

*Chris Arthur*

(En)trance

It was while thinking about the pillars at Shandon that I realized I would never be the sort of writer I used to believe I'd become. I mean the kind who undertakes complete stories, who engineers a beginning, works things through to an ending, and offers readers an experience of apparent wholeness. No matter what the subject, such tales encompass a territory in a manner that suggests it has been adequately covered by the time you leave it. There's a feeling of a journey well prepared for and satisfactorily completed. Words have been packed carefully into whatever cases of style the writer favours. Nothing important is left out. We have everything we need for whatever excursion is embarked upon. A sense of ample provisioning prevails. Step by step we're led towards repletion, resolution, closure.

It is, of course, an illusion—but a wonderful one. Such narratives have an almost narcotic allure. I love to immerse myself in the artificial worlds they offer and it remains a regret that I don't create them myself. Still, there's a little point pining for a genre that doesn't fit your writing as to pretend a sexual orientation that doesn't match whatever sparks your passion.

A writer of the sort I'm not would have been through the Shandon pillars and half way up the avenue by now, introducing us to key characters along the way and laying out the plot they're going to follow. The jigsaw would be starting to fit together, offering tantalizing hints of the emergent picture. Such authors place the pieces of their story with a precision nicely judged to carry things along at a tempo that will hold the reader's attention. My efforts—I almost said "alas," but would not have meant it—result in less immediately enticing prospects, though I hope they too can lay claim to holding the attention, albeit with a less comfortable grip. Instead of the strategic assemblage of location, character and action, the systematic setting of the scene within which things unfold, the piece by piece unveiling of the story whose hooked beginning caught us

at the outset on the barbs of its intriguing promise, I take single pieces of life's puzzle and lean the weight of reflection upon them till they're pulverized, then ponder the dust particles; how we're wedded to them, how they're threaded through us, how they create unnoticed galaxies in the unlikeliest places.

"Only connect," said the great E.M. Forster. "Only write about what you know," says the old watchword of practical advice for would-be writers. I attempt to disconnect things from the dense mesh of their immediate, camouflaging milieu and examine them with a gaze whose first allegiance, far from being given to the warm familiarity of the known, is rooted in a recognition of the strangeness that attends even the most mundane circumstance. While Forster and writers of his exalted ilk concentrate on the construction of fictions, weaving their delicately spun cocoons of imagined happenings and outcomes on the hard substratum of facts—about India, about manners, about sexuality—I focus on fragments of the substratum itself, trying to tease out the tendrils that are coiled tightly at the heart of every moment, their intricate abundance independent of invention.

Shandon was the County Antrim farm where my mother and her two sisters grew up, and where her eldest sister subsequently raised her own family. We lived nearby and often visited, so it was a place that shaped me too. Its trees and fields and garden were part of the world colonized by childhood. But colonizing is always a two-way process. Shandon's contours gently laid their weight upon our games and imaginings, leaving an invisible imprint on our lives.

I suppose I should at least make some attempt to *describe* the pillars through which I have so far refused to go. Approached in one way, this constitutes no great problem—beyond the usual difficulty of finding words to fit flush with the mind's jutting hoard of pictures. Built of faded redbrick, the pillars were five feet high and acted as thickset entrance markers flanking the avenue leading to the house. It was almost as if whoever built Shandon had dropped a piece of the house about fifty yards away, for the pillars were made of the same material and echoed its style.

They gave early warning in miniature of the more massive structure they represented. Each one was capped with a domed, cream-painted slab of concrete which made them reminiscent of giant red-stemmed mushrooms. Perhaps “pilaster” (“*a square column, partly built into, partly projecting from a wall*”) would be a more accurate term, for the pillars were not free-standing but were each attached at one side to a short curve of wall, also redbrick and topped with the same cream hue of painted concrete, thickly applied, like a slab of icing. But technical correctness must yield to common usage. We called them pillars, not pilasters, and so I will continue to name them here. Their attenuated walls ran for no more than eight or ten feet before merging with the mixed shrubs of the uneven hedge that marked most of Shandon’s extensive boundary—a tangled line of hawthorn, beech and flowering currant interspersed with some mature chestnut trees. This outpost of brickwork at Shandon’s entrance echoed the hedge’s wall of greenery, but in an altogether different key—a linear staccato of squares and right angles set in counterpoint to the curving whorls of leaves and branches.

On their wall-less side, where the avenue flowed between them like a hardened river made of tar, the pillars still bore traces of where wrought iron gates once hung. But the gates themselves had vanished long before I appeared on the scene to read meaning into their absence. The immediate reason for their removal is prosaic enough. Like iron gates and railings all over Britain, they were removed during World War II to be melted down and re-forged into armaments. Beyond this immediate, practical reason, though, the taking away of Shandon’s gates provides a symbol for another, and more significant, feature of that moment in history—the way in which it heralded an opening up to outside influences, an increase in the permeability of the boundaries set by family, nation, faith. Shandon, like these other enclosures, could not stay isolated from the modern world. None of our barriers, whether physical, psychological or cultural, even in so insular a society as Northern Ireland, were able to resist its insistent ingress.

Approached in another way, describing the pillars becomes more problematic. It’s like lighting a touch-paper whose unremarkable fizzling

will lead to an explosion of complication. Unlikely as it may seem, fireworks are hoarded in the unsuspected arsenal of these little redbrick columns. In this approach, a kind of cognitive tripwire is laced around all sorts of unseen interrelationships and unexpected connections so that every step towards a description brings things crashing down and colliding together in combinations that fracture the containment of our ordinary categories.

A writer of the sort I know I'll never be wouldn't stumble at this first hurdle of describing Shandon's pillars, but would instead leap deftly over every tripwire and move on. His or her polished craft would briskly package a palatable image in a dozen words or less, something functional, efficient, spare, unencumbered. The pillars would be treated in a common-sense manner, something to be taken in *en passant*. What I see as portals to another world which have the power to stop me in my tracks, gasping at the miles-deep lagoon of possibilities they open up, my authorial alter-ego would see as no more than background detail to be glanced at and dismissed.

The pillars and their walls were like giant cupped hands placed at the roadside. They were held strategically apart at just the right angle and distance to welcome visitors and shepherd them along the obvious route—following the curved avenue that wound up the gentle incline to the house. Instead of herding readers through Shandon's pillared entrance and moving things quickly forward to the apparent seat of action—the house as stage for a score of dramas, the setting in which lives unfold into their rich spectrum of stories—my focus, perhaps perversely, is on the pillars themselves and the unsuspected other-world they suggest. If, immediately on entering Shandon's gateless entrance, you turned hard left or right and pushed your way through the outer foliage of the dense laurel thickets that grew behind the pillars and their walls, you would find yourself inside a cool leafy enclosure. The laurel thickets could be stepped into. At their centre was a hollow, not quite hedge and not quite garden. It straddled the space between boundary and territory. Fallen leaves accumulated over years matted the ground here, preventing the growth of any grass, paving

the shady heart of the thickets with a soft brown floor that gave slightly beneath even a child's light tread, releasing an aroma of earth and rot mixed in with the sweetly cloying anaesthetic smell which freshly crushed laurel leaves exude with even greater potency.

The way the pillars were positioned, and the camber of the land leading up to Shandon, meant that the laurel grotto behind the left-hand pillar offered a better vantage point from which both road and house could be observed. Because of this, and because the laurel grew more densely here, this was the side we favoured. Behind the pillar and its wall, beneath the green canopy of laurel growing snug within the shielding brick, was one of the special places of childhood. We often played there. The details of our games are long forgotten, but the arena that hosted them remains vividly remembered. This was one of our secret observation posts for spying on the adult world. It was here we found a discarded whiskey bottle not quite empty, a half-smoked cigarette, its butt pinked with lipstick, crumpled pages from a pornographic magazine, once a pair of knickers. Sharp verbal flecks ("fuck", "bastard", "cunt") blew in from the conversations of strangers walking past, providing spoken parallels to these tawdry artifacts. We little suspected that our encounter with such things was part of the incremental process of initiation into the tribe that at once fascinated and bored us.

The pillars were set back from the road and there was a semi-circle of dusty tarmac between it and them, almost as if the road's vein had bulged outwards and grown varicose with the pressure of traffic it carried, leaving a kind of asphalt no-man's land where cars occasionally turned. From our laurel den we often watched unseen, our presence unsuspected, eavesdropping on people walking by or writing down the registration numbers of cars speeding to and from Lisburn, the bustling market town whose centre was only a mile or two from Shandon. The road away from Lisburn led to the airport and to the ferries at the port of Larne, so it was nearly always busy. A rich seam of stories could be tapped into by building on the foundation of those *not* turning in at Shandon's pillars, but passing by, going elsewhere, preoccupied with other homes and families, entrances

and destinations, lives entirely unaware of ours. Peeping over the brick, camouflaged by the laurel's foliage, who knows what stories we witnessed so fractionally, or how the different threads of our lives and the lives of those who went by could be joined up to make sense of the history we were all, moment by moment, weaving together? Setting the intricacies of that mesh of lives alongside the fortunes of the few protagonists on whom we focus is a good way of remembering how much our sense of things relies on abstraction, how much our pictures of the world leave out.

The pillars are gone now, and their walls, and the laurel that nestled behind them. Shandon itself is still there, but lived in by strangers and occupying only a heavily pruned remnant of its former territory. There are new houses on what used to be its lawns and tennis court and fields and orchard. All those untidy margins where hens once wandered freely, pecking amongst the long grass and weeds, have been flattened, concreted over, made into patios and parking spaces. Today, looking at the anonymous bungalows with their tiny manicured gardens spread out on old Shandon's sprawling territory, it's like seeing a palimpsest of neat equations pasted over the swirling curlicues of a dishevelled, rambling manuscript that once told many tales. I can remember the original manuscript so clearly that it sometimes feels as if I'm reading the past and present mixed together—watching the ghosts of unruly children tearing around open-plan living rooms, climbing damson trees suddenly growing again in designer kitchens, playing tag around the shiny vehicles, making daisy chains on driveways where the grass tennis court used to be. We often chased each other there with the heavy roller meant for keeping the court's surface even—though any smoothness we managed to impose was soon ruptured by the wildflowers which studded the grass with irresistible profusion, however often mower and roller were applied.

So, my description of the pillars is not drawn from life. I can't go there now with notebook and camera, take their likeness from the things themselves and come away again to make this wordy shadow of their substance. Instead, I have to sketch them from the spectral images my memory offers. I know that memory's grip, however firm and true it might

appear, cannot be relied on to cup things with the same steady pressure of exactitude that being there affords. Moreover, words find it harder to get a grip on what's invisible than on what the eyes lay out before us, so there's a double slippage to consider in terms of assessing the accuracy of what I say. I'm no doubt unaware of the real extent of this slippage, but I do know that memory has filtered out the drabness that a photo would inevitably show. I always see Shandon's pillars lit by mellow sunlight. Even as it warms my recollection, I know this distillate of a hundred perfect summer days cannot be real. County Antrim's is no Mediterranean climate. Often we played when it was wet and cold. Grey clouds supplied the backdrop more often than the unbroken blue and gold that remembrance now bestows. But showing them suffused by a clemency the local weather rarely offers, picturing them without the shadow of the ordinary, whilst not "true to life" in the sense of constituting a faithful reproduction of a camera's snapshot is, at a deeper level, far more accurate than any photograph could claim to be. Memory's version captures a truth about the place, not merely as it *appears*, but as it was felt, played in, dreamed of, as its lineaments intertwined and pulled on mine, delicately adjusting the sails of childhood to catch the breath of meaning that emanates from things—things which, to an adult's rigging, have only the unbreezy weight of the ordinary about them. Memory can offer up the richness of imagining where a photograph would only dole out the thin gruel of the visually literal.

Trying to escape the doldrums of adulthood, the way the grownup mind too easily falls for the lure of the superficial, the simple, the no-nonsense, the cut-and-dried, and lazily equates what meets the eye with truth, I sometimes picture Shandon's pillars via different perspectives from my own. My hope is that by altering its angle and tempo in this way perception might be given further purchase and gradually unroll a fuller picture, one that might catch more of the pillars' elusive quality of fullness-beyond-labelling, a quality that nags on the edges of every description and defies each stratagem of words to pin it down. In the same way as shamans take on the guise of animal spirits to guide them through trances so, more

prosaically, I adopt non-human familiars to help me see entrances (trance and entrance are, of course, blood-brothers), and to notice the pillars which stand even on the humblest of things, marking the start of unexpected avenues.

This imaginative process, whose inevitable anthropomorphism invalidates any claim actually to “see” things as the animal in question might have done, certainly suggests a more richly textured view of the Shandon pillars than does our customary viewpoint. Many horses must have passed between them. How did the brickwork fall upon an equine eye? What shape did they take for a butterfly basking on the pillars’ sun-warmed brick? How did they appear to the owl that flew above them one Spring night in 1941, a freshly killed mouse clutched in its talons, the sound of German bombers droning overhead? How did they seem to the Shandon dogs, who stopped always at the pillars, venturing no further, their innate sense of territory acting as surely as any gate? Shifting biological realities like this is, naturally, speculative and unsupported, but it can help free us from that commonest of intellectual constraints—the assumption that our own outlook is the only one, or that it’s somehow uniquely authoritative and can be relied on to deliver a veridical picture of the world.

My favourite shamanic familiar in terms of broadening the view of Shandon’s pillars, breaking the spell of the familiar and making visible some of the threads that suture the ordinary to the extraordinary, is a kind of temporal kestrel. It hovers above them, immobile, a fixed point, keeping its position constant as, below it, time is made to speed by, rapidly spooling and unspooling towards a far distant future, a far distant past, so that the pillars’ present is churned into different focus. This fluttering familiar of the imagination can provide new perceptual footholds that allow me to ascend a little further up the sheer wall of that most difficult ascent: describing things the way they are.

A writer of the kind I’ll never be would view this kind of self-willed temporal dislocation with misgivings. Stories cannot flourish when time is sluiced through the pillars at the speed and volume my feathered familiar can release. Such writers prefer the ordinary tempo of hours-days-weeks-

months-years, our customary backdrop of duration cut to allow our fleeting presences to show up, their significance assured by the scale of this familiar screen. They would take us (and I often like to follow) not into the freefall of some sheer shamanic precipice where the dimensions of the drop make all our minuscule doings seem insignificant, but rather into the clipped sure world that prose so readily offers, laying uncomplicated sentences upon the mind as if they could hold the weight of the actual and so safely bear our tread across the abyss of existence.

In this clipped sure world a wealth of stories can be conjured from the raw material of what happened at Shandon, or what could have happened there, as this is shown by the images that appear on our screening scale of mundane time and circumstance. So we might focus on the maids who used to work here, employed via hiring fairs, living in—a small bedroom was provided—and paid the pittance usual at this time, allowed the expected miserly allotment of holidays. The maids were young, single, usually from rural areas, and invariably Catholic. They offered my mother and her sisters a friendly keyhole through which to gaze at the—to them—exotic rituals of this different faith, at once familiar and forbidden. My mother remembers one maid taking her to chapel, aged six or seven. The candles, incense, Latin, realistic depictions of the crucifixion—so different from the austere simplicities of her parents’ Presbyterianism—fell upon her mind with such an impact that the image was held there, perfectly remembered, for eighty years. Or, the focus could be made to fall on the army officers billeted at Shandon during the War. One night the household was wakened by the screams of a Major’s wife. They suspected murder but found her sitting up in bed, terrified, as a bat circled the room and her husband snored beside her. One suspects she would have readily agreed with the philosopher Thomas Nagel’s view that “anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life.” How would that alien creature have “seen” the pillars? What, if any, sense of entrance would it possess? Or, one might chronicle, or create stories from, those family Christmases at Shandon which, for years, acted as a kind of magnet,

pulling us back through the pillars from the familial diaspora that was to come (no one envisaged or wanted it) as Ulster's "Troubles" scattered us far from our County Antrim roots.

Anyone who passed between the pillars might be used to snag a line of narrative and take it forward, pulling the attention of readers along behind them. Funeral corteges passed through, embryos enfolded in their mothers' flesh, strangers, cousins, gardeners, labourers, doctors, governesses, tinkers and suitors, each with their own story, each story adding its featherweight to the enormous tonnage of the human saga. Once, when my mother was ten, an uncle came bloodied to the door for help, his eye spiked and blinded by a thorn while grubbing up a blackthorn hedge. Once, when I was a teenager, terrorists must have passed between the pillars, a furtive nocturnal trespass, to lie in wait for a prison officer who lived in a new house just beyond Shandon's hedge. Mercifully, this attempted killing failed.

Since writers of the sort I'm not aren't constrained by the boundaries of what happened, it would be easy to invent all manner of stories about love and lust, about class and religion, about Englishness and Irishness, war and poverty. Using Shandon's building blocks, a story could be constructed around a youthful lieutenant, fresh from public school, who's torn between a sensually sophisticated maid and the naïve refinement of one of the virgin daughters of the house. It's tempting to succumb to such diversions, to sweep through the pillars dramatically, making an entrance that draws the eye towards the unfolding of some vivid story, baited perhaps with rape or murder or the compelling simplicity of some other violently eye-catching beginning. But, for whatever reason, my interest is set in a key that eschews the racy harmonics of such narratives, even though I'm partial to them and often like to hum along. The entrances that intrigue me lead to less obvious destinations than the Big House with its cast of characters. For me, the pillars don't just suggest the domestic scale of a habitation and its dwellers. They also bring to mind pillars as ancient religious markers erected on the earth to stake some claim to the numinous, to post a reminder of entrances beyond the obvious. These upright

markers can be found scattered through the landscapes of many countries. Their style and date may vary; they may have been raised on the occasion of covenant, sacrifice, or worship. But for all their seeming variety, and despite their dense solidity, such pillars serve a similar function—to act as apertures, bore-holes, openings, entrances from the seen to the unseen world, reminders that mystery lies just beneath the crust of the quotidian.

In Japan, the gates of shrines are guarded by pairs of stone dogs called *koma-inu*. These sit facing each other at either side of the entrance, creating an invisible barrier which visitors must cross. One dog has its mouth open; the other has its mouth shut. The one with its mouth open is breathing in and is called “A”. The one with its mouth closed is breathing out and is called “Un”. The phrase “A-Un-no-kokyu”, (“A-Un breathing”) has come to describe a relationship between people that’s so close they can communicate without using words.

For me, invisible dogs stand at Shandon’s pillars, their shared respiration symbolizing the intimate and mysterious connection that exists between the known and the unknown, between the telegraphic attenuations of the names we give things, the descriptions we offer—superficial, partial—and the significance that’s coiled intricately within them. Passing between the pillars I trip on this invisible umbilical of breathy connection and, as I fall, sometimes catch a glimpse of the endless sands of being upon which the mirages of common diction sparkle out their little images. We exist in a world of multiple registers that allow us to move through it in a variety of modes, but we sometimes forget the links between them. The no-nonsense world of facts and figures, at once useful and obscuring (perhaps useful *because* obscuring) skitters its way across a surface created by its own computations. Yet for every *Un* there is an *A*. Even if we are oblivious to it, in the breath of every sentence we inhale dormant complexities, their unnerving plenitude is only temporarily suspended by the icy hold of words; the promise of a thaw of complication-into-wonder remains whenever we pause for reflection.

From my temporal kestrel’s vantage point, the land can be seen changing so much across time that it seems like liquid. Not just the gradual

rhythm of the seasons and the gentle ripple of plant life as thorn bushes and chestnut trees edge their shoots slowly from the earth, unfolding into the shapes their mature form etches on the mind and parsing time with their annual budding and leaf-fall. Like a living space-probe filming across incomprehensible distances, my kestrel-familiar leaves its camera running so that the recognized small-scale scene soon retreats into the non-being that preceded it, the earth claiming back, pulling into its dark fastness, all the trees and fields and roads and houses, replacing them with an unpeopled wilderness of ocean, and before that smouldering lava, and before that an amorphous cloud of debris and gas in space waiting to spark into the particularities of existence. Racing upwards through time's amplitude, the pillars and house I know are there and gone in a flash, the people I knew replaced by strangers, our generation grubbed out like a blackthorn hedge to make way for the next one, and the next one following on from that. Sometimes our customary preoccupations, our everyday measures, seem to act like a thorn in the eye, blinding us to the real dimensions of things. Sometimes they seem more like blinkers that stop us catching sight of what would only terrify, that offer a shield against the vertigo of being.

Somewhere in the hovering kestrel's imagined purview there are the first human eyes ever to have looked at this place which, centuries after their individual extinction, would be momentarily marked by the pillars. Somewhere there will no doubt be the last pair of human eyes to harbour the image of whatever exists at these precise co-ordinates of space long after Shandon, and all memory of it, has completely vanished. And between these pillars marking each end of our species' story, there flows a torrent of individuals, images, experiences too rich for any account to catch beyond the blandest generalization. Go forwards, go backwards, using Shandon's pillars as a kind of navigation buoy, and you are soon lost in dwarfing distances. We may think we've tamed things with our words. But always waiting, just inside the doorway of the dullest declension, is the portal of the seemingly unlimited. The shape and colour of unremarkable redbrick pillars falling on a human retina may seem of little moment. But the pillars bear a cargo heavier by far than anything the eyes can hope

to carry. And the retina itself soon unspills from the neat baptism of that label into a story of cells and genes and light juggled across aeons as we slowly emerged from the flotilla of creatures that bore life from its veiled beginnings towards our own small part in its unfolding.

In Greek mythology, dreams entered via one of two gates. True dreams came through the Gate of Horn; false dreams through the Gate of Ivory. Looking down from the perspective of my kestrel-familiar, hovering in an imagined temporal updraft as the aeons flow by beneath its watching eye, I sometimes think a third gate should be added, somewhere between dreams and waking. This Gate of Laurel is the entrance through which comes a crushing counterweight of fullness, a corrective for all the simplifications and superficiality with which we customarily clad things. It is a gate where the trance of mystery might be joined to those entrances whose thresholds we've grown so used to crossing as we make our way into our variously impoverished visions of the world.

The street-lighting used to stop several hundred yards before Shandon's entrance. Once, when she was only nineteen and walking home alone after dark, my mother heard footsteps following behind her. When she slowed down, listening intently, they slowed down. When she stopped, they stopped. When she turned and stared into the darkness, she could make out no figure, but when she walked faster the following steps started up again and went faster too. Heart pounding, she began to run, sure that an assailant was stalking her. In fact, it turned out to be the sound made by her own loose-fitting shoes. Somehow their flip-flop noise sounding out with each step she took seemed more like someone following than the echo of her own paces. When I think about the Shandon pillars now I can hear the noise of another weight of discourse echoing in the wake of memory's gilded pictures. It feels more like the close-shadowing of something gargantuan and other than anything self-generated, but I'm reminded of my mother's youthful terror and wonder about the depth of deception words may carry in their capacious holds. Perhaps my sense of mysterious entrances implicit in the mundane, entrances that are at once alluring and alarming, is no more than the sound of my own prose run-

ning away from its unrecognized echo.

A writer of the type I once wanted to become would have acted as a stricter gatekeeper, controlling the flow of what passed between the pillars of his words. Such a writer would have let through only a manageable cast of characters, actions, dialogue. With such verbal irrigation a rich harvest of stories can be sown. I love such writing and admire the thoroughbred genres in which it flourishes with such sophistication. But I also like the mongrel toughness of the essay which, standing in the unlikely setting of the hollowed laurel thicket, allows me to resist the closures and conclusions of composition and feel the deluge of the real push against the fabric of the mind until it is engulfed and intoxicated. The sweep of the avenue up the gentle incline towards the house, and the tight turn off the approved route into the laurel thicket behind the left-hand pillar, provides a nice statement of the different ambience of story and essay. Typically, essays occupy the margins, explore liminal spaces, turn back upon themselves, deal with seemingly ordinary things, tolerate meandering and incompleteness, estrange the familiar. The type of writing I once thought I'd do keeps to broader paths and moves more swiftly towards a dénouement, variously providing the semblance of safe passage via the ingenious handholds that the codes of literary invention and the myths of linearity have variously established.

We each of us pass between the pillar of our first in-breath and the pillar of our last out-breath, the relationship between being and non-being as intimately interconnected as that between the endless invisible intercourse of *A* and *Un*. Given the nature of the pillars that mark the beginning and the end of our journey, is it any wonder that, eschewing the terror of the real, we often turn to stories for some comfort? We cannot choose where to go in, do not know when we'll go out, and the attempt to chronicle the nature of our entrance, route and exit can open up vistas that make the Pillars of Hercules seem toy-like in comparison.

The eighteenth century Zen teacher known in Japan as Ekai, in China as Hui K'ai, wrote a famous text, *Wu-men Kuan* (*The Gateless Gate*). This provides commentary on forty-eight classic koans. Zen, he said, has no

gates. The key question is, “how does one pass through this gateless gate?” I hope Master Ekai would not judge the way I’ve approached Shandon’s entrance as being entirely without merit. I make no attempt to close with words the gateless gate that lies between its pillars, a tangible symbol of the portals that await us at the heart of every moment. Instead, I try to see the invisible *koma-inu* that stand there, unleash them from the confinement of the ordinary and listen, spellbound, to the astonishing susurrations of their *A-Un* breathing.