

The Bone People (excerpt)
By Kerri Hulme

The night is still young, but she can't be bothered relighting the fire.

Shall I drink this depression off? Nah, I'll try sleeping it out, first.

She doesn't bother with a lamp, plodding up the spiral in the gloomy dark.
She does light the great candle that stands by her bed.

Three foot high, inches wide, intended to provide the easterlight in a church. It is rooted in a massive pottery base she made three years ago: the base is decorated with spirals that wind and flow together, like eddies of smoke, eddies of water.

Spirals make more sense than crosses, joys more than sorrows....

She sits down on the bed edge, watching the flickering candle flame.

A writhing fire, dancing on this candle...twisting to an inward wind, then spiring up orange and smoking....

There are moths in the room. Willowisp silver of their wings, out in the shadow bounds, a shimmering irregular beat, sought seen caught out of the corner of the eye....

I wonder if Sim sees auras like that? A twist of wayward light, or thick clouding smoke. Lights, he said, but...

I wonder if he's dreaming now? Joe says he does, hence the trichloral and put him to bed soon after we finished trimming his hair...though it wouldn't have needed dope to make him sleep. He was exhausted...and what is there about cutting hair that should bring home his nightmares to him?

And damn it, soul...Joe and his care and love of the brat—and then the casual admission that the only way he can control Sim is to whack him into submission. What about korero, Joe? What about our tribe's famous talk-it-out with all concerned? It worked tonight. Give the urchin reasons, and time to think things out, and he responds, even more than you'd expect. You can bring him round with a little talk, a bit of humour and sympathy, round to wherever you want.

E man, you can't be so short on understanding, even given your past, that the *only* way you can handle Simon P is to knock him out. And if he's such a burden, you've said yourself that the Tainuis would take him tomorrow. So, given that you love him, why not take that extra time and trouble with him? Instead of yelling like tonight...and I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't come along just then?

To hell, Holmes, what's the point of thinking about this? You know damn well you'll never say it to Gillayley.

The candle flame has steadied now, and the moths are darting closer.

If I'm going to sit here, I might as well drink and forget about bloody Gillayleys....

Down to the cellar, using a torch to explore the labels of the bottles.

Frontignac, pinotage, port and muscatel;
hock, riesling, sauterne, and liebfraumilch;
mead, burgundy, chianti, and dandelion wine;
Cider? Perry? Arrack? Beer? Stout? Ale?
Holy mother, I didn't realise I had so much grog stored away....

More labels in the steady beam; rum, tequila, Scotch, bourbon, cognac, and liqueurs of all degrees...claret and sherry, madeira and sack, and ah hah! what better? Gloom defeating champagne....

There's half a case of it left. And I thought that the bottle I took from upstairs to Moerangi was the last of it...dear spirits, remind me to visit more often...take two, and hope they'll do.

Upstairs rapidly to the livingroom, where the smell of dead ashes hangs heavily everywhere.

"Ah, choices, choices..." standing in front of her minor grog hoard.

"Lessee, what's a fitting cup from which to drink the health of God in bloodless wine?" She runs her fingers over the wine goblet collection.

A thin shell of pottery, lopsided, coloured brown and yellow, speckled like a thrush breast; wooden goblets with carved stems; the three pure bubbles of crystal, brittle upon the thinnest possible stalks; matte pewter; engraved silver; a clear hemisphere of aquamarine, flawed and scintillating with light on that one side; the thick, chunky cut glass that Charles, long ago prince of doomed distant Stuarts, was supposed to have owned; translucent bowls of porcelain brought back from Japan; two handsized lacquer bowls; a jade cup that held as much wine as an eggshell on a tall pedestal of fretted ivory...no two quite the same. All rare, all strange...especially the odd little pottery bowl that Simon used on his drinking spree....

She holds it in her hand a moment, reverently.

Two and a half thousand years old, dug from a gravesite in Greece, my precious...what brews were drunk in thee?

But she chooses one of the crystal bubbles, and picks up a bottle-opener, a mirror, and wanders back to her bedroom.

*And here I go,
knocking around the bottle,
holding my heart open and
hoping my mind keeps closed....*

Tuneless bellowing, Holmes....

She watches the candlelight spurt up, from the wind of the opening door.

Do not dance, do not get excited, flame; it is only me come in....

She opens the bottle of champagne, and sets the mirror by the candle. She can see her face in it, a candlelit ovoid, with gouges for eyes, shadowmouthed.

"Hi me. I shall converse with thee. There is nobody near so fluent, so full of shining wit. You know the right things to say, to titillate me, to appall. I shall assure thee, give me praise, comfort...no end of good it'll do, talking to a mirrored me."

Her voice raps into silence.

She shudders.

I think I'm going off my head.

They say if you can think it, you can't be it.

The candle rears up and smoke clouds the mirror.

For no reason, she hears Joe talking in the bach at Moerangi: "It was a good idea. I could see out the window that way, and who came in the door."

O yes. Mirror of course. From his flat-on-the-back phase of childhood. And he also said—how did those two bits go?

"I used to get afraid that I'd look up into the mirror and see nothing there."

And,
“I had this nightmare eh. One day, I’d look into the mirror and somebody else would be looking back out of my face.”

Nasty.

She leans carefully over, and swivels the mirror round so she can’t see in it.

It was a nice idea, to practise the old discipline of mirror and candle again, to use the image and living light as pointers to the self beyond self.

But not in this state, gentle soul. It’s a bad stage when you get talking to mirrors, and right at the moment, I think you’re unstable enough to see other people looking outa your eyes.

She rests back against the headboard of the bed, and begins drinking steadily.

The cold white eye of the moon looks in.

A bottle down, and a bottle to go....

*Over the lip of wax
a rivers spills,
flame reddens flickers
flares, stills,
and the river congeals....*

The black wick slopes over, leaning out of the flame.

The world is night, quiet night.

She wets the rim of the bubbleglass, and strokes round and round slowly. The crystal begins to sing.

“Getta guitar?”

She squints at the wine. In the uneasy light, she can just see her reflection.

“Was it thee or me who spake?”

Silence.

“Musta been me.”

She sets the goblet down by the backwards mirror with great care, and fumbles her way downstairs.

“Stuhupid barstard, shoulda brought the light.”

The toadstools by the seventh step glow palely green. She reaches into the niche and pinches one off, and splutters into a chuckle.

“Brought it!” triumphantly. But the phosphorescence fades even as she speaks. “Ah sheeit,” throwing it down on the stone, “hope I *squash* you.”

Darkness, darkness, all around.

The distant crying of the sea...or is it my heart in me? Thou nede not be afrayed of any bugges by night...it must be the livingroom circle by now...this step? What if I’ve stepped out of my retreat and this downward spiral goes on and on in the black forever? Steep deep, deep where light suffocates and people become tiny creeping shades unseen ever except by horrible....

“Thank heaven,” in a loud voice, stepping out into the livingroom. The great window lets in enough moonlight for her to see by.

Wonder when me new one’s coming?

She lights a lamp quickly, and another, and another, and their flames all seem to run together in a blurring winery flicker.

“I can see. Short of. I mean sort of. Sort. Of. Thank you.” She bows herself, to the lamps, to the moon.

Take it easy, Holmes, take it slow.

Bugger the guitar, I need tucker, I need food.”

Hunting through the cupboards, remembering with a vague despair that she’d eaten the remaining tinned food yesterday and earlier today, and had meant to get more when she went into Whangaroa, but....

“Ah, typical,” she sneers in derision of herself. “Floating on a lake of grog, and sitting on a mountain of tobacco and assorted weedery, and watch ya got to eat?”

A jar of lumpfish caviar.

She sighs.

“Better than nothing.”

Excerpt #2 from *The Bone People*

The kaumatua edges forward again. “Tauranga atua...” he says softly. Under his breath, again and again, “Tauranga atua, tauranga atua,” as though those words give strength and enable him to walk.

Tauranga... a resting place for canoes, an anchorage.

For a god canoe, what anchorage?

I remember a wet afternoon, when I was a child, and I read a magazine. It had the pictures and story of how they found an old canoe of the Egyptians...the sun ship of Cheops, that was it, a burial ship for a pharaoh to ride in. And I thought then—to think of it now!—how much more exciting it would be to find a ship of ours...not a dusty narrow craft in the desert sand, a river-craft if it sailed at all, but one of the fartravelled saltsea ships, that knifed across great Kiwa centuries ago...guided by stars, powered by the winds and by the muscles of stronghearted women and men....

But Cheops’ canoe travelled the way of the dead, and that’s a journey and a half...coffined it was, confined it was, confined between stone blocks.

Where will I find this ship? In stone? In water as he suggested?

Or only in the clouded remnants of an old man’s mind?

The kaumatua’s grasp on his arm tightens again.

“Here,” he says in a choked whisper, “here.”

The earth track goes on a way yet, turning a corner to head towards the sea. The sea is loud here, as though the diminishing rock walls, by some freak of acoustics, channel the sound in. There doesn’t appear to be anything different about this part of the gorge. Joe looks sadly round.

Mad and stricken after all....

“See. It?”

The rasping urgency of the tired voice makes him stare at the bare surrounding rocks as hard as he can. Tears blur his vision.

I can’t say even Yes for him. I can’t tell him a lie.

The wind blows a little more strongly, and the white streamers of cloud shift away from the face of the sun. Over by the cliff, something glints.

“Is it the water?” asks Joe sharply.

The old man sags.

“Haere...” pushing himself away from Joe, go, you go, I cannot go.

As gently as possible, Joe helps him lie down at the side of the track. He takes off his parka and wraps it into a pad, a pillow for the kaumatua’s head. The old man’s eyes are closed.

“I’ll come right back.”

Don’t die yet, he thinks fiercely. He clammers over the rocks towards the glint, his heart pounding.

A weathered stratum of rock makes an overhang. It is almost a cave, but it hasn’t a floor. A great natural well, like a sinkhole, a cenote, has been formed into the rock.

The water is pale green and milky, as though it contains lime dust in suspension. It is opaque at first glance. But in a very short time—trick of the light, or his eyes adjusting—he can see shadows in the pool. He can’t tell how deep the water is, or how large the things that show as shadows are. They cover the bottom of the pool, with patches and gaps between them. Long angular shadows mainly, with two round ones at the far side.

It can’t be one of the great ships...the pool’s only, what? twenty feet in diameter...but there’s something down there...rock debris? Old logs? Dunno...where does the water come from?

Underground spring maybe...there doesn’t seem to be any outflow or overflow....

He puts his hand in the water cautiously, meaning to see whether the water is coloured or contains stoneflour, and snatches it out again before his fingers go in past the knuckles.

Jesus Holy!

It's like ten thousand tiny bubbles bursting on his skin, a mild electric current, an aliveness.

He notices that the water is not still at the far end of the pool. Fine tendrils, filaments of clearness, rise and meld with the pale green, like an ice-cube melting in whisky and spinning lucid threads into the surrounding colour.

He edges back from the side of the pool. Peace, peace, I'm just looking...maybe I should introduce myself?

Feeling foolish, squatting on his haunches by the overhang, he tells the water his name and his tribe, that Tiaki Mira has named him as his replacement.

Stupid fool, Ngakau...what do words mean to, whatever it is? If it's anything....

He says "E noho ra" before he goes, though.

The old man is sitting, back against a rock, when he returns.

"Not dead yet!" he calls cheerfully, triumphantly. "I am staggering on the edge of corruption, but I'm not dead yet!"

Fresh strength has been infused into him, from the rest or by Joe finding what he was sent to find. His eyes are bright and see the present again, and he no longer mumbles unintelligibly to the ghosts that surround him.

He produces Kerewin's last cigar from the pocket of his greatcoat, and lights it, passing it then to Joe.

E hoa, if only you could see where your smokes went...where are you now? And the last time I shared a smoke, it was with Haimona....

O boy, what are they doing to you? Though maybe you can't know....

They smoke in silence, sharing the cigar puff and puff about.

"Pity we didn't bring the tea," says the kaumatua suddenly. "It's a good place for a picnic nei?"

Joe looks at him sideways. "A bit too quiet for my liking."

"O, it's not like this all the time...plenty of noise in a thunderstorm! It booms and echoes all up the gorge like giant men yelling...and when there's an earthquake! Ahh, I've been here when the earth was creaking and groaning as if she were giving birth...and sometimes, on long summer evenings when the flies are humming, sometimes..." the bantering note is gone, and his voice is low and dreamy, "the old people come back. I've seen them standing round the mouth of that shelter up there, watching and talking softly. With their long oiled hair, and their fine strong bodies, and proud free-eyed faces...sometimes they talk, and sometimes they walk, filing away down a track that isn't there anymore, silent under the sun...maybe they don't come back, maybe I've gone into their time, because they've looked to where I sit and shaded their eyes, squinting, as though they could see something but not enough. and once, a woman threw a piece of cooked kumara at me and I ducked, and laughed...and once I looked at my dog, and he'd gone misty. Insubstantial, until I put my hand on him, and he whined and licked my hand, and when I looked back, the old ones had gone...mysteries, o Joseph. All the land is filled with mysteries, and this place fairly sings with them."

"I don't think I'd like to meet any of the old folk."

I don't think I could look them straight in the eye. I'd feel like a thing of no account, less than a slave.

"You may, and you may not."

The old man shrugs, and begins talking about other days and happenings, when he was younger and spent much of his time hunting pig and deer through the scrub.

"Fishing and hunting and looking after my garden," he finishes, "that's how my life has been spent. It has been a very easy life, I suppose. No wars or great doings. Just watching things grow, and catching things for food. No family worries after the old woman died. No money problems, always enough to eat, enough to smoke, a roof over my head. A man can find satisfaction with enough."

"Yes," says Joe.

His thigh has started to ache after all the walking and scrambling over the rocks, and his arm is throbbing hard.

I'd like to stretch out in the sun and go to sleep while he talks, but I can't do that.

He says with an effort,

“Your dogs, e pou? Where did you get them?”

“O, the old lady had a bitch, that somehow got herself in pup...a dog from a hunter’s pack maybe? They bred among themselves, never too many, all good and strong dogs, not a mean or bad cur among them. The last one, he died about two years ago, and I didn’t have the heart to start again. Just as well, ne? It’s not good for a dog to outlive his master...they were company as well as hunting companions. That last one, Tika he was called, must have been the only dog in the country who was brought up and lived on fish, eh. I haven’t hunted pig or deer for many years now, but I can still fish...o, he used to get a bit of bird now and then, but mainly fish....” He sits in the sun, his hands folded in his lap, remembering the dogs, retelling their exploits as they come into his mind.

It’s maybe his last talk, Ngakau. Make it happy for him.

So he chuckles amiably at the funny stories, and clucks his tongue at the bad ones, and mourns with the old man over the deaths of long-dead dogs. The ache in his arm and leg grows, but he doesn’t let it show on his face.

At last the kaumatua reaches out in a loud voice, something that is guttural and archaic and incomprehensible to Joe. The chant rings in the gorge, an echo dying seconds after the last word has been called out.

“A farewell,” says the old man, turning to him, answering his question before it is asked. “I don’t think the maurioa or the little god recognise we who watch over them as individuals. My grandmother thought of us as an attendant stream of awareness, and said they knew when we left. Now, they’ll know I’m leaving.”

Joe, rubbing his thigh awkwardly with his left hand,

“I told them when I said hello. Sort of.”

What did you see to say hello to?” asks the old man, grinning.

Joe flushes.

“What looked like long shadows in the water,” his words echoing the kaumatua’s earlier words.

The old man says gently,

“It’s all in pieces, you know...and not all of it is there. The old people managed to get the stern and the prows and a few of the hull sections to that safety...I know they used pieces of the hull to carry the little god and the mauri to the tarn.

“They’re the round shadows?”

He smiles with satisfaction. “Ah, you’re a discerning one after all...it took me days to see them properly. Yes, I think they may be unwrapped now, but when my grandmother brought them to the surface they were covered with the remains of cloaks. Red feather cloaks, too.”

“She swam in *that*?”

The old man smiles more widely still.

“You touched it, eh? It’s a surprise isn’t it! No, she called them to the top, and the little god came with the mauri on his back, and they stayed there for minutes while she sang, and then sank back to safety. Believe it, or disbelieve it, that was how the matter was. I tried once, using the words that she taught me, but the water started boiling, and that hadn’t happened when she sang, so I was afraid and stopped. My grandmother was a very strong-minded woman, remember, and she had knowledge she maybe never should have had.”

Joe shivers, partly from the growing pain, partly from the magic.

“Where did she get hold of it?” he asks, not really wanting to know.

The old man waves a hand in the air. “From her girlhood, she was curious about this place...her grandfather doted on her, and told her many things from the past. What he told her of the burial of this canoe, and what it contained, fascinated her mind. She sought out the people who had knowledge, and one way or another, obtained all she needed to know. She had the right to this piece of land, through her mother’s sister, who was never married. She had to wait years until she got it though, and when she got it, she made sure, pakeha fashion, that it would never pass out of their hands except to someone she was confident would look after what it bore. Me. Now you.”

“Remember, it was a time of flux and chaos when she sought her knowledge. No-one can be blamed for giving her information that she maybe should never have known. And she can be praised for having that staunch courage and intelligence to preserve something she believed, as I believe, to be of unusual value. Incalculable value. How do you weigh the value of this country’s soul?”

Joe shakes his head. He doesn’t want to think of what could be lying there in the cool green and stinging water.

He does say, tentatively, as they’re walking slowly away, “If it is, the heart of Aoteroa...why isn’t this whole place...flowering? Something as strong as that, would make the very stones flower, ne? And there is nothing at all...no birds...flies, you say, but...flies?”

The kaumatua waits until the halting sentences are finished.

“It despaired of us, remember. It is asleep...maybe its very sleep keeps the living things away, except for flies, who come to the sleeping and the dead alike. Aue! the one thing I regret about dying is that, secretly, in the marrow of my heart, I have always wanted to see what happens when it wakes up.” He sighs. “Maybe we have gone too far down other paths for the old alliance to be reformed, and this will remain a land where the spirit has withdrawn. Where the spirit is still with the land, but no longer active. No longer loving the land.” he laughs harshly. “I can’t imagine it loving the mess the Pakeha have made, can you?”

Joe thought of the forests burned and cut down; the gouges and scars that dams and road works and development schemes had made; the peculiar barren paddocks where alien animals, one kind of crop, grazed imported grasses; the erosion, the overfertilisation, the pollution....

“No, it wouldn’t like this at all. We might have started some of the havoc, but we would never have carried it so far. I don’t think.” He adds thoughtfully, after a pause of seconds, “I can’t see that,” nodding back towards the hidden well, “ever waking now. The whole order of the world would have to change, all of humanity, and I can’t see that happening, e pou, not ever.”

“Eternity is a long time,” says the kaumatua comfortably. “Everything changes, even that which supposes itself to be unalterable. All we can do is look after the precious matters which are our heritage, and wait, and hope.” The lively glint is back in his eyes.

“Well, at least *you* can do that...this one is going to take things easy from now on!” He rubs his belly. “Though I might wait long enough for tea, Joseph. Yes, I think I’ll take you through my garden, and we’ll gather food for tea. We’ll eat a last good meal together, and you can tell me all about your dead family that was, and your live one which you have lost, and I’ll be as polite as you were while I was boring you with tales of my dogs, hei?”

Joe grins shamefacedly.

“I wasn’t that bored...I hope it’s not our last meal. Maybe you won’t be called away so fast now they,” gesturing with his hand to the pale shining sky, “know how inept and unlearned I am.”

“Ah, you’ll do, you’ll do,” says the old man cryptically, and they walk on, limp on, in silence.