

The Poet's Essay.

Kenneth Koch.

IV

Educating the Imagination

When I first thought of teaching poetry, which I did to adults at the New School a long time ago, I knew there was a standard kind of poetry workshop in which there are twelve students who write poetry and a teacher, and every week a student has a turn. The poet prints up some poems, and everybody reads them and comments on them. In that kind of workshop you find out how you're doing, how good you are, how publishable you are, and so on. You get the advantages of knowing other poets and getting their criticism, but that seemed to me not enough. I wanted to do something new. I tried to think of a way to bring into the classroom all of the things that I thought had made me inspired to write poems and made me write better, and I figured out a way to do this, which I got better at doing as I went on doing it.

To the question, "What makes a writer better?" obviously, one answer is reading other poets and being influenced by them, so one of the first assignments I had my adult poets do

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was to read William Carlos Williams. This was particularly relevant at the time, though I still do it at Columbia, because when I started teaching at the New School, in the early sixties or maybe the fifties even, there were still a number of students whose idea of poetry was something like "O wingéd being soaring through the azure," and Williams can show you quickly the pleasure of saying "Bird there in the blue," or something like that. In other words, the word *woman* is closer to your heart than the word *damsel*, and so on and so forth. Also, Williams writes about ordinary things that are right in front of you. He uses the language that we speak, which had helped me when I read him seriously for the first time, when I was around eighteen years old.

I lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and my first big influence after nursery rhymes had been Shelley. My uncle Leo, who worked in the family furniture store, had me down to the store one day and took me up to a big safe that was upstairs. At this time, he confessed to me that he had written poems. I was fifteen, and he had written poems when he was nineteen. They were all sonnets, he said, and about some love that was unrequited. He wanted me to see them. He didn't think they were very good, but he also wanted to give me a book. So he gave me his sonnets, and he also gave me a book of the *Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. I remember the book was very important to me, as was the red cover of the book and also the wonderful picture of Shelley with wild hair and an open collar. That, for me, suddenly was poetry, and I wrote a number of poems then, which were influenced by Shelley, but they weren't very much like Shelley. I remember the beginnings of a few. They were sonnets. One began "When young I feared two things, cancer and war." The last line was "I never once had known they were the same." I wrote another one, not exactly based on my experience, which began "And as a growing eaglet." You can imagine I'd seen a lot of eaglets!

And as a growing eaglet feebly tries
To spread his new-formed wings and soar through space
Alas, he cannot leave his nesting place. . . .

It was a Petrarchan sonnet about being fifteen years old, and it ended with the line "Not yet a man, and still no more a child." Well, I did get something from Shelley despite these bad poems I wrote. . . . I know I'm in a vast parenthesis. Just imagine that I'm starting over again.

I think that sometimes one of the first stages of somebody's having a talent for poetry is the use of exaggerated, distant, remote, and fancy language like "And as a growing eaglet feebly tries / To spread his new-formed wings and soar through space." It seems to me that's one way to get away from the world of your parents, your brothers and sisters, the other children on the block. It's a way of playing with poetry. You make yourself happy by saying "infinitesimal." If you say "the infinitesimal sun," it's wonderful. It's not any good, but it's not to be disdained. To disdain it is like going around cutting down the first little green shoots in the garden: you never get any flowers.

When I was teaching at the New School, the things I wanted to bring into the classroom were: reading other poets and being influenced; trying new forms, like sestinas, say, or poems with only one word in each line; collaborating with other poets; writing about dreams; writing stream-of-consciousness; deliberately writing things that didn't make sense; and so on. All these things I turned into assignments, so that every week we weren't talking about how good or bad the students were, but about good ways to write about dreams or good ways to get meaning into one word in a one-word line. It worked very well, and I've been doing it ever since at Columbia.

When I went into PS 61 to teach, I thought I'd do the same things, but I found that I couldn't, for various reasons. I couldn't get the children to read William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and be influenced by them. I found that there were all kinds of things I couldn't get the children to do.

As for trying difficult forms, this was all pulverized into one form or variations of one form: repetition. I would say, "Start every line with 'I wish,'" "Put your favorite color in every line," "Start the first line with 'I used to' and the second line with 'But now,'" and so on. It was a children's version of what I had done with adults.

Some people criticized my method—especially at first, though there are still critics of it—saying that, well, children are so spontaneous, they're just naturally poets. This is sort of like saying that people are naturally good cooks. I don't know if anybody is naturally a poet, but children are spontaneous, and they say interesting things. The critics asked, "Why are you interfering with their spontaneity by telling them what to write about?" The reason, of course, is that I may be inspired to write a poem by walking past a bakery, listening to music, falling in love, or reading a poem, but none of this happens to anyone at nine o'clock in the morning at PS 61. You have to make something like it happen there. Actually, if I asked you all to write a poem, probably the hardest thing for all of you would be what to write about, unless you'd been writing all day. I gave children assignments to inspire them, not to limit them. I said, "Start every line with 'I wish,'" not "Start every line with 'I am grateful for.'" My assignments are meant to be used, as all the teachers who have used them successfully know, just to get things started, to help children to write *poems* instead of just talking about what they feel. When you write a poem, it's as if you are saying how you feel on a grid, and you are hanging flowers everywhere on it.

As for the assignments that I dreamed up, I hadn't intended them to be just formulas. My ideas came from my particular experience as to what inspired me, and I don't think there would be much more agreement on what you would have in a poetry writing class than there would be on what you would have in a domestic science class. In both you have to bring in things, but different things for different kinds of cooking and different kinds of poetry.

I thought that it would be worthwhile to go over in some detail the things and the poets that have influenced me, helped me to write, made me write better than I would have otherwise. I'm going to go into a little more detail than I did just now. One effect of this might be to encourage other poets who teach in schools to think about their own experiences and, thus, to find in them some ideas for teaching, and I thought maybe it would have some interest even if it did not accomplish that. This is not an organized speech: it will be

anecdotal and autobiographical. Remember that the general idea is things that excited me about writing poetry and how I learned them and who influenced me and so on. You're supposed to think the same things about yourself, you're not supposed to be interested so much in what happened to me.

The first page of my notes has on top of it in big letters THE ESCAPE. I was brought up in Cincinnati, Ohio. My parents were very nice. The first time I wrote a poem, my mother gave me a big kiss and said, "I love you." The whole idea of writing poetry had a lot to do with escaping, escaping from the bourgeois society of Cincinnati, Ohio, escaping from any society of Cincinnati, Ohio, and escaping from any society anywhere. The first thing I had to find out to be a poet at all was that there was a bigger world, a bigger world than that of my school and my parents and their friends. I had to find out that there was a world where people talked to the moon or said, "O wild west wind," that there was a past that was even more exhilarating and interesting than the Egypt and Ethiopia that I studied in fourth-grade geography.

Then, I had to find out that there was a bigger language than the one that I spoke and my friends and parents spoke. Instead of "Oh, there's the most darling blouse down at Altman's. Let's go down there tomorrow," I had to find out that you could say, "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being." I had to find out you could say, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment." In saying so, I was lifted way above all these troubles of Cincinnati, Ohio, these troubles that seemed to be suffocating me though I had a relatively happy childhood. I had to find this big language with words like "impediment" and "wild west wind" and the idea of talking to everything. Then, I had to find some bigger poetic forms than I knew about, bigger poetic forms than nursery rhymes. I had to find sonnets, odes, and things like that. That was the first stage.

No sooner had I found all of these things than I had to start getting rid of them. I was writing corny poetry like "When young I feared two things, cancer and war" or "And as a growing eagle feebly tries." No sooner had I found these things that made me a poet—the bigger subject matter, the

bigger language, the bigger forms—than I had to find which forms and diction were right for me and which big subjects were right for me to talk about. One I found was my feelings about my girlfriends. That was a good one to talk about. Another was the pleasure I got driving in a car, because I started driving a car, as all the idiotic teenagers did, at about fourteen. It was a crazy law that allowed me to drive. Driving in my car and walking my dog were good subjects for me. Talking to the west wind was not a good subject for me. I didn't know what the west wind was. I found that sonnets weren't good for me, but certain forms were. Mainly free verse was good for me with, sometimes, a little rhyme.

Once I'd found this, then I had to get rid of all of that because I was writing like Kenneth Patchen or I was writing like e. e. cummings or I was writing like Williams. I had to do something new, and that was very hard. It seems that when I went into the schools to teach children, I was skipping the first parts; that is, I was skipping the part of the bigger world, the bigger language, and the bigger forms. I was going right into the classroom with poets who might inspire the children to find something new of their own. That's what I wanted to do. This seemed to work all right. Once I found this way of writing modern poetry, I had to get rid of that because I didn't want to sound like Eliot and Pound and Williams. Ever since then, I've had to try to write poems not like the ones I wrote before. It's an unending process, so one can have a poetry teacher forever. In this case it's largely oneself.

It's wonderful to get children to start to write because it makes them happy, as I say in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. It gives them self-confidence. It makes them like to read books. I had students who actually started coming to school with books! I also noticed that when I stopped teaching at the school—or when Ron Padgett, who succeeded me, stopped—the children stopped writing poetry. If you want people to go on having the pleasure of writing poetry, along with the attendant dangers, the best thing you can do for them is to get them to read. If you can somehow get them to like reading poetry, then they can go on being their own poetry teachers,

and if they like to write, they can go through all these phases. But if they don't read, it probably won't happen.

Among the things I needed to escape from at various times were rhyme and meter. In fact, I had to escape from not being able to rhyme, then I had to escape from rhyme. Poetry is like trying a lot of clothes you eventually have to get rid of. I had to escape from rhyme and meter, and anybody who helped me to do that I admired a lot, such as William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. I was hungry. By the time I was seventeen or eighteen years old, I was just crazy with a thirst to find poetry that didn't rhyme and that didn't use meter. I was so grateful to anybody who didn't do it. I liked practically everybody who wrote in free verse.

Then, I needed people to help me get away from making sense in the usual way, because if you make sense in the usual way, it's like an asymptote, the thing in mathematics that gets close to a line but never gets all the way to it. You never escape from the rabbi and your parents and your teacher if you go on making sense in the usual way because they're all making sense in the usual way, and they're older than you are, and they can do it better. So I had to make some other kind of sense. I was very grateful to dada and surrealism and anything crazy. I remember something John Ashbery said to me at Harvard, where we were both students. We were reading each other's poems. He had just read Alfred Jarry, and he said, "Kenneth, I just read somebody named Alfred Jarry." I said, "Well?" I was waiting for the news. I was always waiting for the news. He said, "I think we should be a little crazier." I said, "Yes, yes." I wanted to do that, so I was very glad for anybody who could help me to be crazier. By the way, in a classroom with little children, a good thing I happened to say was "Be crazy, be stupid." I think there are actually people who go into a classroom and say, "Be imaginative." You know, you get gingerbread houses and fairy princesses.

I also needed poets who could show me how to avoid dead seriousness, high seriousness. I grew up in a time when T. S. Eliot was, as Delmore Schwartz said, the literary dictator of the West, and not only were you supposed to be serious, you were supposed to be a little depressed. You could read

through the quarterlies—the *Kernon Review*, the *Partisan Review*, the *Sewanee Review*—all the big journals of those days, and nobody was seeing anything at the end of that tunnel. They were not even seeing the tunnel. I remember being exhilarated when I read Nietzsche. He said you should be very careful how long you look into the abyss because the abyss is also looking into you. I was very grateful to William Carlos Williams because he seemed happy so much of the time. And to the French poet Saint-John Perse, because he looked at the waves rolling in over the ocean and he saw blue enchantresses, kings, mountains, decades—it was wonderful.

I also needed poetry to help me escape my natural prudery, my natural timidity about talking about sex or being crazy or out of line, because when I was seventeen and eighteen years old I was very proud, for all my avant-garditude, of being a nice upper-middle-class boy in Cincinnati. What kind of poetry was that going to result in? I needed poetry to get me away from my ignorance, because although I had a pretty good education, I was very ignorant. Of course, I loved Eliot and Pound. Whether they were really smart or not I didn't know, but they certainly seemed smart. I needed to get away from what was supposedly poetic subject matter. I had a high school teacher, Katherine Lappa, to whom I dedicated *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, who really helped me to do that. I needed poetry to get me away from my usual way of talking and writing.

Shakespeare and Shelley were very helpful, Shakespeare because of the lift his iambic pentameter gives to almost anything one says:

Thou seest Ron Padgett sitting on my right.
Behind him Anania holds his sway,
And both with folded hands do listen now
To what I say to you upon this night.

With Shakespeare, it is like pumping air into everything you say. It goes. It's great. That's something I never tried with children, which, if I went back into schools, I would like to try.

I remember I was very ambitious when I started teaching children. I assumed they could understand anything, so I read them the beginning of *Paradise Lost*:

Of Mans First disobedience, and the fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe

and so forth. The children were looking at me. I asked, "What does that sound like?" Some smart child, a fifth grader in the back row, said, "It sounds like the preacher." What else do you get out of it the first time you read it, other than that it sounds like the preacher? I thought that was a good answer. In any case, Shakespeare showed me a way to float anything: "I take this piece of paper in my hand / And read it to you." That's wonderful. Shelley did too. He showed me not only how to make it float, but how to be excited about it. He taught me how to be burning, feverish, vague, hurried, in a great rush. I liked anybody who would do this for me.

Keats was another poet I loved, for his lusciousness and sensuousness. No matter what story is going on in "The Eve of St. Agnes," it's all about the fact that there's a stained-glass window and red light is falling on Madeline's fair breast as she sits praying. That's what seems strongest. And "luculent syrrops tinct with cinnamon." Even when they're escaping at the last minute, it's all about the sound of this big iron door opening. It's luscious. I liked Keats's letters too—he says that before he wrote poetry—take that, T. S. Eliot—he cultivated a feeling of deliberate happiness. That was the state in which he could write poetry best. I don't think I was directly influenced by Keats, though he gave me an ideal of lushness and richness and of how much you can get into a poem, how much you can get in every line. It's not just "They are standing on the sidewalk looking at the dump truck." The great thing in the poetry of Frank O'Hara—particularly the early poetry—was that life is so full of a variety of exciting things, exciting people, and exciting ideas that you are just crazy if you're not responding to them. I think Keats, Frank O'Hara, and Gerard

Manley Hopkins were all poets who made me feel that I could get a whole lot of stuff together whether I understood it or not and that I should put as much as possible into every line of every poem.

Whitman was an inspiration because he showed me a way to float things, the way Shakespeare did. "I take this piece of paper in my hand / And read upon it every word": that's Shakespeare. But Whitman taught me another way to float everything:

I see the piece of paper and I pick it up.
I look at the piece of paper and I see what's written on it.
I read the words and they're good words and I'm reading them to you.

It's terrific, but what am I saying? The music makes it say something. And there's always a possibility that once you get going in this motorboat, it's going to go somewhere. Also, it really is true about Whitman what the French writer Valéry Larbaud said, that the main thing that Whitman showed to twentieth-century American poets was that greatness in poetry can come not from difficulties overcome but from—and this is better in French, *facilités trouvées*—easinesses found. Whitman shows you, why not do what is easy? Why not say, "I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass" instead of saying, "Beyond the garden wall where . . ." Just write it the way you would say it. Write about what is right in front of you, what you like. There really aren't any prizes for solving difficulties in poetry. I remember a particularly irritating review of a book of poetry, at a time when nobody would publish my work or Frank's or John's. The reviewer praised it by saying, "Mr. X admirably meets the demands of his forms." Well, isn't that amazing? I'm pretty good at walking sideways, but I don't see anything so great about it.

A poet who inspired me as much as anybody, probably more, is William Carlos Williams, whom I read hard for about three or four months, the way only a baby poet can read somebody. I was nineteen. I started when I was seventeen, but

then when I got out of the army, when I was nineteen, I read Williams a lot more. I realized then that I could write about what I was really doing. All these vacant lots in Cincinnati, these suburban houses, the gutters, the automobiles, the schoolyards were things that I could write about. I hadn't known that before. One great thing, of course, that artists do, including poets, is to open up new subject matter. There's a wonderful poem by Paul Éluard. It's called something like "Eighty-seven Words I Have Up Till Now Been Forbidden to Use." It's a poem in which he deliberately puts in eighty or a hundred words that he hasn't been able to use in poems until then. Well, I hadn't been able to use words like *dog*, *parking lot*, and *sidewalk*, and from Williams I learned that I could.

There are two secret sensual pleasures in Williams. One: it's a lot of fun to write in short lines. It's like flamenco dancing. You don't have a long line that you have to fill up. You say, "I pick up / the piece of paper." Another secret pleasure I got from Williams was the pleasure of interrupting yourself, of hesitating in odd places, which you don't get to do at home or with your friends. They'd think you're stammering or you've gone crazy: "I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast." You can even say, "for break / fast" or "a red wheel / barrow." It's nice, it's a lot of fun. It gives one all kinds of new music. Williams, who seemed to be apt to destroy the music of poetry, created a new kind.

Wallace Stevens, I found him very inspiring. I was envious. I couldn't understand how he did certain things. At the end of "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," there are two lines about an old sailor, who, drunk and asleep, "Catches tigers / In red weather." I couldn't, for the life of me, think of two short lines that had such strong stresses, "Catches tigers / In red weather." Of course they have internal rhyme. Oh, how older people used to torment me talking about internal rhyme! "Stevens has internal rhyme." Internal rhyme you just get naturally. If you give up the rhyme at the end of the line, you find it turning up inside the lines. In any case, "red weather" was obviously an example of internal rhyme, and after a while

you figure out the left hand/right hand sort of poetry, the difference between accent and stress, whichever you choose. While one hand is going da-dum da-dum da-dum, the other is saying, "Put out the light and then put out the light." Some poetry, Stevens's in this case, is completely stressed; that is, there is no meter. It's just the natural stress that you put on words, but I hadn't understood that yet. I had been going through Clement Wood's rhyming dictionary. The last forty pages are devoted to poetic forms, and I had been going through them writing ballades, ballades royales, and things like that. If you write in meter, you don't ever get anything like "Catches tigers / In red weather." That's one thing I admired.

I also admired the way he could be so flat and so elegant at the same time:

A man and a woman
Are one.

I tried to do it myself:

My dog and I
Are one.

My dog and I and the chimney
Are one.

No, it didn't work. People who don't write poetry might not know how many months one could spend trying to write something like "A man and a woman and a blackbird are one" and have it sound like poetry. Anyway, that was very interesting. Things like:

I was of three minds,

That's also very hard to do.

Also, I loved the way he told stories sometimes, elegant, gorgeous stories that to me didn't make any sense, as in his "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," a great poem, which so far as I know doesn't make sense in any ordinary way.

He says that the blue ground "Was full of blocks / And blocking steel." It sounds as though it means something, but I don't know what it means. It means what it is. I tell my students in college, "If you don't know what this means, just respond to it as if it were a story: once there was a blue ground, and it was full of blocks. Then you'll understand it. There was a blue ground, and it was full of blocks." I like that kind of narrative. Stevens, in a poem like that and in a number of others, it seems to me, is creating modern fairy tales, legends in the same way that, in painting, Paul Klee did, Miro did, and Max Ernst did. I was endlessly intrigued by that little Max Ernst of the two children frightened by a nightingale. I found no way to figure it out. I love certain Picasso works for the same reason, that they seem to be telling a very moving, a very important story, but you don't know exactly what the story is about.

I liked almost all dada and surrealist art at first and a lot of Picasso. I liked Matisse because of the sensuousness of it, and I was inspired by a remark that Matisse made. I thought maybe I wrote poems that way. He said, "The way I make paintings is I have a white canvas and I put a splash of pink on it, and then, with every succeeding stroke, I try to keep the canvas as beautiful as it was with just that one stroke of pink." That's asking a lot of a poem, but we might as well try it. All of these things, I think, can be brought into the classroom; that is, they would be things that I would try, but everybody has his own experiences.

I was also inspired by tapestries, frescoes, and predellas, anything that tells a story that you can't quite figure out. I guess if I were a devout Christian, I could have figured out the tapestries and the frescoes a little better than I was able to, but I would see in one tapestry somebody tearing off his clothes and in another somebody holding up a sheep. I really liked this because of the beauty of the detail and because it was telling a story, but I didn't know the story.

I liked other poets for other reasons. I loved Max Jacob because he was able to be sensuous and mysterious at the same time he was funny. When I first read Frank O'Hara's poetry, I

was moved by the fact that he used a lot of exclamation marks. This seems a small thing, but I hadn't had exclamation marks in my poetry before. Kate Farrell and I taught old people in a nursing home—we wrote about it in a book called *I Never Told Anybody*—and the second or third time, Kate and I had the old people write using comparisons. We realized that in the first few poems people had written, there hadn't been a single comparison. In my poetry, when I was about twenty years old, there hadn't yet been any exclamations or invocations "O this! O that!"

Another inspiring thing about Frank's work I got from his poem called "Today." In it he mentions aspirin tablets, jujubes, and sequins, all tiny things with perfect shapes. My poetry got filled with tiny things like yo-yos and marbles. Before that, I had just been writing about big things. I remember, I graduated from Harvard before John and Frank did. I had known John when I was there. I hadn't known Frank. John sent me some of Frank's poems and he said, "I think there's another contender here." I read Frank's poems, which were all about jujubes and marbles, yo-yos, and televisions, and I wrote back and said, "I don't think he's as good as we are." I took these poems to Europe with me. I had a Fulbright grant that year, and I read them on the train to Vienna. Then I suddenly got illuminated. Frank dedicated his book to me, "To Kenneth and the Vienna illumination."

Someone wrote that I helped make poetry easier to understand. I don't know. Apollinaire said about his friends the cubist painters that they were tearing down the world so it could be put together properly. It seemed to me that what I was doing and what my friends were doing in poetry was to get rid of the old, fat referential difficulty in order to break everything down into splashes, dots, and cubes and put it back together in an interesting way. I don't think I was making poetry easy and accessible when I wrote that, but I certainly wasn't trying to make it more difficult—just truer to what I thought, then it ought to be.

And, dame! kong swimming with my bets,
Aladdin, business, out Chanukah of May bust

Sit rumors of aethereal business coo-hill-green
Diamonds, moderns modesty. "There sit
The true of two hens of out-we-do maiden
Monastery belongs to (as! of!) can tip up off cities
Ware fizzle dazzle clothes belong. . . ."

(from *When the Sun Tries to Go On*)

The Circus

1

We will have to go away, said the girls in the circus
And never come back any more. There is not enough of an audience
In this little town. Waiting against the black, blue sky
The big circus chariots took them into their entrances.
The light rang out over the hill where the circus wagons dimmed away.
Underneath their dresses the circus girls were sweating,
But then, an orange tight sticking to her, one spoke with
Blue eyes, she was young and pretty, blonde
With bright eyes, and she spoke with her mouth open when she sneezed.
Lightly against the backs of the other girls waiting in line
To clog the rope, or come spinning down with her teeth on the line,
And she said that the circus might leave—and red posters
Stuck to the outside of the wagon, it was beginning to
Rain—she said might leave but not her heart would ever leave
Not that town but just any one where they had been, risking their lives,
And that each place they were should be celebrated by blue rosemary
In a patch, in the town. But they laughed and said Sentimental
Blonde, and she laughed, and they all, circus girls, clinging
To each other as the circus wagons rushed through the night.

2

In the next wagon, the one forward of theirs, the next wagon
Was the elephants' wagon. A grey trunk dragged on the floor . . .

3

Orville the Midget tramped up and down. Paul the Separated Man
Leaped forward. It rained and rained. Some people in the cities
Where they passed through were sitting behind thick glass
Windows, talking about their brats and drinking chocolate syrup.

At the green and black sea. Uncle Dad stood up in the boat, while Baba
Watched Father plunge his harpoon three times in the whale. Daisy
turned
Dreamily around, her hand on her cheek. Frank's boot
Kicked in the door. Amba wept; Ahna the deer was dead; she lay amid her
puzzled young.
The sweet forms of the apple blossoms bent down to Wehrukai.
The boat split. Sun streamed into the apartment. Amba, Amba!
The lake was covered with gloom. Enna plunged into it screaming.

Minnie the Rabbit fingered her machine gun.
The bright day was golden.
She aimed the immense pine needle at the foxes
Thinking Now they will never hurt my tribe any more.

The circus wagons stopped during the night
For eighteen minutes in a little town called Rosebud, Nebraska.
It was after dinner it was after bedtime it was after nausea it was
After lunchroom. The girls came out and touched each other and had fun
And just had time to get a breath of the fresh air of the night in
Before the ungodly procession began once more down the purple
highway.

With what pomp and ceremony the circus arrived orange and red in the
dawn!
It was exhausted, cars and wagons, and it lay down and leaped
Forward a little bit, like a fox. Minnie the Rabbit shot a little woolen
bullet at it,
And just then the elephant man came to his doorway in the sunlight and
stood still.

The snoring circus master wakes up, he takes it on himself to arrange the
circus.
Soon the big tent floats high. Birds sing on the tent.
The parade girls and the living statue girls and the trapeze girls
Cover their sweet young bodies with phosphorescent paint.

Some of the circus girls are older women, but each is beautiful.
They stand, waiting for their cues, at the doorway of the tent.
The sky-blue lion tamer comes in, and the red giraffe manager.
They are very brave and wistful, and they look at the girls.
Some of the circus girls feel a hot sweet longing in their bodies.
But now is it time for the elephants!
Slowly the giant beasts march in. Some of their legs are clothed in blue
papier-mâché ruffles.

One has a red eye. The elephant man is at the peak of happiness.
He speaks, giddily, to every one of the circus people he passes,
He does not know what he is saying, he does not care—
His elephants are on display! They walk into the sandy ring . . .

Suddenly a great scream breaks out in the circus tent!
It is Aileen the trapeze artist, she has fallen into the dust and dirt
From so high! She must be dead! The stretcher bearers rush out,
They see her lovely human form clothed in red and white and orange wiry
net,

And they see that she does not breathe any more.

The circus doctor leaves his tent, he runs out to care for Aileen.

He traverses the circus grounds and the dusty floor of the circus entrance,
and he comes

Where she is, now she has begun to move again, she is not dead,

But the doctor tells her he does not know if she will ever be able to
perform on the trapeze again,

And he sees the beautiful orange and red and white form shaken with
sobs,

And he puts his hand on her forehead and tells her she must lie still.

The circus girls form a cortege, they stand in file in the yellow and white
sunlight.

"What is death in the circus? That depends on if it is spring.

Then, if elephants are there, *mon père*, we are not completely lost.
Oh the sweet strong odor of beasts which laughs at decay!
Decay! decay! We are like the elements in a kaleidoscope,
But such passions we feel! bigger than beaches and
Rustier than harpoons." After his speech the circus practitioner sat down.

10

Minnie the Rabbit felt the blood leaving her little body
As she lay in the snow, orange and red and white,
A beautiful design. The dog laughs, his tongue hangs out, he looks at the
sky.
It is white. The master comes. He laughs. He picks up Minnie the Rabbit
And ties her to a pine tree bough, and leaves.

11

Soon through the forest came the impassioned bumble bee.
He saw the white form on the bough. "Like rosebuds when you are
thirteen," said Elmer.
Iris noticed that he didn't have any cap on.
"You must be polite when mother comes," she said.
The sky began to get grey, then the snow came.
The two tots pressed together. Elmer opened his mouth and let the snow
fall in it. Iris felt warm and happy.

12

Bang! went the flyswatter. Mr. Watkins, the circus manager, looked
around the room.
"Damn it, damn these flies!" he said. Mr. Loftus, the circus clerk, stared at
the fly interior he had just exposed.
The circus doctor stood beside the lake. In his hand he had a black
briefcase.

3
A wind ruffled the surface of the lake and slightly rocked the boats.
Red and green fish swam beneath the surface of the water.
The doctor went into the lunchroom and sat down. No, he said, he didn't
care for anything to eat.
The soft wind of summer blew in the light green trees.

You Were Wearing

(4)

You were wearing your Edgar Allan Poe printed cotton blouse.

In each divided up square of the blouse was a picture of Edgar Allan Poe. Your hair was blonde and you were cute. You asked me, "Do most boys think that most girls are bad?"

I smelled the mould of your seaside resort hotel bedroom on your hair held in place by a John Greenleaf Whittier clip.

"No," I said, "it's girls who think that boys are bad." Then we read *Snowbound* together

And ran around in an attic, so that a little of the blue enamel was scraped off my George Washington, Father of His Country, shoes.

Mother was walking in the living room, her Strauss Waltzes comb in her hair.

We waited for a time and then joined her, only to be served tea in cups painted with pictures of Herman Melville

As well as with illustrations from his book *Moby Dick* and from his novella *Benito Cereno*.

Father came in wearing his Dick Tracy necktie: "How about a drink, everyone?"

I said, "Let's go outside a while." Then we went onto the porch and sat on the Abraham Lincoln swing.

You sat on the eyes, mouth, and beard part, and I sat on the knees.

In the yard across the street we saw a snowman holding a garbage can lid smashed into a likeness of the mad English king, George the Third.

Alive for an Instant

(S)

I have a bird in my head and a pig in my stomach
And a flower in my genitals and a tiger in my genitals
And a lion in my genitals and I am after you but I have a song in my heart
And my song is a dove
I have a man in my hands I have a woman in my shoes
I have a landmark decision in my reason
I have a death rattle in my nose I have summer in my brain water
This is the matter with me and the hammer of my mother and father
Who created me with everything
But I lack calm I lack rose
Though I do not lack extreme delicacy of rose petal
Who is it that I wish to astonish?
In the birdcall I found a reminder of you
But it was thin and brittle and gone in an instant
Has nature set out to be a great entertainer?
Obviously not A great reproducer? A great Nothing?
Well I will leave that up to you
I have a knocking woodpecker in my heart and I think I have three souls
One for love one for poetry and one for acting out my insane self
Not insane but boring but perpendicular but untrue but true
The three rarely sing together take my hand it's active
The active ingredient in it is a touch
I am Lord Byron I am Percy Shelley I am Ariosto
I eat the bacon I went down the slide I have a thunderstorm in my inside I
will never hate you
But how can this maelstrom be appealing? do you like menageries? my
god
Most people want a man! So here I am
I have a pheasant in my reminders I have a goshawk in my clouds
Whatever is it which has led all these animals to you?
A resurrection? or maybe an insurrection? an inspiration?
I have a baby in my landscape and I have a wild rat in my secrets from you.

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 lot of poetry
Can come from perceptions of this kind, as well as a lot of insane
conversations.

Intense people can sometimes get stuck on topics like these
And keep you far into the night with them. Still, it is true
That the water has just started to boil. How important
For the water! And now I see that the tree is waving in the wind
(I assume it is the wind)—at least, its branches are. In order to see
Hidden meanings, one may have to ignore
The most exciting ones, those that are most directly appealing
And yet it is only these appealing ones that, often, one can trust
To make one's art solid and true, just as it is sexual attraction
One has to trust, often, in love. So the boiling water's seriousness
Is likely to go unobserved until the exact strange moment
(And what a temptation it is to end the poem here
With some secret thrust) when it involuntarily comes into the mind
And then one can write of it. A serious moment for this poem will be
when it ends,
It will be like the water's boiling, that for which we've waited
Without trying to think of it too much, since “a watched pot never boils,”
And a poem with its ending figured out is difficult to write.

Once the water is boiling, the heater has a choice: to look at it
And let it boil and go on seeing what it does, or to take it off and use the
water for tea,
Chocolate or coffee or beef consommé. You don't drink the product then
Until the water has ceased to boil, for otherwise
It would burn your tongue. Even hot water is dangerous and has a thorn
Like the rose, or a horn like the baby ram. Modest hot water, and the tree
Blowing in the wind. The connection here is how serious is it for the tree
To have its arms wave (its branches)? How did it ever get such flexibility
In the first place? and who put the boiling potentiality into water?

6
A tree will not boil, nor will the wind. Think of the dinners
We could have, and the lunches, and the dreams, if only they did.
But that is not to think of what things are really about. For the tree
I don't know how serious it is to be waving, though water's boiling
Is more dramatic, is more like a storm, high tide
And the ship goes down, but it comes back up as coffee, chocolate, or tea.

How many people I have drunk tea or coffee with
And thought about the boiling water hardly at all, just waiting for it to
boil

So there could be coffee or chocolate or tea. And then what?
The body stimulated, the brain alarmed, grounds in the pot,
The tree, waving, out the window, perhaps with a little more élan
Because we saw it that way, because the water boiled, because we drank
tea.

The water boils almost every time the same old way
And still it is serious, because it is boiling. That is what,
I think, one should see. From this may come compassion,
Compassion and a knowledge of nature, although most of the time
I know I am not going to think about it. It would be crazy
To give such things precedence over such affairs of one's life
As involve more fundamental satisfactions. But is going to the beach
More fundamental than seeing the water boil? Saving of money,
It's well known, can result from an aesthetic attitude, since a rock
Picked up in the street contains all the shape and hardness of the world.
One sidewalk leads everywhere. You don't have to be in Estapan.

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
And finally, at last, who answer, my wing, my past, my
Angel, my flume, and my de-control, my orange and my good-bye kiss,
My extravagance, and my weight at fifteen years old
And at the height of my intelligence, oh Cordillera two
And sandals one, C'est toi à l'appareil? Is that you at
The telephone, and when it snows, a serious moment for the bus is when
it snows

For then it has to slow down for sliding, and every moment is a trust.

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, its feet begin to paddle, it is in
And above the water, pushing itself forward, a duck.
And a serious moment for the sky is when, completely blue,
It feels some clouds coming; another when it turns dark.
A serious moment for the match is when it bursts into flame
And is all alone, living, in that instant, that beautiful second for which it
was made.

So much went into it! The men at the match factory, the mood of
The public, the sand covering the barn
So it was hard to find the phosphorus, and now this flame,
This pink white ecstatic light blue! For the telephone when it rings,
For the wind when it blows, and for the match when it bursts into flame.

Serious, all our life is serious, and we see around us
Seriousness for other things, that touches us and seems as if it might be
giving clues.
The seriousness of the house when it is being built
And is almost completed, and then the moment when it is completed.

(7)

The seriousness of the bee when it stings. We say, He has taken his life,
Merely to sting. Why would he do that? And we feel
We aren't concentrated enough, not pure, not deep
As the buzzing bee. The bee flies into the house
And lights on a chair arm and sits there, waiting for something to be
Other than it is, so he can fly again. He is boiling, waiting. Soon he is
forgotten
And everyone is speaking again.

Seriousness, everyone speaks of seriousness
Certain he knows or seeking to know what it is. A child is bitten by an
animal

And that is serious. The doctor has a serious life. He is somewhat, in that,
like the bee.

And water! water—how it is needed! and it is always going down
Seeking its own level, evaporating, boiling, now changing into ice
And snow, now making up our bodies. We drink the coffee
And somewhere in this moment is the chance
We will never see each other again. It is serious for the tree
To be moving, the flexibility of its moving
Being the sign of its continuing life. And now there are its blossoms
And the fact that it is blossoming again, it is filling up with
Pink and whitish blossoms, it is full of them, the wind blows, it is
Warm, though, so much is happening, it is spring, the people step out
And doors swing in, and billions of insects are born. You call me and tell
me

You feel that your life is not worth living. I say I will come to see you. I
put the key in
And the car begins to clatter, and now it starts.

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. It is serious not
to know

And to know and to try to figure things out. One's legs
Cross, foot swings, and a cigarette is blooming, a gray bouquet, and
The water is boiling. Serious the birth (what a phenomenon!) of anything
and
The movements of the trees, and for the lovers

Everything they do and see. Serious intermittently for consciousness
The sign that something may be happening, always, today,
That is enough. For the germ when it enters or leaves a body. For the fly
when it lifts its little wings.

A line Zone

On y loue des chambres en latin Cubicula locanda

Je m'en souviens j'y ai passé trois jours et autant à Gouda

APOLLINAIRE, Zone

A light from the ceiling is swinging outside on Forty-second Street traffic is zinging

Collaborating on The Construction of Boston is interesting

To construct the city of Boston Tinguely is putting up a big wall

Of gray sandstone bricks he is dressed in a French ball

Gown he puts the wall up during the performance

His costume is due to art and not to mental disturbance

Now the wall ten feet high is starting to tremble

People seated in the first rows run back for shelter

However the bricks stand firm Niki de St. Phalle dressed as Napoleon

Shoots at a Venus full of paint with a miniature (but real) cannon

Rauschenberg's rain machine's stuck it gives too much moisture

People look very happy to have gotten out of the theater

People ask that it be put on again but it can't be done

Tinguely with his hand bleeding says Boston can be constructed only once

And that is the end of that

Next day the Maidman Theatre stage is flat

I like the random absurdity of this performance

Done only once with nineteen-sixty-two-and-art romance

I meet Niki four years earlier in France in the spring

Five years before that I am with Janice and Katherine

In Greece two thousand years ago everything came crashing

We stand and try to imagine it from what is still standing

Years before this in Paris it's the boulevard Montparnasse

Larry Rivers is here he is living with a family that includes a dwarf

We are talking I have a "Fulbright" with us is Nell Blaine

I am pulled in one direction by Sweden in another by Spain

The idea of staying in Europe jolts me gives a convincing jerk

It's New York though where most of my friends are and the "new work"

Today with Frank O'Hara a lunch connection

The Museum of Modern Art is showing its Arp collection

Frank comes out of the doorway in his necktie and his coat

It is a day on which it would be good to vote

Autumn a crisp Republicanism is in the air tie and coat
 Soon to be trounced by the Democrats personified as a slung-over-the-shoulder coat
 Fascism in the form of a bank
 Gives way to a shining restaurant that opens its doors with a clank
 However before being taken into this odoriferous coffer
 A little hard-as-a-hat poem to the day we offer
 "Sky/woof woof!/harp"
 This is repeated ten times
 Each word is one line so the whole poem is thirty lines
 It's a poem composed in a moment
 On the sidewalk about fifteen blocks from the Alice in Wonderland Monument
 Sky woof woof! harp is published in *Semicolon*
 Later than this in this John Myers publication
 O'Hara meanwhile is bending above his shirt
 His mind being and putting mine on being on International Alert
 There's no self-praise in his gossip
 Which in fact isn't gossip but like an artistic air-trip
 To all the greatest monuments of America and Europe
 Relayed in a mild excited wide open-eyed smiling conversational style
 Larry he says and Larry again after a while
 He is crazy about Larry these two have a relationship
 That is breaking the world's record for loquaciousness
 I first meet Larry on Third Avenue
 The El goes past and it throws into my apartment rust dust soot and what-have-you
 Larry has a way of putting himself all out in front of himself
 And stumbling through it and looking good while seemingly making fun of himself
 This is my friend Larry Rivers says Jane Freilicher
 She lives upstairs Larry is a sometime visitor
 He is dedicated at this moment entirely to drawing
 Abstract split-plot and flops and spots he finds a blur and boring
 Give me a glass of pencil that hath been
 Steeped a long time in Delacroix and Ingres nor does he neglect Rubens
 He is drawing up a storm in his studio working hard
 A little bit earlier he and Jane and others are boulevards by Bonnard
 Bonnard show at the Modern Museum
 I meet these people too late to go and see them
 I am of New York not a native

I'm from Cincinnati which is to this place's nominative like a remote dative
 In 1948 from college I come here and finally settle
 The city is hot and bright and noisy like a giant boiling kettle
 My first connection to it aside from touristy is sexual
 A girl met here or there at first nothing serious or contextual
 That is earlier now I'm here to live on street subway and bus
 I find people exciting unrecognizable and of unknown-to-me social class
 Finally they start to come into focus
 For a while it's like being at a play I may have the wrong tickets
 On West Tenth Street now I am firmly settled in New York
 I am a poet je suis poète but I'm not doing very much work
 I'm in love with a beautiful girl named Robin
 Her father has a hand-weaving factory he gives me a job winding bobbins
 It is a one-floor loft in the garment district on Thirty-first Street
 Pat Hoey visits someone next door on snow-white feet
 Pat and I like to go to the ballet at the City Center
 I get "Balanchined" as in a wine-press all Jacques d'Amboise has to do is enter
 My poetry is somewhat stuck
 It's taking me a little while to be able to write in New York
 My painter friends help and what I am reading in the library
 It is not the contemporary antics this happens later of John Ashbery
 This shy and skinny poet comes down to visit me from "school"
 When he and Jane Freilicher meet it's as if they'd both been thrown into a swimming pool
 Afloat with ironies jokes sensitivities perceptions and sweet swift sophistications
 Like the orchids of Xochimilco a tourist attraction for the nations
 Jane is filled with excitement and one hundred percent ironic
 This conversation is joy is speed is infinite gin and tonic
 It is modernism in the lyrical laconic
 Our relationship's platonic
 With what intelligence linked to what beauty linked to what grassy gusty lurch across the canvas
 Jane and her paintings I realize once again happiness
 Huh? is possibly going to be available after long absence
 Here today in a gray raincoat she appears
 The style is laughter the subject may be a cause for tears
 Larry has some of the qualities of a stand-up comic
 He says of John Myers John Myers he always calls him that

John Myers never John John Myers says he isn't fat
Well doesn't have a fat EAR but look at his stomach
And oft at a party back his head he throws
And plays the piano singing a song he made up "My Nose"
His nose bothers and is thus conquered by Larry Rivers
He's doing a Bonnardesque painting it's so good it gives me "recognition"
shivers

It's a room filled with women with somewhat beautiful fishlike graces
Mostly orangey-yellow they have sexy and sleepy looks on their faces the
thick

Oil paint makes it look as if you'd stick
To it if you got next to it it also looks very spacious
Now Larry is sitting and smiling he is copying an Ingres
His hand is shaky his lines are as straight as coat hangers
Why don't you I say rather dumbly put something witty in your work
No Kenneth I can't he says prancing around like a funny Turk
Charcoal in one hand and making a little gesture with the other
One Sunday I go with him to the Bronx to visit his sister and his mother
Here I am with Larry's sister and his mother
Sitting in the kitchen above us is a motto
Joannie is blonde her brunette friend is warm and flushed as a risotto
I rather fancy her and Larry's mother fancies it stupid
To have invited this girl at the same time as me so interrupting the arrow
of Cupid

Posing for Rivers his mother-in-law Berdie before a screen
Posing for her son-in-law this woman full and generous as the double
issue of a magazine

The French *Vogue* for example or the *Ladies Home Journal*
Frank thinks her marvelous he finds the sublime in her diurnal
Larry is making a leafy tree out of metal
Here is his Jewish version of Courbet's painting of a funeral
Jane loves Matisse and is a fan of Baudelaire
In these paintings she is working on a secret of yellow blue and pink air
She and Larry make a big painting together
Larry with an unmeditated slash Jane with the perpetuity of a feather
That in a breeze is trying to pull itself together
I'm looking at the finished product it's rather de Kooningesque
Being de-Kooning-like some way is practically of being a New York
painter the test

Here today though is not a de Kooning but one of Jane's it's luscious big
and feminine
I am inspired by these painters

They make me want to paint myself on an amateur basis
Without losing my poetic status
Jane is demonstrating to me the pleasures of using charcoal
I am copying a Delacroix of a black woman called I think The Slave Girl
Erasing makes a lovely mess
It looks like depth and looks like distance
Ink at the opposite end of materials is deliberate and daring
No chance to erase it and oil pastels like wildflowers in a clearing
My Aesthetic I only paint for a few years is rather elementary
Get something that looks good looks real looks surprising looks from this
century

I am sitting at a little table downstairs in the Third Avenue apartment
I like buying slabs of masonite and all kinds of equipment
At the Metropolitan on a big wall is a great big Rubens
Of a king and some nobles on horses bigger than cabins
I am walking through the European Collection
With Larry and Jane they're giving it a professional inspection
On drawing paper I'm doing some Seurat-like dotting
I like this even love it but I know it's going to come to nothing
It is invigorating to stand in this studio

John Ashbery comes to visit he is listening to Bob and Ray on our radio
It is a small old-fashioned console attacked by salt water
John finds them wheezingly amusing all over the house sounds his
raucous laughter

He and I "go back" to Harvard College
Now he is sitting at his typewriter in Greenwich Village
He's just finished a poem and he's happy as after a good repeat
He is certain this feeling won't last
John is predictably and pleasantly gloom-filled
I've just driven to New York from some place north of Bloomfield
I'm an hour and a half late

This enables John to finish his poem as I with mixed feelings find out
"The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers"
He made good use of this couple of wasted hours
Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch in the pajamas
It's a vault over W. C. Williams and a bypass of Dylan Thomas
He is still sitting at his little portable
Being because of my poem-causing lateness exceptionally cordial
We are both fans of the old Mystery Plays
We also find each other mysterious in certain ways
This mystery becomes greater as more time passes
Then finally the mystery itself nascee

We're at Harvard together

We walk along talking about poetry in the autumn weather

He is not writing much this year but he likes to collaborate

So do I we do a set of sestinas at a speedy rate

Six sestinas each about an animal with one concluding one called The

Bestiary

There is also a three-page poem in which all the lines rhyme with the title

The Cassowary

Next we do a poetic compendium called The New York Times

September Eighth Nineteen Fifty-One both with and without rhymes

Our poems are like tracks setting out

We have little idea where we're going or what it's about

I enjoy these compositional duets

Accompanied by drinking coffee and joking on Charles and Perry Streets

We tell each other names of writers in great secret

Secret but absolutely no one else cares so why keep it

We're writing a deliberately bad work called The Reconstruction of

Colonial Williamsburg

In a feeble attempt to win a contest the style is the Kenyon Review absurd

Larry and Jane propose to me renting a house in East Hampton

We go sizzling out of the city with the rapidity of a flu symptom

No this is actually a year later my memory missed it

I now go to California to be a "teaching assistant"

This year goes by I meet the girl who is later my wife Janice

I love to kiss her and to talk to her very often it's talking about my friends

I also talk a lot about "Europe" and France

She's a little deflating and tells me that to be a great poet

I have to do something she tells me but I forget exactly what

I think have for all my poems some sort of system

I am shaken but still feel secure in my avant-garde wisdom

East Hampton glaringest of Hamptons Hampton of sea shine of de

Kooning and of leaves

Frank's visiting we're composing a poem he tugs at his sleeves

It is a Nina we are composing it is a Nina Sestina

For Nina Castelli's birthday her adorable sixteenth one

This year this month this week in fact Frank writes "Hatred"

A stunning tour-de-poem on an unending roll of paper

It makes going on forever seem attractive

Writing in the manner of O'Hara means being extremely active

Twenty people are over then thirty now about forty

Zip Frank sits down in the midst and types out a poem it doesn't even

seem arty

I try it out with little success

It's one of those things the originator can do best

"Hatred" is full of a thundering array of vocables

From it straight through to the Odes Frank's talent is implacable

Now here he is holding out to me a package

Of Picayunes he taps one on his kneebone-covering khakis

Finally we have a poem for Castelli's daughter

Moonlight dissolve next day we're visiting Anne and Fairfield Porter

Fairfield is in his studio a mighty man

Posing like fluttering then settling sea birds around him Jerry Katie

Elizabeth and Anne

He has opinions that do not waver

On his canvases he creates a bright and wholesome fever

Flowers like little pockets of yellow and pink pigment

Are aspiring up to a tree or a wall or a house like a sunlight shipment

At a John Cage concert there is hardly a sound

It's the paradise of music lost and music found

I find it pure and great as if a great big flash of light were going off

underground

Satie and Webern are hitting me in the head and so finally with the

Cantos is Ezra Pound

Frank and I are writing very long poems

Long is really the operative word for these poems

His is called Second Avenue mine When the Sun Tries to Go On

I don't know where I got the title

I'm working on it every afternoon the words seem to me arriving like

stampeding cattle

It's not at all clear but for the first time in my life the words seem

completely accurate

If I write for three hours I allow myself a cigarette

I'm smoking it's a little too much I'm not sure I can get through it alone

Frank and I read each other segments of these long works daily on the

phone

Janice finds it funny now that I've dropped this bunch of pages

That I can't get them back in the right order well I do but it's by stages

It is April I have a job at the Hunter College Library

I come down to the Cedar on a bus hoping to see O'Hara and Ashbery

Astonishingly on the bus I don't know why it's the only occasion

I write a poem Where Am I Kenneth? It's on some torn-out notebook

pages

The Cedar and the Five Spot each is a usable place

(13)

A celebrated comment Interviewer What do you think of space? De
Kooning Fuck space!
In any case Frank is there he says he likes Where Am I Kenneth?
I carry this news home pleasantly and the poem it mentions her to Janice
John's poem Europe is full of avant-garde ardor
I am thinking it's making an order out of a great disorder
I wonder at what stage in life does this get harder
The Cedar Bar one hardly thinks of it is what may be called a scene
However one closed to the public since no one goes there to be seen
It is a meeting place for the briefest romances
And here is Norman Bluhm at the bar saying Who cares about those
nances?
And here he is shoving and here is de Kooning and there is a beer
Being flug at someone Arnold Weinstein or me through the smoke-talky
atmosphere
Of this corner booth
Voici Guston and Mitchell and Smith and here on top of everything is
Ruth

Kligman being bedazzling without stop
She writes a poem with the line At the bar you've got to be on top
Meanwhile tonight Boris Pasternak
Is awarded the Nobel Prize and is forced to give it back
Frank O'Hara is angry there seems both a flash and a blur in his eyes
Kenneth we've got to do something about Pasternak and the Nobel Prize
What? well we ought to let him know
That we support him Off flies a cable into the perpetual snow
Dear Boris Pasternak We completely support you and we also love your
early work

Signed puzzlingly for him in the morning's glare if he ever receives it
Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch
Staging George Washington Crossing the Delaware
Alex Katz comes up looking like a pear
He has some white plywood boards with him he says where
Shall I put this stuff and a big bare
Wall is the side of their emplacement No chair
For Alex painting and cutting And now they're there
The seven soldiers one cherry tree one Delaware crossing boat
Hey hey Ken cries Alex I've done it
I've made you a set for George Washington Crossing the Delaware
The British and American armies face each other on wooden feet
I write this play in our apartment on Commerce Street
I am working in the early afternoon and stay up late

Dawn is peeling oranges on top of the skyscrapers
On the stage a wall goes up and then it's taken down
And under the Mirabeau Bridge flows the Seine
Today Larry and Frank are putting together "Stones"
It's a series of lithographs
Larry puts down blotches violently they look like the grapes of wrath
Frank is smoking and looking his best ideas come in transit
I walk the nine blocks to the studio he says Come in
New York today is white dirty and loud like a snow-clogged engine
Huge men in undershirts scream at each other in trucks near Second
Avenue and Tenth Street
De Kooning's landscape woman is full of double-exposure perfections
Bob Goodnough is making some small flat red corrections
Jane is concentrating she's frowning she has a look of happy distress
She's painting her own portrait in a long-sleeved dark pink dress
I'm excited I'm writing at my typewriter it doesn't make too much sense

Waiting to fill you, buckets,
One morning it was afternoon
Then evening, all the same except
One time when I filled you
And carried you to the apartment
In which a dog was sitting
I forget its name. He drank thirstily
And well I brought you
To other places too with always
A strain, hurting my arms
For you are heavy you
Are heavy with water filled
Whether it was on Leyte
That I carried you
To fellow soldiers
Or up to the blankets, from the sea,
To some who were too hot. It makes
For giddiness to
Concentrate on you
Concentric buckets—senseless—
You lend your sides to the soul.

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To World War Two
Early on you introduced me to young women in bars
You were large, and with a large hand
You presented them in different cities,
Made me in San Luis Obispo, drunk
On French seventy-fives, in Los Angeles, on pousse-café.
It was a time of general confusion
Of being a body hurled at a wall.
I didn't do much fighting. I sat, rather I stood, in a foxhole.
I stood while the typhoon splashed us into morning.
It felt unusual
Even if for a good cause
To be part of a destructive force
With my rifle in my hands
And in my head
My serial number
The entire object of my existence
To eliminate Japanese soldiers
By killing them
With a rifle or with a grenade
And then, many years after that,
I could write poetry
Fall in love
And have a daughter
And think
About these things
From a great distance
If I survived
I was "paying my debt
To society" a paid
Killer. It wasn't
Like anything I'd done
Before, on the paved
Streets of Cincinnati
Or on the ballroom floor
At Mr. Vathé's dancing class
What would Anne Marie Goldsmith
Have thought of me
If instead of asking her to dance
I had put my BAR to my shoulder

And shot her in the face

I thought about her in my foxhole—

One, in a foxhole near me, has his throat cut during the night

We take more precautions but it is night and it is you.

The typhoon continues and so do you.

"I can't be killed—because of my poetry. I have to live on in order to write it."

I thought—even crazier thought, or just as crazy—

"If I'm killed while thinking of lines, it will be too corny

When it's reported" (I imagined it would be reported!)

So I kept thinking of lines of poetry. One that came to me on the beach on Leyte

Was "The surf comes in like masochistic lions."

I loved this terrible line. It was keeping me alive. My Uncle Leo wrote to me,

"You won't believe this, but some day you may wish

You were footloose and twenty on Leyte again." I have never wanted

To be on Leyte again,

With you, whispering into my ear,

"Go on and win me! Tomorrow you may not be alive,

So do it today!" How could anyone ever win you?

How many persons would I have had to kill

Even to begin to be a part of winning you?

You were too much for me, though I

Was older than you were and in camouflage. But for you

Who threw everything together, and had all the systems

Working for you all the time, this was trivial. If you could use me

You'd use me, and then forget. How else

Did I think you'd behave?

I'm glad you ended. I'm glad I didn't die. Or lose my mind.

As machines make ice

We made dead enemy soldiers, in

Dark jungle alleys, with weapons in our hands

That produced fire and kept going straight through

I was carrying one,

I who had gone about for years as a child

Praying God don't let there ever be another war

Or if there is, don't let me be in it. Well, I was in you.

All you cared about was existing and being won.

You died of a bomb blast in Nagasaki, and there were parades.

I was surprised!

You had bars on the palms of your hands

And places to buy neckties

It seemed by the millions

Rudy Burckhardt cast his line

Of photos onto roofs and chimneys

Meyer Liben

Drove his car up and down

Stopping it to

Lean out and talk to women

This was nineteen-forties

New York. With Delmore

Schwartz and Paul

Goodman in it. James Laughlin

Published everyone

While you and I

Met the poet Jean Garrigue

In Sam Abramson's bookstore

Which was I had been

Told the only place to buy

Henry Miller's

Tropic of Cancer and

She was very pretty

Wearing bright

Red lipstick

A jacket, pants, and a tie.

"Jean Garrigue! You're

The poet!" I said. And "That am I!"

She knowingly

Replied. All right,

Living in the City,

I'm for you! I said

To myself and

Later when poetry,

Desire for fame and love

And anonymity and

Full-fledged Communism

Attracted me to you

I found an apartment

To My Twenties

How lucky that I ran into you
When everything was possible
For my legs and arms, and with hope in my heart
And so happy to see any woman—
O woman! O my twentieth year!
Basking in you, you
Oasis from both growing and decay
Fantastic unheard of nine- or ten-year oasis
A palm tree, hey! And then another
And another—and water!
I'm still very impressed by you. Whither,
Midst falling decades, have you gone? Oh in what lucky fellow,
Unsure of himself, upset, and unemployable
For the moment in any case, do you live now?
From my window I drop a nickel
By mistake. With
You I race down to get it
But I find there on
The street instead, a good friend,
X—— N——, who says to me
Kenneth do you have a minute?
And I say yes! I am in my twenties!
I have plenty of time! In you I marry,
In you I first go to France; I make my best friends
In you, and a few enemies. I
Write a lot and am living all the time
And thinking about living. I loved to frequent you
After my teens and before my thirties.
You three together in a bar
I always preferred you because you were midmost
Most lustrous apparently strongest
Although now that I look back on you
What part have you played?
You never, ever, were stingy.
What you gave me you gave whole
But as for telling

Me how best to use it
You weren't a genius at that.
Twenties, my soul
Is yours for the asking
You know that, if you ever come back.

To Driving

Wherever you went, there were woods,
Driveways, cars, and places to have a picnic! And attention to you,
Driving,
Meant less attention to the one beside. Soon she'd be driving
And I would look outside. Without you I'd not ever have seen
The underhalf of Louisiana green
And red and white, or have had the place to ask my father the questions
I did about driving. He said You must stay on the road.
Increasingly, as a trip goes on,
You become the main thing it is and rightly so. What would we do
Without you there, quick and slow, dreaming both interior and exterior—
Without your assurance that "Wherever I am, there you shall be
Whether in the Sahara or Vermont. You stand by me
And I will stay with you, for I am Driving,
Memory that, whenever stopped, can be renewed."

To Jewishness

As you were contained in
Or embodied by
Louise Schlossman
When she was a sophomore
At Walnut Hills
High School
In Cincinnati, Ohio,
I salute you
And thank you
For the fact
That she received
My kisses with tolerance
On New Year's Eve
And was not taken aback
As she well might have been
Had she not had you
And had I not, too.
Ah, you!
Dark, complicated you!
Jewishness, you are the tray—
On it painted
Moses, David and the Ten
Commandments, the handwriting
On the Wall, Daniel
In the lions' den—
On which my childhood
Was served
By a mother
And father
Who took you
To Michigan—
Oh the soft smell
Of the pine
Trees of Michigan
And the gentle roar
Of the Lake! Michigan
Or sent you
To Wisconsin—
I went to camp there—

On vacation, with me
Every year!
My counselors had you
My fellow campers
Had you and "Doc
Ehrenreich" who
Ran the camp had you
We got up in the
Mornings you were there
You were in the canoes
And on the baseball
Diamond, everywhere around.
At home, growing
Taller, you
Thrived, too. Louise had you
And Charles had you
And Jean had you
And her sister Mary
Had you
We all had you
And your Bible
Full of stories
That didn't apply
Or didn't seem to apply
In the soft spring air
Or dancing, or sitting in the cars
To anything we did.
In "religious school"
At the Isaac M. Wise
Synagogue (called "temple")
We studied not you
But Judaism, the one who goes with you
And is your guide, supposedly,
Oddly separated
From you, though there
In the same building, you
In us children, and it
On the blackboards
And in the books—Bibles
And books simplified
From the Bible. How
Like a Bible with shoulders

18
Rabbi Seligmann is!
You kept my parents and me
Out of the hotels near Crystal Lake
In Michigan and you resulted, for me,
In insults,
At which I felt
Chagrined but
Was energized by you.
You went with me
Into the army, where
One night in a foxhole
On Leyte a fellow soldier
Said Where are the fuckin Jews?
Back in the PX. I'd like to
See one of those bastards
Out here. I'd kill him!
I decided to conceal
You, my you, anyway, for a while.
Forgive me for that.
At Harvard you
Landed me in a room
In Kirkland House
With two other students
Who had you. You
Kept me out of the Harvard clubs
And by this time (I
Was twenty-one) I found
I preferred
Kissing girls who didn't
Have you. Blonde
Hair, blue eyes,
And Christianity (oddly enough) had an
Aphrodisiac effect on me.
And everything that opened
Up to me, of poetry, of painting, of music,
Of architecture in old cities
Didn't have you—
I was
Distressed
Though I knew
Those who had you
Had hardly had the chance

To build cathedrals
Write secular epics
(Like *Orlando Furioso*)
Or paint Annunciations—"Well
I had David
In the wings." David
Was a Jew, even a Hebrew.
He wasn't Jewish.
You're quite
Something else. "I had Mahler,
Einstein, and Freud." I didn't
Want those three (then). I wanted
Shelley, Byron, Keats, Shakespeare,
Mozart, Monet. I wanted
Botticelli and Fra Angelico.
"There you've
Chosen some hard ones
For me to connect to. But
Why not admit that I
Gave you the life
Of the mind as a thing
To aspire to? And
Where did you go
To find your 'freedom'? to
New York, which was
Full of me." I do know
Your good qualities, at least
Good things you did
For me—when I was ten
Years old, how you brought
Judaism in, to give ceremony
To everyday things, surprise and
Symbolism and things beyond
Understanding in the
Synagogue then I
Was excited by you, a rescuer
Of me from the flatness of my life.
But then the flatness got you
And I let it keep you
And, perhaps, of all things known,
That was most ignorant. "You
Sound like Yeats, but

19
You're not. Well, happy
Voyage home, Kenneth, to
The parking lot
Of understood experience. I'll be
Here if you need me and here
After you don't
Need anything else. HERE is a quality
I have, and have had
For you, and for a lot of others,
Just by being it, since you were born."

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?

The Unfinished

A beautiful young woman with eyes like a leopard's
Walks past and
She does what a beautiful woman does. She indemnifies reality
From the stones and the Sundays to the hardest hit;
She makes malleable reality
So it will fit on a further beam. She unravels mutuality
So that it's tucked in a single seam. She is not Mrs. Bailey
My schoolteacher in the third grade,
Although of such truths poetry is made. I would not gladly
Live in a world without her, but that is fate.
She may be married to Tarzan. She may be Brendetta the Milk Maid.

(2c)