

The Temple

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As fire is covered by smoke, as a mirror is covered by dust, or as the embryo is covered by the womb, the living entity is similarly covered by different degrees of lust.

Bhagavad Gita (3:38)

i. Scissors: Rock

Night fragments into so many stories over
India that I have to see
If you still sit beside me in the bicycle
rickshaw, looking at all
The spires and minarets of places we
wouldn't sleep that night,
At strings of lights from wedding festivals,
at puddles shimmering
In roads of dust and ashes fallen from pyres
burnt beside the river.
And the dark sway of an elephant musks the
night with a burden of scent
That might be camel or horse or oxen in
another country.

But these are only comparisons, drawn
beneath the same stars—Pleiades,
Pollux,
Deneb—under the same stone moon which,
earlier, crushed its manganese light
Through the stench of Calgary
slaughterhouses and humid Dallas
smog.
So none of this is new, and the shadow of
the elephant has passed by anyway,
And I may have just confused its odor with
the drying pats of cowdung
Mixed with straw, the cooking fuel that lines
the mud walls
Running beside the tracks through Benares,
back toward Calcutta.

So I have nothing to say, and can only point,
an inarticulate guide, weary
By day's end, at more minarets and spires
drawn beneath a moon I recognize
Vaguely, and can even name, moon, with
the stone my tongue has suddenly
become,
And I can't name the hotel I've read of in
the guide, so the driver pedals us to
anyplace
Modern and dark, looming tall and
windowed awkwardly in this dim
light,
Where we surrender, beneath a slow fan
wobbling above, to the exhaustions
of travel,
To a quick conversion from dollars to
rupees, to a sudden diffidence
With words, with bodies, this burden of so
many stars.

ii. Scissors: Scissors

In the morning a gecko does push-ups for
flies against the mirror before the sun
Comes up, and greets us with a pair of nods.
I am pleased to say *morning*
And *gecko*, but you still sleep, and the
lizards find their opposite ways
down the glass
Until one disappears into the carpet's weave
of animals hidden in leaves and
vines,
And the other just disappears.

I push you awake so we'll be in time for the
Ganges tour,
So we'll be in time to say our names against
the horrors or the beauties
Friends might ask about when we get home.
We've kept a log
Smudged with penciled words and drawings,
so when we visited
Other countries for the first time, we would

try other words for beauty—
Bellissima at Roman fountains and portraits
 in museums,
 Or *Wundersam*, or *magnifique*. But in India
 we kept beauty
 And satisfied ourselves by placing
 oppressive before it, a talisman
 Against the heat, against the eyes of those
 who stared
 While carrying their burdens of the dead to
 the river's *ghats*.

So when we step into the wobbly boat, we
 are not prepared to witness the river
 And its bloated eye of sun rising over distant
 cut-out fronds of jungle palms,
 Rising above sandstone temples and
 mosques gathered beside the river,
 Which shines beneath the black boats plying
 a slow current laced with ash
 And cries of bathers massed on shore,
 waiting to cleanse themselves
 In the pure river of the dead and living, and
 all the while, smoke spires rise
 From the bank, and we are silent.

When we leave, I can't put any of these
 visions in the small, brass vase
 I bargained down to twenty rupees as we
 ride the tour bus to the next stop,
 The Monkey Temple. Your reflection
 wavers, distorted on the urn
 Against the curving curtain of trees on the
 horizon, or maybe
 It is confused or angry at the face behind
 you trying to peer
 Into the space between the nape of your
 neck and the shirt you've loosened
 Against the heat, against the oppressive
 beauty of four thousand years,
 Of so much distance, so many souls rising
 into fire-thickened sky.

iii. Scissors: Paper

As we walk to the Monkey Temple, we
 check our cameras
 While the guide speaks rapidly about
 Krishna and the monkeys,
 About the uncleanness of our shoes, so we
 all take off our shoes
 Before we climb the steps to look for rhesus
 monkeys,
 Spires, golden statues, and paintings both
 like and unlike many
 We have seen elsewhere, and which, after
 all, we are paying to see.

So when I take a picture on the stairs, I call
 you down to look
 At a monkey holding her dead baby like a
 doll, and she screams
 At me because I might take her baby instead
 of this picture
 Of her hysterical madness, of her rag of a
 child smiling stone teeth for me
 After so many months in the humid, jungle
 air.

And there is so little left for me to take, I
 wonder if it is the heat that makes
 her
 Stop and try to nurse what becomes a lighter
 burden in her arms,
 Nurturing what only becomes truly dead,
 and held tightly against all
 Catastrophe this temple excuses to the light.
 She holds on
 Even against the heat, even against her
 child's tightening smile.

iv. Rock: Paper

If we had seen the woman shopping at a
 Texas grocer's,
 Picking out casaba or tomato, thumbing a
 rind, scoring skin
 With a nail for something firm and ripe and

living inside,
 We wouldn't have noticed that she had
 carried something dead
 Inside her, until it turned into a kind of
 stone.

Later she might stare through the coffee
 shop window,
 And the rain would wash the curb with
 gasoline iridescence,
 And the letters would turn their backs on
 anyone
 Who might come inside to see what all the
 fuss was about—free refills.

She would wonder at her childlessness and
 remember children in tight rows
 That failed to contain their nervous laughter
 when she taught them, in Health,
 Names like *epididymus*, fallopian tube, *vas*
deferens, or even *Mons Veneris*—
 The mountain of love—spoken in perfect
 Latin to the lucky girls
 Whose parents signed goldenrod slips,
 because they didn't think
 That the body, fossilized in dead languages,
 could be resurrected
 By the archaeology of fingers pressing for
 something living inside.

The coffee by now would be tepid, and her
 husband—who'd finally consented
 To a test and was fertile, who remains so in
 the grassy joke each grave becomes,
 And at whom even then she would smile,
 remembering,
 Because he never blamed her and nights
 would kiss her low on the belly,
 As though having a child was still possible
 into their sixties.
 He would have laughed at the irony of such
 a monument to fatherhood,
 Blamed it on his rock-hard manhood to
 friends, until he'd get to the part
 Where it was a little girl, and he wouldn't

stop until he had named her,
 In the small fiction she makes up while
 gazing into the stainless steel
 instruments.

When she removes her surgical gown in the
 small waiting room so she can dress,
 She can't decide whether Tuesday or
 Wednesday would be better
 To give birth to her fossil child, because she
 won't be able to eat the night before,
 Or because death has had such a long
 gestation inside of her,
 She's reluctant to give it up despite the pain.

v. Paper: Paper

Because neither my wife nor I can decide
 whether my daughter was conceived
 In the Hong Kong Ritz by the shadowed
 blue of the BBC talk show,
 Or in our San Francisco apartment among
 the unsteady moments between bank
 account and employment
 While lights outside quaked from cars and
 voices too full of the city—
 Because any conception loses its memory of
 origin, only to fall
 Back on the sciences of ultrasound to trace a
 sequence invented after the fact—
 Because of this, my daughter is upstairs
 right now at the writing desk you
 gave her, Larry,
 And she is pressing the bones of her hand to
 pen a story of her life
 Without having to lie, and she is succeeding,
 I fear, to weave something
 I will never understand, something that can't
 be threaded back to me or traced
 To any stone that I might leave behind for
 her to hold
 Against the loss of my soul, or whatever
 eddies up from dust or fire or water
 Or from her simple act of breathing as she

concentrates on the next, perfect word.

vi. Rock: Rock

On the outskirts of Calcutta, I pass a man
dead or dying on the hot dust
Of a wide and empty street, and I do not
know whether to shoo the flies
From his open sores, or to add to the coins
which have blossomed around his
body.
I do not know the fare for such a journey, so
I go on, buy a chance
Against doubt with the flower-shaped *paisa*
coin I toss to buy his fire.

I have erased, so many times from this
poem, the word *soul*
Because soul is what is lost in these
transactions between fire and sky,
Lost to photos taken of smoke, lost in all
that memory loses,
So that soul becomes what I've invented to
explain all that I've lost,
And because of all that I keep losing, I've
discovered my soul is inexhaustible.

Eddies of ash lighten the currents swirling in
the wide, sun-streaked river every
morning,
And thin reeds of smoke from funeral pyres
write nothing on the rising humid
air—
And all these rivers that we stand beside,
these fires that we burn—
They aren't the beginnings or the ends of
anything.

Contributor's Note

M. L. Williams co-edited the poetry anthology *How Much Earth: The Fresno Poets* (Heyday, with Christopher Buckley and David Oliveira) in which the poem, "The Temple," was originally published. Williams has contributed essays to *A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis* (Eastern Washington UP) and *The Measured Word: On Poetry and Science* (Georgia UP). His work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Isotope*, *The Best of the Prose Poem*, *Rattapallax*, *Solo*, *Never Before: Poems about First Experiences*, *Verse and Universe: Poems and Mathematics*, and elsewhere. He currently teaches creative writing at Valdosta State University and is the poetry editor for *The Snake Nation Review*. "The Temple" is reprinted here with the permission of the author.