Classic Poetry Series

Kenneth Patchen

- poems -

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As We Are So Wonderfully Done With Each Other

As we are so wonderfully done with each other
We can walk into our separate sleep
on floors of music where the milkwhite cloak of childhood
lies

oh my love, my golden lark, my soft long doll
Your lips have splashed my dull house with print of flowers
My hands are crooked where they spilled over your dear
curving

It is good to be weary from that brilliant work
It is being God to feel your breathing under me

A waterglass on the bureau fills with morning.....
Don't let anyone in to wake us

Kenneth Patchen

Creation

Wherever the dead are there they are and
Nothing more. But you and I can expect
To see angels in the meadowgrass that look
Like cows -
And wherever we are in paradise
in furnished room without bath and
six flights up
Is all God! We read
To one another, loving the sound of the s’s
Slipping up on the f’s and much is good
Enough to raise the hair on our heads, like Rilke and Wilfred Owen

Any person who loves another person,
Wherever in the world, is with us in this room -
Even though there are battlefields.

Kenneth Patchen

Fall of the Evening Star

Speak softly; sun going down
Out of sight. Come near me now.

Dear dying fall of wings as birds
complain against the gathering dark...

Exaggerate the green blood in grass;
the music of leaves scraping space;

Multiply the stillness by one sound;
by one syllable of your name...

And all that is little is soon giant,
all that is rare grows in common beauty

To rest with my mouth on your mouth
as somewhere a star falls

And the earth takes it softly, in natural love...
Exactly as we take each other...
and go to sleep...

Kenneth Patchen

In the footsteps of the walking air

In the footsteps of the walking air
Sky's prophetic chickens weave their cloth of awe
And hillsides lift green wings in somber journeying.

Night in his soft haste bumps on the shoulders of the abyss
And a single drop of dark blood covers the earth.

Now is the China of the spirit at walking
In my reaches.
A sable organ sounds in my gathered will
And love's inscrutable skeleton sings.

My seeing moves under a vegetable shroud
And dead forests stand where once Mary stood.

Sullen stone dogs wait in the groves of water ...
Though the wanderer drown, his welfare is as a fire
That burns at the bottom of the sea, warming
Unknown roads for sleep to walk upon.

Kenneth Patchen

Irkalla's White Caves

I believe that a young woman
Is standing in a circle of lions
In the other side of the sky.

In a little while I must carry her the flowers
Which only fade here; and she will not cry
If my hands are not very full.

±

Fiery antlers toss within the forests of heaven
And ocean’s plaintive towns
Echo the tread of celestial feet.
O the beautiful eyes stare down…
What have we done that we are blessèd?
What have we died that we hasten to God?

±

And all the animals are asleep again
In their separate caves.
Hairy bellies distended with their kill.
Culture blubbering in and out
Like the breath of a stranded fish.
Crucifixion in wax. The test-tube messiahs.
Immaculate fornication under the smoking walls
Of a dead world.
I dig for my death
in this thousand-watt dungheap.
There isn’t even enough clean air.
To die in.
O blood-bearded destroyer!

In other times...
(soundless barges float
down the rivers of death)
In another heart
These crimes may not flower…
What have we done that we are blessèd?
What have we damned that we are blinded?

±

Now, with my seven-holed head open
On the air whence comes a fabulous mariner
To take his place among the spheres—
The air which is God
And the mariner who is sheep—I fold
Upon myself like a bird over flames. Then
All my nightbound juices sing. Snails
Pop out of unexpected places and the long
light lances of waterbulls plunge

into the green crotch of my native land.
Eyes peer out of the seaweed that gently sways
Above the towers and salt gates of a lost world.

±

On the other side of the sky
A young woman is standing
In a circle of lions—
The young woman who is dream
And the lions which are death.

Kenneth Patchen

Let Us Have Madness

Let us have madness openly.
O men Of my generation.
Let us follow
The footsteps of this slaughtered age:
See it trail across Time's dim land
Into the closed house of eternity
With the noise that dying has,
With the face that dead things wear--
nor ever say
We wanted more; we looked to find
An open door, an utter deed of love,
Transforming day's evil darkness;
but We found extended hell and fog Upon the earth,
and within the head
A rotting bog of lean huge graves.

Kenneth Patchen

Pastoral

The Dove walks with sticky feet
Upon the green crowns of the almond tree,
Its feathers smeared over with warmth
Like honey
That dips lazily down into the shadow ...

Anyone standing in that orchard.So filled with peace and sleep,
Would hardly have noticed the hill
Nearby
With its three strange wooden arms
Lifted above a throng of motionless people
- Above the helmets of Pilate's soldiers
Flashing like silver teeth in the sun.

Kenneth Patchen

Saturday Night in the Parthenon

Tiny green birds skate over the surface of the room.
A naked girl prepares a basin with steaming water,
And in the corner away from the hearth, the red wheels
Of an up-ended chariot slowly turn.
After a long moment, the door to the other world opens
And the golden figure of a man appears. He stands
Ruddy as a salmon beside the niche where are kept
The keepsakes of the Prince of Earth; then sadly, drawing
A hammer out of his side, he advances to an oaken desk,
And being careful to strike in exact fury, pounds it to bits.
Another woman has by now taken her station
Beside the bubbling tub.
Her legs are covered with a silken blue fur,
Which in places above the knees
Grows to the thickness of a lion's mane.
The upper sphere of her chest
Is gathered into huge creases by two jeweled pins.
Transparent little boots reveal toes
Which an angel could want.
Beneath her on the floor a beautiful cinnamon cat
Plays with a bunch of yellow grapes, running
Its paws in and out like a boy being a silly king.
Her voice is round and white as she says:
'Your bath is ready, darling. Don't wait too long.'
But he has already drawn away to the window
And through its circular opening looks,
As a man into the pages of his death.
'Terrible horsemen are setting fire to the earth.
Houses are burning ... the people fly before
The red spears of a speckled madness . . .'
'Please, dear,' interrupts the original woman,
'We cannot help them ... Under the cancerous foot
Of their hatred, they were born to perish -
Like beasts in a well of spiders ...
Come now, sweet; the water will get cold.'
A little wagon pulled by foxes lowers from the ceiling.
Three men are seated on its cushions which breathe
Like purple breasts. The head of one is tipped
To the right, where on a bed of snails, a radiant child
Is crowing sleepily; the heads of the other two are turned
Upward, as though in contemplation
Of an authority which is not easily apprehended.
Yet they act as one, lifting the baby from its rosy perch,
And depositing it gently in the tub.
The water hisses over its scream ... a faint smell
Of horror floats up. Then the three withdraw
With their hapless burden, and the tinny bark
Of the foxes dies on the air.
'It hasn't grown cold yet,' the golden figure says,
And he strokes the belly of the second woman,
Running his hands over her fur like someone asleep.
They lie together under the shadow of a giant crab

Which polishes its thousand vises beside the fire.
Farther back, nearly obscured by kettles and chairs,
A second landscape can be seen; then a third, fourth,
Fifth ... until the whole, fluted like a rose,
And webbed in a miraculous workmanship,
Ascends unto the seven thrones
Where Tomorrow sits.
Slowly advancing down these shifting levels,
The white Queen of Heaven approaches.
Stars glitter in her hair. A tree grows
Out of her side, and gazing through the foliage
The eyes of the Beautiful gleam - 'Hurry, darling,'
The first woman calls. 'The water is getting cold.'
But he does not hear.
The hilt of the knife is carved like a scepter
And like a scepter gently sways
Above his mutilated throat ...
Smiling like a fashionable hat, the furry girl
Walks quickly to the tub, and throwing off
Her stained gown, eels into the water.
The other watches her sorrowfully; then,
Without haste, as one would strangle an owl,
She flicks the wheel of the chariot - around
Which the black world bends ...
    without thrones or gates, without faith,
    warmth or light for any of its creatures;
    where even the children go mad - and
As though unwound on a scroll, the picture
Of Everyman's murder winks back at God.
Farther away now, nearly hidden by the human,
Another landscape can be seen ...
And the wan, smiling Queen of Heaven appears
For a moment on the balconies of my chosen sleep.

Kenneth Patchen

The Artist's Duty

So it is the duty of the artist to discourage all traces of shame
To extend all boundaries
To fog them in right over the plate
To kill only what is ridiculous
To establish problem
To ignore solutions
To listen to no one
To omit nothing
To contradict everything
To generate the free brain
To bear no cross
To take part in no crucifixion
To tinkle a warning when mankind strays
To explode upon all parties
To wound deeper than the soldier
To heal this poor obstinate monkey once and for all

To verify the irrational
To exaggerate all things
To inhibit everyone
To lubricate each proportion
To experience only experience

To set a flame in the high air
To exclaim at the commonplace alone
To cause the unseen eyes to open

To admire only the abrsurd
To be concerned with every profession save his own
To raise a fortuitous stink on the boulevards of truth and beauty
To desire an electrifiable intercourse with a female alligator
To lift the flesh above the suffering
To forgive the beautiful its disconsolate deceit

To flash his vengeful badge at every abyss

To HAPPEN

It is the artist’s duty to be alive
To drag people into glittering occupations

To blush perpetually in gaping innocence
To drift happily through the ruined race-intelligence
To burrow beneath the subconscious
To defend the unreal at the cost of his reason
To obey each outrageous inpulse
To commit his company to all enchantments.

Kenneth Patchen

The Hangman's Great Hands

And all that is this day. . .
The boy with cap slung over what had been a face. ..

Somehow the cop will sleep tonight, will make love to his wife...
Anger won't help. I was born angry. Angry that my father was being burnt alive in the mills; Angry that none of us knew anything but filth, and poverty. Angry because I was that very one somebody was supposed To be fighting for
Turn him over; take a good look at his face...
Somebody is going to see that face for a long time.
I wash his hands that in the brightness they will shine.
We have a parent called the earth.
To be these buds and trees; this tameless bird Within the ground; this season's act upon the fields of Man.
To be equal to the littlest thing alive,
While all the swarming stars move silent through The merest flower
. .. but the fog of guns.
The face with all the draining future left blank. . . Those smug saints, whether of church or Stalin, Can get off the back of my people, and stay off. Somebody is supposed to be fighting for somebody. . . And Lenin is terribly silent, terribly silent and dead.

Kenneth Patchen

The Naked Land

A beast stands at my eye.

I cook my senses in a dark fire.
The old wombs rot and the new mother
Approaches with the footsteps of a world.

Who are the people of this unscaled heaven?
What beckons?
Whose blood hallows this grim land?
What slithers along the watershed of my human sleep?

The other side of knowing ...
Caress of unwaking delight ... O start
A sufficient love! O gently silent forms
Of the last spaces.

Kenneth Patchen

The Orange Bears

The Orange bears with soft friendly eyes
Who played with me when I was ten,
Christ, before I'd left home they'd had
Their paws smashed in the rolls, their backs
Seared by hot slag, their soft trusting
Bellies kicked in, their tongues ripped
Out, and I went down through the woods
To the smelly crick with Whitman
In the Haldeman-Julius edition,
And I just sat there worrying my thumbnail
Into the cover---What did he know about
Orange bears with their coats all stunk up with soft coal
And the National Guard coming over
From Wheeling to stand in front of the millgates
With drawn bayonets jeering at the strikers?

I remember you would put daisies
On the windowsill at night and in
The morning they'd be so covered with soot
You couldn't tell what they were anymore.

A hell of a fat chance my orange bears had!

Kenneth Patchen

The Slums

That should be obvious
Of course it won't
Any fool knows that.
Even in the winter.
Consider for a moment.
What?
Consider what!
They never have.
Why now?
Certainly it means nothing.
It's all a lie.
What else could it be?
That's right.
Sure.
Any way you look at it.
A silk hat.
A fat belly.
A nice church to squat in.
My holy ass...
What should they care about?
It's quaint.
Twelve kids on the fire escape...
Flowers on the windowsill...
You're damn right.
That's the way it is.
That's just the way it is.

Kenneth Patchen

The Temple

To leave the earth was my wish, and no will stayed my rising.
Early, before sun had filled the roads with carts
Conveying folk to weddings and to murders;
Before men left their selves of sleep, to wander
In the dark of the world like whipped beasts.

I took no pack. I had no horse, no staff, no gun.
I got up a little way and something called me,
Saying,
'Put your hand in mine. We will seek God together.'
And I answered, 'It is your father who is lost, not mine.'
Then the sky filled with tears of blood, and snakes sang.

Kenneth Patchen

There Are Not Many Kingdoms Left

I write the lips of the moon upon her shoulders. In a temple of silvery farawayness I guard her to rest.

For her bed I write a stillness over all the swans of the world. With the morning breath of the snow leopard I cover her against any hurt.

Using the pen of rivers and mountaintops I store her pillow with singing.

Upon her hair I write the looking of the heavens at early morning.

-- Away from this kingdom, from this last undefiled place, I would keep our governments, our civilization, and all other spirit-forsaken and corrupt institutions.

O cold beautiful blossoms of the moon moving upon her shoulders . . . the lips of the moon moving there . . . where the touch of any other lips would be a profanation.

Kenneth Patchen

We Go Out Together In the Staring Town

We go out together into the staring town
And buy cheese and bread and little jugs with
flowered labels

Everywhere is a tent where we put on our whirling
show

A great deal has been said of the handless serpents
Which war has set loose in the gay milk of our
heads

But because you braid your hair and taste like
honey of heaven
We go together into town to buy wine and
yellow candles.

Kenneth Patchen

When We Were Here Together

when we were here together in a place we did not know, nor one another.
A bit of grass held between the teeth for a moment, bright hair on the wind.
What we were we did not know, nor even the grass or the flame of hair turning to ash on the wind.
But they lied about that. From the beginning they lied. To the child, telling him that there was somewhere anger against him, and a hatred against him, and the only reason for his being in the world.
But never did they tell him that the only evil and danger was in themselves; that they alone were the prisoners and the betrayers; that they - they alone - were responsible for what was being done in the world.
And they told the child to starve and to kill the child that was within him; for only by doing this could he become a useful and adjusted member of the community which they had prepared for him.
And this time, alas, they did not lie.
And with the death of the child was born a thing that had neither the character of a man nor the character of a child, but was a horrible and monstrous parody of the two; and it is in this world now that the flesh of man’s spirit lies twisted and despoiled under the indifferent stars.
When we were here together in a place we did not know, nor one another.
O green the bit of warm grass between our teeth. O beautiful the hair of our mortal goddess on the indifferent wind.

Kenneth Patchen