Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Song

The first time Brigit Pegeen Kelly intones *sweet* in her best-known poem, “Song,” it describes a sound. A girl listens to the train’s horn passing each night, until the night she doesn’t hear the horn, and knows her goat is dead.

Another song, the song that opens the poem, replaces the horn that will someday announce the girl’s train out of this town where the boys who killed her goat and hung its head in a tree still hear that song. It is the song the goat’s head sings to them.

Listen: there was a goat’s head hanging by ropes in a tree. All night it hung there and sang. And those who heard it Felt a hurt in their hearts and thought they were hearing The song of a night bird. …

What they hear is the poem, or what we hear is the goat song. It is a song of death that sings to the living, all those who live in the murdered world. This song has two refrains. One describes the boys’ labor to remove the goat’s head: *It was harder work than they had imagined.* Another concludes the poem, the credo of this Trouble Song, and the final words we need to hear again:

Not a cruel song, no, no, not cruel at all. This song Is sweet. It is sweet. The heart dies of this sweetness.

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73 For Brigit Pegeen Kelly (1951–2016)
74 Once it occurs at the end of a line, and once it is cut after *they*, the last words *Had imagined* singing back at them from the next line.