

Classic Poetry Series

Kenneth Koch
- poems -

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Kenneth Koch(27 February 1925 – 6 July 2002)

an American poet, playwright, and professor, active from the 1950s until his death at age 77. He was a prominent poet of the New York School of poetry, a loose group of poets including Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery that eschewed contemporary introspective poetry in favor of an exuberant, cosmopolitan style that drew major inspiration from travel, painting, and music.

Kenneth Koch was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on February 27, 1925. He studied at Harvard University, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree, and attended Columbia University for his Ph.D.

Many critics found Koch's early work obscure, such as *Poems* (1953), and the epic *Ko, or A Season on Earth* (1959), yet remarked upon his subsequent writing for its clarity, lyricism, and humor, such as in *The Art of Love* (1975), which was praised as a graceful, humorous book. His other collections of poetry include *New Addresses* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), winner of the Phi Beta Kappa Poetry Award and a finalist for the National Book Award; *Straits* (1998); *One Train and On the Great Atlantic Rainway, Selected Poems 1950-1988* (both published in 1994), which together earned him the Bollingen Prize in 1995; *Seasons of the Earth* (1987); *On the Edge* (1986); *Days and Nights* (1982); *The Burning Mystery of Anna in 1951* (1979); *The Duplications* (1977); *The Pleasures of Peace* (1969); *When the Sun Tries to Go On* (1969); *Thank You* (1962); and *Seasons on Earth* (1960).

Koch's short plays, many of them produced off- and off-off-Broadway, are collected in *The Gold Standard: A Book of Plays*. He has also published *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* (Scribners, 1998); *The Red Robins* (1975), a novel; *Hotel Lambosa and Other Stories*(1993). Koch wrote the libretto for composer Marcello Panni's *The Banquet*, which premiered in Bremen in June 1998, and his collaborations with painters have been the subject of exhibitions at the Ipswich Museum in England and the De Nagy Gallery in New York. His numerous honors include the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, awarded by the Library of Congress in 1996, as well as awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Fulbright, Guggenheim, and Ingram-Merrill foundations. In 1996 he was inducted as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Kenneth Koch lived in New York City, where he was professor of English at Columbia University. Koch died on July 6, 2002 from leukemia.

A Momentary Longing To Hear Sad Advice From One Long Dead

Who was my teacher at Harvard. Did not wear overcoat
Saying to me as we walked across the Yard
Cold brittle autumn is you should be wearing overcoat. I said
You are not wearing overcoat. He said,
You should do as I say not do as I do.
Just how American it was and how late Forties it was
Delmore, but not I, was probably aware. He quoted Finnegans Wake to me
In his New York apartment sitting on chair
Table directly in front of him. There did he write? I am wondering.
Look at this photograph said of his mother and father.
Coney Island. Do they look happy? He couldn't figure it out.
Believed Pogo to be at the limits of our culture.
Pogo. Walt Kelly must have read Joyce Delmore said.
Why don't you ask him?
Why don't you ask Walt Kelly if he read Finnegans Wake or not.
Your parents don't look happy but it is just a photograph.
Maybe they felt awkward posing for photographs.
Maybe it is just a bad photograph. Delmore is not listening
I want to hear him tell me something sad but however true.
Delmore in his tomb is sitting. People say yes everyone is dying
But here read this happy book on the subject. Not Delmore. Not that rueful man.

Kenneth Koch

Bel Canto

The sun is high, the seaside air is sharp,
And salty light reveals the Mayan School.
The Irish hope their names are on the harp,
We see the sheep's advertisement for wool,
Boulders are here, to throw against a tarp,
From which comes bursting forth a puzzled mule.
Perceval seizes it and mounts it, then
The blood-dimmed tide recedes and then comes in again.

Fateful connections that we make to things
Whose functioning's oblivious to our lives!
How sidewise news of light from darkness springs,
How blue bees buzz from big blooms back to hives
And make the honey while the queen bee sings
Leadbelly in arrangements by Burl Ives—
How long ago I saw the misted pine trees
And hoped, no matter how, to get them into poetry!

Stendhal, at fifty, gazing as it happened
On Rome from the Janiculum, decided
That one way he could give his life a stipend
Was to suspend his being Amour's fighter
And get to know himself. Here he had ripened
Accomplished, loved, and lived, was a great writer
But never had explored in true detail
His childhood and his growing up. So he set sail

Composing La Vie de Henry Brulard
But in five hundred pages scarcely got
Beyond his seventeenth year, for it is hard
To take into account what happens here
And fit it all onto an index card.
Even one moment of it is too hot,
Complex and cannibalistically connected
To every other, which is what might be expected.

Sterne's hero has a greater problem, never
Getting much past his birth. I've had a third one.
My autobiography, if I should ever
Start out to write it, quickly seems a burden
An I-will-do-that-the-next-time endeavor.
Whatever life I do write's an absurd one
As if some crazy person with a knife
Cut up and made a jigsaw puzzle of a life.

In any case a life that's hardly possible
In the conditions that we really live in,
Where easy flying leaps to inaccessible
Mountainy places where love is a given
And misery, if there, infinitesimal,
Are quite the norm. Here none by pain is driven
That is not curable by the romanza
That's kept in readiness to finish any stanza.

Whatever, then, I see at this late stage of
My life I may or may not have stayed ignorant
Of that great book I've strained to write one page of
Yet always hoping my page was significant.
Be it or not, for me and for the ages
I leave it as it is. Yet as a figurant
Who has not stopped, I'm writing in addition
More lines to clarify my present disposition.

One person in a million finds out something
Perhaps each fifty years and that is knowledge.
Newton, Copernicus, Einstein are cunning.
The rest of us just rise and go to college
With no more hope to come home with the bunting
Than a stray dachshund going through the village.
However, what a treat our small successes
Of present and of past, at various addresses!

To be in all those places where I tarried

Too little or too late or bright and early
To love again the first woman I married
To marvel at such things as melancholy,
Sophistication, drums, a baby carriage,
A John Cage concert heard at Alice Tully—
How my desire when young to be a poet
Made me attentive and oblivious every moment!

Do you remember Oceanview the Fair?
The heights above the river? The canoes?
The place we beached them and the grass was bare?
Those days the sandbars gave our knees a truce?
The crooked line of pantry shelves, with pear
And cherry jam? And Pancho, with his noose?
Do you remember Full and Half and Empty?
Do you remember sorrow standing in the entry?

Do you remember thought, and talking plainly?
Michel and I went walking after Chartres
Cathedral had engaged our spirits mainly
By giving us an insight into Barthes.
Michel said he was capable of feigning
Renewed intentions of the soul's deep part,
Like this cathedral's artificial forces
That press a kind of artless thought into our faces.

And yet— ¶ The moor is dark beneath the moon.
The porcupine turns over on its belly
And new conceptions rap at the cocoon.
Civilization, dealing with us fairly,
For once, releases its Erectheion
Of understanding, which consoles us, nearly.
Later we study certain characteristics
That may give us a better chance with the statistics.

How much I'd like to live the whole thing over,
But making some corrections as I go!
To be a better husband and a father,

Be with my babies on a sled in snow.
By twenty I'd have understood my mother
And by compassion found a way to know
What separates the what-I-started-out-as
From what-I-sometimes-wished-I-was-when-in-the-mountains.

To be once more the one who what was worthy
Of courtship courted—it was quite as stressful
As trying to, er, as they say, give birth to
A poem and as often unsuccessful,
But it was nice to be sublime and flirty
With radiant girls, and, in some strange way, restful.
I could be everything I wasn't usually—
And then to get somebody else to feel it mutually!

In poems the same problem or a similar.
Desire of course not only to do old things
But things unheard of yet by nuns or visitors
And of the melancholy finch be co-finch
In singing songs with such a broad parameter
That seamstresses would stare, forget to sew things,
Astronauts quit the sky, athletes the stadium
To hear them, and the rest of what they hear be tedium.

Such wild desires, I think it's recognizable
Are part and parcel of the Human Image
And in a way, I'd say, no less predictable
Than Popeye's feelings for a can of spinach.
Yet if we're set on course by the Invisible,
All pre-determined, what about the language
That teases me each morning with its leanings
Toward the Unprogrammed Altitudes beyond its meanings?

Are you, O particles, O atoms, nominatives
Like Percevals and Stendhals, set in motion
By some Ordaining Will that is definitive?
Is this invading chill and high emotion,
This tendency to know one is regenerative,

Is this, all, tidal take-home like the ocean?
Be what you may, my thanks for your society
Through the long life I've had, your jokes and your variety,

The warmth you've shown in giving me a temperature
That I can live with, and the strength you've shared with me
In arms and legs—and for your part in literature,
What can I say? It is as if life stared at me
And kissed my lips and left it as a signature.
Thank you for that, and thank you for preparing me
For love itself, and friendship, its co-agent.
Thank you for being this, and for its inspiration.

Kenneth Koch

Fresh Air

I

At the Poem Society a black-haired man stands up to say
"You make me sick with all your talk about restraint and mature talent!
Haven't you ever looked out the window at a painting by Matisse,
Or did you always stay in hotels where there were too many spiders crawling on
your visages?
Did you ever glance inside a bottle of sparkling pop,
Or see a citizen split in two by the lightning?
I am afraid you have never smiled at the hibernation
Of bear cubs except that you saw in it some deep relation
To human suffering and wishes, oh what a bunch of crackpots!"
The black-haired man sits down, and the others shoot arrows at him.
A blond man stands up and says,
"He is right! Why should we be organized to defend the kingdom
Of dullness? There are so many slimy people connected with poetry,
Too, and people who know nothing about it!
I am not recommending that poets like each other and organize to fight them,
But simply that lightning should strike them."
Then the assembled mediocrities shot arrows at the blond-haired man.
The chairman stood up on the platform, oh he was physically ugly!
He was small-limbed and -boned and thought he was quite seductive,
But he was bald with certain hideous black hairs,
And his voice had the sound of water leaving a vaseline bathtub,
And he said, "The subject for this evening's discussion is poetry
On the subject of love between swans." And everyone threw candy hearts
At the disgusting man, and they stuck to his bib and tucker,
And he danced up and down on the platform in terrific glee
And recited the poetry of his little friends—but the blond man stuck his head
Out of a cloud and recited poems about the east and thunder,
And the black-haired man moved through the stratosphere chanting
Poems of the relationships between terrific prehistoric charcoal whales,
And the slimy man with candy hearts sticking all over him
Wilted away like a cigarette paper on which the bumblebees have urinated,
And all the professors left the room to go back to their duty,
And all that were left in the room were five or six poets
And together they sang the new poem of the twentieth century
Which, though influenced by Mallarmé, Shelley, Byron, and Whitman,
Plus a million other poets, is still entirely original

And is so exciting that it cannot be here repeated.
You must go to the Poem Society and wait for it to happen.
Once you have heard this poem you will not love any other,
Once you have dreamed this dream you will be inconsolable,
Once you have loved this dream you will be as one dead,
Once you have visited the passages of this time's great art!

2

"Oh to be seventeen years old
Once again," sang the red-haired man, "and not know that poetry
Is ruled with the sceptre of the dumb, the deaf, and the creepy!"
And the shouting persons battered his immortal body with stones
And threw his primitive comedy into the sea
From which it sang forth poems irrevocably blue.

Who are the great poets of our time, and what are their names?
Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful
influence
(Is Eliot a great poet? no one knows), Hardy, Stevens, Williams (is Hardy of our
time?),
Hopkins (is Hopkins of our time?), Rilke (is Rilke of our time?), Lorca (is Lorca of
our time?), who is still of our time?
Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire, Éluard, Reverdy, French poets are still of our time,
Pasternak and Mayakovsky, is Jouve of our time?

Where are young poets in America, they are trembling in publishing houses and
universities,
Above all they are trembling in universities, they are bathing the library steps
with their spit,
They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about maple trees and their
children,
Sometimes they brave a subject like the Villa d'Este or a lighthouse in Rhode
Island,
Oh what worms they are! they wish to perfect their form.
Yet could not these young men, put in another profession,
Succeed admirably, say at sailing a ship? I do not doubt it, Sir, and I wish we
could try them.
(A plane flies over the ship holding a bomb but perhaps it will not drop the bomb,
The young poets from the universities are staring anxiously at the skies,
Oh they are remembering their days on the campus when they looked up to

watch birds excrete,
They are remembering the days they spent making their elegant poems.)

Is there no voice to cry out from the wind and say what it is like to be the wind,
To be roughed up by the trees and to bring music from the scattered houses
And the stones, and to be in such intimate relationship with the sea
That you cannot understand it? Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants?

3

Summer in the trees! "It is time to strangle several bad poets."
The yellow hobbyhorse rocks to and fro, and from the chimney
Drops the Strangler! The white and pink roses are slightly agitated by the
struggle,
But afterwards beside the dead "poet" they cuddle up comfortingly against their
vase. They are safer now, no one will compare them to the sea.

Here on the railroad train, one more time, is the Strangler.
He is going to get that one there, who is on his way to a poetry reading.
Agh! Biff! A body falls to the moving floor.

In the football stadium I also see him,
He leaps through the frosty air at the maker of comparisons
Between football and life and silently, silently strangles him!

Here is the Strangler dressed in a cowboy suit
Leaping from his horse to annihilate the students of myth!

The Strangler's ear is alert for the names of Orpheus,
Cuchulain, Gawain, and Odysseus,
And for poems addressed to Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald,
To Ezra Pound, and to personages no longer living
Even in anyone's thoughts—O Strangler the Strangler!

He lies on his back in the waves of the Pacific Ocean.

4

Supposing that one walks out into the air
On a fresh spring day and has the misfortune

To encounter an article on modern poetry
In New World Writing, or has the misfortune
To see some examples of some of the poetry
Written by the men with their eyes on the myth
And the Missus and the midterms, in the Hudson Review,
Or, if one is abroad, in Botteghe Oscure,
Or indeed in Encounter, what is one to do
With the rest of one's day that lies blasted to ruins
All bluey about one, what is one to do?
O surely one cannot complain to the President,
Nor even to the deans of Columbia College,
Nor to T. S. Eliot, nor to Ezra Pound,
And supposing one writes to the Princess Caetani,
"Your poets are awful!" what good would it do?
And supposing one goes to the Hudson Review
With a package of matches and sets fire to the building?
One ends up in prison with trial subscriptions
To the Partisan, Sewanee, and Kenyon Review!

5

Sun out! perhaps there is a reason for the lack of poetry
In these ill-contented souls, perhaps they need air!

Blue air, fresh air, come in, I welcome you, you are an art student,
Take off your cap and gown and sit down on the chair.

Together we shall paint the poets—but no, air! perhaps you should go to them,
quickly,
Give them a little inspiration, they need it, perhaps they are out of breath,
Give them a little inhuman company before they freeze the English language to
death!
(And rust their typewriters a little, be sea air! be noxious! kill them, if you must,
but stop their poetry!
I remember I saw you dancing on the surf on the Côte d'Azur,
And I stopped, taking my hat off, but you did not remember me,
Then afterwards you came to my room bearing a handful of orange flowers
And we were together all through the summer night!)

That we might go away together, it is so beautiful on the sea, there are a few
white clouds in the sky!

But no, air! you must go . . . Ah, stay!

But she has departed and . . . Ugh! what poisonous fumes and clouds! what a suffocating atmosphere!

Cough! whose are these hideous faces I see, what is this rigor

Infecting the mind? where are the green Azores,

Fond memories of childhood, and the pleasant orange trolleys,

A girl's face, red-white, and her breasts and calves, blue eyes, brown eyes, green eyes, fahrenheit

Temperatures, dandelions, and trains, O blue?!

Wind, wind, what is happening? Wind! I can't see any bird but the gull, and I feel it should symbolize . . .

Oh, pardon me, there's a swan, one two three swans, a great white swan, hahaha how pretty they are! Smack!

Oh! stop! help! yes, I see—disrespect for my superiors—forgive me, dear Zeus, nice Zeus, parabolic bird, O feathered excellence! white!

There is Achilles too, and there's Ulysses, I've always wanted to see them,

And there is Helen of Troy, I suppose she is Zeus too, she's so terribly pretty—hello, Zeus, my you are beautiful, Bang!

One more mistake and I get thrown out of the Modern Poetry Association, help!

Why aren't there any adjectives around?

Oh there are, there's practically nothing else—look, here's grey, utter, agonized, total, phenomenal, gracile, invidious, sundered, and fused,

Elegant, absolute, pyramidal, and . . . Scream! but what can I describe with these words? States!

States symbolized and divided by two, complex states, magic states, states of consciousness governed by an aroused sincerity, cockadoodle doo!

Another bird! is it morning? Help! where am I? am I in the barnyard? oink oink, scratch, moo! Splash!

My first lesson. "Look around you. What do you think and feel?" Uhhh . . .

"Quickly!" This Connecticut landscape would have pleased Vermeer. Wham! A-Plus. "Congratulations!" I am promoted.

OOOhhhhh I wish I were dead, what a headache! My second lesson: "Rewrite your first lesson line six hundred times. Try to make it into a magnetic field." I can do it too. But my poor line! What a nightmare! Here comes a tremendous horse,

Trojan, I presume. No, it's my third lesson. "Look, look! Watch him, see what he's doing? That's what we want you to do. Of course it won't be the same as his at first, but . . ." I demur. Is there no other way to fertilize minds?

Bang! I give in . . . Already I see my name in two or three anthologies, a serving girl comes into the barn bringing me the anthologies,

She is very pretty and I smile at her a little sadly, perhaps it is my last smile!
Perhaps she will hit me! But no, she smiles in return, and she takes my hand.
My hand, my hand! what is this strange thing I feel in my hand, on my arm, on
my chest, my face—can it be . . . ? it is! AIR!
Air, air, you've come back! Did you have any success? "What do you think?" I
don't know, air. You are so strong, air.
And she breaks my chains of straw, and we walk down the road, behind us the
hideous fumes!
Soon we reach the seaside, she is a young art student who places her head on
my shoulder,
I kiss her warm red lips, and here is the Strangler, reading the Kenyon Review!
Good luck to you, Strangler!
Goodbye, Helen! goodbye, fumes! goodbye, abstracted dried-up boys! goodbye,
dead trees! goodbye, skunks!
Goodbye, manure! goodbye, critical manicure! goodbye, you big fat men
standing on the east coast as well as the west giving poems the test! farewell,
Valéry's stern dictum!
Until tomorrow, then, scum floating on the surface of poetry! goodbye for a
moment, refuse that happens to land in poetry's boundaries! adieu, stale eggs
teaching imbeciles poetry to bolster up your egos! adios, boring anomalies of
these same stale eggs!
Ah, but the scum is deep! Come, let me help you! and soon we pass into the
clear blue water. Oh GOODBYE, castrati of poetry! farewell, stale pale skunky
pentameters (the only honest English meter, gloop gloop!) until tomorrow,
horrors! oh, farewell!

Hello, sea! good morning, sea! hello, clarity and excitement, you great expanse
of green—

O green, beneath which all of them shall drown!

"Fresh Air" from *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*, published by Alfred A.
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Kenneth Koch

In Love with You

O what a physical effect it has on me
To dive forever into the light blue sea
Of your acquaintance! Ah, but dearest friends,
Like forms, are finished, as life has ends! Still,
It is beautiful, when October
Is over, and February is over,
To sit in the starch of my shirt, and to dream of your sweet
Ways! As if the world were a taxi, you enter it, then
Reply (to no one), "Let's go five or six blocks."
Isn't the blue stream that runs past you a translation from the Russian?
Aren't my eyes bigger than love?
Isn't this history, and aren't we a couple of ruins?
Is Carthage Pompeii? is the pillow the bed? is the sun
What glues our heads together? O midnight! O midnight!
Is love what we are,
Or has happiness come to me in a private car
That's so very small I'm amazed to see it there?

2

We walk through the park in the sun, and you say, "There's a spider
Of shadow touching the bench, when morning's begun." I love you.
I love you fame I love you raining sun I love you cigarettes I love you love
I love you daggers I love smiles daggers and symbolism.

3

Inside the symposium of your sweetest look's
Sunflower awning by the nurse-faced chrysanthemums childhood
Again represents a summer spent sticking knives into porcelain raspberries,
when China's
Still a country! Oh, King Edward abdicated years later, that's
Exactly when. If you were seventy thousand years old, and I were a pill,
I know I could cure your headache, like playing baseball in drinking-water, as
baskets
Of towels sweetly touch the bathroom floor! O benches of nothing
Appear and reappear—electricity! I'd love to be how
You are, as if
The world were new, and the selves were blue

Which we don
Until it's dawn,
Until evening puts on
The gray hooded selves and the light brown selves of . . .
Water! your tear-colored nail polish
Kisses me! and the lumberyard seems new
As a calm
On the sea, where, like pigeons,
I feel so mutated, sad, so breezed, so revived, and still so unabdicated—
Not like an edge of land coming over the sea!

Kenneth Koch

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

News

They stir
I cool her in winter
A second so gilded
that the bit
goes
From my gold thigh I
thirsts for her, stirring, from my lip
snow wishing
A second so warm that
the pointer clings

What did my arm
do before it collected her?
I have no faith

Like a jaw
Like a mystery
Like a river-demon

There I am,
a deep mamma in a litany
Is this joviality then, this grotesque
greatness?

In immutability I
fill an intruder, lasting
around my man, droll from
darkness

Farcical and foreign
What can the continent do without arm
to run?

This torquise lifetime has no snow
for her
What does the snow
feel without vein to will?
In news I nod a lifetime, going
across my life, slight from snow

Is that living
then, that coolheaded wilderness?

Kenneth Koch

On The Great Atlantic Rainway

I set forth one misted white day of June
Beneath the great Atlantic rainway, and heard:
"Honestly you smite worlds of truth, but
Lose your own trains of thought, like a pigeon.
Did you once ride in Kenneth's machine?"
"Yes, I rode there, an old man in shorts, blind,
Who had lost his way in the filling station; Kenneth was kind."
"Did he fill your motionless ears with resonance and stain?"
"No, he spoke not as a critic, but as a man."
"Tell me, what did he say?" "He said,
'My eyes are the white sky, the gravel on the groundway my sad lament.'
"And yet he drives between the two. . . ." "Exactly, Jane,

And that is the modern idea of fittingness,
To, always in motion, lose nothing, although beneath the
Rainway they move in threes and twos completely
Ruined for themselves, like moving pictures."
"But how other?" "Formulalessness, to go from the sun
Into love's sweet disrepair. He would fondly express
'Rain trees'—which is not a poem, 'rain trees. . . .'"
"Still, it is mysterious to have an engine
That floats bouquets! and one day in the rear-vision
Mirror of his car we vowed delight,
The insufficiency of the silverware in the sunlight,
The dreams he steals from and smiles, losing gain."

"Yet always beneath the rainway unsyntactical
Beauty might leap up!" "That we might sing
From smiles' ravines, 'Rose, the reverse of everything,
May be profaned or talked at like a hat.'"
"Oh that was sweet and short, like the minuet
Of stars, which would permit us to seem our best friends
By silver's eminent lights! For nature is so small, ends
Falsely reign, distending the time we did
Behind our hope for body-work, riding with Kenneth."
Their voicing ceased, then started again, to complain
That we are offered nothing when it starts to rain
In the same way, though we are dying for the truth.

"On the Great Atlantic Rainway" from *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*,
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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

Poem For My Twentieth Birthday

Passing the American graveyard, for my birthday
the crosses stuttering, white on tropical green,
the years' quick focus of faces I do not remember . . .

The palm trees stalking like deliberate giants
for my birthday, and all the hot adolescent memories
seen through a screen of water . . .

For my birthday thrust into the adult and actual:
expected to perform the action, not to ponder
the reality beyond the fact,
the man standing upright in the dream.

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...

Kenneth Koch

The Brassiere Factory

Is the governor falling
From a great height?
Arm in arm we fled the brassiere factory,
The motion-boat stayed on the shore!
I saw how round its bottom was
As you walked into southern France—
Upon the light hair of an arm
Cigar bands lay!
I kissed you then. Oh is my bar
The insect of your will? The water rose,
But will the buffalo on
The nickel yet be still?
For how can windows hold out the light
In your eyes!
Darling, we fled the brassiere factory
In forty-eight states,
Arm in arm,
When human beings hung on us
And you had been arrested by the cloths
Were used in making, and I said, "The Goths
Know such delight," but still we fled, away
Into a dinner atmosphere
From all we knew, and fall asleep this day.
O maintenance men, with cruel eyes,
Then arm in arm we fled the listless factory!
The music changed your fingers' ends to pearl,
I punched you, you foolish girl,
For thanks to the metronome we got out alive, in the air
Where the sun filled us with cruelty!
There's what to do
Except despair, like pages! and laugh
Like prawns, about the sea!
Oh arm in arm we fled the industry
Into an earth of banks
And foolish tanks, for what bare breasts might be.

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Kenneth Koch

The Circus

I remember when I wrote The Circus
I was living in Paris, or rather we were living in Paris
Janice, Frank was alive, the Whitney Museum
Was still on 8th Street, or was it still something else?
Fernand Léger lived in our building
Well it wasn't really our building it was the building we lived in
Next to a Grand Guignol troupe who made a lot of noise
So that one day I yelled through a hole in the wall
Of our apartment I don't know why there was a hole there
Shut up! And the voice came back to me saying something
I don't know what. Once I saw Léger walk out of the building
I think. Stanley Kunitz came to dinner. I wrote The Circus
In two tries, the first getting most of the first stanza;
That fall I also wrote an opera libretto called Louisa or Matilda.
Jean-Claude came to dinner. He said (about "cocktail sauce")
It should be good on something but not on these (oysters).
By that time I think I had already written The Circus
When I came back, having been annoyed to have to go
I forget what I went there about
You were back in the apartment what a dump actually we liked it
I think with your hair and your writing and the pans
Moving strummingly about the kitchen and I wrote The Circus
It was a summer night no it was an autumn one summer when
I remember it but actually no autumn that black dusk toward the post office
And I wrote many other poems then but The Circus was the best
Maybe not by far the best Geography was also wonderful
And the Airplane Betty poems (inspired by you) but The Circus was the best.

Sometimes I feel I actually am the person
Who did this, who wrote that, including that poem The Circus
But sometimes on the other hand I don't.
There are so many factors engaging our attention!
At every moment the happiness of others, the health of those we know and our
own!
And the millions upon millions of people we don't know and their well-being to
think about
So it seems strange I found time to write The Circus
And even spent two evenings on it, and that I have also the time
To remember that I did it, and remember you and me then, and write this poem

about it

At the beginning of The Circus

The Circus girls are rushing through the night

In the circus wagons and tulips and other flowers will be picked

A long time from now this poem wants to get off on its own

Someplace like a painting not held to a depiction of composing The Circus.

Noel Lee was in Paris then but usually out of it

In Germany or Denmark giving a concert

As part of an endless activity

Which was either his career or his happiness or a combination of both

Or neither I remember his dark eyes looking he was nervous

With me perhaps because of our days at Harvard.

It is understandable enough to be nervous with anybody!

How softly and easily one feels when alone

Love of one's friends when one is commanding the time and space syndrome

If that's the right word which I doubt but together how come one is so nervous?

One is not always but what was I then and what am I now attempting to create

If create is the right word

Out of this combination of experience and aloneness

And who are you telling me it is or is not a poem (not you?) Go back with me
though

To those nights I was writing The Circus.

Do you like that poem? have you read it? It is in my book Thank You

Which Grove just reprinted. I wonder how long I am going to live

And what the rest will be like I mean the rest of my life.

John Cage said to me the other night How old are you? and I told him forty-six
(Since then I've become forty-seven) he said

Oh that's a great age I remember.

John Cage once told me he didn't charge much for his mushroom identification
course (at the New School)

Because he didn't want to make a profit from nature

He was ahead of his time I was behind my time we were both in time

Brilliant go to the head of the class and "time is a river"

It doesn't seem like a river to me it seems like an unformed plan

Days go by and still nothing is decided about

What to do until you know it never will be and then you say "time"

But you really don't care much about it any more

Time means something when you have the major part of yours ahead of you
As I did in Aix-en-Provence that was three years before I wrote The Circus
That year I wrote Bricks and The Great Atlantic Rainway
I felt time surround me like a blanket endless and soft
I could go to sleep endlessly and wake up and still be in it
But I treasured secretly the part of me that was individually changing
Like Noel Lee I was interested in my career
And still am but now it is like a town I don't want to leave
Not a tower I am climbing opposed by ferocious enemies

I never mentioned my friends in my poems at the time I wrote The Circus
Although they meant almost more than anything to me
Of this now for some time I've felt an attenuation
So I'm mentioning them maybe this will bring them back to me
Not them perhaps but what I felt about them
John Ashbery Jane Freilicher Larry Rivers Frank O'Hara
Their names alone bring tears to my eyes
As seeing Polly did last night
It is beautiful at any time but the paradox is leaving it
In order to feel it when you've come back the sun has declined
And the people are merrier or else they've gone home altogether
And you are left alone well you put up with that your sureness is like the sun
While you have it but when you don't its lack's a black and icy night. I came
home
And wrote The Circus that night, Janice. I didn't come and speak to you
And put my arm around you and ask you if you'd like to take a walk
Or go to the Cirque Medrano though that's what I wrote poems about
And am writing about that now, and now I'm alone

And this is not as good a poem as The Circus
And I wonder if any good will come of either of them all the same.

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Kenneth Koch

The History Of Jazz

I

The leaves of blue came drifting down.
In the corner Madeleine Reierbacher was reading Lorna Doone.
The bay's water helped to implement the structuring of the garden hose.
The envelope fell. Was it pink or was it red? Consult Lorna Doone.
There, voyager, you will find your answer. The savant grapeade stands
Remember Madeleine Reierbacher. Madeleine Reierbacher says,
"If you are happy, there is no one to keep you from being happy;
Don't let them!" Madeleine Reierbacher went into the racing car.
The racing car was orange and red. Madeleine Reierbacher drove to Beale Street.
There Maddy doffed her garments to get into some more comfortable clothes.
Jazz was already playing in Beale Street when Madeleine Reierbacher arrived
there.
Madeleine Reierbacher picked up the yellow horn and began to play.
No one had ever heard anything comparable to the playing of Madeleine
Reierbacher.
What a jazz musician! The pianist missed his beats because he was so excited.
The drummer stared out the window in ecstasy at the yellow wooden trees.
The orchestra played "September in the Rain," "Mugging," and "I'm Full of Love."
Madeleine Reierbacher rolled up her sleeves; she picked up her horn; she played
"Blues in the Rain."
It was the best jazz anyone had ever heard. It was mentioned in the
newspapers. St. Louis!
Madeleine Reierbacher became a celebrity. She played with Pesky Summerton
and Muggsy Pierce.
Madeleine cut numerous disks. Her best waxings are "Alpha Beta and Gamma"
And "Wing Song." One day Madeleine was riding on a donkey
When she came to a yellow light; the yellow light did not change.
Madeleine kept hoping it would change to green or red. She said, "As long as you
have confidence,
You need be afraid of nothing." Madeleine saw the red smokestacks, she looked
at the thin trees,
And she regarded the railroad tracks. The yellow light was unchanging.
Madeleine's donkey dropped dead
From his mortal load. Madeleine Reierbacher, when she fell to earth,
Picked up a blade of grass and began to play. "The Blues!" cried the workmen of
the vicinity,
And they ran and came in great numbers to where Madeleine Reierbacher was.

They saw her standing in that simple field beside the railroad track
Playing, and they saw that light changing to green and red, and they saw that
donkey stand up
And rise into the sky; and Madeleine Reierbacher was like a clot of blue
In the midst of the blue of all that sky, and the young farmers screamed
In excitement, and the workmen dropped their heavy boards and stones in their
excitement,
And they cried, "O Madeleine Reierbacher, play us the 'Lead Flint Blues' once
again!"

O railroad stations, pennants, evenings, and lumberyards!
When will you ever bring us such a beautiful soloist again?
An argent strain shows on the reddish face of the sun.
Madeleine Reierbacher stands up and screams, "I am getting wet! You are all
egotists!"
Her brain floats up into the lyric atmosphere of the sky.
We must figure out a way to keep our best musicians with us.
The finest we have always melt in the light blue sky!
In the middle of a concert, sometimes, they disappear, like anvils.
(The music comes down to us with sweet white hands on our shoulders.)
We stare up in surprise; and we hear Madeleine's best-known tune once again,
"If you ain't afraid of life, life can't be afraid for you."
Madeleine! Come back and sing to us!

2

Dick looked up from his blackboard.
Had he really written a history of the jazz age?
He stared at his television set; the technicolor jazz program was coming on.
The program that day was devoted to pictures of Madeleine Reierbacher
Playing her saxophone in the golden age of jazz.
Dick looked at his blackboard. It was a mass of green and orange lines.
Here and there a red chalk line interlaced with the others.
He stared attentively at the program.

It was a clear and blue white day. Amos said, "The calibration is finished. Now
there need be no more jazz."

In his mountain home old Lucas Dog laughed when he heard what Amos had
said.
He smilingly picked up his yellow horn to play, but all that came out of it was

steam.

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Kenneth Koch

The Magic Of Numbers

The Magic of Numbers—1

How strange it was to hear the furniture being moved around in the apartment upstairs!

I was twenty-six, and you were twenty-two.

The Magic of Numbers—2

You asked me if I wanted to run, but I said no and walked on.

I was nineteen, and you were seven.

The Magic of Numbers—3

Yes, but does X really like us?

We were both twenty-seven.

The Magic of Numbers—4

You look like Jerry Lewis (1950).

The Magic of Numbers—5

Grandfather and grandmother want you to go over to their house for dinner.

They were sixty-nine, and I was two and a half.

The Magic of Numbers—6

One day when I was twenty-nine years old I met you and nothing happened.

The Magic of Numbers—7

No, of course it wasn't I who came to the library!

Brown eyes, flushed cheeks, brown hair. I was twenty-nine, and you were

sixteen.

The Magic of Numbers—8

After we made love one night in Rockport I went outside and kissed the road
I felt so carried away. I was twenty-three, and you were nineteen.

The Magic of Numbers—9

I was twenty-nine, and so were you. We had a very passionate time.
Everything I read turned into a story about you and me, and everything I did was
turned into a poem.

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Kenneth Koch

To My Father's Business

Leo bends over his desk
Gazing at a memorandum
While Stuart stands beside him
With a smile, saying,
'Leo, the order for those desks
Came in today
From Youngstown Needle and Thread!'
C. Loth Inc., there you are
Like Balboa the conqueror
Of those who want to buy office furniture
Or bar fixtures
In nineteen forty in Cincinnati, Ohio!
Secretaries pound out
Invoices on antique typewriters—
Dactyllographs
And fingernail biters.
I am sitting on a desk
Looking at my daddy
Who is proud of but feels unsure about
Some aspects of his little laddie.
I will go on to explore
Deep and/or nonsensical themes
While my father's on the dark hardwood floor
Hit by a couple of Ohio sunbeams.
Kenny, he says, some day you'll work in the store.
But I felt 'never more' or 'never ever'
Harvard was far away
World War Two was distant
Psychoanalysis was extremely expensive
All of these saved me from you.
C. Loth you made my father happy
I saw his face shining
He laughed a lot, working in you
He said to Miss Ritter
His secretary
'Ritt, this is my boy, Kenny!'
'Hello there Kenny,' she said
My heart in an uproar
I loved you but couldn't think

Of staying with you
I can see the virtues now
That could come from being in you
A sense of balance
Compromise and acceptance—
Not isolated moments of brilliance
Like a girl without a shoe,
But someone that you
Care for every day—
Need for customers and the economy
Don't go away.
There were little pamphlets
Distributed in you
About success in business
Each about eight to twelve pages long
One whole series of them
All ended with the words
'P.S. He got the job'
One a story about a boy who said,
'I swept up the street, Sir,
Before you got up.' Or
'There were five hundred extra catalogues
So I took them to people in the city who have a dog'—
P.S. He got the job.
I didn't get the job
I didn't think that I could do the job
I thought I might go crazy in the job
Staying in you
You whom I could love
But not be part of
The secretaries clicked
Their Smith Coronas closed at five p.m.
And took the streetcars to Kentucky then
And I left too.

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

To You

I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut
That will solve a murder case unsolved for years
Because the murderer left it in the snow beside a window
Through which he saw her head, connecting with
Her shoulders by a neck, and laid a red
Roof in her heart. For this we live a thousand years;
For this we love, and we live because we love, we are not
Inside a bottle, thank goodness! I love you as a
Kid searches for a goat; I am crazier than shirttails
In the wind, when you're near, a wind that blows from
The big blue sea, so shiny so deep and so unlike us;
I think I am bicycling across an Africa of green and white fields
Always, to be near you, even in my heart
When I'm awake, which swims, and also I believe that you
Are trustworthy as the sidewalk which leads me to
The place where I again think of you, a new
Harmony of thoughts! I love you as the sunlight leads the prow
Of a ship which sails
From Hartford to Miami, and I love you
Best at dawn, when even before I am awake the sun
Receives me in the questions which you always pose.

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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!

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