

Night Prayer at Binh Doung +

Simon Peter Eggertsen

Confirmed in the slim night shadows,
a four-toed blue and gold dragon ridges
the tiles of the moss-glazed roof, ascends
to the slivering waxed Têt moon, an off-center
crescent smile above the aging temple. I watch
in the shadows as muted *whomnnngs* from
a squat brass bowl, struck soft by a straight
teak wand, and a staccato of loose leather
whoomphs from an old drum announce
the smooth evening entrance of a mother,
a daughter, one in yellow, one in white,
two subdued daisies, two days before
Lord Buddha's birthday. Small hands lift,
quickly press smoldering, red-bundled incense
to straight, soft brows three times, forward,
then back. The glow puts a squinted tracery
in the air, like a child's sparkler does on
the Fourth of July at Wildwood, embers writing
in some unknown alphabet new text for the prayer rolls.
They stand still, close eyes, shut out the world,
focus on now and the after. Their soft lips move,
slow, shape a chant, praise first, then flatter.
They loft four deep wishes to Lord Buddha,
push luck to the souls of departed ancestors.
Three repetitions will be enough this evening:
May we be filled with loving kindness; may you be well.

May we be peaceful and at ease, may you be whole . . .
Their reverence made, each time the incense less,
they leave an open set of spring flowers at each
modest altar, the surprise of pink peach blossoms,
and two Vietnamese pears, their green shape bold
on the white of smooth porcelain. The light left over
ricochets off a brushed brass urn, marks the presence
of two suns, an earth and a moon in one place.
Finished, they drop their temple money
at Lord Buddha's feet, vanish through the door
like wisps of ash blown to the side by a shuffling
breeze. Taking with them a square of sticky rice
for their own good luck, they race home before
the twelve-toll bell strikes midnight, *donnnng*,
locks them out until the dawn. Safe inside at home,
they warm a pot of fragrant jasmine tea, wait for
tomorrow's first visitors, practice the ritual greeting,
ready the gifts, single sprigs of spring blossoms:
"Hai loc."
Tomorrow, the narcissus will bloom.

+This poem was recently named an honourable mention for the Thomas Merton Prize for Poetry of the Sacred.

SIMON PETER EGGERTSEN {speggertsen@yahoo.com} was born in Kansas, raised in Utah, schooled in Virginia and England, and came very late to poetry after a career in international health. He has degrees in literature, language, and law and now splits his time between Montreal and Cambridge, Massachusetts. A set of his poems won the Irreantum Poetry Prize (2012)—the last time it was given.