

The Temple in the Jungle

for (and after) Brigit Pegeen Kelly (1951-2016)

The viper is mine, the pit viper with the scales
speckled by black, and I am the boy in the ochre robes

contemplating as intently as any monk in any monastery
has ever contemplated, but I have no insights, nor have I tamed

my viper. Now, there are only the lotuses and the koi clustering
together to be fed, and the luster of the beige floorboards

on which postulants congregate to chant, on which the light
of a setting sun shimmers like the polished amber in a pendant.

I have thought enough of death, of entering the black tunnel,
of shedding this body and swimming in the circumfluent darkness

where all is stasis and where time slows to a standing chill. Let us unfetter
ourselves and allow our mind to be like a mother-of-pearl dish, as radiant

as the disk of the full moon whose luminescence ripples
across the surface of the reflecting pool. And though my robes

are too loose, and though the nightingales will never
stop dropping their calls, there is only *Goodnight* in all this,

and *Life is suffering*. I have learned tolerance,
learned to take the blade from my wrist and hoard whatever

shrapnel of pleasure the day tosses at me. Now my mind
coasts alongside the chanting, my fellow monks opening

their mouths in perfect halos of sound, the pitch undulates,
rising and diving like a plane attempting to correct itself. And my mind

does the same, though it can no longer sink into the sounds
they sing. That goodfellow Siddhartha Gautama. *Oh, have faith,*

force your desires away. Meditate. Meditate. The laity
do not know I am a product of fantasy. I am the illusion

that you can jettison the sufferings that make a life a life,
jettison it just as I have done to these robes. I have still

not touched the tip of peace unless it is in the scales

of my pit viper who is as still as a weathered stone. And though

there is no nirvana, no insight or mind of white silk brocade, there is also no reason to blame myself — no reason to desire to end desires.

The Blue and the Black

The sky a sea of black liquor.
The stars regarding me sadly.
The cars shining their headlights of artificial amber.
The people walking about, engaged with each other's presence.
The cacophony of the crowd's voice turning into a whirl.
The stars piercing through the night's carbon paper.
The sky morphing into a mauve, swallowing
each dot of light, before thinning to blue-grey.
The tatters of clouds are frayed like threadbare clothes.
The sun a scorching orb, burning grey from the sky.
The blue flattening and flattening.
The speck that is me recessing into the cityscape:
a light drowned out and as forgotten
as a box in the attic.

In the Realm of the Devas

The devas are discontent, we must not say otherwise.
They are replete with desire and riddled
with agitation, just as I'm agitated
when the woman in Apartment 309
offers me money to stroke my hair.
As the years sweep by in the crescent
above the devas, the taste of ambrosia
and the flute's delicate partita deafens them
to their impending rebirth. Their existence is as fragile
as the wine bottles I take out of the dumpster
in the parking lot and smash with a sledgehammer.
These devas are not worthy of reverence. They are sick
of the Buddha, that *goodfellow* Siddhartha Gautama,
who never stops meditating, sitting there in a lotus position
oblivious to the monks and postulants who, kneeling
in front of him, desire dance and drink.
The devas care little for the Buddha's marble calm,
viewing it instead as aloofness
like that of the homeless man's at the corner of Fourth and Main —
the one that stands outside of Market Liquors —
who daily tells me that I have a weird way of walking.
One night the devas will transcend heavenly pleasures. One night,
when their desires have evaporated like a puddle,
and the full moon's luminosity ripples
across the reflecting pool, they will finally shed
their forms and develop a mind that shines
as effulgent as the polished floors of the meditation hall.
They will leave this monastery, traverse the mountains,
and rise into the faint streaks of ochre in the pre-dawn sky.

Having It Out with Anorexia

*"We turn skeletons into goddesses and look to them
as if they might teach us how not to need."*

— Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*

1 The Disordered Senses

The delusion is of purity:
a promise to purge
the self of its contaminates,

flaying the body
of fat and flesh, carving
it down to each sinew.

Anorexia
was my anesthetic.
What pain could penetrate

that cage of half-
truths and self-denials
in which I locked myself?

Fat was heretic.
Now, there is skin
stretched taut over razor-

like clavicles, the empty
bowls of my hip bones.
I am starved and sinless.

I have given myself
to the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have swallowed its mantra:

it feels good not to need.

To be thin
was to transcend.

2 Binging and Purging

But the body, out of starvation, betrays the mind:
three packets of cookies, a cake, a large pizza,
cereal, brownies, two sandwiches,
a dozen doughnuts, fried chicken, candy bars.

I would tear off the cellophane wrapping,
and shove handfuls of food into my mouth
only to vomit it into a garbage bag seconds later.

3 Advice from a Friend

“Why can’t you just eat?
One day won’t cause you to gain weight.”

4 Walking

I would walk miles of tarmac, passing
each dim streetlight in the decaying dusk.
Though my muscles were atrophying—
a pain pulling at each leg— I didn’t care.
At least I was losing weight.

5 At One Point

At one point, only a few years ago, I saw
suicide and self-destruction as something chic,
an ornament for the self.

I was 95 pounds, mired in depression
and the hospital, shivering under a paper-thin blanket.

The orderly would rattle up the hallway
with her metal cart, the plate, with its 600 calories
of Salisbury steak, shuddering next to the scalpels and forceps.

How long I was in that hospital room and its sterility —
the fluorescent lights stinging my eyes
with their hygienic flare; the telemetry clinging
to my ribcage; the IV bag pumping

electrolytes into my veins. I still recall
the weightiness of the magnesium
rushing into my veins, flooding my blood
like a viscous metal.

6 In the Morning

My mother would hover over me as I slept
to make sure I was still alive.

I wonder how many hours she spent
attentive to each twitch, attuned
to the risings and fallings of my chest
that signified life.

7 A Ripple

A skeleton wore my clothes,
the XS-sized shirt hanging
from clavicle and collar bones
as if from a clothes rack.
It is tired of trying.
It wants to be left alone,
left out in a charnel ground
where vultures can peck
at the flesh, and the sun
dissolve it to ash.

We move on to my twentieth
therapist. And I feel
relieved of myself, the buzzing
of my psyche quieted,
and inside me the stillness
a pool of water possesses
just after a rock was tossed into it.
The ripples disbanded, fading
out to leave a surface as placid as glass.

Gradually, I came back to friends,
to books and poetry; came back
to the taste of an orange's zest.

8 Three Years On

Anorexia and bulimia, your masochism
will lie latent, waiting in the space
between each synapse.

Neurotic and self-sabotaging, you'll whisper
to my psyche, seizing me with your onslaught
of numbers, and turn me into someone obsessed
with the calories in my coffee's creamer.

Three years and twenty-five pounds removed,
I finish my breakfast and step outside,
into midmorning's mild gold. September's mist

settles on my skin, and I sense

a quiescence of mind.

How remarkable is this morning:

the bronze of dawn cresting over the horizon.

The Peaceable Prairie

Far out, on the precipice of perceptibility, where the hills rise to meet the horizon and the pines lean into the dying fire of dusk, lay a prairie in which Rose, in lace, braves the briars, the heat, to gather strawberries, returning to the group clustered under the poplar tree. Upon reconvening, the leader spoke of betrayal — the strawberries mildewed, and six people recoiled like an adder after striking; but I tell you what he said was nothing new to me, I have heard the words of others, the promises, implode and shatter like wine glasses — and so certain was I of the quietude that would come as the sun's scorn receded, as the night froze the wind to a stillness, stopping the grass swaying, as the voice disbanded, and trailed towards the moon's fragile crescent. It was only then that I realized I no longer heeded his sermon; nor did Rose need to turn towards the leader as amber crested over the horizon and say, "Thank you. I know now what you mean."