

Classic Poetry Series

Weldon Kees
- poems -

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Weldon Kees(1914 - 1955)

Weldon Kees was born in Beatrice, Nebraska, on February 24, 1914. His father, John Kees, owned a hardware store. As a boy, Kees had an interest in music, art, and writing. He also published his own movie magazine. In 1935, he graduated from the University of Nebraska with a B.A. degree. While still in college, Kees began to publish fiction in many mid-western literary magazines.

Kees began to write and publish poems shortly after college. His first job was working for the Federal Writers' Project in Lincoln, Nebraska. Through the 1930s Kees mostly wrote short stories, placing them in the little magazines and intellectual quarterlies (Prairie Schoone, Horizon, Rocky Mountain Review). He continued to write fiction after leaving the Federal Writers Project for a job as a librarian in Denver. In October 1937 at the age of 24, he married Ann Swan. His reputation as a writer of fiction continued to grow. A novel, *Fall Quarter*, was completed in 1941, but its whimsical tale of a young professor who battles the dreariness of staid Nebraskan college life was thought by publishers to be too droll for a year in which war seemed imminent (eventually published in 1990). In 1943, the couple moved to New York City, where Kees wrote for *Time* magazine and published reviews in national magazines and newspapers such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. Kees's first collection of poems, *The Last Man*, was published in 1943. His second collection, *The Fall of Magicians*, first appeared in 1947.

In the mid-forties, he also began to paint; he had one-man shows at galleries including the Peridot Gallery. His painting was often shown with and compared to abstract expressionists such as William de Kooning. Between 1934 and 1945, he published more than thirty stories.

In 1951 Kees moved to San Francisco. In California, he began to study and play jazz piano, while continuing his painting. His jobs included writing film reviews for radio, writing for a theater review entitled *Poets Follies*, and working on screenplays. Much of this writing is collected in the volume *Reviews and Essays, 1936-1955* (1988).

In the mid 1950s, Kees became increasingly depressed. His wife became seriously alcoholic and then mentally ill; the two separated in 1954 and were divorced. His final book, *Poems 1947-1954*, was published in 1954.

On July 18, 1955, his car was found abandoned on the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge. He had told a friend that he wanted, like Hart Crane, to start a new

life in Mexico. He had also suggested that he might kill himself. His disappearance has been treated as a presumed suicide.

Five years after his disappearance and presumed suicide, Kees's *Collected Poems* was first published. In his introduction to that volume, Donald Justice called Kees among the three or four best of his generation. Justice went on to note that Kees is original in one of the few ways that matter: he speaks to us in a voice or, rather, in a particular tone of voice which we have never heard before. Kees's *Collected Poems* have since been reprinted twice. His collection of fiction, *Ceremony and Other Stories*, first appeared in 1983.

1926

The porchlight coming on again,
Early November, the dead leaves
Raked in piles, the wicker swing
Creaking. Across the lots
A phonograph is playing Ja-Da.

An orange moon. I see the lives
Of neighbors, mapped and marred
Like all the wars ahead, and R.
Insane, B. with his throat cut,
Fifteen years from now, in Omaha.

I did not know them then.
My airedale scratches at the door.
And I am back from seeing Milton Sills
And Doris Kenyon. Twelve years old.
The porchlight coming on again.

Weldon Kees

A Distance From The Sea

To Ernest Brace

"And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not."
--REVELATIONS, x, 4.

That raft we rigged up, under the water,
Was just the item: when he walked,
With his robes blowing, dark against the sky,
It was as though the unsubstantial waves held up
His slender and inviolate feet. The gulls flew over,
Dropping, crying alone; thin ragged lengths of cloud
Drifted in bars across the sun. There on the shore
The crowd's response was instantaneous. He
Handled it well, I thought--the gait, the tilt of the head, just right.
Long streaks of light were blinding on the waves.
And then we knew our work well worth the time:
The days of sawing, fitting, all those nails,
The tiresome rehearsals, considerations of execution.
But if you want a miracle, you have to work for it,
Lay your plans carefully and keep one jump
Ahead of the crowd. To report a miracle
Is a pleasure unalloyed; but staging one requires
Tact, imagination, a special knack for the job
Not everyone possesses. A miracle, in fact, means work.
--And now there are those who have come saying
That miracles were not what we were after. But what else
Is there? What other hope does life hold out
But the miraculous, the skilled and patient
Execution, the teamwork, all the pain and worry every miracle involves?

Visionaries tossing in their beds, haunted and racked
By questions of Messiahship and eschatology,
Are like the mist rising at nightfall, and come,
Perhaps to even less. Grave supernaturalists, devoted worshippers
Experience the ecstasy (such as it is), but not
Our ecstasy. It was our making. Yet sometimes
When the torrent of that time

Comes pouring back, I wonder at our courage
And our enterprise. It was as though the world
Had been one darkening, abandoned hall
Where rows of unlit candles stood; and we
Not out of love, so much, or hope, or even worship, but
Out of the fear of death, came with our lights
And watched the candles, one by one, take fire, flames
Against the long night of our fear. We thought
That we could never die. Now I am less convinced.
--The traveller on the plain makes out the mountains
At a distance; then he loses sight. His way
Winds through the valleys; then, at a sudden turning of a path,
The peaks stand nakedly before him: they are something else
Than what he saw below. I think now of the raft
(For me, somehow, the summit of the whole experience)
And all the expectations of that day, but also of the cave
We stocked with bread, the secret meetings
In the hills, the fake assassins hired for the last pursuit,
The careful staging of the cures, the bribed officials,
The angels' garments, tailored faultlessly,
The medicines administered behind the stone,
That ultimate cloud, so perfect, and so opportune.
Who managed all that blood I never knew.

The days get longer. It was a long time ago.
And I have come to that point in the turning of the path
Where peaks are infinite--horn-shaped and scaly, choked with

thorns.

But even here, I know our work was worth the cost.
What we have brought to pass, no one can take away.
Life offers up no miracles, unfortunately, and needs assistance.
Nothing will be the same as once it was,
I tell myself.--It's dark here on the peak, and keeps on getting
darker.

It seems I am experiencing a kind of ecstasy.
Was it sunlight on the waves that day? The night comes down.
And now the water seems remote, unreal, and perhaps it is.

Weldon Kees

A Musician's Wife

Between the visits to the shock ward
The doctors used to let you play
On the old upright Baldwin
Donated by a former patient
Who is said to be quite stable now.

And all day long you played Chopin,
Badly and hauntingly, when you weren't
Screaming on the porch that looked
Like an enormous birdcage. Or sat
In your room and stared out at the sky.

You never looked at me at all.
I used to walk down to where the bus stopped
Over the hill where the eucalyptus trees
Moved in the fog, and stared down
At the lights coming on, in the white rooms.

And always, when I came back to my sister's
I used to get out the records you made
The year before all your terrible trouble,
The records the critics praised and nobody bought
That are almost worn out now.

Now, sometimes I wake in the night
And hear the sound of dead leaves
against the shutters. And then a distant
Music starts, a music out of an abyss,
And it is dawn before I sleep again.

Weldon Kees

A Pastiche For Eve

Unmanageable as history: these
Followers of Tammuz to the land
That offered no return, where dust
Grew thick on every bolt and door. And so the world
Chilled, and the women wept, tore at their hair.
Yet, in the skies, a goddess governed Sirius, the Dog,
Who shines alike on mothers, lesbians, and whores.

What are we governed by? Dido and Carrie
Chapman Catt arrange themselves as statues near
The playground and the Tivoli. While warming up the beans,
Miss Sanders broods on the Rhamnusian, the whole earth worshipping
Her godhead. Later, vegetables in Athens.
Chaste in the dungeon, swooning with voluptuousness,
The Lady of the Castle weds pure Christ, the feudal groom.

Their bowels almost drove Swift mad. "Sad stem,
Sweet evil, stretching out a lion's jaws," wrote Marbode.
Now we cling together in our caves. That not impossible she
That rots and wrinkles in the sun, the shadow
Of all men, man's counterpart, sweet rois
Of vertew and of gentilness... The brothel and the crib endure.
Past reason hunted. How we die! Their pain, their blood, are ours.

Weldon Kees

Aspects Of Robinson

Robinson at cards at the Algonquin; a thin
Blue light comes down once more outside the blinds.
Gray men in overcoats are ghosts blown past the door.
The taxis streak the avenues with yellow, orange, and red.
This is Grand Central, Mr. Robinson.

Robinson on a roof above the Heights; the boats
Mourn like the lost. Water is slate, far down.
Through sounds of ice cubes dropped in glass, an osteopath,
Dressed for the links, describes an old Intourist tour.
—Here's where old Gibbons jumped from, Robinson.

Robinson walking in the Park, admiring the elephant.
Robinson buying the Tribune, Robinson buying the Times. Robinson
Saying, "Hello. Yes, this is Robinson. Sunday
At five? I'd love to. Pretty well. And you?"
Robinson alone at Longchamps, staring at the wall.

Robinson afraid, drunk, sobbing Robinson
In bed with a Mrs. Morse. Robinson at home;
Decisions: Toynebee or luminol? Where the sun
Shines, Robinson in flowered trunks, eyes toward
The breakers. Where the night ends, Robinson in East Side bars.

Robinson in Glen plaid jacket, Scotch-grain shoes,
Black four-in-hand and oxford button-down,
The jeweled and silent watch that winds itself, the brief-
Case, covert topcoat, clothes for spring, all covering
His sad and usual heart, dry as a winter leaf.

Weldon Kees

Colloquy

In the broken light, in owl weather,
Webs on the lawn where the leaves end,
I took the thin moon and the sky for cover
To pick the cat's brains and descend
A weedy hill. I found him groveling
Inside the summerhouse, a shadowed bulge,
Furred and somnolent.—"I bring,"
I said, "besides this dish of liver, and an edge
Of cheese, the customary torments,
And the usual wonder why we live
At all, and why the world thins out and perishes
As it has done for me, sieved
As I am toward silences. Where
Are we now? Do we know anything?"
—Now, on another night, his look endures.
"Give me the dish," he said.
I had his answer, wise as yours.

Weldon Kees

Covering Two Years

This nothingness that feeds upon itself:
Pencils that turn to water in the hand,
Parts of a sentence, hanging in the air,
Thoughts breaking in the mind like glass,
Blank sheets of paper that reflect the world
Whitened the world that I was silenced by.

There were two years of that. Slowly,
Whatever splits, dissevers, cuts, cracks, ravel, or divides
To bring me to that diet of corrosion, burned
And flickered to its terminal.-Now in an older hand
I write my name. Now with a voice grown unfamiliar,
I speak to silences of altered rooms,
Shaken by knowledge of recurrence and return.

Weldon Kees

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Weldon Kees

Dead March

Under the bunker, where the reek of kerosene
Prepared the marriage rite, leader and whore,
Imperfect kindling even in this wind, burn on.

Someone in uniform hums Brahms. Servants prepare
Eyewitness stories as the night comes down, as smoking coals await
Boots on the stone, the occupying troops. Howl ministers.

Deep in Kyffhauser Mountain's underground,
The Holy Roman Emperor snores on, in sleep enduring
Seven centuries. His long red beard

Grows through the table to the floor. He moves a little.
Far in the labyrinth, low thunder rumbles and dies out.
Twitch and lie still. Is Hitler now in the Himalayas?

We are in Cleveland, or Sioux Falls. The architecture
Seems like Omaha, the air pumped in from Düsseldorf.
Cold rain keeps dripping just outside the bars. The testicles

Burst on the table as the commissar
Untwists the vise, removes his gloves, puts down
Izvestia. (Old saboteurs, controlled by Trotsky's

Scheming and unconquered ghost, still threaten Novgorod.)
--And not far from the pits, these bones of ours,
Burned, bleached, and splintering, are shoveled, ready for the fields.

Weldon Kees

For My Daughter

Looking into my daughter's eyes I read
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.
Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands;
The night's slow poison, tolerant and bland,
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others' agony; perhaps the cruel
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.
These speculations sour in the sun.
I have no daughter. I desire none.

Weldon Kees

Girl At Midnight

Then walk the floor, or twist upon your bed
While bullets, cold and blind, rush backward from the target's eye,
And say, "I will not dream that dream again. I will not dream
Of long-spent whispers vanishing down corridors
That turn through buildings I have never known;
The snap of rubber gloves; the tall child, blind,
Who calls my name; the stained sheets
Of another girl. And then a low bell,
Sounding through shadows in the cold,
Disturbs the screen that is my mind in sleep.

"—Your face is never clear. You always stand
In charcoal doorways in the dark. Part of your face
is gone. You say, 'Just to be through with this damned world.
Contagious fogs blow in. Christ, we could die
The way deer sometimes do, their antlers locked,
Rotting in snow.'

"And I can never speak.
But have I ever told the truth to you?
I did not ask for this; a new disease threads in.
I want your lips upon my lips, your mouth
Upon my breasts, again, again, again, again;
I want the morning filled with sun.

"But I must dream once more of cities burned away,
Corrupted wood, and silence on the piers.
Love is a sickroom with the roof half gone
Where nights go down in a continual rain.

Heart, heart. I do not live. The lie of peace
Echoes to no end; the clocks are dead.
What we have had we will not have again."

Weldon Kees

Interregnum

Butcher the evil millionaire, peasant,
And leave him stinking in the square.
Torture the chancellor. Leave the ambassador
Strung by his thumbs from the pleasant
Embassy wall, where the vines were.
Then drill your hogs and sons for another war.

Fire on the screaming crowd, ambassador,
Sick chancellor, brave millionaire,
And name them by the name that is your name.
Give privilege to the wound, and maim
The last resister. Poison the air
And mew for peace, for order, and for war.

View with alarm, participant, observer,
Buried in medals from the time before.
Whisper, then believe and serve and die
And drape fresh bunting on the hemisphere
From here to India. This is the world you buy
When the wind blows fresh for war.

Hide in the dark alone, objector;
Ask a grenade what you are living for,
Or drink this knowledge from the mud.
To an abyss more terrible than war
Descend and tunnel toward a barrier
Away from anything that moves with blood.

Weldon Kees

La Vita Nuova

Last summer, in the blue heat,
Over the beach, in the burning air,
A legless beggar lurched on calloused fists
To where I waited with the sun-dazed birds.
He said, "The summer boils away. My life
Joins to another life; this parched skin
Dries and dies and flakes away,
Becomes your costume when the torn leaves blow."

--Thus in the losing autumn,
Over the streets, I now lurch
Legless to your side and speak your name
Under a gray sky ripped apart
By thunder and the changing wind.

Weldon Kees

Late Evening Song

For a while
Let it be enough:
The responsive smile,
Though effort goes into it.

Across the warm room
Shared in candlelight,
This look beyond shame,
Possible now, at night,

Goes out to yours.
Hidden by day
And shaped by fires
Grown dead, gone gray,

That burned in other rooms I knew
Too long ago to mark,
It forms again. I look at you
Across those fires and the dark.

Weldon Kees

Lines For An Album

Over the river and through the woods
To grandmother's house we go ...

She waits behind the bolted door,
Her withered face in thirty pieces,
While blood runs thin, and memory,
An idiot without a name,
Recalls the snows of eighty years,
The daughter whose death was unexplained,
Darkness, blue veins, and broken leases.
Grandmother waits behind the door
(Sight dims beyond the curtain folds)
With her toothless smile and enuresis.

Over the river and through the woods
To grandmother's house we go ...

Weldon Kees

Problems Of A Journalist

"I want to get away somewhere and re-read Proust,"
Said an editor of Fortune to a man on Time.
But the fire roared and died, the phoenix quacked like a goose,
And all roads to the country fray like shawls
Outside the dusk of suburbs. Pacing the halls
Where mile-high windows frame a dream with witnesses,
You taste, fantast and epicure, the names of towns along the coast,
Black roadsters throbbing on the highways blue with rain
Toward one lamp, burning on those sentences.

"I want to get away somewhere and re-read Proust,"
Said an editor of Newsweek to a man on Look.
Dachaus with telephones, Siberias with bonuses.
One reads, as winter settles on the town,
The evening paper, in an Irving Place café.

Weldon Kees

Relating To Robinson

Somewhere in Chelsea, early summer;
And, walking in the twilight toward the docks,
I thought I made out Robinson ahead of me.

From an uncurtained second-story room, a radio
Was playing There's a Small Hotel; a kite
Twisted above dark rooftops and slow drifting birds.
We were alone there, he and I,
Inhabiting the empty street.

Under a sign for Natural Bloom Cigars,
While lights clicked softly in the dusk from red to green,
He stopped and gazed into a window
Where a plaster Venus, modeling a truss,
Looked out at Eastbound traffic. (But Robinson,
I knew, was out of town: he summers at a place in Maine,
Sometimes on Fire Island, sometimes the Cape,
Leaves town in June and comes back after Labor Day.)
And yet, I almost called out, "Robinson!"

There was no chance. Just as I passed,
Turning my head to search his face,
His own head turned with mine
And fixed me with dilated, terrifying eyes
That stopped my blood. His voice
Came at me like an echo in the dark.

"I thought I saw the whirlpool opening.
Kicked all night at a bolted door.
You must have followed me from Astor Place.
An empty paper floats down at the last.
And then a day as huge as yesterday in pairs
Unrolled its horror on my face
Until it blocked—" Running in sweat
To reach the docks, I turned back

For a second glance. I had no certainty,
There in the dark, that it was Robinson
Or someone else.
The block was bare. The Venus,
Bathed in blue fluorescent light,
Stared toward the river. As I hurried West,

The lights across the bay were coming on.
The boats moved silently and the low whistles blew.

Weldon Kees

Robinson

The dog stops barking after Robinson has gone.
His act is over. The world is a gray world,
Not without violence, and he kicks under the grand piano,
The nightmare chase well under way.

The mirror from Mexico, stuck to the wall,
Reflects nothing at all. The glass is black.
Robinson alone provides the image Robinsonian.

Which is all of the room--walls, curtains,
Shelves, bed, the tinted photograph of Robinson's first wife,
Rugs, vases panatelas in a humidior.
They would fill the room if Robinson came in.

The pages in the books are blank,
The books that Robinson has read. That is his favorite chair,
Or where the chair would be if Robinson were here.

All day the phone rings. It could be Robinson
Calling. It never rings when he is here.

Outside, white buildings yellow in the sun.
Outside, the birds circle continuously
Where trees are actual and take no holiday.

Weldon Kees

Robinson At Home

Curtains drawn back, the door ajar.
All winter long, it seemed, a darkening
Began. But now the moonlight and the odors of the street
Conspire and combine toward one community.

These are the rooms of Robinson.
Bleached, wan, and colorless this light, as though
All the blurred daybreaks of the spring
Found an asylum here, perhaps for Robinson alone,

Who sleeps. Were there more music sifted through the floors
And moonlight of a different kind,
He might awake to hear the news at ten,
Which will be shocking, moderately.

This sleep is from exhaustion, but his old desire
To die like this has known a lessening.
Now there is only this coldness that he has to wear.
But not in sleep.—Observant scholar, traveller,

Or uncouth bearded figure squatting in a cave,
A keen-eyed sniper on the barricades,
A heretic in catacombs, a famed roué,
A beggar on the streets, the confidant of Popes—

All these are Robinson in sleep, who mumbles as he turns,
“There is something in this madhouse that I symbolize—
This city—nightmare—black—”
He wakes in sweat
To the terrible moonlight and what might be
Silence. It drones like wires far beyond the roofs,
And the long curtains blow into the room.

Round

"Wondrous life!" cried Marvell at Appleton House.
Renan admired Jesus Christ "wholeheartedly."
But here dried ferns keep falling to the floor,
And something inside my head
Flaps like a worn-out blind. Royal Cortissoz is dead.
A blow to the Herald-Tribune. A closet mouse
Rattles the wrapper on the breakfast food. Renan
Admired Jesus Christ "wholeheartedly."

Flaps like a worn-out blind. Cezanne
Would break out in the quiet streets of Aix
And shout, "Le monde, c'est terrible!" Royal
Cortissoz is dead. And something inside my head
Flaps like a worn-out blind. The soil
In which the ferns are dying needs more Vigoro.
There is no twilight on the moon, no mist or rain,
No hail or snow, no life. Here in this house

Dried ferns keep falling to the floor, a mouse
Rattles the wrapper on the breakfast food. Cezanne
Would break out in the quiet streets and scream. Renan
Admired Jesus Christ "wholeheartedly." And something inside my head
Flaps like a worn-out blind. Royal Cortissoz is dead.
There is no twilight on the moon, no hail or snow.
One notes fresh desecrations on the portico.
"Wondrous life!" cried Marvell at Appleton House.

Weldon Kees

Statement With Rhymes

Plurality is all. I walk among the restaurants,
the theatres, the grocery stores; I ride the cars
and hear of Mrs. Bedford's teeth and Albuquerque,
strikes unsettled, someone's simply marvelous date,
news of the German Jews, the baseball scores,
storetalk and whoretalk, talk of wars. I turn
the pages of a thousand books to read
the names of Buddha, Malthus, Walker Evans, Stendhal, André Gide,
Ouspenski; note the terms: obscurantism,
factorize, fagaceous, endocarp; descend
the nervous stairs to hear the broken ends
of songs that float through city air.
In Osnabrück and Ogden, on the Passamaquoddy Bay,
in Ahmednagar, Waco (Neb.), in Santa Fé,
propelled by zeros, zinc, and zephyrs, always I'm pursued
by thoughts of what I am, authority, remembrance, food,
the letter on the mezzanine, the unemployed, dogs' lonely faces, pianos and
decay.

Plurality is all. I sympathize, but cannot grieve
too long for those who wear their dialectics on their sleeves.
The pattern's one I sometimes rather like; there's really nothing wrong
with it for some. But I should add: It doesn't wear for long,
before I push the elevator bell and quickly leave.

Weldon Kees

Testimonies

"Others at their porches ..."

1.

"I baited bears and prayed. The Queen
Grew inky on Boethius. Between
The angels and the animals we lived and died.
The sun, the King, and my own being blazed as one.
I spoke occasionally to God."

2.

"I circumcise my son and laud
The covenant. The massacres go on.
And now, plunder, expulsion. Poisoned fountains drown
The Synagogue. Blood stains the font;
The staff breaks toward the desert in my hands."

3.

"I did not see the Grail. Sir John
Lay dying at the bridge. When barbers cut away
Those spongy growths from the poor soldiers' gums,
The whole camp echoed with our cries.
I place the cauldron of God's wrath upon the coals."

4.

"I watch the world contract to this
Gray winter Grub Street where the scavengers
Drop in the cold. The famine spreads more every day.
God save the King, the Army, and the House of Lords!
The rags fall from my arms outside the coffee-house."

5.

"I live. The Elevated shudders to a stop
At Twenty-Eighth and Third. Among
The nuns and crippled Negroes, we descend
The stairway to the street, to red-cheeked chromo Christ,
Hung with the bloody calves' heads in the butcher shop."

Weldon Kees

The Beach

Squat, unshaven, full of gas,
Joseph Samuels, former clerk
in four large cities, out of work,
waits in the darkened underpass.

In sanctuary, out of reach,
he stares at the fading light outside:
the rain beginning: hears the tide
that drums along the empty beach.

When drops first fell at six o'clock,
the bathers left. The last car's gone.
Sun's final rays reflect upon
the streaking rain, the rambling dock.

He takes an object from his coat
and holds it tightly in his hand
(eyes on the stretch of endless sand) .
And then, in darkness, cuts his throat.

Weldon Kees

The Bell From Europe

The tower bell in the Tenth Street Church
Rang out nostalgia for the refugee
Who knew the source of bells by sound.
We liked it, but in ignorance.
One meets authorities on bells infrequently.

Europe alone made bells with such a tone,
Herr Mannheim said. The bell
Struck midnight, and it shook the room.
He had heard bells in Leipzig, Chartres, Berlin,
Paris, Vienna, Brussels, Rome.
He was a white-faced man with sad enormous eyes.

Reader, for me that bell marked nights
Of restless tossing in this narrow bed,
The quarrels, the slamming of a door,
The kind words, friends for drinks, the books we read,
Breakfasts with streets in rain.
It rang from Europe all the time.
That was what Mannheim said.

It is good to know, now that the bell strikes noon.
In this day's sun, the hedges are Episcopalian
As noon is marked by the twelve iron beats.
The rector moves ruminantly among the gravestones,
And the sound of a dead Europe hangs in the streets.

Weldon Kees

The Climate Of Danger

The middle is the place to stand
If there can be one solid spot,
Undoubted, in that damaged land.
Two schools exist; one says there is
No region lacking hazard, pain,
And fear; the other mentions plains
Enclosed
For those
Wanting more than the perfumed rose.

On one hand, birds and trained baboons
Polish the atmosphere with words
Like slate, rasping and grey. Their moons
Are sterile as their eyes, dull marbles,
Damp and cavern-caught. And evenings
Spread through days of easy grief:
The fall
Of all
Grins from a shaky pedestal.

And on the other, absolutes
Disguised as gods in masks of print
Poke into ruins and dispute
Arrival of the perished hour,
Past and dead—one they await
Hysterically, to penetrate,
And guide
With pride
To unexpected suicide.

Weldon Kees

The Conversation In The Drawing Room

—That spot of blood on the drawing room wall,
No larger than a thumbnail when I looked a moment ago,
Is spreading, Cousin Agatha, and growing brighter.

Nonsense. The oriole warbles in the sunlight.
The fountains gush luxuriantly above the pool.
The weather is ideal: on the paths a sheen
Of summer provides a constant delight.
I am thinking of affiliating with a new theosophist group.

—Once you could hide it with a nickel.
Now it strangely assumes the shape and size of a palm,
And puts out fingers, Cousin Agatha. Look, examine it!

Some aberration of the wallpaper, no doubt.
Did you have an omelette for lunch, and asparagus?
Mrs. Pisgah's husband spoke from the beyond during the séance
Last night at Madame Irani's. He seemed to have a cold.
The tamborine did not function with its usual zest.

—And a wrist, Cousin Agatha, and an arm!
Like those maps in a cinema that spread
Like wind blowing over a field of wheat, Cousin Agatha!

I have warned you, Hobart, about reading *The Turn of the Screw*
And that story of Balzac's, whatever the name of it is,
Just before retiring. They always have a decidedly bad effect upon you.
I believe I will put another aspirin in the lily's vase.
And now I must go to take my nap in the sunroom.

—Cousin Agatha, it moves like a fish, wet,
Wet like a fish, becomes a moving thing
That spreads and reaches from the wall!

I cannot listen to you any more just now, Hobart.
Kindly speak to Marie about the place cards for this evening.
Ah, there is the oriole again; how beautiful the view
From this window!—Yet why, one wonders, must Hobart begin
Gasping and screaming in such a deplorable fashion
There in the drawing room? It is scarcely considerate.
Youthful animal spirits, one supposes, combined
With a decided taste for the macabre. Where is the barbitol?
Marie can never learn to leave it here, by the incense burner.
Ah, now he has stopped and only thrashes about, rather feebly, on the floor.
It is a beautiful afternoon; I will get up about three-fifteen.
Everything is blissfully quiet now; I am ready for sleep.

Weldon Kees

The Doctor Will Return

The surgical mask, the rubber teat
Are singed, give off an evil smell.
You seem to weep more now that heat
Spreads everywhere we look.
It says here none of us is well.

The warty spottings on the figurines
Are nothing you would care to claim.
You seem to weep more since the magazines
Began revivals on the Dundas book.
It says here you were most to blame.

But though I cannot believe that this is so,
I mark the doctor as a decent sort.
I mix your medicine and go
Downstairs to leave instructions for the cook.
It says here time is getting short.

That I can believe. I hear you crying in your room
While watching traffic, reconciled.
Out in the park, black flowers are in bloom.
I picked some once and pressed them in a book.
You used to look at them, and smile.

Weldon Kees

The End Of The Library

When the coal
Gave out, we began
Burning the books, one by one;
First the set
Of Bulwer-Lytton
And then the Walter Scott.
They gave a lot of warmth.
Toward the end, in
February, flames
Consumed the Greek
Tragedians and Baudelaire,
Proust, Robert Burton
And the Po-Chu-i. Ice
Thickened on the sills.
More for the sake of the cat,
We said, than for ourselves,
Who huddled, shivering,
Against the stove
All winter long.

Weldon Kees

The Furies

Not a third that walks beside me,
But five or six or more.
Whether at dusk or daybreak
Or at blinding noon, a retinue
Of shadows that no door
Excludes.--One like a kind of scrawl,
Hands scrawled trembling and blue,
A harelippped and hunchbacked dwarf
With a smile like a grapefruit rind,
Who jabbbers the way I do
When the brain is empty and tired
And the guests no longer care:
A clown, who shudders and suddenly
Is a man with a mouth of cotton
Trapped in a dentist's chair.

Not a third that walks beside me,
But five or six or more:
One with his face gone rotten,
Most hideous of all,
Whose crutches shriek on the sidewalk
As a fingernail on a slate
Tears open some splintered door
Of childhood. Down the hall
We enter a thousand rooms
That pour the hours back,
That silhouette the walls
With shadows ripped from war,
Accusing and rigid, black
As the streets we are discolored by.
The crutches fall to the floor.

Not a third that walks beside me,
But five or six, or more
Than fingers or brain can bear--
A monster strung with guts,
A coward covered with hair,
Matted and down to his knees,
Murderers, liars, thieves,

Moving in darkened rows
Through daylight and evening air
Until the eyelids close,
Snapped like the blades of a knife,
And your dream of their death begins.
Possessors and possessed,
They keep the bedside wake
As a doctor or a wife
Might wait the darkness through
Until the pale daybreak--
Protectors of your life.

Weldon Kees

The Party

The obscene hostess, mincing in the hall,
Gathers the guests around a crystal ball.
It is on the whole an exciting moment;
Mrs. Lefevre stares with her one good eye;
A friendly abdomen rubs against one's back;
"Interesting," a portly man is heard to sigh.

A somewhat unconvincing oriental leers
Redundantly; into the globe he peers,
Mutters a word or two and stands aside.
The glass grows cloudy with sulphurous fumes;
Beads rattle, latecomers giggle near the door.
A scene forms in the glass; silence invades the rooms.

The oriental glances up, conceals surprise
At such immediate success. Our eyes
Stare at the planes that fill the swelling globe,
Smoke-blue; blood, shelltorn faces. Suddenly a drum
Begins its steady beat, pursues us even here:
Death, and death again, and all the wars to come.

Weldon Kees

The Smiles Of The Bathers

The smiles of the bathers fade as they leave the water,
And the lover feels sadness fall as it ends, as he leaves his love.
The scholar, closing his book as the midnight clock strikes, is hollow
and old:

The pilot's relief on landing is no release.

These perfect and private things, walling us in, have imperfect and
public endings--

Water and wind and flight, remembered words and the act of love
Are but interruptions. And the world, like a beast, impatient and
quick,

Waits only for those who are dead. No death for you. You are
involved.

Weldon Kees

The Speakers

"A equals X," says Mister One.
"A equals B," says Mister Two.
"A equals nothing under the sun
But A," says Mister Three. A few
Applaud; some wipe their eyes;
Some linger in the shade to see
One and Two in neat disguise
Decapitating Mister Three.

"This age is not entirely bad."
It's bad enough, God knows, but you
Should know Elizabethans had
Sweeneys and Mrs. Porters too.
The past goes down and disappears,
The present stumbles home to bed,
The future stretches out in years
That no one knows, and you'll be dead.

Weldon Kees

The Upstairs Room

It must have been in March the rug wore through.
Now the day passes and I stare
At warped pine boards my father's father nailed,
At the twisted grain. Exposed, where emptiness allows,
Are the wormholes of eighty years; four generations' shoes
Stumble and scrape and fall
To the floor my father stained,
The new blood streaming from his head. The drift
Of autumn fires and a century's cigars, that gun's
Magnanimous and brutal smoke, endure.
In March the rug was ragged as the past. The thread
rots like the lives we fasten on. Now it is August,
And the floor is blank, worn smooth,
And, for my life, imperishable.

Weldon Kees

To A Noisy Contemporary

Your ego's bad dream drums that vision
Encountered on page one, pages three to eighty-nine.
Count the wound-up places where we went aground.
As an entertainment, zero. Hero horror. Try the line

Of incestuous relations, hearty friendship, or the cult
Of the ectoplasmic navel and the ravishments of guilt.

Page two was delightful. And the margins were wide;
One was tempted by the imagery of bloody wrists,
Your hysterogenic spasms and italicized reproofs.
You may well supplant the tuba if the music lasts.

Weldon Kees

To Build A Quiet City In His Mind

To build a quiet city in his mind:
A single overwhelming wish; to build,
Not hastily, for there is so much wind,
So many eager smilers to be killed,
Obstructions one might overlook in haste:
The ruined structures cluttering the past,

A little at a time and slow is best,
Crawling as though through endless corridors,
Remembering always there are many doors
That open to admit the captured guest
Once only.
Yet in spite of loss and guilt
And hurricanes of time, it might be built:

A refuge, permanent, with trees that shade
When all the other cities die and fade.

Weldon Kees

Variations On A Theme By Joyce

The war is in words and the wood is the world
That turns beneath our rootless feet;
the vines that reach, alive and snarled,
Across the path where the sand is swirled,
Twist in the night. The light lies flat.
The war is in words and the wood is the world.

The rain is ruin and our ruin rides
The swiftest winds; the wood is whorled
And turned and smoothed by the turning tides.
--There is rain in the woods, slow rain that breeds
The war in the words. The wood is the world.
This rain is ruin and our ruin rides.

The war is in words and the wood is the world,
Sourceless and seized and forever filled
With green vine twisting on wood more gnarled
Than dead men's hands. The vines are curled
Around these branches, crushed and killed.
The war is in words and the wood is the world.

Weldon Kees

What The Spider Heard

Will there be time for egnogs and eclogues
In the place where we're going?
Said the spider to the fly.

I think not, said the fly.
I think not, sang the chorus.
I think not, said a stranger
Who mysteriously happened by.

Will they beat me and treat me the way they did here,
In the place where we're going?
Asked the spider of the fly.

It is likely, said the fly.
Very likely, sang the chorus.
Extremely likely, said the stranger,
With an eager gleam in his eye.

O, why go there when we know there is nothing there but fear
At this place where we're going?
Said the spider to the fly.

What a question! said the fly.
What a question! sang the chorus.
What a question! said the stranger,
Leering slightly at the spider,
Winking slyly at the fly.

Weldon Kees

Year's End

The state cracked where they left your breath
No longer instrument. Along the shore
The sand ripped up, and the newer blood
Streaked like a vein to every monument.
The empty smoke that drifted near the guns
Where the stiff motor pounded in the mud
Had the smell of a hundred burned-out suns.
The ceiling of your sky went dark.
A year ago today they cracked your bones.

So rot in a closet in the ground
For the bad trumpets and the capitol's
Long seasonable grief. Rot for its guests,
Alive, that step away from death. Yet you,
A year cold, come more living to this room
Than these intruders, vertical and warm.

Weldon Kees