

The Bone Feeder Opera

Libretto 2.18

*Just before dawn. Mist covers the land. A soft wind blows through the bent forms of driftwood
– or are these old bodies?*

Ferryman

Tērā te haeata takiri ana mai ki waho ki te moana
Arā, te puna i te ao mārama
E rangona ai te korokoro tuī

Ao ake i te ata
Ka mahue noa te tini me te mano
I Hawaiiki, i te hau-kainga e karanga nei
Taihoa ake he pōkai whenua te tāria nei

Mākūkū ana te whenua i aku roimata
Arā, te puna i te ao mārama
E rangona ai te kihikihi e...i

(Streams of light flow to the sea
this, the spring of the world of light¹,
the land where the tui's voice greets the dawn

As we wake to the light
others, our loved ones, are left behind.
They reach out from Hawaiiki and call us back
but we must walk our own shores first.

the land is transformed by my tears
this, the spring of the world of light,
where cicadas' voices call us still.)

Chorus of Chinese Miners and Women

孤蟬早唱
展翅共鳴
拍翼共鳴

(A lone cicada rises
her wings singing
her wings singing)

我地都過咗世入棺安息
嗰日我地再第二輪過世
注定要喺呢度外山遊盪。
遠離家母嘅懷抱

(we were dead, already in our coffins
 we died a second death that day
 fated to wander these foreign hills
 beyond the embrace of our mothers' wombs²)

Aotearoa, 2017, Rawene Wharf

Ben I need to cross the harbour -
Ferryman You're blocking my light.
Ben Those kids, they said to find you -
Ferryman Just take a step there -
 those kids? they said I was porangi?
Ben I need to get to Mitimiti...
 to Mitimiti, I need to go there.
Ferryman Help yourself. Oh, you can't swim?
Ben It's your job to take me there -
 to the other side.

Ferryman Ae. Perhaps it is. The other side....
 Hāere mai, ki konei.³
 Hokianga hooch - they say it grows
 on old Chinamen's bones.
 Tastes of sweet and sour.
 Ae. What's your name bro?
Ben Ben. Ben Kwan.
Ferryman And I'm the Ferryman.
 Some say I walk on water, but no
 Some say I walk on air, but no
 Some say I call the fish to me...Haere mai!
 Kai moana's the best, just fried or frittered, or grilled, even raw
 and I'm a great fisherman
 a fisherman, a fisher of men.....
 I'm the Ferryman. The Ferryman.

Some say I walk on water, I do
 Some say I walk on air, I do
 The space between the states, life/death, air and water
 Mine to trawl, to catch, to hold, to release, to hope, to guard
 and I'm a great fisherman
 a fisherman, a fisher of men
 a weaver of dreams, a holder of tales,
 an eater - of kai moana.
 I'm the Ferryman. The Ferryman.

the ocean spray? doesn't touch me.
 No wave can faze me.
 But the tears of men? you got me.
 those Chinamen - they haunt me,

And you, boy - do you know what you hold?
 a pounamu cicada, flown from another home

found by my people with Kwan's bones –

I'm the Ferryman, I'll take you to the other side
but a warning before we land –
don't leave the path
respect Papatuanuku:
the land is tapu, bones were found
- don't mess with what you don't understand.

Kohukohu, the other side of Hokianga Harbour

Ferryman Step on the land
see the sparkling waters
Ben Those mangy old mangroves?
Ferryman Teeming with eels
I would catch as a child. Between the roots
the dead still play. Here, every tree breathes
every stone moves, bones crawl still
onto the beach. Around them
leaves whisper, surround,
dream of returning home⁴ -
Ben Ghosts. Only an idiot would believe -
Ferryman Trust me bro – don't piss off the kehua.

Kwan (a ghost) looks out to sea.

Kwan It is dawn. The daylight has grown
fingers into my bones, tendrils holding me tight
to the earth. Deep within
I breathe and sleep, breathe and sleep.
I am hungry, I never eat.

The moon wanders these hills
never pausing to think, to dream
never looking into the silent river
yearning in the shadows

I poured wine, gave offers of rice
on the grave of my father, promised I would return -
I did not. Now I can
not drink with him, nor my sons.
I sit alone, forever hungry.

Chinese chorus A lone cicada rises
her wings singing

we were dead, already in our coffins
we died a second death that day
condemned to walk these foreign hills
beyond the embrace of our mothers' wombs

Kwan The moon wanders these hills

never pausing to think, to dream
 never looking into the silent river
 yearning in the shadows

All my men, five hundred voices
 fading into the rain, a thousand restless feet
 walk the paths, of this quiet harbour
 Our ship sank in deep, sank in deep
 churning water, on our way home

But look, here's sunrise
 the same cold sun
 A change in the air?
 Will I ever be warm?

Chorus of Maori women

Box by box
 coffin by coffin
 they come to find us
 swept in on the tides

we unwrap the bones
 we hold them like children
 these bodies of men
 broken, needing homes

to look after guests
 is the highest honour
 and so we bring them here
 to the urupa.

Chorus of Chinese miners

what is this land
 trees twisted like dragons
 clouds bending down
 in suffocation

what is this land
 where have we come to
 why did our ship sink
 what happens now

where are our people
 how will they find us
 how will they feed us
 how shall we speak?

The Ghosts of the Miners discover Ben.

Ben who's that?

Dan (*whispering*)

Sam

Wang

that

that

that

Dan I'm Sing Song Dan, a connoisseur – of sustenance.... fine wine.... and ladies
Sam+Wang Naturally.

Sam I'm Doctor Sam, not medical – an expert in....science....and high tech
Dan + Wang crushed
 in his own diggings.

Wang Bungalow Wang, at your service – a gentleman....learned....adviser
Dan+Sam who can't read.

Ben Who's there? this wind... rising like voices

Ghosts? Only an idiot would believe -

Dan+Sam Three of five hundred unlucky souls -
Wang Four hundred ninety nine to be precise -

Miners We're China's finest.
 From Poon Yue, Jung Sung, and See-yip
 built on the curve of the Pearl River Delta
 its forests of jade
 its paddies of silver
 its ducks like... ducks
 We came seeking fortune.
 Some only found dust.
 And now we're dead
 lost in the ass end
 of an upside-down land.

Wang Can you believe we've been here
 One hundred and sixteen years?

Dan I'm hungry

Sam You're always hungry

Wang at least the wine's improved

Sam What would you know? You can't drink, you're dead!

Dan We don't need to drink to get ankled scattered

Sam battered off our faces

Wang legless smashed

Miners dead to the world...

Ben I thought I saw shadows -the trees are breathing - ow!

Dan Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Could it really be?

Sam he has Kwan's nose

Wang poor little fellow

Dan Yes, he walks like him

Sam with a rod stuck up his bum

Wang after so long - we must tell Kwan.

Sing Song Dan grabs Ben's bag.

Ben Hey, hey, my bag!

Ben holds a jade cicada.

Ben you, heart of stone
 warm inside my rib cage
 pulsing dark, then light

find him, you say
 find the bones find the bones
 raise the dead, bring him back,
 take him back home
 only then will a shipwrecked family
 be complete

you came to me
 one moonlit evening

a treasure lost, now found

Jade cicada
you were placed in the mouth
of my great, great grandfather
to be his guide, to help him home
so the family legend goes

find him, you say
find the bones find the bones
raise the dead, bring him back,
take him back home
only then will a shipwrecked family
be complete

so my father
said the ship's in the depths
outside this cold dark harbour
I cross divides
I have no home, I have no words to call my own

Kwan, watches Ben from the shadows.

Mitimiti, Mitimiti
find him at Mitimiti
oh heart of flesh⁵, of stone
why me, why now?

Kwan

佢相眼，佢個輪廓

(oh her eyes! her mouth)
Her eyes! her face!
it's as if she lives –

Ben If I could find him now
my great great grandfather
lost bones, the connection I seek
to make me complete

Kwan - the connection I seek
to make me complete

Ben Who's that?

None hear me – I beat, I breathe
I float, I move from scene to scene
I am adrift, I have no anchor
No place to stand, to call my own

Kwan Could this be true? a fresh spring field
I never knew I'd ploughed
A heart of tiny grass
who'd forgotten the sun⁶ ?

Ben No double strands to bind me

no hands that hold and find me
the grains of rice that feed
both the living and the dead
words that fall through water, through time –

Kwan Chinese, immortalised -
through sons, daughters, flowing downstream -
Tell me of your family. Their names,
how they dress, what they eat, if they speak
Chinese -

Ben and Kwan

None hear me – I beat, I breathe
I float, I move from scene to scene
I am adrift, I have no anchor
No place to stand, to call my own

Alone, here – I walk, I think
I do, I speak, I try to find
I cannot feel, I'm hollow, empty
No one to hold or call my own.

Ben I know no stories. My past is dead.
my father and my grandfather never said
where they came from, their connection to China-
I think they felt shame - in this land
That they fed and watered, made things grow-
their yellowness rendered them invisible, like ghosts.

Kwan

佢相眼，佢個輪廓

Koh seung ngan, koh gor lean coc
(her eyes, her face)
it's as if she lives...

China, 1855. Pearl River Delta

Wei Wei from high on the terrace
I watched him walk away

Women we watched them walk away, away
towards the sea

Wei Wei
ever flowing
the sea
my tears

Women
our tears
ever flowing
from high on the terrace
down to the sea

Wei Wei

when shall we hold them again?
our only reminders
our growing bellies
our children's questions
where is my father?

Women

where is my father
where is my husband
where is my son

Wei Wei

far away, far away
a land where dragons crawl on the earth
and clouds smother the mountains
where the sea is like a jade bowl
shattered by the waves

Women

far away, far away
where our husbands toil in the earth
and rocks smother their bodies
where iron fists are used to break men
shattered shards of hearts

Wei Wei

from high on the terrace
I watched him walk away

Women

we watched them walk away, away
towards the sea

Wei Wei

ever flowing
the sea
my tears

Women

our tears
ever flowing
from high on the terrace
down to the sea

Weiwei

My growing belly sings to the moon:
When shall I see him again
She says nothing
Calmly washes her hair in the water
Night after night
Moon after moon
Season on season

Women

night after night
moon

season
as the rice rises, then falls, then rises again:
when shall we see them again?

Aotearoa, 2017

Ferryman

Old friend – it's too cold
to sit in the freezing rain
Those pine trees are your friends
but even those will fade.

Kwan

I've spent longer here dead
than I have been alive.

I open the door, and there she is –
her face half turned to me
the voice I've heard in my dreams

Chorus There you stand, what will you do?
Can you recall who she is?

Kwan

Yes!
Of course I do.
Her hair so long
The way her fingers bend
And how her words can draw me in

Chorus

Can you feel? How does she look? Or is she just a shadow?

Kwan

I can see her
She's cooking rice
for our many sons
the house full of fragrance...

Chorus

Are you there? Or do you stand...outside the house you built?

Kwan

Stop. Stop. Stop.
I remember, I remember
Wei Wei, of course
Parents, family, our village
the strong autumn wind
the light on the fields

Chorus

Oh! the light the wind the sun!
Soft the rain, hits the earth
musty with growing,
with fertile soil –

Kwan

My father's muscled back, when I was all gangly knees.
On the steep terrace, eating our steamed rice
like generations past.

Chorus

Oh! the stones the fields the sky!
Ancestors, watching us
hillsides of knowing,
our link to the earth –

Kwan

I remember, I remember
kneeling in the sun
Bai san with suckling pig
bowing three times to sky
burned paper money

Chorus

Oh! the earth the stones the roots!
to walk the ancient pathways
a place for us to stand -
to eat shows our respect

Kwan

We cannot eat.

Chorus

We cannot eat.

Kwan

To eat shows respect.

Chorus

We cannot eat. To eat shows respect.

Kwan

We cannot show respect.

Chorus

We cannot eat. To eat shows respect. We cannot show respect.

Kwan

We cannot show respect to our ancestors.

We cannot show respect to our ancestors.

Chorus

We cannot eat. To eat shows respect. We cannot show respect.
To our ancestors.

Kwan

We cannot show respect to our ancestors.
Our ancestors. How soft and green are the hills where their bones lie! Constantly renewing,
children's voices calling among the graves.
I have food for you, father. I eat with you, to show respect.
But no. Here we are
among the pine needles, the old dead tree, the freezing rain.

Chorus

the pine needles, the old dead tree, the freezing rain.

Ferryman Respect, my friend Kwan
the years you've lingered here
now this boy has come
you'll join her soon -

Kwan She was not the only one
There was another –

Ferryman Kwan, you old sea-dog!

Kwan I've been torn between two –

Ferryman How could I not have known?

They are interrupted by the Miners

Miners Gong hei! Gong hei!
The lion's roar has cracked the sky
our jubilation's running high
the boy's here for your bones
and so, you must be going home -
Gong hei, gong hei, gong hei!

Kwan My friends, you're quick to bang the blocks
We don't even know what this boy's about -

Miners Gong hei! Gong hei!
He heard you Kwan, he must be blood
A hundred years, but you've been found
we're pleased that you're the one
Lead us all, we'll follow soon –
Gong hei, gong hei, gong hei!

Kwan I'm not sure I can go to China
All my duty and my heart
belongs to you, my noble crew
A leader won't abandon those who
trusted him to lead them home – instead we sank,
got stranded in this wild and wary land.

Miners Gong Hei!
Dan It's been a long long wait
Wang What's another century or eight?

Kwan It's not as simple as you say -
Sam We have some things to entertain...

Miners We watch gweilo -
trying to eat their takeaway food
speak Chinese at business school
put Asian cliches on TV
or blame us for the housing need -

Gong hei! Gong Hei! Gong hei!

Wang My friend and esteemed employer
all your hard work has paid off

From crushing rocks and sweeping floors.
In life, you climbed from humble miner
Forging business with white men
Do not decay, go – seize the day – take our love – don't delay.

Miners Gong Hei! Gong Hei!
Dan Just tell the ladies I said hi
Sam And here's the smell to remember him by (*he farts*)

Kwan If I go, you must follow. I only lead the way -
Wang We are good at obeying, command and we'll obey...

Miners Gong hei! Gong hei!
the lion's roar has cracked the sky
our jubilation's running high
the boy's here for your bones
and so, you must be going home -
Gong hei, gong hei, gong hei!

The Miners disperse.

Dunedin, 1891

Kwan
Here I am
a self made man
all those doubts forever silenced
here are four walls of mine
the whole street, mine
before this all came true
I made this in my mind
But what of the heart? what of her?
the tiny feet, the tiny eyes, the voices
of my sons?
They exist only in my mind
What use is it when the heart's already buried?

Louisa
...Hello.
Sir, how much is this orange?

Kwan
...whole and warm,
the sun made flesh,
the breath of heaven,

Louisa
Hello. Sir, how much is your orange?

Kwan
It's yours, but come back
tomorrow, and the next day

Chorus

But what of the heart? What of her?
the tiny feet, the tiny eyes, the voices of your sons?

Louisa

Hello. Sir, how do I say Hello?

Chorus

Tomorrow, and the next day.
The next day and tomorrow.

Kwan

Hello?

Louisa

No, in your language.

Kwan

Oh, "néih hóu ma."

Louisa

néih hóu ma.
Like eating an orange.

Louisa + Kwan

Whole and warm
the sun made flesh
the breath of heaven, oh –

Chorus

But what of the heart? What of her?
the tiny feet, the tiny eyes, the voices
of your sons?

Louisa

My name's Louisa.

Kwan

Call me Kwan.

Chorus

Néih hóu ma. Like eating an orange
whole and warm,
the sun made flesh,
the breath of heaven, oh –

Louisa

the first time I saw him
he was stacking oranges, wearing a suit
a gold watch and a bowler hat
His shoulders straight and strong
eyes embracing the earth

He knew my father –
a missionary. They understood
each other, though he never believed.

The first time I saw him
I wanted to stand
between two worlds, like him
To speak for myself
Without fear, like him
to reach out – to the sky – like him

Wei Wei

From high on the terrace –
from the beginning, I knew it was the end.
He'd return, maybe once, maybe twice
give me my sons, a larger house
and then like a summer which only comes
once in a lifetime – he'd be gone.

Far away, far away
to where dragons crush men's bones
And women only travel through their sons.
I'll send them one by one
If he'd wanted to stay with me he could
But...

Wei Wei and Louisa

Two worlds, one heart
two trees that flower apart
as one comes slowly into fruit
the other must lose her blossoms

Wei Wei /Chorus

Moon by moon

Wei Wei

I write to you
our sons are getting taller
while all the while
the rice rises and falls
we've spent half our lives apart

Kwan

We've spent half our lives apart
how long can this go on?
when fruit rot, throw them away
and start afresh

Wei Wei and Louisa

Two worlds, one heart
two trees that flower apart
as one comes slowly into fruit
the other must lose her blossoms

Kwan

Here I am
Just me a man.
I stand longing at your threshold

here is my heart, all yours
my whole life, yours
I stretch between two worlds
held fast by silken threads

Kwan and Chorus

But what of the land? what of you?
must we begin, all over again, the voices
that mock?

Kwan

Is it only in my mind?
what use is it?
when the heart's, already buried?

Kwan and Chorus

Whole and warm, the sun made flesh
the breath of heaven, oh -

Kwan

You have her eyes.

The Ferryman has found Kwan and is quietly watching.

Ferryman This place runs through your veins
like a river through the valley -

Kwan Over time earth seeps into old bones
Roots come down and grow through the cracks
Do you hear them? Cicada nymphs
underneath the earth, breathing, breathing.
Seven years blind, crawling, crawling.
Then one day – they dig upwards.
They break their old skins.

Ferryman You think the boy's your seed?
He could be one of many –

Kwan My family flowers here -
A spring blossom
A spreading tree, a new dynasty.

Ferryman Find him, speak to him, Kwan -

Kwan But if he doesn't see me?

Ferryman If he's yours he will.

At Mitimiti cemetery

Ben

Your light is all I see now
no direction needed

I'm close, I can feel it
your bones now beneath my feet –
I am here, your wings singing, trembling
against my skin: Mitimiti, Mitimiti
find him at Mitimiti

from this graveyard of Maori bones
I'll take you, I'll take you home –

a shipwreck disinherited my family
through our years of shame
my father and my father's father
rootless, drifting
never felt at home

I want to claim my stories
reconnect my family
my task must be completed

to take these bones to China
and find myself

Ben picks up a spade. The sky and earth react.

Ferryman Stop. Wait, don't dig
The land here is tapu – protecting the bones
of many ancestors, not just your own.

Chorus Climb the path, up the mountain
look out to where the sea meets sky
and bright salt tears coat the stones
this is where we laid the bones
this is where we laid the bones.

Ferryman Don't break the earth's skin
her anger is quiet, but runs deep inside
if you bruise trust, you might just die.

Chorus Climb the path, up the mountain
look out to where the sea meets sky
so bright salt tears will coat the stones
until their families come for them
until their families come for them.

Kwan You see me?
The Ferryman was right.

Ben Who are you?
Kwan Your ancestor – I'm Choy Kwan
Ben But you can't be, Choy Kwan is beneath my feet.
Kwan How I've longed for this
the moment I finally meet my family
and you're here - your eyes, your face
this jade cicada led you here
not to bring me home
but to bring home to me, here
Ben The cicada? How could you know?

Kwan reaches out to Ben.

Ben Let me go.
Kwan Listen. I belong here now
because of you.
Ben If you really were my ancestor
you'd know how duty drives me
how I owe this to my family –
Kwan I am your elder, I forbid you –
Ben How would you know
how it feels
have you ever been alone
not knowing where you belong?
Kwan You know nothing. You are fake Chinese.
Ben Let me pass!

Ben raises his shovel.

*The barriers between past and present fall.
A storm builds.*

Miners

White settlers (intercalating)

The year nineteen hundred and one:

we fear these oriental aliens

we dig up the bones
the proper rites
each bone sieved
and rinsed and tied

leaving yellow scars
on our country's face
the stains of opium
a national disgrace

on board the Ventnor
the coffins of kauri
are loaded with honour
with attendants to kowtow

to save our race
we must legislate
Chinese must pay
their families, banned

Ferryman What have you done? No!

Miners

In calm seas, the moon like frost – we hit a rock.

Kwan + Ferryman STOP

Ben Now I've begun, I cannot –

Kwan + Ferryman STOP

Ben the earth's contorting, but I will not -

Kwan + Ferryman STOP

Ben I made a promise to myself
that I must abide

Miners we died once, now we die again.

Ben The water swirls, a vortex
my body cracks, my flesh torn
bones

sinking
drifting

the clouds cover me

Kwan please – don't leave

Ben I see you

Kwan you see me?

Ben my family – hold me – hold me –

The cicada is broken. Ben's limp body is tossed up on the beach. The storm abates.

Chorus of Maori women

Auē, Auē
Ka hinga te kihikihi
Ka whānau mai, mate tonu atu
Kua pō te ao mārama
Kua pō te ao mārama

(Translation:

Auē, Auē
a cicada falling
rebirth and death
the world of light darkens
the world of light darkens)

Ferryman/Miners/Chorus of Chinese women

He mātaotao, he tau a Hinemoana. Ka mōteatea
i ngā tini haerenga, i ngā mea ngaro,
Ka kitea, ka ngaro. Ko tātou tēnei
Ka ngaro, ka kitea, ka ngaro.

今晚觀音特別清淨莊嚴。唱盡
人生旅程萬事失而復得而
再失。實在我哋都係同樣
失而復得而再失。

(The sea is cool and clear tonight. She speaks
of journeys taken and things lost,
and found, and lost again. We are the things
lost, and found, and lost again.)

Kwan How can I farewell you?
For a brief moment
I dreamt I could stay –
but now? I am once again lost.

You are the river that runs through my heart
the current I love so much, that travels forever
with its falling fronds and clean dark water

Dawn. Mitimiti Beach

Ben Where am I?
Ferryman This is Mitimiti beach.
Ben I've seen you before –
Ferryman -I'm just the Ferryman.
Ben I had a dream, I met an old ghost – the ghost of my great great grandfather.
Ferryman You've been unwell.
Ben How did this get broken? I was going to leave it here, on his grave. It
belongs here with him.
Ferryman Yes, it does.
Ben hands him the shovel.
Ben I won't be needing this anymore. Hey, have you got any food?
Ferryman You must be hungry.
Ben No, it's for feeding the bones.

Ben performs the Bai San ceremony.

Chorus

拜山
敬養祖骨
無分男女一代傳一代
孝道之職。

時已逝，骨肉已化，梯田已塌
而田地如常，永恒、肥沃
回憶黑暗無聲的水
一水貫穿我凡人
一水貫穿我凡人。

(Bai San
to feed the bones
a sacred duty passed
from son to son, daughter to daughter.

Time passes, bones fade, even terraces wear down –
but the land is eternal, fertile, strong
dreaming of the dark and silent water
and a river runs through us all
(a river runs through us all.)

END