

EXTRACT: BRYONY BOND

She keeps coming back to that image of Hiroshige's Monkey Bridge. The viewer's eye, her eye, goes from forest to forest, passing some other travellers on the way. The implication is not that the river running through the picture is a gorge separating two masses of land but that at least one side is an island. Is she travelling with all the anticipation any visit to an island brings or has she just returned? Suffused with a sense of fulfilment at coming back to wherever one has left from? Each side the archetype beckons and conjures up a small universe of possibilities. From forest to forest. From wood to wood via air and water. In the forest are brigands, wood sprites, ghosts. Mystery. Looking down from the precipice one can see more portals. The cave under the bridge and the whirlpool. The dark blue at the bottom of the image has an edge of the world feel, as the eye follows the river around, soon enough one reaches the deep sea. The small village in the middle-distance invites one to peer into every dwelling. The mind's eye can enter the cave miraculously without any fear of being dashed upon the rocks. Therein lies the treasure, at least for her: a robber's hoard, or a secret path through the rock to the village beyond. Trolls, witches, bears. A correspondence exists with the forest, a dark, damp, scary place terrifying to enter, where the secrets lie. The whirlpool might drag her down but again, miraculously, she breathes underwater. There is a hidden world down here.

Perhaps a kingdom? And speaking of hidden kingdoms, the place feels like it could contain an endless supply...

Quite true. She never grows bored of wondering about the place...

What else does she encounter on these walks?

The more frequent her walks become, the more they serve to confuse her further about the various spaces, picture galleries and covered walkways. A peep around a

new and unknown door will reveal anything from an empty broom cupboard to a great ballroom, furniture draped with dust sheets. One afternoon she comes across a beautiful open courtyard, the walls festooned in ancient wisteria and apparently used only for drying linen. It takes her several attempts to find it again. There are prints and paintings everywhere, of every description and quality, as though several collections are combined or chosen by an eye possessed of varying fortune and erratic taste. Objets d'art, some of value, are kept permanently on display, often indifferently dusted. Most of the spaces appeared to have nothing to do with the others, as though they had somehow accumulated there from nowhere, unprecedented. Yet some consistencies began to show through. Motifs, even. She notes that the image of a lone bat keeps reappearing, as though from some heraldic design: its wings always fully unfurled. The same image is to be found embroidered on the corner of a set of curtains, embossed in silver leaf on the back of an ancient copy of *In Praise of Folly*. A weather vane on top of a bell tower in the shape of a golden bat, an embroidered, dog-eaten pillow, a tiny signature in the corner of a painting. Passing from one room to another, each entered for the first time, each leading to the next until she comes across a room of paintings, all of varying sizes, all small enough to have been made without the artist taking a step. Imagine that. The painter, whoever she was, surrounded, almost clothed in them, caparisoned. Paintings like spangles, like sequins. Each image standing within the span of an arm's flourish or the head dipping down for a detail. A human scale. Not the height of the painter but the span of two arms stretched out in the air, the space between thumb and finger. The room is a deep yellow-green with a dark polished wooden floor, no daylight. Light seems to come from the paintings, like tiny windows. The colours all muted. Milky blue films cast over each canvas. Thin patches of fog, weak sunlight, all cool, calm and grey like Japanese woodcuts. She looks closer and the paint appears to ghost into ridges and sharp peaks. Paintings of: a.) A domestic landscape, a small garden. In the centre a bare tree in winter, lopsided. A branch stretches out so far to reach the sun that it needs a crutch to stop it from cracking and tearing off; a weathered grey fork of wood, bound together itself with white tape. b.) A garden, a tree, but this time it's spring; laden

with faded pink blooms. The same shape yes, the same tree; there is the crutch, almost invisible under the heavy weight of the blossom. c.) A new view; leaves this time and no blossom. Green like the bottom of a pond. d.) In winter, again, stark steel grey, and then in autumn; moist brown decay lies beneath the branches. It is the same tree, again and again. The same view for years. A steady gaze, a stationary point at a window, around it the seasons come and bring their changes; one year rolls into the next. But there is always looking. Here is a new moment, fresh paint to place, to scumble, to scrape and trowel. She moves onwards through the endless rooms and walkways.