

Poetry Series

Kenneth Salzmänn
- poems -

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Kenneth Salzmänn()

Kenneth Salzmänn is a writer and poet who lives in Woodstock, NY, and Ajijic, Mexico. His poetry has appeared in *Riverine: An Anthology of Hudson Valley Writers*, *Beloved on the Earth: 150 Poems of Grief and Gratitude*, *Rattle*, *The New Verse News*, *The Comstock Review*, and elsewhere.

1969

1If fifty thousand candles can be
the waxy, whispered remains of dead boys
in a cold, November rain,
then Kilby might wrap this night
in chords seized from an acoustic guitar,
as if melody waits unformed
somewhere near the Ellipse,
as if harmony can settle the score
and not swell unexpectedly
forty years from now when a blood-red BMW
points up the 101,
purposeful enough.

If a drunk and stumbling bum can insist
against the 2 a.m. terrors of Arlington Cemetery
that we imbibe his history
and heft an icy, dented mortar shell
made slick by the Potomac mist,
then Salzmänn might write a poem
to reduce or enlarge
this rainy night of America's soul,
as if cadences tried out on the Mall
can settle into lines
that won't overstay their welcome
and float back insistently
forty years from now when promises and poems
are petals scratched from stubborn soils,
then gone.

Kenneth Salzmänn

A Brief Note To Josephine, From Diana

Take this quilt and let it blanket you,

in comfort and in loss.

It was stitched just for you

six generations ago.

Ever since, these colorful threads

have run through the lives

of daughters, then mothers,

then grandmothers, then daughters.

Take this quilt and one day

spread it over your own children

and over their children,

in comfort and in loss.

Everything is changing, and will.

But these ancient threads are holding fast.

Kenneth Salzmänn

At Paul's Mall

Freddie Hubbard on the bandstand
blowing away at abstract truth
until up jumped spring
and we smoke the darkness
of Paul's Mall just as if
it will go on forever—
jazzed breath ascending
endlessly heavenward through
the coils of the flugelhorn—
and just as if one jazzedsex waitress
is still returning to our table
like first light, all lips without sound
when the trumpet washes over
the shape of her words
and we order another round,
another round if only for the sake
of the intervals sculpted by her
wordless tongue and teeth
on this again our maiden voyage.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Butterfly Dreams

There's always the danger,
of course,
of mistaking ornamentation for completion
when piercing soft tissue
with sterling and tiny chips of diamonds
which will sway unseen
in perfect time to private rhythms,
or when drawing
inky suggestions of caterpillars
beneath the freckled surface
in hopes of butterflies.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Cahuita

black sand in cahuita
sucks back the shadows of the new sun and
delicately
slices white flesh
drinking tiny droplets of blood and it
crackles just a bit
beneath the weight of the small ecstasies
of monkeys or flocking parrots dawning
just two dirt roads and a sharp right
beyond miss edie's patio
where each day
gringas gather
over papaya con leche
to talk of pura vida
black sand and riptides.

Kenneth Salzmann

Counting My Dead

Because the dark corners
of night can tug at sleep
more readily now
that years like regrets
are piling up and crowding
my dreams, I am counting
my dead at sixty-five,
and coming to know
not all of my corpses
have died.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Desert Rivers

These three Mexican gravediggers must know
Deep, earthy truths about dirt and regret.
And know something of halting rivers that flow

In desert rivers that have dried and set
Like misspent hope beneath the desert sun,
As if rivers might cleanse an earthly debt.

When the final words of last sad songs run
Like faltering rivers across this day,
Gravediggers know an ending has begun.

These three Mexican gravediggers won't say
How desert death encircles birth to grow
Startling blossoms in the barrens unbaked clay.

These three Mexican gravediggers won't show
The ways ice-cold embers regain their glow.

Kenneth Salzmänn

In The Poet's Garden

In the poet's garden one summer evening
in June rows of leafy enjambments stop
at the edge of a lush planting of blossoming

trochees and alongside the muted petals
of shade-loving tercets while a simile like a snake
slithers through a bed of perennial metaphors

that spread outward and over the fern
hill to kiss tidy plots where amphibrachs
are draping a trellis and underfoot

anapests are sprouting and iambs abound.
In the poet's garden rhymes climb pink
spondees at the foot of a synecdoche

of rhythm and hyperbole. Metonomies
now grow where once only concrete was.

Kenneth Salzmänn

In The Quapaw Quarter

This redbud sears
and steams when ice
white as an older world
slips over the Quapaw
in new spring.

It is an ember cupped in the verdant
bed of March and smoldering,
spattering promises while poised
to answer anticipated needs
for heat and light.

At flashpoint a cardinal skims across
its purpled fingers, sipping vapor.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Ink Stains, For Maggie Estep, Dead At 50

'Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang
— Herman Melville, *Billy Budd: A Sailor*

Consider Maggie's unfinished novel one more book
I won't read in a too-short lifetime spent
not reading too many essential books.

There would have been a pit bull,
I know, and tough, strong, vulnerable,
steely women wrapped
in layers of language
and gathered into a gang.

I think of days spent in literature classes
with Melville's abbreviated masterwork,
unresolved meanings fluttering slightly
out of reach like brittle manuscript
pages locked away for years.

I think of budding certainties
obscured bywords. Smudges
across time. Finely crafted
characters turned inside out
in certain strokes when
stuttering angels must hang.

I think of the way ink stains.

Consider Maggie's just one more
novel among many ended abruptly
in a truncated final chapter.

There will be a pit bull. I'm sure,
and unrealized meanings
fluttering out of reach.

There will be vicious vulnerable
women turning to dust like old paper.

I consider how often I might reach
for her never-to-be book,
only to be reminded yet again
of the way ink stains.

Kenneth Salzmann

Lines In Late April, For April T. Upon Hearing The Prognosis

April has been characteristically brief,
coming in on a promise, but somehow
always circling the point.

Taconic streams swollen by the melting mountains
push impatiently against matted leaves and fallen
branches that seem to belong somewhere else.

Nightfall is a gentle rustling on the forest floor
and the piercing laughter of predators that slip through
shadows and edge along the lake where moonlight descends.

One day, April is icy, grasping and resolute.
Another time, the impudent, golden reach of forsythia
arches against the likelihood across gunmetal gray skies.

April ice can slip in unexpectedly with the sinking sun
to swallow tender sprouts like a crusty tumor.
Ice lays waste to fragile shoots on old wood.

In the end, the ice in April is every bit as fragile
as those new buds setting out a plan for summer. These
gnarled bones of birches have lasted another winter.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Marginal Lives

For all we know, or can suspect,
these love lines aren't worth the paper
they were printed on a dozen years ago—
when 'Robert' underlined certain scenes
for 'the sexiest trooper in New York'
and underscored their anticipated significance
in neatly inked notes drawn in the now-musty
margins of this paperback detective novel
we come across on the bargain rack
at the secondhand bookstore on Hamilton Street.

'All books this shelf twenty-five cents, '
the sign advises, neglecting to say
there are mysteries between these covers
that the author never contemplated
and we will never solve.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Musaf: Additional Prayer

Musaf: Additional Prayer

Praised be the one
I have lived contentedly without;
who reveals the Berkshires today
are an unexpected house of prayer
and sorrow, as just one green month
rises to repair a broken circle; whose
search for me is unfulfilled
and perhaps not ended.

Blessed is eternal loss and glory, wonder of the universe,
splash of color slipping from a winter-weary wood
that I have often walked alone; blessed a father's flight
that leaves a son with no direction to flee but back
along remembered village roads that run two ways
through dimming childhoods; blessed each step out
and each step back, the returning implicit in the going.

Blessed are the little-traveled village roads that carry
fathers and sons toward innumerable destinations.

Blessed are the four corners, and the fringes.

Eternal Mothering Presence, you coax Deuteronomy
from the gentle throats of Berkshire songbirds
and fly away; you clothe the naked birches
with the finishing touches of spring; you drop green vowels
on weathered wood until the world finds a voice
and whispers Shema; you make me a Jew.

Unending Adonai, help us to go on imagining
that, wherever we go, we have only missed you
by a moment; allow us our untenable conviction
that we might become a blessing.

Blessed Father, command us to be free.

Octubro, For Paul Desmond

Somewhere deep inside
where melody and marrow
meet, an October song is born.
Like a dry martini on a summer
afternoon, the saxophone glides
up and under the Amazon's ethereal
rainforest rhythms, cooling hot
jungle breezes that might
for some other player be
a summertime cloudburst,
a reaching after the rainy
season, note-worthy
truths or quarter-truths.
Your October song is
a rippling reflection of
a memory and a melancholy
promise mined this time, too,
from somewhere deep inside
where melody and marrow meet.

Kenneth Salzmänn

On The Day Of The Dead

This is the day we welcome the not-yet-dead.
They come to our crypts or graves to bury us
beneath armfuls of marigolds, to dine with us
on candied pumpkin, pan de muerto, sugar
skulls, jars of atole. They make a resting place
of the cold, packed earth at the base of flowery
ofrendas. With copal incense and seashell rattles,
with Catrinas and calaveras said to honor us,
the living-still struggle to carve in stone or custom
a wedge between themselves and us.

Kenneth Salzmann

Planting The Hyacinth Bean Vines

Planting the hyacinth bean vines today
in compost it took us all season to make
from the insistent decay of daily lives rich
in unread newspapers, orange rinds,
eggshells, the cores of apples,
compliant twigs, fallen leaves,
one of us might have thought to say:
'Once we had ample time
to neglect a garden.'

Kenneth Salzman

Postcards To A Son, Now Grown

I.

This is just a note to say that too many times
I have forgotten to let the sense of your words
Settle like a soft dusting of pollen
Across the scarred surface of my soul;
And just a note to say my shadow may be spent.

II.

I just wanted you to know that there's little
Left to know, other than to confirm the fable
That tells us that the winds that warm and
The winds that kill are both the breath of God;
And wanted you to know my shadow may be spent.

III.

I am only writing because in these silences
That give rise to sound there is a stillness
In which a beginning stirs, apart from any
Need or knowing that was the sum of me;
And writing because my shadow may be spent.

IV.

I simply wanted to tell you the letting go
Begins and ends in the same breathless
Mixture of awe and apprehension that
Attends every stop or start that we can know;
I wanted to tell you my shadow may be spent.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Progress Notes

"I want to be treated by a doctor who has read Macbeth"
—Jaroslav Pelikan

The doctor is
a 52 y/o man coming into
our lives
unbidden.
A preliminary examination
reveals him to be
sound of science,
if disengaged.
His understanding of
wonder
is impressively restricted.
He denies reading Macbeth
and reports having known
no connection
between cytogenetic studies
and the mysteries we note.
The doctor appears
to be clinically deficient
in Shakespeare,
as indicated by
standard methods
for describing a stain
in efforts to know
the nature of blood.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Recuerdo

A face that may have been
shadow and flame upon
a pillow of fallen leaves
once when my fingers
traced eyes and lips across the night
until the source of her mystery
burned my flesh beyond forgetting
is now forgotten,
but these hands remember
what it is to touch.

Kenneth Salzmann

Say No More

I intended to say we share words as well,
although it takes just two of us and a common language
to articulate a tower.

More like that Sunday magazine article

On dying languages in Patagonia

Than we care to say:

I asked her if she ever had

a conversation with the only other person

in the world who [spoke Yaghan].

No, Emelinda said impatiently,

the two of us don't talk.

You might have said we are forever tossing

sound about in places where ideas are gathered

then drummed into senselessness.

That we are approaching the moment

when we will sit at a café table

telling secrets but speaking in tongues.

I intended to say we share words as well,
and the speechlessness of aged Yaghan women
hoarding icy words in a land of fire.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Seeing Europe In Seven Weeks

Fifty and finished, it's a matter now
of a Greyhound bus, a hole in the sole
of a creased and cracking shoe,
elbow patches and for good reason.
Seeing Europe in seven weeks
you roared through our twenties and yours.
Indiscreet old men have you roaring still,
sweaty jazz and flappers, drinking from your pocket
on your continental crawl. Seeing Europe in seven weeks
who could say it would come down to an ugly city,
a Greyhound bus? Coins cast in the Trevi Fountain
won't come back to buy a loaf of bread.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Small Round Words

We have talked this through on frantic city streets
when we were young: After all these years we are still
at a loss to learn the September sky; we go right on failing
to memorize the colors the leaves will turn
in autumn. Or the reasons science soon
might confirm your soul.

I am about to stop writing
about my dead. The poems
are piling up in plain pine boxes;
they're lining unmarked graves
and fluttering like ash above
the redbricked chimney
of the Woodlawn crematorium;
always, I am leaving
small, round words like stones
upon the crypt.

In the moments before our deaths,
we have heard them say,
we might gather strength to make
one last demand
that won't be met.

By then, unmet demands
may come as no surprise.

After all these years we haven't learned
to map the September sky.

After all these years
what we know best of summer
is our own penchant for missing
luminous moments.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Take Five/Final Take, For Paul Desmond

So many have walked along this wall
in just this way that their footfalls, too,
are beaten in sambas and rondos
into the hidden tempo of the street;
yours come down at stage door
in five-four paces, encircling ghostly
wisps of breath, gathering again
in a new confusion of entrances and exits
reedy melodies drawn from a muscle memory
of riffs that how often have skitted
through those horns in cool
approximations of redemption.

Kenneth Salzmänn

The Hudson Valley School In The Time Of Rmn

Only in Esopus does morning spill
just so, puncturing dense skies and denser
stands of oak with random spears of day
that drop upon the iced remains of summer,
falling to earth precisely where we lay,
improvising blessing and escape
from failing light. Only in Esopus did
cryptic valley rays select for targets
flat, gray monuments and secret parts
of your endless capacity for drawing,
in midstream, moonlight and quick conclusions
from the night. Only in Esopus could
taut, bright chords from a breathy canticle
take on the shape and taste of stars settling
soft in the whiteness of your prairie hands
signing flight.

Kenneth Salzmnn

The Last Jazz Fan

for David Peirce

The last jazz fan slipped
from the world one night
like the amorphous
notes of a trumpet solo
at closing time. Some say
reedy melodies hovered
above him like nimbus clouds
at the exact moment rhythm
left the room. Explosive riffs
be-bopped across the sky
when the last jazz fan
returned to stardust,
and clarinets cooled
the darkness. Some say
it is the silent spaces between
that describe the song,
but some say the spaces
might expand until
they swallow the song

and silence is certain.

Kenneth Salzmänn

The Persistence Of Ashes

In fact, it is the roses that remain.

They enter the house all summer long,
and longer. I place them on the mantle beside the urn
where they will expend their pinks and reds petitioning
what gods they know for the persistence of your ashes.

And they will weep petals across the hearth.

At times, I catch myself believing in the immutability
of ashes, as if we are of this place or any other. As if
the generations that go on spreading like ash will turn
one day to the fixed notion of a place that is home.

The roses were planted fifty years ago or more, a neighbor said,
by a woman who went about, as people do, growing flowers
and growing old, until there was nothing left but roses to testify
that she had ever been. And we set out to make a home amid the thorns
and petals of her life. We nested in the oak-lined rooms that
remembered
all her moods and all her movements, but only briefly. And you
took it upon yourself to took it upon yourself to cleanse and nourish

those roses, perhaps in hopes of sanctifying a transitory life

followed seamlessly by ash and bone.

Kenneth Salzmänn

The Stadium

This is no game, remember,
Because the elevated rumbles still
Through the kitchen smells of each
Wave of ever-dark-eyed strangers
Ever cooking up strange dishes
Strangely spiced, and all the while
Slipping strange words
Into the spiced atmosphere
Hovering over 161st Street
To rise above the
Train's insistent jazz,
To swell into an unequivocal
Roar that will be joined by ghosts
As surely as forgotten ancestors
Will never let us go.
America is dark-eyed, too,
Against all its wishes,
And speaks in tongues,
And can't subdue
Its hunger for a common language.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Theology

Perhaps it is
enough to know
that a yellow sun

dripping

through a blue sky
can paint the forests
the deepest green.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Transparency

And when all was done then said,
it wasn't his flaws that caused
him to disappear.

Often enough he had willed that to be so,
wishing to become as insubstantial as
the bundled absence of all he lacked.

But as things turned out
it was a random strand of virtue
that rendered him invisible.

Ones who should have known better
tugged and teased that thread into prominence,
then magnified it beyond all meaning.

Old friends spoke of strength and courage.
New friends suspected him of gentle grace.
He insisted he stood falsely accused,

Offering his alibi to a myopic mirror
that, upon reflection, denied
any impression of him at all.

Kenneth Salzmänn

Walt Whitman's Butterfly

It's as if Walt Whitman's butterfly completes the composition, as if photographs never lie. It's as if Walt Whitman's butterfly perches on the calloused finger of the calloused hand that scratches the poem that never ends. It's as if the soaring words will yawp and sprawl on butterfly wings, fluttering across the exuberant line, the expanding leaves, the poet's insistent immortality. It's as if Walt Whitman's butterfly will pollinate the pages of other poets in other lives, leaves, lines, that they may yawp and sprawl in breathy cadences some more. It's as if only Walt Whitman's butterfly can complete the hazardous migration from century to century across born- and unborn-generations that they might sing with open mouths his strong melodious song of himself. It's as if, however, on closer inspection in the beams of the moon, Walt Whitman's butterfly wings are the rigid wings of what turns out to be a cardboard butterfly, after all. It's as if the imaginary insect completes the composition, as if photographs never lie.

Kenneth Salzmänn

What But The Music?

Maybe graying women and balding men are gathering
right now in every improbable town that hugs
a two-digit highway pointing vaguely toward America.

Maybe it's turning out we are unremarkable, after all—
unique and universal, just like all the rest.

Maybe it's nothing but the same comfortable crawl
every generation makes toward first things and well-worn
memories, when they start to notice the obituaries
are piling up higher than anyone ever thought they could.

Or maybe it is the music, after all.

What but the music might have orchestrated
forgotten revolutions and unforgettable kisses?

What but the music underscored every presumed
triumph and defeat, drew us into church basements
and into cheap apartments in bad neighborhoods,
ripped down walls, egged us on, played us out?

(Some of us never thought we'd make it this far,
and some of us were right.)

But maybe a soundtrack laid down decades ago
can permeate our souls and chart our lives
until one day we begin to see—long after we've
stopped looking—that astonishing rhythms
really did change the world.

What but the music might have bound us then?

What but the music might bind us again?

Kenneth Salzmänn

When Summer Gathered

When that summer gathered around us
in astonishing waves of need,
denim girls in back seats or slow dancing
to awkward strains from electric guitars
were danger and mystery and power,
every bit as if there were a god.

Unlikely gods spill love or loss or death
across summer waters and cloudless skies
brimming with possibility.

When summer gathered that year,
longhaired boys sipped wine and wonder
in cemeteries hugging silver lakes
while longhaired girls swam naked in the night.
Eyes and lips and soft brown skins washed over
our random plans for sudden change,
almost as if there were a god.

Unlikely gods hurl harsh laughter
when clumsy attempts to touch bind our hands;
unlikely gods stir still waters
by cemeteries hugging silver lakes

when lovers swimming naked in the night

ride astonishing waves of need.

The summer rain falls warm on new lovers,

to bead and pool with salty tears.

Dark-eyed girls with dark hair spread soft against

the moist grasses of small town greens

are danger and mystery and power,

and astonishing waves of need.

Every bit as if there is a god,

we will taste the ways love and death both bleed.

Kenneth Salzmänn

When The Plum Tree Blossomed

No one saw the plum tree this year ease
into its cloak of springtime blossoms
in the same week the forsythia
proclaimed the sun, in the same week
the hospital demanded all the living
we could muster. No one watched new buds
prepare for lace in the ironic promise
of fruit that will not come in later spring.
There was a year when plums formed and
dropped from this isolated, barren tree
despite the certainties of borrowed science,
and there have been years spent far from
the hospital and far from ironic promises
of a spring that never stops arriving,
each time to blossom and bear fruit against
familiar probabilities. No one saw the plum
tree come into full bloom this year;
even so, it remains our godly gift
to watch over it while each petal falls
and each tender leaf searches for its shape.

Kenneth Salzmann