

Review · Greg Kuzma

JANE KENYON'S BOOK is about the soul in isolation and its struggles. Though things happen in the poems — there are observances, a sparrow, a sleepy wasp, a squirrel digging holes in moss, a mother and child “trading mock blows” on a street — quite often these are merely settings for or preludes to the self in consideration of its condition. When Kenyon says, “I ate an orange,” I accept that there is now one fewer orange in the world. After “eight days of rain,” it is she who is “sick indoors,” wanting to get out, and she who takes a walk by the river.

Nothing but trouble comes to mind
as I lean over the rusty iron rail.
I know of plenty, in detail, that is not
my own . . .

(“High Water”)

The dominant season offers wet weather, mud, or November's all-too-soon over days, with the sun gone by four. A “neighbor's small affront” weighs on her mind. Watching a withered apple fall into a snowdrift, she wonders if she is “numbered with the damned.” A china gravy boat, the last piece in a barrel, reminds her suddenly of the person who owned it, who is dead, and “I grieved for you then / as I never had before.” These are not cheerful poems. But neither are they negative or bitter. A stately and elegant detachment informs them, integrating pain with the day's events.

Kenyon tells of suffering remorse for her sarcasm in class, wounding a student. The scene of a “young father” burying his child haunts her until she can write a small poem about it. “No one dares to come near him, even to touch his sleeve,” she writes, in the last line. Or she is “rebuked” — her word — and “retreats in anger” to the barn, to “burn alone.” But then she finds balm, in a stone trough filled with water. Collecting for the Heart Fund, having her little speech prepared, she is glad to find no one home,

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but feels guilty afterwards. Many of the poems are about the kind of enforced idleness that comes with depression. "My head was heavy, heavy. . . . I had to ask two times / before my hand would scratch my ear." She has to speak to it to get her body to function. In dark weather or cold or rain she suffers "Inertia":

Smoke from the chimney
could not rise. It came down
into the yard, and brooded there
on the unlikelihood of reaching

heaven. When my arm slipped
from the arm of the chair
I let it hang beside me, pale,
useless, and strange.

("Rain in January")

Kenyon writes about "Depression" and "Depression in Winter," and one rather long poem for her, six stanzas, deals with hospitalization and "a week of stupor":

Sun and moon
rose and set over the small enclosed
court, the trees. . . .
The doctor's face appeared
and disappeared
over the foot of the bed. By slow degrees
the outlandish sadness waned.

Restored to my living room
I looked at the tables, chairs, and pictures
with something like delight,
only pale, faint—as from a great height.
I let the phone ring; the mail
accrued unopened
on the table in the hall.

("Sun and Moon")

One poem discloses for how long the speaker has been sad. She recalls her childhood, wearing a yellow summer dress, and whirling in it around and around.

And I knew then
that I would have to live, and go on
living: what a sorrow it was. . . .
(“Evening Sun”)

Yet for all the grief, the poet is not incapacitated. There are lovely moments in which things in nature are witnessed with precision. The house that can be dark and depressing is also home, to which she often hurries. There is relief from the dark days when spring arrives, reminding her of other springs. By far her greatest solace is her husband and companion. Evening come, the work done, they might go for a walk by the pond (“April Walk”). In “Alone for a Week” she does the clothes, and seeing them on the line, she remembers lovemaking:

I washed a load of clothes
and hung them out to dry.
Then I went up to town
and busied myself all day.
The sleeve of your best shirt
rose ceremonious
when I drove in; our night-
clothes twined and untwined in
a little gust of wind.

Or suffering a talkative guest, she meets her “obligations” with her “sleeping self” and only comes fully awake in the dark later, under the moon, aware of the other’s affection.

The Boat of Quiet Hours is a remarkable book. In it Kenyon reveals how one may live a life of beauty despite fear and sadness and anger. Each poem is an intimate experience where the soul seeks the strength to renew itself, and finds that strength. Kenyon’s life is filled with urgencies and a dark and brooding presence. Pain informs nearly every poem. But in balancing

this pain and seeking to understand it, she achieves powerful effects. So carefully does she hold to what she knows, so hard is she on herself both for her failures, imagined or real, and for the pleasures she takes, each poem becomes a record of something to honor, something to be glad for, a small victory over despair. And so the conclusions she reaches reverberate beyond their circumstances, with her versions of reality cold and clarified, with her eloquent version of the truth:

The mouse pulls batting
from a hundred-year-old quilt.
She chewed a hole in a blue star
to get it, and now she thrives. . . .
Now is her time to thrive.

Things: simply lasting, then
failing to last: water, a blue heron's
eye, and the light passing
between them: into light all things
must fall, glad at last to have fallen.
(“Things”)