

A sunset over the ocean with three small sailboats on a beach in the foreground. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the water and sky. The sailboats are white with blue hulls, and their sails are up. The beach is dark and sandy. In the background, there are mountains and a city skyline.

# SPRING BUDS and AUTUMN LEAVES

A Shiraishi Haibun  
by  
JOHN DOUGILL

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AND AUTUMN LEAVES**

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Spring Buds and Autumn Leaves-- a Shiraishi Haibun/ by John Dougill



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## PART ONE: SPRING BUDS

### ARRIVAL



Spring in Shiraiishi. Springtime sunshine and falling-in-love time. Late spring when the days are warm and golden, the blues brilliant, and nature alive with the joys of creation. Here one passes from the frantic pace of modern Japan and into a world of unhurried ways. Here time slows down, days lengthen, and anxiety kicks off its shoes to enjoy the lulling massage of gentle waves. Here is a world apart.

What is it about small islands? Self-contained, secluded, surrounded by water, perhaps they remind us of our origins. Here we can return to a private paradise, away from the busy bustle of the mainland. Here one feels closer to nature, closer to the eternal verities, closer to the source of life itself.

Urban blues dissolve  
 In golds and greens and marine:  
 Still ocean mind

Japan is a country of islands, yet so many have been destroyed by the rapacious demands of industry. From Okinawa to Tsushima to the islands off Hiroshima, I had gone in quest of an island getaway, yet it seemed the Concrete State had always got there before me. Tacky and tasteless tourist traps mar the most famous, and one soon learns to avoid them.

By contrast, the places where people wave you away saying there's nothing to see are the ones with most allure. I once came across an appealing place with a population of just

fifty, not a single one of whom was under 60. A few dilapidated houses, a sad-looking shrine, and one sole vehicle to drive the one short stretch of tarmac. You could see why the young had left. Yet you'd never find a more cheerful community, all hearty, laughing and toothless. It was like a mythical island of Chinese legend where people live happily forever.

It was not with high hopes that I descended on Shiraishi, for an island with an International Villa hardly speaks of seclusion. Yet from the moment I got off the boat and walked round the headland I was entranced. There, dancing on the blue sea, was a small island with evocative shrine and torii. It was a gorgeous sunny day, and in my enchantment I seemed to hear the sound of sirens singing.

Waves lapping;  
There's music softly playing  
On Benten Island



Along the margin of the sea ran a stretch of clean warm sand, with not a single person in sight. I took off my shoes and walked barefoot in delight. The bright colours, the sea air, the warmth of the spring sunshine was invigorating. I came alive. I'd found myself.

Through May and June I made the villa my home and settled into a routine of writing and walking. A nearby path leads along the spine of the island's chain of hills which command

views of the Inland Sea. The panoramas offered an expanse of blue dotted with small gold-fringed islands topped off in green. It was breathtaking, majestic. The islands sparkled as if newly polished.



On one of the small peaks stood a granite table which I claimed as my own. Here every morning, in the hours before the sun grew hot, I would sit and muse. I was lord of the domain, none so high as I, surveying the small fishing-boats as they scurried back and forth, the little island houses clustered on either side of a small hill, and the tiny villagers at work in their vegetable plots. Sitting there day after day, I could feel my soul unwind as tensions wafted away in the gentle breeze.

Near the table was a large flat rock and I spent many a minute - or was it hours - watching the comings and goings over its surface. Ants, caterpillars, beetles, an odd kind of centipede, and all scurrying about. It seemed like a microcosm of that great planetary rock on which we all scratch a living.

On this busy rock  
A busy universe  
Of constant searching

And so began a series of golden days when not a cloud sullied the azure sky and the sea glistened in the sunshine. All around me nature was bursting with life. The constant chirping of birds was joined by the occasional drone of passing boats as darting butterflies seized the opportunity to dance in the sunshine. Once, sunk in meditative reflection, I was startled by a great whooshing noise that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I jumped out of my seat looking up to see a great hawk above me, looking down. For a moment we stared each other in the eye. Was it hoping for a picnic, or simply playing games?

In the still peace of my lofty retreat, the sounds of nature were oddly magnified. Once a diminutive creature on a nearby tree let out a succession of deafening trills:

Shaman on the wing -  
Your tiny body trembling  
With divine power

It was the magical season when caterpillars turn into butterflies, and my thoughts were cast back to my own youthful moments of joyful sunshine days...

Dancing butterfly:  
Have you come to haunt me  
Springtime of my past?

Perhaps it was the sea air, perhaps it was the spirit of place, perhaps it was the infection of spring, but poems sprang up within me as if asking to be written. It seemed nature itself was dictating, a kind of automatic writing marred only by my own incompetence.

Caterpillar legs  
Marching across the page  
Printing this poem

There was barely a human among my visitors, but dragonflies often came to keep me company. Given their short span of life, it seemed a privilege to share the precious moments. They came in alluring colours, some so radiant they spoke of other worlds. From my Olympian height, I could see around me the constant motion of vessels across the Inland Sea and on one occasion I counted over a hundred. Some were tankers, some were ferries, some private motorboats, but the majority were tiny one-man fishing boats, mere specks on the surface of the sea. Like the busy insects, humans too seemed always on the move.

Boats in motion:  
Won't *you* at least stay  
My dragonfly?

Yet I too was a restless soul, and each day went on walks of exploration. By day three, I'd discovered it took just an hour and forty minutes to walk the one sole road around the island. I felt I'd 'done' Shiraishi, but how wrong I was. The whole island is crossed with hill paths and forgotten trails, so you can walk a different way every day and barely repeat yourself. Each spring morning I was treated to the joy of new discoveries.

Along from the main beach is a road running uphill, and on a whim I followed a pathway to the right that led to a small headland where in a clearing stood a shrine to Hachiman, the deity of war and protector of Japan. From his vantage point, this most masculine of kami looked over to the beguiling Benten. As I sat there and soaked in the atmosphere, a brightly-coloured butterfly



danced for joy in the sunshine. Was it putting on a display? It seemed to embody the integration of shrine and nature, the way that man and animal can and should complement each other.

Mighty Hachiman  
 Don't you see the butterfly  
 Pulling on your rope



Another early visit was to the island's sole 'attraction'. While walking on the hills near the International Villa, I'd caught sight of a peculiar white-shaped dome. Intrigued, I followed a path downwards and came upon Kairyu-ji, the island's Shingon temple. What a jewel! Sandwiched between its Buddhist buildings is a Shinto shrine, telling of the close ties between the two faiths. Within the temple grounds is a white Wat, built by the present priest after student days in Thailand. But the most striking feature is a small place of prayer squeezed beneath a large flat boulder. It was on this, according to local lore, that the legendary priest, Kukai (aka Kobo Daishi, 774-835), meditated while on his way back from China.



Over the next few weeks I revisited the temple almost daily. It was not religion that drew me, however. Within the temple grounds, in a hollow, lies a landscaped pond fed by dripping pipe and walled by small rocks. The first time I came upon it, there were several large plops as one by one small rocks seemed to leap off the side and into the water. These turned out to be a family of small turtles basking in the sunshine. Only grandad lingered until my footsteps finally scared him off too. From the grass nearby I heard a quack, though I was puzzled for I could see nothing. Then I spotted him: a mallard snuggled up in the grass near a bush.

An old pond  
Sitting duck  
Quack!



Unlike the cold-blooded turtles, he let me approach close, quacking all the while as if in greeting. He'd made himself a kind of suntrap in the grass, well-placed to catch the afternoon sun. Unusually he was alone on his pond. We had an affinity it seemed. Lame in one leg, perhaps he recognised in me a loner and a soul mate. For my part I made a point of calling by each day, gladdened by the greeting he always gave.

Not far from the temple, along a path that leads past the Thai folly, is a landscaped area beneath a hillside shrine to Inari, deity of rice and business. Follow the path and on turning a corner you are suddenly greeted by the magical sight of red torii leading up the hillside. It was such a pleasing sight, with such a strong sense of rightness, that it brought a smile to my face.



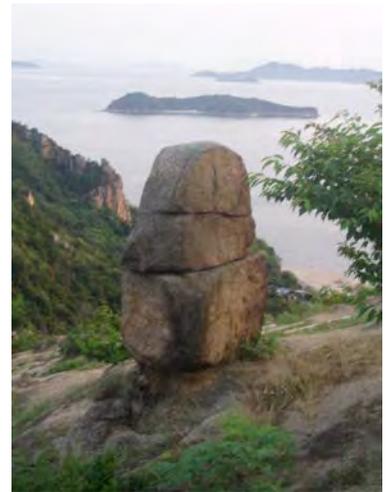
What spirit of place  
 Could possess these mountainsides:  
 Red torii rising

The torii trail leads up to a large rock beneath which a cave-like opening houses a rock shrine. Mysterious, dark, womb-like, it brought to mind the narrow recesses where Taoist sages sought inner peace. It was surely in such places that early Shinto was cultivated, for incomers from Korea brought with them shamanistic notions of rocks as vessels for unseen spirits. It was with quickening heart-beat that I entered the dark, cramped space, only to find an offering that spoke not of ancient mystery but of modern consumerism.

Spring bounty  
 But only tinned pineapple  
 For poor Inari



Beyond the cave the path leads up to a hilltop. Here as elsewhere on the mountain one can't help being struck - if that is the right word - by the remarkable rocks that are such a feature of the island. They tell of elemental forces, and some are awe-inspiring. 'Until you can feel, and keenly feel, that stones have character, that stones have tones and values, the whole artistic meaning of a Japanese garden cannot be understood,' wrote Lafcadio Hearn. The same could be said for the Shiraishi landscape.



As I wandered the island hills, I came to realise how vital the rocks are to the spirit of place. There is one shaped like a hawk's head, one like a phallus, and one that hovers magically on the edge of a cliff. Some draw one like a magnet, their solid surface vibrating with a special resonance, and when I stood for a while by one such rock, soaking up the atmosphere, I was joined by a small bee:



Hovering, buzzing:  
Can it be that you too  
Sense the rock's power?



The native reverence for rocks is evident in the way that many are used to house small religious statues and offerings for the gods. It brought out my pagan inclinations, awakening spiritual yearnings deadened by an urban existence. Under one massive boulder, on the

edge of a precipice, I came across the threefold manifestation of Zao Gongen, patron of mountain ascetics. It seemed delightfully impish.



Shinto rocks:  
Stones drinking saké  
Spirits stoned

As the mornings grew warmer, I found myself forced more and more indoors. Some like it hot, but I was born for cooler climes. The early morning stints at the top-of-the-world table gradually grew briefer, until they ceased altogether. Instead I found myself marooned in the International Villa, clinging to the comfort of the air-conditioned rooms. Weekends had always been lively, but during May the weekdays were quiet enough. I'd had some interesting companions. A doctor from New York, getting away from alcohol and a midlife crisis. A family of four with young children and an enormous appetite for adventure. A woman competing in a hot-air balloon race, and a photographer who'd first come to Japan as a soldier after the war.

But as the weeks wore on, the world-travellers gave way to summer time pleasure seekers. Some were open in their disdain for the boring backwater and its lack of amenities. It seemed my time had run its course, though it was painful to think of leaving.

Sunburn:  
Time to peel myself  
Away

And so, like the setting sun, I made preparations for departure. But such was my attachment that I knew I'd be back once the heat of summer had passed. The peace, the invigorating sea air, the unspoilt nature, the sense of history, the neat gardens and monumental rocks - something about the island had entered my soul. Even after I left I often wandered the sun-kissed pathways in my dreams. But most of all, like a warm afterglow, I remembered those gorgeous sunset surprises when I sat on the veranda of the villa in the muggy evening air, enjoying the dimming of the day. Simply heavenly.

Dusk -  
Laid out for the goddess  
A crimson carpet



## PART TWO: AUTUMN LEAVES

### RETURN

Autumn drew me back to spring discoveries. Retracing half-forgotten paths, I found the views had not changed, and the rocks looked familiar like old friends. Yet everywhere nature showed signs of winding down. A dead snake, drowsy wasps, mosquitoes too torpid to evade a casual swat. No caterpillar visitors now, barely any butterflies.

The day I arrived, I walked at dusk down to the temple pond. There was but a single plop as a solitary turtle dropped into the water. The carp that had been visible and vigorous in the spring sunshine now swam languidly in murky depths. But it wasn't these I had come to see, and I was despondent at the lack of welcome.

An old pond:  
A solitary plop.  
No quack

My friend had flown, and I felt oddly dejected. Yet by way of compensation there was warmth in the greetings of human friends. These included the folk at San-chan's, the island's café-bar. It was through them I had met an American called Amy Chavez, a free spirit who settled on Shiraishi to become the resident gaijin. A freelance writer and entrepreneur, she had managed to set up a yearly cycle divided between island summer and Bali surf. Many dream of such a life, but few are brave enough to carry it out.



A knock-out sunset at San-chan's (left), and Amy in cow costume at her Moooo! beach bar



By now the beach lay empty, abandoned by the summer frolickers, yet the clear October days were sensual and warm. Others seemed to enjoy them just as much as I did.

Autumn daze -  
Even the bees  
Are basking

No longer in the first flush of enchantment, I'd become more conscious of the island's blemishes. Abandoned cars and discarded scrap. The Fukuyama factories on the mainland. The ugly island on the other side from which came the grating sound of quarry mills. Down at the harbour was a miserable dog called Lucky, chained and condemned to solitude. And as I came to inspect the west coast, I realised how defaced it had been by native quarriers: rock vivisection at its most brutal.

Nonetheless I was upbeat at being back, and it was not long before I turned to untrodden ways. Like a magician's pocket, the island seemed able to supply a never-ending series of surprises. Rocks perched on the top of ledges, threatening to topple over at a touch; a bamboo grove of delicate finery filtering rays of golden sunshine onto the darkened ground; a mysterious cave which once housed a ritual round stone. It seemed impossible such a small island could offer so much.



One sunny morning I came upon a whole network of paths in the south that opened up new views. On another occasion I took a walk on the hills behind the villa, following a track through a bamboo grove to a clearing where five palm trees had been planted as a feature. It seemed so Japanese, the notion of beautifying nature. Clear away trees so you can plant other trees to admire.

Like the solitary flower in an alcove, the desire is for the essence without the messy reality. All those weeks I walked the hills, I don't recall meeting a single Japanese.

For the islanders the primary concern is self-sufficiency, and in the early mornings one would pass old women on the way to their allotments. These island folk are doughty souls. I once fell into conversation with a sprightly seventy-five year old and complimented him on his vigour. 'That's nothing. You see those two,' he said pointing at a small fishing boat. 'He's eighty-six and she's seventy-nine.'

You could see the dogged diligence in the island gardens, all neat trimmed bushes and orderly plants in the bare ground. I had passed by in springtime but hadn't taken the time to stop and stare. Now I delighted in the details. Here would be a bonsai, there a collec-

tion of chrysanthemum, and over there a spirit house. Round this corner a roof tile with a ferocious devil, round that one a twisted pine.

November drizzle --  
The dozing cat opens  
One eye



Bit by bit, I was getting a grip on the island's history. There were tombs and artifacts from prehistoric times. The brother of Emperor Jimmu had stayed here in the legendary sweep of the Yamato clan across the Inland Sea. The Shingon temple had been set up in 1183 to pacify the souls of those killed hereabouts during the Gempei Wars, and the harbour dated from Edo times when its construction served to reclaim land from the sea. Previously the main settlement had been in the south, but the islanders realigned themselves around the

harbour to face the mainland. According to folklore, a sacrificial woman had been interred in the harbour wall, and a small shrine on a nearby hill was meant to appease her soul.



One day I walked up to the shrine, then followed the path into the woods. Up above was a massive rock, visible from the harbour, and I had an inkling it might prove special. Its location was typical of the shaman rocks I had come across in Korea, and its name (the Bikuni Rock) spoke of a religious connection.

Above: The Bikuni Rock visible half-way down the hill

The path passed by the rock at some distance, so I made my way through the undergrowth to get closer. As I did so, I could see what looked like a fierce gaping mouth at its base. I was trying to traverse the steep muddy slope between us, when all of a sudden I slipped and slithered down, rolling over and over until I hit a thicket where sharp thorns stuck into my leg. Perhaps, I mused, as with some dogs this was not a rock that liked to be stroked. For a while I lay on the ground, gathering my wits and staring upwards at the swaying canopy.

Kami...

Wind in the trees

... kaze

Back on the path, I wanted to see where it led. I expected it to wind back to the road soon enough, and given the small dimensions of the headland it could hardly lead me astray. But it did. As the afternoon light faded, I realised I was utterly lost. It is at times like this one understands how very palpable the sense of the spirit world must have been to early humans. Rustlings, snapping twigs, tappings ... The wood was alive with unseen presences.

Twilight --

Invisible creatures

That stir



In November the temple held a festival, which caused great excitement. It was a grand affair with a parade of priests in all their finery accompanied by black-kimonoed women. There was a special opening of the Wat, traditional dances by costumed schoolchildren, and a fire ceremony carried out by mountain ascetics with magic spells. Prayers on wooden sticks wafted up to heaven as they burnt.

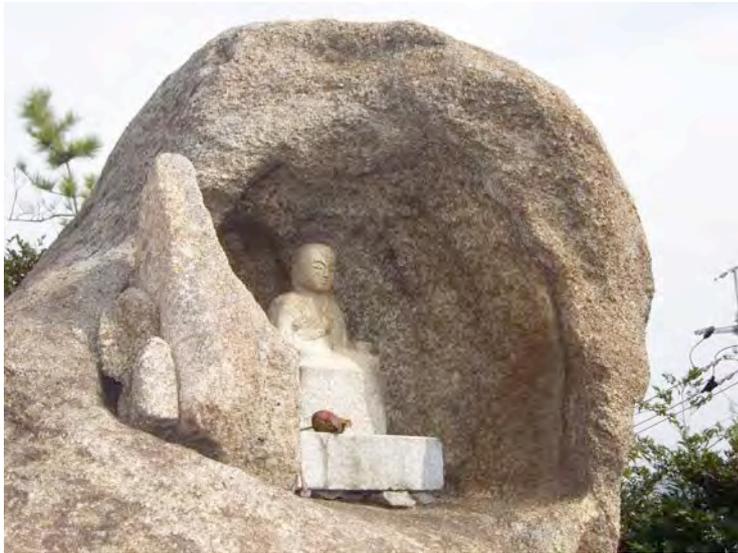




Afterwards I was given some protective healing by the island eccentric, Manji, using his ascetic powers. A cuddly uncle of a man, he lives in a dilapidated house by the harbour where he exhibits a display of kitsch such that passing foreigners take it for a junk shop. A friend to the wild life, he is followed wherever he goes by hungry birds, like a Japanese St. Francis. A friend to children too, he had once been spotted in a rowing boat at the harbour all dressed up as Urashimataro, the Peach Boy, to welcome newcomers to the island. The world needs more like him.

Falling leaf:  
But you're still chirpy  
As a child

On my walks I had often come across small shrines bearing numbers and recognised them as part of a miniature '88 temple pilgrimage'. Many of the Inland Sea islands have them because of their closeness to Shikoku, where Kukai (aka Kobo Daishi) had founded the original. I imagined the Shiraishi trail would take a few hours at most, like others I had walked. I was wrong, for it turned out Amy and her boyfriend had taken whole days to trace the unused paths and hidden nooks.



The Edo-era folk who set up the route knew the island well, for the small shrines are set with geomantic care in places with a numinous aura. Some are in the thick of groves, some on cliff edges overlooking the sea, and some in the clefts of enormous boulders. One sits inside the ruin of a sixth-century tomb.

The trail leads through wooded hillsides and cliffside paths, and you never know quite where it will lead next. It might dip down towards the sea, then lead uphill to where a thousand-armed Kannon looks on the weary wanderer with infinite compassion. Each small shrine is numbered, from 1 to 88, and houses a different deity according to the Shikoku temple it represents. Along with the buddha is a small statue of the sect founder, Kobo Daishi. Frozen for all eternity in stone, he sits through wind and rain oblivious to the elements and the passing of time.

Kobo Daishi  
Unmoved by autumn leaves -  
Number 62

One mid-November night the temperature dropped ten degrees all of a sudden, and it never recovered. I was glad to have an extra blanket. It seemed I was not the only one feeling the cold, for nature was undergoing change and others too sought refuge.

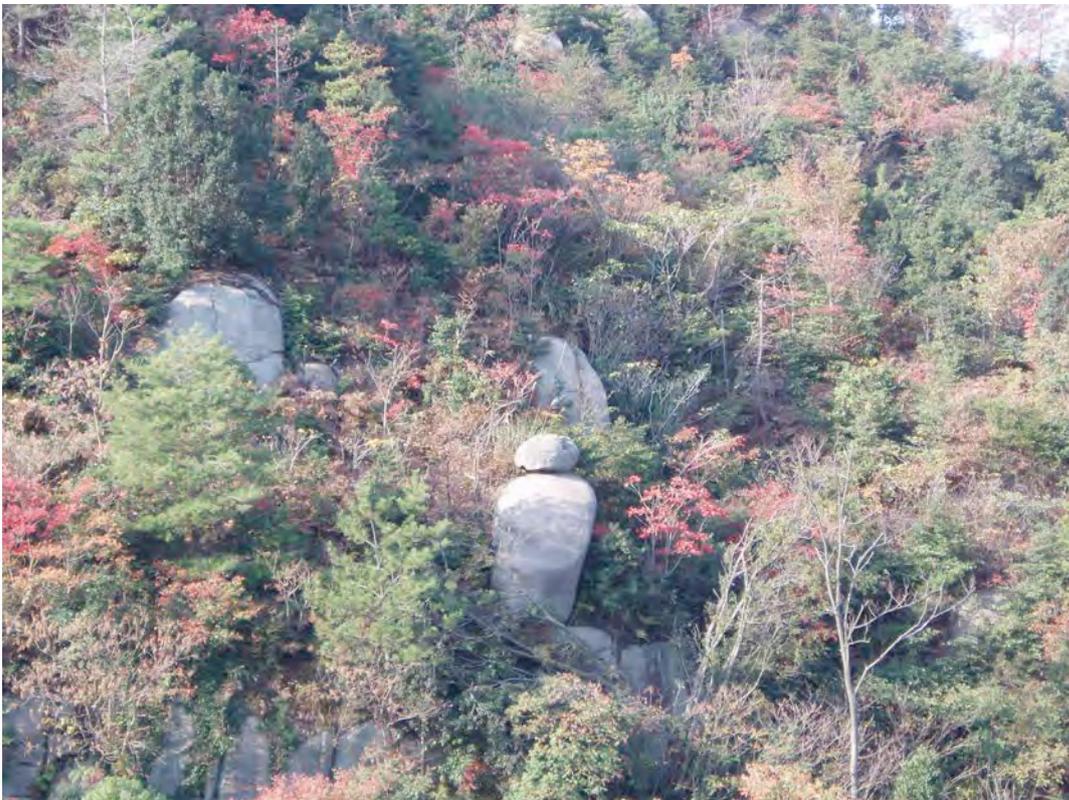
Chilly room:  
You too want to snuggle up  
Queen bee

As the weather worsened, my inspiration waned. Though I returned to the table at the top of the world, words would not flow and I was easily distracted. Perhaps nature was telling me something. Perhaps it was time to head for other parts.

Migrating ducks:  
This chilly autumn morn  
Thoughts go flying

On a walk one day I had an unexpected surprise. Rounding a corner, I found myself faced with a hillside palette of multicoloured hues. There must have been something about the location that compelled the trees to dress up before their colleagues. It felt as if I'd stumbled on hidden treasure. No showy colours, no fiery red maples or bright ginkgo yellows, but subtle shadings woven into an evergreen background. Not a soul was to be seen: the picture was mine alone. Or so I thought...

Autumn beauty --  
The deafening silence  
Of birdsong



Further on, the path looped round to where another clearing had been made, this time for cherry blossom trees. The way was thick with webs and large spiders lay in wait. Coming face to face with a large green-yellow arachnid is something of a shock, but no doubt the spiders too were mortified at a clumsy giant charging face first into their carefully crafted traps. Would they have the energy to remake them?

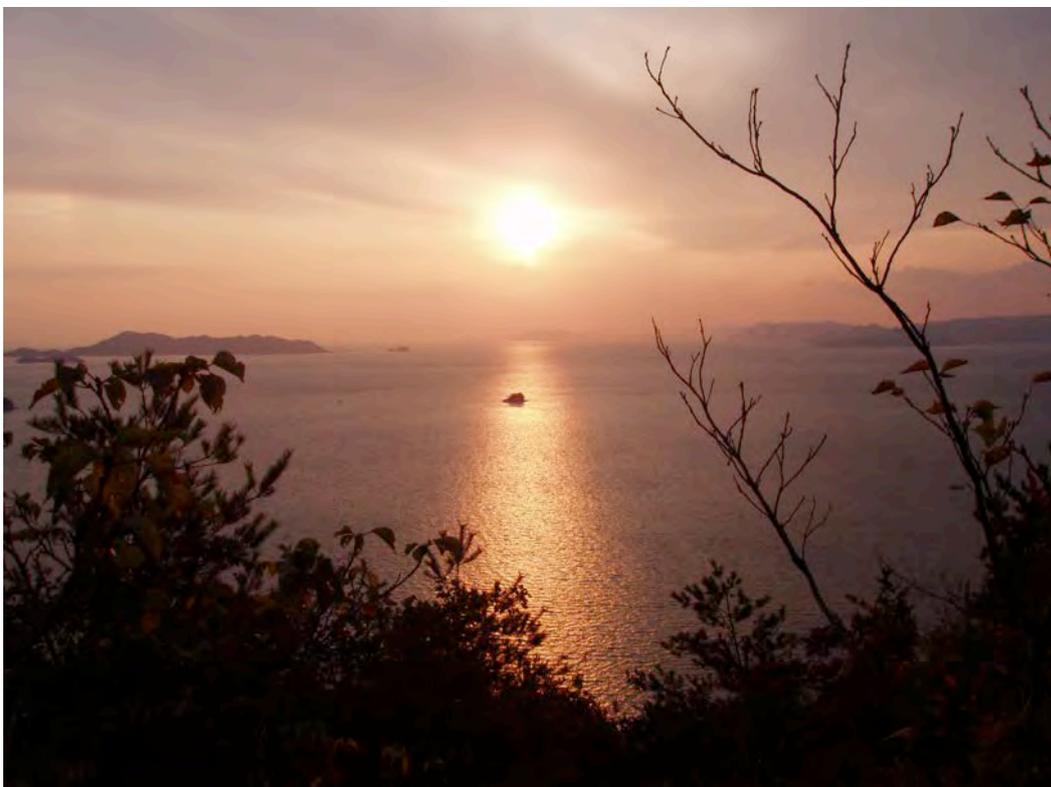
Darkening skies:  
The year's last cricket  
Beneath fallen leaves

Not long after came bouts of rain and unappealing days. Increasingly, it seemed, I was confined to the villa and San-chan's, my daily round circumscribed by the little path that led from one to the other. In-between the once noisy fields were growing quiet. Sometimes I would make a detour via the island cemetery, inspecting the offerings laid out for the dead.

Late November -  
How many days yet remain  
Mister Frog?

With winter approaching, island life was winding down and it was getting time for me to leave. Morning walks had given way to afternoon strolls, and I spent the last few days walking the western side of the island to view the spectacular sunsets. Sometimes the beauty was so poignant that it tugged at the heartstrings.

December:  
The sound of the setting sun  
Touching water



The villa was frequented less and less now, and I often found myself alone between the weekends. With the longer nights and worsening weather, there was a heavier sense of darkness. Perched on a rise, with only the stars above, the villa felt strangely isolated. The creaks and crackings set off dark imaginings, as if I was seven years old again. In the enfolding gloom, it could be spooky indeed.

Before I left, I revisited the table where I'd sat in the spring sunshine and written with such enthusiasm. There was little of the vibrancy that had been so evident before, only the persistent cawing of crows as they returned home. One group flew right across the face of the sun, black spots against the liquid orange, before heading for a small uninhabited island for the night. And as the fiery red glow spread slowly along the far horizon, the busy boats merged into darkness. My cycle of seasons had run its course.

Winter departure:  
My heart reaching out  
In its wake





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## **About the Author**

John Dougill first came to Japan in 1975 when traveling around the world. Thereafter he worked for three years in the Middle East, bought a house in Oxford, and for the past eighteen years has lived in Jpaan (Kanazawa and Kyoto). An avid traveler, he has recently been to North Korea, South America and an island in the middle of Lake Baikal. He takes an interest in the shamanistic roots of Shinto, and writes regularly for Kansai Time Out. He currently teaches British Culture at Ryukoku University in Kyoto.

## **Other books by John Dougill**

Printed books available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

Kyoto: A Cultural History (US:OUP/UK:Signal, 2006). This book covers 1200 years of Kyoto history, illustrating how central the city has been to Japanese culture.

Oxford's Famous Faces (Oxface, 1986; new edition 2007) This short guide introduces famous people who have been associated with Oxford and describes what they did and where they lived. Includes Crown Prince Naruhito and Masako.

Oxford: A Literary Guide (Oxface, 2002) This short but richly illustrated guide details Oxford writers and writings. Lewis Carroll; Oscar Wilde; J.R.R. Tolkien; C.S. Lewis; Graham Greene, P.B. Shelley, etc.