PASSWORDS
Teaching Kenneth Koch

The Flight of the Rocket

MARK STATMAN

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Did you once ride in Kenneth's machine?
—Kenneth Koch

By the time of his death in July 2002, Kenneth Koch had long since emerged as one of America's most daring and innovative poets. Even so, he was probably as well known as an educator—both as a professor at Columbia and as a pioneering teacher of poetry in the public schools. Many in the education field, for instance, knew him simply as the author of *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* or *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* My relationship with Kenneth was decidedly more personal. I first met him in 1978, when I signed up for his Imaginative Writing class at Columbia. I could hardly have foreseen that four years later I would be marrying his daughter, and that over the course of the next 20 years, Kenneth would become not only a generous father-in-law and sensitive mentor, but also one of my closest friends.

My reasons for wanting to teach Kenneth's poetry are (as you might imagine) many, and rather complex. The first is that teaching Kenneth's poetry is one more way to keep him present in my life. The second is that I regret not teaching his work more during his lifetime. The truth is, when I began studying with Kenneth, I really didn't know much about his poetry. I remember how he took a group of us to task about our shocking ignorance of the Koch opus. He wondered how we could trust him to critique our poetry when we were so unfamiliar with his work. Shortly after graduation, I began to teach poetry. For two decades, Kenneth would pester me (semi-jokingly, of course) as to why I rarely seemed to teach his work.[1] I guess I had a certain amount of resistance to doing so. Let's face it, Kenneth could be rather bossy on the subject of whose work I should teach (and sometimes whose I shouldn't!). But since his death,

I've found it a great consolation to try out various lessons based on his work, and sketched out others in my mind, and I've discovered how much Kenneth's poetry—ironically or naturally—lends itself extremely well to teaching.

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One of Kenneth's greatest strengths as a poet was his remarkable ability (and courage) to explore the past. Part of the beauty of Kenneth's memory-poems is their variety, how they manifest the different ways the past comes back to us. But even more, what the reader gets from these poems is not just a sense of Kenneth's life—the what and how of it, the emotions, the places—but an inspiring invitation to do a similar kind of coaxing back of the past.

"The Circus," from *The Art of Love* (1975), is exemplary of Kenneth's innovative approach to memory poems, and represents a significant advance in his oeuvre. There was actually an earlier "Circus" (1962), which appeared in *Thank You and Other Poems*; the recollection of writing the first poem is, in fact, one of the subjects of the second. But more than this, the second poem is also one that invokes a certain place (Paris) and his life in that place at the time. Addressed to Kenneth's first wife, Janice, it begins, appropriately enough, with the Joe-Brainardian phrase, "I remember."

> 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.

The opening lines refer to a time and place that can only exist in memory. Frank O'Hara was alive. The Whitney Museum (currently uptown) was in Greenwich Village. Important here, as well, is the fact of the "I" reminding him that there actually was a "we," something that is difficult for him to understand. There is a separation between Kenneth as poet and Kenneth as husband or friend, both in that past-present and the present of the writing of the poem.

> 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.

Toward the end of the poem, the consciousness of what has changed becomes keener:

> 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

Kenneth used to say that Williams's narrator is apologizing for something for which he isn't exactly sorry.

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.

The poem ends with a bittersweet nostalgia, as Kenneth reflects not only on what was accomplished by writing the first "Circus," but what was not.

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 as The Circus
And I wonder if any good will come of either of them all the same.

Launching Ideas: After reading "The Circus," I ask my students to write a poem about something they wrote a long time ago: a letter to their parents, a birthday card to a friend, a note they passed in class, graffiti on the bathroom wall, initials on a tree. I encourage them to write about what they would change if they could rewrite it now? What did they leave out, and why? I ask them to include a description of where they were when they wrote their respective letter/card/note? Where did they live, and who was (or was not) sitting next to them? What interrupted them, or what inspired them then that won't interfere with or inspire them now? Is their handwriting the same? Do they wonder why they chose the title that they did? And what earmarks it as their own? That is, what aspects of their writing are the same?

* * *

Writing about what was, what could have been, what wasn't, are themes to which Kenneth returns often. *To Marina* (1979) presents a variation on "The Circus"—here, Kenneth focuses on a specific person: Marina, a Soviet woman with whom he was infatuated. Kenneth's uses every possible mnemonic device to evoke her—we hear her voice ("Ziss is lawflee"), we see her coiffure ("your blondeness"), and observe moments when being together in public was dangerous ("I held your hand and you said / Kenneth you are playing with fire"). Though I frequently reserve this poem for my older students, it can be an engaging poem for all ages if taught simply as a poem about the forbidden. I particularly enjoy teaching it in conjunction with William Carlos Williams's "This is just to say"; I remember Kenneth used to say that Williams's narrator is apologizing for something for which he isn't exactly sorry. The same ambiguity pervades "To Marina."

The poem flies through the affair, integrating descriptions of walks, snippets of conversation, attempts to grapple with all the hope, love, and strangeness of a relationship that is becoming all-encompassing for Kenneth.

> Certain
> Artistic careers had not even started. And I
> Could have surpassed them. I could have I think put the
> Whole world under our feet. You were in the restaurant. It
> Was Chinese. We have walked three blocks. Or four blocks. It is New York
> In nineteen fifty-three. Nothing has as yet happened
> That will ever happen and mean as much to me. You smile, and
> turn your head.

Once the relationship ends, the poem shifts into the present, to reflect on the odd and moving presence of something lost. It's as if by opening the door to a single year in the past ("nineteen fifty-four"), the whole past ("when it was the Renaissance") becomes available to him.

> And now it has been twenty-five years
> But those feelings kept orchestrating I mean rehearsing
> Rehearsing in me and tuning up
> While I was doing a thousand other things, the band
> Is ready, I am over fifty years old and there's no you—
> And no me, either, not as I was then,
> When it was the Renaissance
> Filtered through my nerves and weakness
> Of nineteen fifty-four or fifty-three,
> When I had you to write to, when I could see you
> And it could change.

Launching Ideas: After reading "To Marina," I ask my students to imagine that they were forbidden to see someone that they cared about: a parent or a friend. I encourage them to write a list poem that catalogues an encyclopedic array of details about that person. What are the five things they wouldn't want the other person to forget. What might they want to apologize for? What would be the madeleine of their remembrance, what little tick or quirk would remind them of that person and their entire time together?

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"Passing Time in Skansen," from *One Train* (1994), is similarly vivid and snapshot-like. In "Skansen," Kenneth recalls "a beautiful summer evening" at a "public dancing place" in Sweden circa 1950. The poem partially reflects on the naïvete of being young: how there are things one doesn't notice because one doesn't know enough to look. In another way, the poem is about the passport of youth: how

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we are more willing *not* to know things, more at ease with our ignorance (in this case, the single phrase we can speak in Swedish). Because of this, we are apt to be more open to the pleasures of what is happening around us.

> You had to be young to go there.
> Or maybe you could be old. But I didn't see old people then.
> Humanity was divided into male and female, American and other, students
> and nonstudents, etcetera.
> The only thing that I could say in Swedish
> Was "Yog talar endast svenska"
> Which meant I speak only Swedish, whereas I thought it meant
> I DON'T speak Swedish.
> So the young ladies, delighted, talked to me very fast
> At which I smiled and understood nothing,
> Though sometimes I would repeat
> Yog talar endast svenska.

Launching Ideas: After reading "Passing Time in Skansen," I encourage my young students to write a poem beginning, "You had to be young to go there...." I urge them to invoke places that adults are not allowed, welcome, or able to go, or to portray childhood and adulthood as foreign countries. With older students, I ask them to create snapshot portraits of themselves at a moment in the past, a situation—perhaps in a foreign country—in which they felt totally at sea, or like a complete outsider. What were the resulting feelings? Was the experience of having things outside one's control pleasurable, as it was for Kenneth, or the opposite? A further exercise based on "Skansen" is the following: If you could know only one phrase in a foreign language, what would it be? Write a poem about the implications of visiting a foreign land with only that phrase in your repertoire.

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In *New Addresses* (2000), Kenneth writes what seems to be a poetic autobiography. In a collection of 50 apostrophes—poems addressed to a certain idea, person, or place—he covers an encyclopedic range of subjects from World War II, Jewishness, Breath, his Twenties, his Fifties, and Old Age. "To My Father's Business" is one of the only poems of Kenneth's in which his father, Stuart, makes an appearance. Stuart was president of C. Loth, an office-furniture supply company based in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Kenneth grew up. Remembering his father's business offers Kenneth a neutral way of analyzing his complex relationship with his father:

> 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."

Kenneth knows the business is no place for himself even as he recognizes "C. Loth you made my father happy / I saw his space shining / He laughed a lot, working in you." Kenneth is even aware of why he might want to be there: "I can see the virtues of now / That could come from being in you." Still, it was never going to happen. For the young Kenneth Koch, there was too much out in the world to think he would ever feel content in Cincinnati.

I didn't think 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.

For Kenneth, writing about his father's business means admitting something important: the business was something he loved, and this was mainly due to the fact that his father loved it. But it was also something Kenneth knew he could never be a part of.

Lauching Ideas: After reading "To My Father's Business," my college students often talk about the lives their parents expect and hope for them to lead. Many of them find themselves in Kenneth's situation, and I invite them to pursue that subject in a poem. Teaching this poem to younger students, one might ask them to write a poem about visiting their parents at work. How did their fathers or mothers act/dress/speak differently at their offices than they did at home? How was work different than school? An entire unit could be devoted to poems about fathers' and mothers' work-lives and responsibilities; Robert Hayden's "Those Sunday Mornings," for instance, might work wonderfully in conjunction with Kenneth's poem.

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Getting young students to write about their memories is especially rewarding: It allows them to write with great authority—they come to realize that they know their pasts better than practically anyone else (including their

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current teachers). In thinking about memory—how we remember things, and how we choose to describe them—they are able to see that memoir and autobiography are essentially creative. My young students are drawn to this idea of storytelling, of changing their lives through narration. At the same time, putting their memories on the page is a way of preventing forgetting, of making certain moments of their lives public and unchanging.

In this respect, Kenneth's poem "Flight" (from *A Possible World*, a book he worked on until shortly before he died) is a wonderful poem to bring into the classroom.

The rocketship was waiting. I had to get on it.
It flew me away from the gardens,
It flew me away from the lake, the deliberate Como,
It flew me away from the strolls in the sun.
It didn't go very far but merely brought me
To a place where a few years previous
I had sat down writing some letters.
The rocketship hardly needed
Its rocket parts to do this, an ordinary plane would have done.
It took me to Hydra fifty years ago
If it didn't need rockets now, it needed them then.
I had no idea where I was going
The rockets made it sure I landed there
The island surrounded and supported by rocks
There were Norris and the waterside restaurant Msieu Oui-Oui's,
There were Dion and the ants in the courtyard
There was a large church bell and no water
(No wells) till the water boat came with its hose
There was Margaret there was Margaret's face
No opera and no concert
But lofty conversation, white bricks
A wall-hanging of *The Return of Odysseus*
No cars and no lawyer and no doctor
And the rocketship waiting again.

"Flight," from *A Possible Word* © The Estate of Jay Kenneth Koch. Reprinted courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher.

When I introduce this poem to my students, one of the first things we talk about is the metaphor of the rocket, its connection to memory and the imagination. We talk about how the rocket initially doesn't take him all that far, but then travels on to the fifty-year-old memory of being on the Greek island of Hydra. Here are friends—Norris, Dion, Margaret—and marvelous conversations. Here are exotic places, like the waterside restaurant M'sieu Oui-Oui's. The island is free of the cares of the world—no cars, no need for doctors, lawyers, the way there is in the present. The poem also displays Kenneth's knack for creative description and his attention to detail. He opens with being at the "deliberate" Lake Como, strolling in the sun through the gardens. On Hydra, we see the island that is "surrounded and supported by rocks." He shows the reader the ants in the courtyard, the large church bell, the water boat with its hose, the wall-hanging of *The Return of Odysseus*.

My young students (the poets I cite here are all sixth graders) find this attention to detail and the metaphor of the rocket exhilarating and inspiring.[2] Mark Van Name, for example, traveled to Italy by airplane once. In his poem, he travels there again, but this time the plane is made of memory, not steel:

The plane
it came
I went in, it flew me to Venice
the sinking city...

David Kanarak thought of his memories being contained in a chamber with many files:

I opened up
another file
which took me
to a snow covered
White House and Capitol Building
I felt cold but
amazed...

Rachel Rudnitsky was influenced not by the metaphor of the rocketship, but by her desire to return to a place that had given her much happiness:

I want to return to the
Bahamas
the sand is so white
the water
as clear as glass...

In her poem "Ithaca," Amy Sigle described (in fluid details) her memories of upstate New York:

Water rushing,
Falling forever downward.
Dirt trails to follow.
Trees hiding chipmunks
And squirrels
And snakes.
Minnows swimming in schools
And the trout going deeper
And deeper
And deeper

Into the dark water.
Sun glistening
On the water
And the sometimes soft
Sometimes loud
Sound of rushing water,
Traveling
And every year, everything is
Different.

When I think of the last year of Kenneth's life, fighting leukemia, working furiously to finish the poems for *A Possible World*, I think a lot about that rocketship. I think about how Kenneth's machine takes him back and forth in time, and of the appropriateness of that to-and-fro. As he writes in "On the Great Atlantic Rainway":

> And that is the modern idea of fittingness
> To, always in motion, lose nothing...

With the flight of the rocket, the coming together of imagination and memory, the writing of the poem, the calm and happiness Kenneth felt on Hydra some fifty years ago is made permanent.

Notes

1. There is one instance that I remember quite happily. In April 2001, I was teaching Kenneth's poem "To the Island of Hydra" to a group of fifth graders who had a question about one section of the poem. Knowing that Kenneth was at home, I wondered aloud to my students, "Wouldn't it be great if we could ask the poet?" They agreed that it would be. So while they looked on, somewhat quizzically, I took out my cellphone. Kenneth and I discussed the poem, and Kenneth answered the kids' questions as I relayed them to him. A week or so later, I showed him the student poems—he seemed thrilled by the outcome of the exchange.

2. This rocketship reminds me of another metaphorical vehicle, from Kenneth's poem "On the Great Atlantic Rainway." In it, a voice asks: "Did you once ride in Kenneth's machine?" This machine allows for travel through physical, intellectual, and emotional landscapes that are real, imagined, comic, serious, and sublime.