

## 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-  
 jacket 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 surreality 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* leaping 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, hazardously. 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 paradisaal 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.