**WORDS IN ORBIT**

Kenneth Frost. Some insights into eight poems from *Coring the Moon, Selected Poems*, Main Street Rag, 2014.

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For Kenneth, words were actions. He said he stalked words in orbit. When I first met him, and for weeks thereafter, the rooms spun as I tried to catch all the orbiting spheres that glittered in his conversations. At the same time he laughed so heartily about ridiculous things like comic strips or his own foibles that I thought he must not be eccentric like most of the other poets I knew. He loved baseball, ice cream, his parents, New York City, Maine, me. He was devoted to a retarded aunt. Although he was a man regular in his habits, systematic, thorough and clear in his thinking, never moody, an ordinary life did not happen with him. If he was writing a poem, reading, studying, talking with or teasing a friend, his attention was absorbed, intuitive, reciprocal, and never distracted; he was always late, but with aplomb. He had plenty of esprit, like the figure-skater in his poem which follows. And like the heroine, he had once been in danger of losing his life; for him, it had been in combat and the resulting injury, but, like the heroine, he miraculously escaped death.

**THE FIGURE-SKATER**

Like the headlight
on a freight train
stirring its witches’
broth of wheels
down double-barreled rails,
faster, faster,
looming on,
homing on
the heroine,
bound in her strait-
jaacket of ropes,
the figure-skater,
wound in her
star-spangled spin
flashing a spool
of zodiacs,
dances how many angels
on the steel-tipped
infinity
of her skate-blades
while her esprit woos
the fortune
a dust bowl
remembers
in whirlwinds
till a star leaps
out of the coils
of gravity.
Escapading on
the mirror’s altar,
she swings
into exploding mercury
that bends and scatters
apparitions
just holding on
to godspeed
with the rich glaze of her smile.

The figure-skater’s tight “star-spangled spin” seems to bind her in a
“strait- / jacket of ropes” as the spotlight which singles her out as a star bears
down on her like the headlight on a freight train, “faster, faster.” It turns
out, however, that she is the possessor of an esprit that woos good fortune,
and at the last possible moment “a star leaps / out of the coils / of gravity”
and she is saved. The danger passed, she is now free to “escapade on/ the
mirror’s altar” and she just manages to hold on to “godspeed / with the rich
glaze of her smile”—that remote, impersonal and preoccupied, “glazed”
smile of the performer.

In this poem, one of Kenneth’s major themes is treated in miniature, as
a theatrical mimesis, an ice capade, an entertainment—that of difficulties
surmounted against impossible odds.

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FRISBEE

The frisbee of my clavicle
has something to it.

They can’t throw it away.
It keeps coming back for my head.
It likes to play ball with my head.
You’d think stale air was Fido

or these creeps William Tell.
They’re not.

I’m not his son.
Jesus, I’m confused,

but I don’t want to be seen
with a bone through my head.

I would have thought I had
more important business

than to hang
around this antique factory

worrying what morticians do
to fakes, but here I am,

wondering
have they replaced my brain

with a sponge soaked in vinegar.
It thinks the same.

Just the other day, after many years of reading “Frisbee,” I realized that this poem in its brilliant surrealism is the darkest possible metaphor for Kenneth’s fear, after being severely injured in combat, that he would remain in hospital (“this antique factory” staffed by “morticians”) for the rest of his life—he was only twenty-two at the time. Life had seemed full of possibilities up until now and he had thought to do “more important business” in his life. He deals with his fears and emotions by minimizing and ridiculing them with the image of a toy and a game—his clavicle is a frisbee that is being played with, his head is used for a ballgame. A mordant reference is made to William Tell shooting an apple off his son’s head. The poet knows he is not William Tell’s son nor, more tellingly, anyone else’s son. He feels himself to be a fake, or dead, deeply alienated, self-conscious about the conspicuity of his injuries (“I don’t want to be seen / with a bone through my head.”) In a bitter and terrifying reference to the Crucifixion, he wonders if the anonymous “they” have replaced his brain with “a sponge soaked in vinegar,” which was offered to Jesus on the Cross. “It thinks the same.” He sees
himself as an inadequate, disappointing, disappointed, confused, unwitting, stupefied insult.

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Kenneth loved his elderly Aunt Dot, who was slightly retarded, and Aunt Dot adored him, her nephew Bud, as the family called him. The poem “Handkerchief Hello” is a profoundly tender poem written when Aunt Dot became senile.

HANDKERCHIEF HELLO

My senile aunt
waves her hand like a handkerchief hello
to the old lady
who comes to the mirror’s castle window-frame
each night and waves
herself into her fingertips goodbye
before one of them climbs, hand over hand,
the stairway to
the mountain peak of sleep.

Who speaks the caressing command?

Stirred around the golden
whirlpool of a pendulum,
I am contemplated by
my own motion
inward.
I never knew
that I would know such peace.

A drop of water
as it hits, explodes
into a crown
emptying itself.

Aunt Dot looks into the mirror, which is like a castle window-frame to her, and she waves goodbye genteely (“with her fingertips”) to her neighbor, an old lady she doesn’t recognize there (herself) before she climbs the stairs “hand over hand” to sleep.

The poem then embarks upon a meditation in which Someone “speaks the caressing command.” All will be well. The “whirlpool” of the pendulum, or Time, is seen to be “golden” and the poet is “contemplated” by his “own
motion/ inward.” This motion inward is an action of the One who “speaks the caressing command” (“Oh Lord, you search me and you know me,” Ps. 139) and the poet responds, “I never knew/ that I would know such peace,” the certitude reinforced by the word “know” twice in two lines. The self-emptying of the falling drop of water “explodes/ into a crown.”

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HAZARDOUS INVASION

Watching a Brownian movement create
its self-erasing pattern,
I realize I have thought
what I say.
It builds a bridge to nowhere
and I walk on it.
The retina is full
of hazardous invasions.

Some saint has disappeared
into the body

with his secret
connection of events
raised to the power
of the loss
of references.

Kenneth’s poems might well be described as Brownian movements (pedesis, from the Greek “leaping”): the random motion of particles suspended in a fluid (a liquid or a gas) resulting from their collision with the quick atoms or molecules in the gas or liquid. In Kenneth’s poems there are apparently random motions and definite leapings of words, metaphors and images—a fizz of life, cascades of unexpected collisions and juxtapositions.

“Hazardous Invasion” is an intensely modern and widespread experience: We create and witness so many self-erasing patterns and we talk so much that we actually are surprised that we have thought anything through before we speak. What we say and what we make are self-destructing obsolescent bridges to nowhere, and we walk on them. We know ourselves to have been invaded, bombarded, hazardless. We also know that there is goodness, even saintliness, in us, in our bodies, although the saint has disappeared from our sight. This saint-in-hiding has a secret connection of
events, but the references have been lost.

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LUTE SONG

What boulder leaks a morning thawed
to a lute song riding its champagne memory
Aether pings its rosary one by one by one
till chords run wild

All doors break open
manes comb the air and harvest it

See see the shining

A paradisal morning, leaked from a boulder and “thawed / to a lute song / riding its champagne memory” bubbles with breezes, birds, insects, water, leaves—its exhilarating, fermented, inebriating lute song in early morning light, and the aether (which is what the gods breathe) “pings / its rosary / one by one by one.” The ecstatic lute song and the prayer of the rosary “run wild / all doors break open”—everything is possible—horses are running free and their manes “comb the air / and harvest it”—“See see / the shining.”

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SCENT OF FLOWERS

And what on earth am I to do with this scent of flowers,
with the sun and moon shining at once,
the forest yelling and moaning?
Somewhere in the name of the flowers
a leg and a boot are sleeping restlessly
beyond my reach
and two captains in black
are dancing a ballet on the grass,
running up and kissing each other on the cheek.
The shadows of the trees are growing
huger and huger
and I want to ask how the sun and the moon are both shining
and I want to point at the sky.

This poem, about a near-death injury on a battlefield, speaks of a scent of flowers, an unexpected sweetness, as the soldier lay there, and an impression of “the sun and moon both shining at once,” while deafening sounds of combat continue—“the forest yelling and moaning.” Fading in and out of consciousness, he sees “a leg and a boot…sleeping restlessly / beyond my reach.” Everything becomes darker, and he thinks that two captains are dressed in black, and that they are dancing a ballet and kissing each other on the cheek. He wants to understand “how the sun and the moon are both shining,” and he wants “to point at the sky.” He wants to understand himself and what has happened to him sub specie aeternitatis.

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For three days

now
just
as the clock
strikes
twelve,
the stars
begin
drumming,
drumming.
 “It’s all right,”
I keep
saying.
Then,
a left foot
burning
drops
through the air
of sleep.

That dream of death would continue periodically for the rest of the soldier’s life. Many years later, during a three-night period of sleeplessness, he would experience again the recurrent nightmare at midnight, and it would seem that the stars began “drumming, drumming.” Trying to allay the dread, he would repeat, “It’s all right,” while the memory of a “left foo / burning / (would) drop / through the air / of sleep.”

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END OF DAY

Upside
down
spiders weave
evening air

ave
ave

I fall into light
that slips out of the room;
furniture and books
secrete the end of day,
exiling themselves
in my silence.
The shining outlasts
its day
till I cannot
remember

Spiders weaving evening air, ave, ave—those “v” sounds vibrating like violin strings, weaving evening air, ave ave at the terminus of day.
Ave, ave—Hail, esteemed one; greetings; farewell; be well.
The light that slips into the room destabilizes me and I fall into it; the end of day, my entire life, are secrets secreted in the furniture and books here in this room, but now exiled far from me in the deep welcoming silence of my soul. The shining (Eternity) is greater than, and outlasts, its day. My memory does not encompass it.
I am reminded of the shining in “Lute Song,” that morning in paradise, which was always part of Kenneth’s sensibility.