

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Kenneth Koch**

**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## Mountain

Nothing's moving I don't see anybody  
And I know that it's not a trick  
There really is nothing moving there  
And there aren't any people. It is the very utmost top  
Where, as is not unusual,  
There is snow, lying like the hair on a white-haired person's head  
Combed sideways and backward and forward to cover as much of the top  
As possible, for the snow is thinning, it's September  
Although a few months from now there will be a new crop  
Probably, though this no one KNOWS (so neither do we)  
But every other year it has happened by November  
Except for one year that's known about, nineteen twenty-three  
When the top was more and more uncovered until December fifteenth  
When finally it snowed and snowed  
I love seeing this mountain like a mouse  
Attached to the tail of another mouse, and to another and to another  
In total mountain silence  
There is no way to get up there, and no means to stay.  
It is uninhabitable. No roads and no possibility  
Of roads. You don't have a history  
Do you, mountain top? This doesn't make you either a mystery  
Or a dull person and you're certainly not a truck stop.  
No industry can exploit you  
No developer can divide you into estates or lots  
No dazzling disquieting woman can tie your heart in knots.  
I could never lead my life on one of those spots  
You leave uncovered up there. No way to be there  
But I'm moved.

Kenneth Koch

## One Train May Hide Another

In a poem, one line may hide another line,  
As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.  
That is, if you are waiting to cross  
The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at  
Least after the first train is gone. And so when you read  
Wait until you have read the next line--  
Then it is safe to go on reading.  
In a family one sister may conceal another,  
So, when you are courting, it's best to have them all in view  
Otherwise in coming to find one you may love another.  
One father or one brother may hide the man,  
If you are a woman, whom you have been waiting to love.  
So always standing in front of something the other  
As words stand in front of objects, feelings, and ideas.  
One wish may hide another. And one person's reputation may hide  
The reputation of another. One dog may conceal another  
On a lawn, so if you escape the first one you're not necessarily safe;  
One lilac may hide another and then a lot of lilacs and on the Appia  
Antica one tomb  
May hide a number of other tombs. In love, one reproach may hide another,  
One small complaint may hide a great one.  
One injustice may hide another--one colonial may hide another,  
One blaring red uniform another, and another, a whole column. One bath  
may hide another bath  
As when, after bathing, one walks out into the rain.  
One idea may hide another: Life is simple  
Hide Life is incredibly complex, as in the prose of Gertrude Stein  
One sentence hides another and is another as well. And in the laboratory  
One invention may hide another invention,  
One evening may hide another, one shadow, a nest of shadows.  
One dark red, or one blue, or one purple--this is a painting  
By someone after Matisse. One waits at the tracks until they pass,  
These hidden doubles or, sometimes, likenesses. One identical twin  
May hide the other. And there may be even more in there! The obstetrician  
Gazes at the Valley of the Var. We used to live there, my wife and I, but  
One life hid another life. And now she is gone and I am here.  
A vivacious mother hides a gawky daughter. The daughter hides  
Her own vivacious daughter in turn. They are in  
A railway station and the daughter is holding a bag  
Bigger than her mother's bag and successfully hides it.  
In offering to pick up the daughter's bag one finds oneself confronted by  
the mother's  
And has to carry that one, too. So one hitchhiker  
May deliberately hide another and one cup of coffee  
Another, too, until one is over-excited. One love may hide another love  
or the same love  
As when "I love you" suddenly rings false and one discovers  
The better love lingering behind, as when "I'm full of doubts"  
Hides "I'm certain about something and it is that"  
And one dream may hide another as is well known, always, too. In the  
Garden of Eden  
Adam and Eve may hide the real Adam and Eve.

Jerusalem may hide another Jerusalem.  
When you come to something, stop to let it pass  
So you can see what else is there. At home, no matter where,  
Internal tracks pose dangers, too: one memory  
Certainly hides another, that being what memory is all about,  
The eternal reverse succession of contemplated entities. Reading  
A Sentimental Journey look around  
When you have finished, for Tristram Shandy, to see  
If it is standing there, it should be, stronger  
And more profound and theretofore hidden as Santa Maria Maggiore  
May be hidden by similar churches inside Rome. One sidewalk  
May hide another, as when you're asleep there, and  
One song hide another song; a pounding upstairs  
Hide the beating of drums. One friend may hide another, you sit at the  
foot of a tree  
With one and when you get up to leave there is another  
Whom you'd have preferred to talk to all along. One teacher,  
One doctor, one ecstasy, one illness, one woman, one man  
May hide another. Pause to let the first one pass.  
You think, Now it is safe to cross and you are hit by the next one. It  
can be important  
To have waited at least a moment to see what was already there.

Kenneth Koch

## Paradiso

There is no way not to be excited  
When what you have been disillusioned by raises its head  
From its arms and seems to want to talk to you again.  
You forget home and family  
And set off on foot or in your automobile  
And go to where you believe this form of reality  
May dwell. Not finding it there, you refuse  
Any further contact  
Until you are back again trying to forget  
The only thing that moved you (it seems) and gave what you forever will  
    have  
But in the form of a disillusion.  
Yet often, looking toward the horizon  
There—inimical to you?—is that something you have never found  
And that, without those who came before you, you could never have  
    imagined.  
How could you have thought there was one person who could make you  
Happy and that happiness was not the uneven  
Phenomenon you have known it to be? Why do you keep believing in this  
Reality so dependent on the time allowed it  
That it has less to do with your exile from the age you are  
Than from everything else life promised that you could do?

Kenneth Koch

## Talking to Patrizia

Patrizia doesn't want to  
Talk about love she  
Says she just  
Wants to make  
Love but she talks  
About it almost endlessly to me.

It is horrible it  
Is the worst thing in life  
Says Patrizia  
Nothing  
Not death not sickness  
Is as bad as love

I am always  
In love I am always  
Suffering from love  
Says Patrizia. Now  
I am used to it  
But I am suffering all the same

Do you know what I did to her  
Once?--speaking  
Of her girlfriend--I kicked her out  
I literally kicked her she was down on the floor and I  
Gave her the colpi di piedi the  
Kicks of my foot. She slid out.

She did this  
To me promised to go on a trip  
I am all waiting prepared  
Suitcases and tickets  
She comes and says her other friend finds out she  
Can't go she guessed about it. I KICKED her out

Oh we are still together  
Sometimes. But love is horrible. I thought  
You might be the best  
Person to talk to Patrizia since you  
Love women and are a woman  
Yourself. You may be right Patrizia

Said. But this woman who abandons  
You I think you should  
Disappear. Though maybe with this woman  
Disappearing won't work.  
I think not disappear.  
It's too bad I don't know her

If I knew her if I could see her  
Just for ten minutes--I'm afraid  
If you saw her you might take

Her away from me. Patrizia  
Laughs. No it hasn't happened to me  
Thank God to like such young women yet

Why? When you are my  
Age--still young--she  
Is thirty . . . nine? you are close enough  
To people very young to  
Know how horrible they are  
And you don't love them

You don't want to have anything  
To do with them! Oh  
Uh huh, I said putting  
My hands down on the table and then off  
Look at you excuse me but I have to laugh  
At you sitting in this horrible

Restaurant at one o'clock  
In the morning in a  
City you don't want to be  
In and why? For this woman.  
It is horrible I know but  
Also funny

I know I said. Listen I have  
An idea. Do you know her address? You know where  
She lives? You should go there  
Go and hide there  
Outside her house  
In the bushes

Then when she comes out  
You jump out  
You confront her. You will see  
If there is love  
In her eyes or not. It can't  
Be hidden. You will know It can't be mistaken

This works This has always worked  
For me. It won't work for me. I can't  
Go and hide there It is true  
Patrizia says when there is love everything  
Works when there isn't nothing does. Love  
Is a god These Freudian things I don't believe at all

This god you have to do what  
He wants you to you are  
Angry but all you really want  
Is to get her back. Then--revenge! If  
This woman did something like this to me  
I would simply dislike her in fact

I would hate her You may want to consider  
Patrizia said that this woman is  
Doing this test to you. No, I  
Said. I know she's not. I know something. I feel  
A hundred years old. Yet  
You don't look so bad, Patrizia said.

Find another woman. I can't. I  
Know Patrizia said. But one always thinks it  
Is a good idea. But  
If you can't you can't. I  
Can't even eat  
This food Patrizia I said.

I'm sorry I said Patrizia to be so  
Boring I can't stop talking Forgive  
Me. It doesn't bore me at all  
Patrizia says It's my favorite subject  
It isn't every day one sees somebody  
In such a state you can help him by talking to stay alive

You know, Patrizia says if she  
Does this thing to you now  
She will do it again  
And again so you'd better be ready  
Maybe you can get the advantage  
By saying she is right you

Don't love her Good bye You leave  
However if you want her  
You should go into the bushes  
And surprise her when they see you  
It always makes a difference  
I can't go hide there Patrizia

That's insane. I went but not  
Hiding and not confronting.  
Patrizia: What did she say? I said  
The same things. Patrizia said  
Did you see love in her eyes? I said  
No. I didn't. I saw

Something else. In Florence it's rainy  
Her (relatively) short hair and  
Her eyes along the Arno  
The last time I'll ever see her again  
As the one I am seeing again  
When seeing again still has some meaning.

It's finished Patrizia's saying  
For now but don't worry

I think you will get her back  
But it will be too late. Oh Patrizia I  
Let my back and head fall against  
The chair Late isn't anything!

Kenneth Koch

## The Boiling Water

A serious moment for the water is  
when it boils  
And though one usually regards it  
merely as a convenience  
To have the boiling water  
available for bath or table  
Occasionally there is someone  
around who understands  
The importance of this moment  
for the water—maybe a saint,  
Maybe a poet, maybe a crazy  
man, or just someone  
temporarily disturbed  
With his mind "floating" in a  
sense, away from his deepest  
Personal concerns to more  
"unreal" things...

A serious moment for the island  
is when its trees  
Begin to give it shade, and  
another is when the ocean  
washes  
Big heavy things against its side.  
One walks around and looks at  
the island  
But not really at it, at what is on  
it, and one thinks,  
It must be serious, even, to be this  
island, at all, here.  
Since it is lying here exposed to  
the whole sea. All its  
Moments might be serious. It is  
serious, in such windy weather,  
to be a sail  
Or an open window, or a feather  
flying in the street...

Seriousness, how often I have  
thought of seriousness  
And how little I have understood  
it, except this: serious is urgent  
And it has to do with change. You  
say to the water,  
It's not necessary to boil now,  
and you turn it off. It stops  
Fidgeting. And starts to cool. You  
put your hand in it  
And say, The water isn't serious  
any more. It has the potential,  
However—that urgency to give  
off bubbles, to

Change itself to steam. And the  
wind,  
When it becomes part of a  
hurricane, blowing up the  
beach  
And the sand dunes can't keep it  
away.  
Fainting is one sign of  
seriousness, crying is another.  
Shuddering all over is another  
one.

A serious moment for the  
telephone is when it rings.  
And a person answers, it is  
Angelica, or is it you.

A serious moment for the fly is  
when its wings  
Are moving, and a serious  
moment for the duck  
Is when it swims, when it first  
touches water, then spreads  
Its smile upon the water...

A serious moment for the match  
is when it burst into flame...

Serious for me that I met you, and  
serious for you  
That you met me, and that we do  
not know  
If we will ever be close to anyone  
again. Serious the recognition  
of the probability  
That we will, although time  
stretches terribly in  
between...

Anonymous submission.

Kenneth Koch

## To Various Persons Talked To All At Once

You have helped hold me together.  
I'd like you to be still.  
Stop talking or doing anything else for a minute.  
No. Please. For three minutes, maybe five minutes.  
Tell me which walk to take over the hill.  
Is there a bridge there? Will I want company?  
Tell me about the old people who built the bridge.  
What is "the Japanese economy"?  
Where did you hide the doctor's bills?  
How much I admire you!  
Can you help me to take this off?  
May I help you to take that off?  
Are you finished with this item?  
Who is the car salesman?  
The canopy we had made for the dog.  
I need some endless embracing.  
The ocean's not really very far.  
Did you come west in this weather?  
I've been sitting at home with my shoes off.  
You're wearing a cross!  
That bench, look! Under it are some puppies!  
Could I have just one little shot of Scotch?  
I suppose I wanted to impress you.  
It's snowing.  
The Revlon Man has come from across the sea.  
This racket is annoying.  
We didn't want the baby to come here because of the hawk.  
What are you reading?  
In what style would you like the humidity to explain?  
I care, but not much. You can smoke a cigar.  
Genuineness isn't a word I'd ever use.  
Say, what a short skirt! Do you have a camera?  
The moon is a shellfish.  
I can't talk to most people. They eat me alive.  
Who are you, anyway?  
I want to look at you all day long, because you are mine.  
Might you crave a little visit to the Pizza Hut?  
Thank you for telling me your sign.  
I'm filled with joy by this sun!  
The turtle is advancing but the lobster stays behind. Silence has won the game!  
Well, just damn you and the thermometer!  
I don't want to ask the doctor.  
I didn't know what you meant when you said that to me.  
It's getting cold, but I am feeling awfully lazy.  
If you want to we can go over there  
Where there's a little more light.

Anonymous submission.

Kenneth Koch

## Variations At Home And Abroad

It takes a lot of a person's life  
To be French, or English, or American  
Or Italian. And to be at any age. To live at any certain time.  
The Polish-born resident of Manhattan is not merely a representative of  
    general humanity  
And neither is this Sicilian fisherman stringing his bait  
Or to be any gender, born where or when  
Betty holding a big plate  
Karen crossing her post-World War Two legs  
And smiling across the table  
These three Italian boys age about twenty gesturing and talking  
And laughing after they get off the train  
Seem fifty percent Italian and the rest percent just plain  
Human race.  
O mystery of growing up! O history of going to school!  
O lovers O enchantments!

The subject is not over because the photograph is over.  
The photographer sits down. Murnau makes the movie.  
Everything is a little bit off, but has a nationality.  
The oysters won't help the refugees off the boats,  
Only other human creatures will. The phone rings and the Albanian  
    nationalist sits down.  
When he gets up he hasn't become a Russian émigré or a German circus  
    clown  
A woman is carrying a basket—a beautiful sight! She is in and of  
    Madagascar.  
The uniformed Malay policeman sniffs the beer barrel that the brothers of  
    Ludwig are bringing close to him.  
All humanity likes to get drunk! Are differences then all on the surface?  
But even every surface gets hot  
In the sun. It may be that the surface is where we are all alike!  
But man and woman show that this isn't true.  
We will get by, though. The train is puffing at the station  
But the station isn't puffing at the train. This difference allows for a sense  
    of community  
As when people feel really glad to have cats and dogs  
And some even a few mice in the chimney. We are not alone  
In the universe, and the diversity causes comfort as well as difficulty.  
To be Italian takes at least half the day. To be Chinese seven-eighths of it.  
Only at evening when Chang Ho, repast over, sits down to smoke  
Is he exclusively human, in the way the train is exclusively itself when it is  
    in motion  
But that's to say it wrongly. His being human is also his being seven-eighths  
    Chinese.  
Falling in love one may get, say, twenty percent back  
Toward universality, though that is probably all. Then when love's gone  
One's Nigerianness increases, or one's quality of being of Nepal.  
An American may start out wishing  
To be everybody or that everybody were the same  
Which makes him or her at least eighty percent American. Dixit Charles  
    Peguy, circa 1912,

"The good Lord created the French so that certain aspects of His creation  
Wouldn't go unnoticed." Like the taste of wheat, sirrah! Or the Japanese.  
So that someplace on earth there would be people who were  
Writing haiku. But think of the human body with its arms  
Its nose, its eyes, its brain often subject to alarms  
Think how much energy, work, and time have gone into it,  
To give us such a variegated kind of humanity!  
It takes fifteen seconds this morning to be a man,  
Twenty to be an old one, four to be an American,  
Two to be a college graduate and four or five hours to write.  
And what's more, I love you! half of every hour for weeks or months for  
this;  
Nine hundred seconds to be an admirer of Italian Renaissance painting,  
Sixteen hours to be someone awake.  
One is recognizably American, male, and of a certain generation. Nothing  
takes these markers away.

Even if I live in Indonesia as a native in a hut, someone coming through  
there  
Will certainly gasp and say Why you're an American!  
My optimism, my openness, my lack of a sense of history,  
My distinctive facial muscles ready to look angry or sad or sympathetic  
In a moment and not quite know where to go from there;  
My assuming that anything is possible, my deep sense of superiority  
And inferiority at the same time; my lack of culture,  
Except for the bookish kind; my way of acting with the dog, come here  
Spotty! God damn!  
All these and hundreds more declare me to be what I am.  
It's burdensome but also inevitable. I think so.  
Expatriates have had some success with the plastic surgery  
Of absence and departure. But it is never absolute. And then they must bear  
the new identity as well.

Irish or Russian, the individuality in them is often mistaken for nationality.  
The Russian finding a soul in the army officer, the Irishman finding in him  
someone with whom he can drink.  
Consider the Volga boatman? One can only guess  
But probably about ninety percent Russian, eighty percent man, and thirty  
percent boatman, Russian, man, and boatman,  
A good person for the job, a Russian man of the river.  
This dog is two-fifths wolf and less than one-thousandth a husband or  
father.  
Dogs resist nationality by being breeds. This one is simply Alsatian.  
Though he may father forth a puppy  
Who seems totally something else if for example he (the Alsatian) is attracted  
To a poodle with powerful DNA. The puppy runs up to the Italian boys  
who smile  
Thinking it would be fun to take it to Taormina  
Where they work in the hotel and to teach it tricks.  
A Frenchwoman marvels at this scene.  
The woman bends down to the dog and speaks to it in French.  
This is hopeful and funny. To the dog all human languages are a perfumed

fog.  
He wags and rises on his back legs. One Italian boy praises him, "Bravo!  
canino!"  
Underneath there is the rumble of the metro train. The boy looks at the  
woman.  
Life offers them these entangling moments as—who?—on a bicycle goes  
past.  
It is a Congolese with the savannah on his shoulders  
And the sky in his heart, but his words as he passes are in French—  
"Bonjour, m'sieu dames," and goes speeding off with his identity,  
His Congolese, millennial selfhood unchanging and changing place.

Kenneth Koch

## Variations On A Theme By William Carlos Williams

1

I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next summer.  
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do  
and its wooden beams were so inviting.

2

We laughed at the hollyhocks together  
and then I sprayed them with lye.  
Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing.

3

I gave away the money that you had been saving to live on for the  
next ten years.  
The man who asked for it was shabby  
and the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold.

4

Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg.  
Forgive me. I was clumsy and  
I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the doctor!

Kenneth Koch