

A Woman Walking on Air

I saw
 a woman walking on air,
 bare feet barely touching the temple ground,
 leaving no footprints in the hot noonday dust.
 Radiant.
 Not the woman I left two weeks before
 for New Year's in New Delhi,
 bitterness and anger leaching out from her then,
 like moisture from the baked clay earth
 on which she walked,
 leaving footprints everywhere,
 grounded,
 incapable of flight.

A survivor, this former woman,
 tough, no respecter of niceties,
 no patience for small talk or manners,
 no censor on her thoughts.
 What was the point
 when nowhere was safe
 and no one to be trusted?
 She always sat facing the door,
 tense, chain-smoking,
 expecting the ghosts of her past
 who all too often obliged her:
 an alcoholic home,
 occupation of her homeland,
 a much too precocious adolescence
 spent underground with co-conspirators
 instead of boyfriends,
 dressing for espionage and sabotage
 instead of for proms.
 Capture and torture by Gestapo.
 Forced to witness executions,
 improbably rescued just before her own,
 but broken far more than she knew.
 After the war
 failed marriages,
 estranged sons,
 forced emigration,

professional blacklisting,
 loss of homeland and livelihood,
 until nothing remained
 but emptiness
 and black despair
 and intractable depression.
 And three attempts at suicide.
 Death was preferable to this living death.
 An unexpected visitor denied her even this refuge
 when she pulled her from the oven the third time.

Unable to live, unable to die,
 she gathered what little she had,
 enough for 3 months,
 and flew to India,
 expecting little.
 A last throw of the dice,
 indifferent to her fate.

As was her wont—
 acceptance not in her nature or her history,
 trusting only her mistrust—
 she fought her teacher at every turn:
 dismissed his teaching,
 found fault with his instructions,
 cursed him and called him names.
 He bent like a pine branch in winter
 under the weight of her onslaught,
 offered no resistance,
 was simply there
 every day,
 and waited,
 accepting all,
 rejecting nothing.
 Until she was finally forced to face herself
 to find release.

Himself radiant now,
 her happiness his.
 No longer quite teacher and student,

“Dharma brother and sister,” they called each other,
their bond a glimpse of the other shore
from which they had returned together.

“She has experienced,” he said, softly.
He meant “*nibbāna*”
and trusted us to understand.
He did not say “Enlightenment”—a western word.
She had “entered the stream”—*sotāpanna*—First Path.

A year later, money for one month only,
needing no longer,
she “experienced” again,
almost to the day.
Second Path—*sakadāgāmi*—“once return,”
one more human birth, it is said,
before the end of birth and death altogether.

“I don’t know if I believe all this stuff about rebirth,”
she confided, just before returning home for good.
“Maybe it’s all just Buddhist mumbo-jumbo,
but just in case,
my life has been so full of suffering,
I’d like to come back one more time
and experience the good things this life has to offer.”
And then, drawing a most unBuddhist conclusion:
“So I’m not going to practice for Third Path.”
From which, it is said, there is “no-return”—*anāgāmi*—to the human plane.

And she didn’t.
Until a letter 10 years later:
“Oops! I slipped!” she wrote.
“I started practicing for Third Path.
I guess I won’t be coming back after all.”
And as far as I know,
she hasn’t.

—Jack Engler



This page contains material sent in by our readers. If you have a poem, drawing or photograph you would like to share with others, relating to your meditative insights or retreat experience, please send it to the editors at BCBS.