

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures of Kaku-an

by strannikov

i

In fields that've never grown this tall, I still search,
until I reach an unnamed stream, the waters slid off
unnamed hills hours and horizons ago.
I cannot take another step! —besides, I'm lost:
the sun slides, the locusts pipe up, hardly a band of trustworthy
guides,
songs in ev'ry direction.

ii

On this shaded, soggy bank, an overgrown path.
The sweet grass may be tall and thick, but clearly,
someone has walked here,
someone in those hills by now left this flat track here,
somewhere in those hills, someone sniffs the sky, snorting in stark
sunlight.

iii

And from a branch, of all things, a nightingale sings.
The sun's warm, the wind soft and cool, the water's waving
willows green.
In this clearing no one can hide,

an artist could not paint an ox in the space he'd need to show it,
his canvas could not be hidden.

iv

And just how would I paint an ox? It would take at least five
senses.

And just what ox? The ox with the only strong head and neck and
heart,
who'd strut or charge just where he'd please,
he could stand anywhere and be in just one place.

v

To get him to pose would take a whip and a rope,
otherwise, who knows where he would wander off to?
Put a light yoke over that neck, and he'd guide you down rows
and fields,
and pretty soon, he'd follow you, once you'd both forgotten the
rope.

vi

Remember when you were worn out? The ox would let you ride
him home,
he'd strut to your quiet pipe as the evening fell.
As well as you could play, his tail would twitch the tune—
the melody, the cadence of notes: the locusts stop to listen.

vii

Once in the yard, the ox would head to his barn and you, to your room.

Nothing near or far off stirs, you can hear the whole world resting:

you wake at noon, the sun sits still,
a whip and a rope lie curled in a bare corner.

viii

No whip, no rope, no me, no ox,
the sky's too big for eyes to see,
a snowflake won't settle on a smoking furnace;
the fathers were never restless, it was always the earth that moved.

ix

So where do I start, when begin? —too late to ask for directions!
If I see and I hear no evil and no good, I wind up with nothing to say.

Just sitting somewhere in my room, it's the world outside that's turning,
the water rolls not far away, across the stream red flowers bloom.

x

Later, in muddy overalls, I manage to show up in town.

“No shirt, no shoes, no service.” —ha! I can't help but smile at the sign.

Miracles? —take 'em or leave 'em:

but I can spin my walking stick, and I turn into a windmill.

