movements
by heart. Their grief, beautiful as the etudes,
as the theater, crumbling from the inside out.

III.

After a five a.m. bus ride arrowing through cloud forest,
I make it to the last hour of the farmer's market

full of need.

A Quaker woman in hand-sewn Virgin Mary blue
offers wheat loaves, goat cheese, gospel.
I am as hungry as I have ever been.

We speak in rusted English
as if translating from separate mother tongues
to meet in a mutually foreign third.

I want to know the texture of her happiness and her surrender,
if both of us dream of the resplendent quetzal
while making straight, even stitches meant to last a lifetime, or longer.

At the Edge of the Jungle

a man makes his living renting rubber boots. He has five or six pairs, of varying sizes. He wears a crisp shirt, tucked into clean slacks that are tucked into one of the pairs of boots. He waits in a small gatehouse on stilts. He does not read the newspaper or watch television; he sits, watches, waits.

Tourists arrive, anxious to see the rainbow macaws breakfasting in the almond trees and the gorgeously imbalanced toucans picking berries from the palms. There is a saucy audacity to these birds. People want to witness such manifestations of pomp and verve.

During the rainy season, which lasts half the year, mud is a sure bet. The boot man waits patiently; the shin-deep sludge will send the tourists straight to him.

The people who live in office cubicles keep a small compartment of fantasies: the black dream of the golden jaguar, the bright shard of the viper, the familiar scent of banana. Such evocations draw them to the dark mulch of tangled mangrove roots.

The man hands them boots and points to the trailhead. "There," he says. Nothing else is needed—they plunge in, in, in.

Unfencing the Neighborhood

In the layers of deep time
mastodons foraged in nearby meadow edges.
The autumnal evening sky and placid bay
are both the palest sun-bleached pink.

When the lumbering pachyderms eased
forequarters, then hindquarters into
the water of a still pond
it could have been an evening just like this.

Kieran, home from kindergarten, forages
for the last plums and blackberries and the first apples
from his yard, then ours; his circular path radiates out
a little more all the time.

Such basic inclinations feel timeless;
changeless changelings we browse this land
for berries, greens, protein. Geologic time
resurfaces with the bones of our predecessors.

A farmer plows his field and churns up
a curvaceous tusk; heavy rains and landslides bury
then reveal an entire lakeshore town; again unhinged,
this swath of tumultuous earth turns over.

For a time, peat bogs were still circled in foliage
but spruce, hemlock, cedar, the trees we recognize as home
weren't always here. Scimitar cats lurked low in the underbrush;
people strung fish to dry in the wind.

Women strip bare and soak in the hot springs;
their laughter trickles through the woods-cloaked night.
Men navigate the waterways in handmade boats;
they desire the taste of smoke and cedar, of sea and woman.

Fear, Then Oblivion

Without philosophy, one must contend with the immediate
tragedy of a chipped dish.

The jerk and snap of reflex is initial, instinctual, protective.
Flinch and the third eye blinks shut.

Squinting, we watch the thinnest wedge of the world
and call it complete.

The cat, at rest in my lap, jerks alert at each surprise sound,
then settles in again. One must relinquish each disturbance as it comes.

We fear and so refuse to witness what is ours:
love, mishandled love, indifference and little else.

A flurry of anchovies and broken water:
the transparent sea keeps invisible predators.

Helicopters circle the city, sending down a cataract roar
as searchlights displace the night.

Alarms caterwauling this way and that
demarcate the distance between ourselves and new disasters.

Cataclysm does not have to be our offspring.
I will not mother mayhem.

Borne of upheaval, the mountain draws in its clouds,
but keeps its many sheer faces above the cloud-line.

This heart, this mind, these hands, if open, can hold and mend—
if clenched, can only seize or dumbly pummel.

The moon levitates with unseen abandon.
What things refuse to reflect or release?

Holes in the universe. Voids.
Such black matter is not just in space.

Touching, Not Touching

Unstirred wind chimes in cool morning air;
tree roots climb the wet pumice stone.

All week long the yellow monkey flower
has been hollering for attention.

In my dreams, a holy man who has not touched anyone
in half a century lays his hands on a fallen stag.

At six, my job was to pound out all resistance
in the abalone, pound it until it became tender.

A milk-full doe accepts the quick rough tugs
of the fawns as she watches the tree-line.

A blue whale with a heart the size of a Volkswagen
weaves through the water, leaving a trail of invisible ribbons.

Without speaking, the holy man reveals
my name, as scrawled in the arrangement of stars.

Stag heart, whale heart, resistant abalone
I dream and mouth their names in the dark.

We are encircled in bitter cherry, leaves the color of
malachite and the three satisfying greens of avocado.

In the depths, diaphanous jellyfish dance in the light
of a moon that drifts ever more distant.

When One Animal

All day long, an injured, panting fawn runs for everything with my body. *No* is a cellular rejection, a pulsing collapse. Death is a quick-slow rush.

My animal awareness clarifies: the heart has a self-paced, exhaustible nature: the ponderous tortoise retreats, the coruscating firefly strikes an immolating flame. Breathe, my friend, and let your exhales be slow.

A compote of marrow for nourishment, nettles for vitality.
A pressing touch to the body's tidal meridians. A poultice of tea.
A hand, a glance, again, this work of softening.

How do I summon the charge that surges the river of caribou, the movement of our tribe? It is the matter of bones, the water of our flow. It is intention like flint. In each utterance a compact written on wood.

Make of this body a singing bowl.
Make of this body a singing
bowl.

Inventory of the Trousseau

My trousseau, my dear, has no silver spoons.
A few dishes painted with desert roses, a box of flour-dusted
recipe cards, miscellany handed down
with coaxings and reprimands.

I was raised with all the baggage of a good girl.
Like secrets, I added the pinecone of a sequoia, a stone from the Ganges,
many solitary, quiet years and their consequences—
sheaves of yellowing poems, a second-hand bed, a gold ring that isn't mine.

Staples in lieu of heirlooms: a burlap sack of rice
a package of soup bouillon, dried beans.
A muscular fist of a heart, the salted fish of stubbornness,
failure that tastes of chokecherry preserves.

What lace I've tatted is of uncommon knots:
calliope hummingbirds hovering in soft purple jacaranda blooms,
young frogs slipping through trickling water, dripping leaves,
a fluttering of fingers, eyelids, light.

Curtains, clothes, blankets:
private comforts already worn with regular use.
We're old enough to know, love,
we must make and make again.

Those things we've learned are hardest to let go.
We have what we hold and we fix what needs to be
rent and made right. I have fine scissors to cut clean edges,
I have needles and thread to suture socks, buttons, wounds.

Icicle Moss

Five women remake the horizon:
ten barely visible pale moon areolas
encircle the steaming mineral pool.

We've come to this seep
to do the subversive: to celebrate
births, to make a community stronger.

Imagine five women
without fear or hesitation
enter the old growth forest

and tell jokes to one another, stories
that knit, strong as bone, a structure
that is survival. Make no mistake:

this is deliberate work.
These are the economics of daily essentials:
water, soil, grain; love, company, laughter.

We are at home here;
we are of icicle moss, of madrone,
complicit with bear and badger.

We chronicle the glacial scarifications
like granite; the snowmelt
like avalanche lilies.

There is strontium in our milk;
lead, synthetic hormones, antidepressants
in the rivers, the fish. We know.

We are talking about it,
murmuring crones who won't quiet.

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the journals which published the following poems in earlier versions:

- The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, *Quiddity*, autumn 2009
- The Migrations of Women, *Babel Fruit*, autumn 2008
- Unfencing the Neighborhood, *Tidepools*, spring 2007
- Icicle Moss, *Her Mark*, 2010

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to artist Maggie Taylor (<http://bit.ly/h2GsBA>) for the use of her *Twilight Swim* as cover art for the online version of *Handmade Boats* (<http://wschap1.wordpress.com>).

About the author

Web-active poet H.K. Hummel (<http://web.me.com/hkhecke/Site/About.html>) lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Deeply influenced by her native Pacific coast, she writes most often about the intersections of landscape and psyche. Her poetry has recently been published in *Antigonish Review*, *Quiddity*, *Hawk & Handsaw*, *Merge* and *Aquila Review*. She is one of the founding editors of the online literary journal *Blood Orange Review*. Heather blogs at *Practice & Craft* and can also be found on Facebook and Twitter.

About the editor/publisher

Nic Sebastian (<http://verylikewhale.wordpress.com>) is the founder-editor of *Whale Sound* (<http://whalesound.wordpress.com>), an online audio poetry journal that features readings by Nic Sebastian of the work of web-active contemporary poets. *Whale Sound* began editing and publishing audio chapbooks in November 2010.