
POETRY

W E L D O N K E E S

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

If Weldon Kees were alive today, he would be 79 years old; but the first thing that makes this unthinkable is his poems. Their vehement bleakness makes it all too plausible that on July 19, 1955, when a car registered in his name was found near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the 41-year-old Weldon Kees had committed suicide.

No body was ever found. Now and then a rumor would have him alive and well under an assumed name, south of the border. However, during the last 35 years, nothing even remotely close to his diction, either under his or an assumed name, has appeared in print. As far as this evidence goes, the poet is dead.

Suicide, as the great Czech poet Vladimir Holan once said, is not an exit; it is the word "exit" painted on a wall. Suicide—or, for that matter, a disappearing act—is also bad PR, particularly when the general disposition of the public toward poetry is that of benign neglect (of such extraordinary proportions, it must be added, that one wonders what the word *benign* is doing here). Whatever happened to the body of Weldon Kees, the body of his work, given the size of this nation's potential readership, might just as well also rest at the bottom of the Pacific.

The consolation, perhaps, is that it is not there alone. Scores and scores of outstanding American poets see their work consigned to the same fate by the existing system of book distribution in this country. "The American people"—in the memorable phrase of a former U.S. senator—"have the right to be wrong." This sounds truly democratic and in line with the Constitution, yet nature and Providence, or both, thrust poets into the nation's midst to make it more lucid. As things are, the American people's right to know their own poetry is denied to most of them.

With that, democracy is denied its purpose, for democracy is not an end unto itself. The purpose of democracy is to become enlightened democracy. Democracy without enlightenment is but a well-policed jungle. What does this have to do with Weldon Kees? Not much, perhaps, except that his dark vision could spare many an individual the loneliness of his or her agony. It could because in Kees's poetry agony is raised to the level of art. And this is the level to which, to paraphrase Walter Pater, all human experience, be it negative or positive, aspires.

This is what enlightenment is all about. It should not be mistaken for therapy, although it can perform that task also. At a certain point, men and women should grow up and recognize that they are the sum not only of their intentions and convictions but also of their deeds. In clarifying this point, the poems of Weldon Kees come in handy. He is a poet of remarkable totality of

approach toward the world and his very self. Behind his irate dismissal of both, one discerns a fierce Calvinist spirit; one sees a man summoning his epoch and himself to his own last judgment and finding no argument in either's defense, and, naturally, no grace.

He does this with relish and with savage irony. How is it, one may wonder, that a boy from Nebraska turned into this merciless, supreme agonist? Was there something in his background? Was it the Wall Street Crash, or the years of the Great Depression? Was it the war on the Continent, and perhaps the need to compensate for his guilt at not taking part in it? A failed marriage? Should we wax Freudian?

We should not. Neither taken separately nor in their totality will these explanations account for this poet's diction. They will not because Kees was not alone on the scene, although there is no denying his cooperation in that diction's hardening. Its origins are not in his life but in his very art and in its terrifying ability to impose standards upon work and life alike. The measure of one's surrender to these standards is, frankly, the measure of one's talent, and Kees was a man of immense talent. Herein lies the explanation of his artistic success and his human tragedy.

To put it simply, by the time of Weldon Kees's arrival, the dominant note in poetry on both sides of the Atlantic was that of negation of the modern reality. The source of that note was, of course, European Romanticism; its current mouthpiece, Modernism. To be sure, the reality by and large did not deserve any better. On the whole, art's treatment of contemporary reality is almost invariably punitive—so much so that art itself, especially the incurably semantic art of poetry, can be suspected of having a strong Calvinist streak.

It does: because aesthetic authority cannot be delegated. However, unlike its practitioners, it is capable of an equivalent of grace.

Be that as it may, Kees had no alternative but to pick up that note of negation and play it the best he could. He did, and he played it better than anyone around, to the bitter end. He was a genuine American soloist, with no mute and no support. He played better, to my mind, than Eliot and, on occasion, Auden, whose respective repertoires were wider to begin with. Because they existed, Kees had to go further. He had to go further, I suspect, also because he was from Nebraska. Unlike his great and small contemporaries, he took negation and alienation literally.

His poems display neither the incoherence of nostalgia for some mentally palatable past nor, however vaguely charted, the possibility of the future. All he had was the present, which was not to his Muse's liking, and eventually not to his own either. His poetry, in other words, is that of the here and now and of no escape, except for poetry itself. Yet for all he had to say about the present, his language is amazingly clear and direct, and the formal aspects of his verse are amazingly conservative. Evidently Kees did not feel the imperative of arrhythmia so palpable among his less memorable peers, not to mention successors.

This makes his sanity less questionable than many a melodrama buff would have liked. As for his spiritualistic imagery, that, too, I believe, owes

more to Max Ernst than to his own nightmares. The real nightmare for him was to do a mediocre job; his 1975 *Collected Poems* (edited by Donald Justice) shows him in absolute control of his subconscious. Kees was a professional, not an amateur, and certainly not a sissy. Amateurs and sissies don't write poems as tough as the ones you find in this selection. Once or twice this toughness could be faked, but not for 12 years: the duration of Weldon Kees's career as a poet. Then, too, it's deliberate, which is to say genuine. And it makes one think that whatever happened on July 19, 1955, was not a fluke. It was deliberate.

On that day America lost a very tough poet. For him, it was presumably the end of his rope, but it should not be that way for us. He should be read, and here are a few of his poems. In them, you will hear that keen, implacable, truly American solo, which cannot be mistaken for anything else. This is our trumpet; this, if you will, is our early cool. It is calling to us from the depth of the 1950s, the Eisenhower years. It is very pure, very heart-rending. Its silver penetrates the darkness, and vice versa, almost in gratitude. It sounds sort of like a trumpet solo by Clifford Brown, who also died around the same time.

The Scene of the Crime

There should have been some witness there, accusing—
Women with angry mouths and burning eyes
To fill the house with unforgiving cries;
But there was only silence for abuse.

There should have been exposure—more than curtains
Drawn, the stairway coiling to the floor
Where no one walked, the sheeted furniture,
And one thin line of light beneath the door.

Walking the stairs to reach that room, a pool
Of blood swam in his thought, a hideous guide
That led him on and vanished in the hall.
There should have been damnation. But, inside,
Only an old man clawed the bed, and drooled,
Whispering, "Murderer!" before he died.

The Patient is Rallying

Difficult to recall an emotion that is dead,
Particularly so among these unbelieved fanfares
And admonitions from a camouflaged sky:

I should have remained burdened with destinations
Perhaps, or stayed quite drunk, or obeyed
The undertaker, who was fairly charming, after all.

Or was there a room like that one, worn
With our whispers, and a great tree blossoming
Outside blue windows, warm rain blowing in the night?

There seems to be some doubt. No doubt, however,
Of the chilled and empty tissues of the mind
—Cold, cold, a great gray winter entering—
Like spines of air, frozen in an ice cube.

A Distance from the Sea

To Ernest Brace

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

That raft we rigged up, under the water,
Was just the item: when he walked,
With his robes blowing, dark against the sky,
It was as though the unsubstantial waves held up
His slender and inviolate feet. The gulls flew over,
Dropping, crying alone; thin ragged lengths of cloud
Drifted in bars across the sun. There on the shore
The crowd's response was instantaneous. He
Handled it well, I thought—the gait, the tilt of the head, just
right.

Long streaks of light were blinding on the waves.
And then we knew our work well worth the time:
The days of sawing, fitting, all those nails,
The tiresome rehearsals, considerations of execution.
But if you want a miracle, you have to work for it,
Lay your plans carefully and keep one jump
Ahead of the crowd. To report a miracle
Is a pleasure unalloyed; but staging one requires
Tact, imagination, a special knack for the job
Not everyone possesses. A miracle, in fact, *means* work.
—And now there are those who have come saying

That miracles were not what we were after. But what else
Is there? What other hope does life hold out
But the miraculous, the skilled and patient
Execution, the teamwork, all the pain and worry every miracle
involves?

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

The days get longer. It was a long time ago.
And I have come to that point in the turning of the path
Where peaks are infinite—horn-shaped and scaly, choked with
thorns.
But even here, I know our work was worth the cost.
What we have brought to pass, no one can take away.
Life offers up no miracles, unfortunately, and needs assistance.
Nothing will be the same as once it was,
I tell myself.—It's dark here on the peak, and keeps on getting
darker.
It seems I am experiencing a kind of ecstasy.
Was it sunlight on the waves that day? The night comes down.
And now the water seems remote, unreal, and perhaps it is.

Aspects of Robinson

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

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

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

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

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

Equinox

Under black lace the bald skull shines and nods,
A melon seasoned in this winter sun,
Bare, yellowed, finial
Above the claw-and-ball-foot chair that mourns
North toward the frozen window and the bay. The gulls
Rise in a long line off the rocks, steer
For the lighthouse, shadowing the boats
That toss, abandoned, far beyond the point.
Dead fish are heaped upon the coast for miles.
Her life is sleep, and pain. With waking
To this sequestered and snow-haunted world,
The black mantilla creaks with frost; red eyes
Break through the rinds of flesh, blur

Toward the dripping faucet and the last cans of
Spaghetti and baked beans, corroding on the shelves.

A bubble, then a sound that borders on a word
Breaks from her mouth. If she could think,
Her eighty years would bend toward Spain
Shadows of *santos*, crowds swarming in the heat,
Plumes, awnings, shields, the sun six hours high . . .

She believes this coast is in the South. A month ago,
Smoke from the village chimneys died. No lights burn
In windows of the cottages. Over the vacant docks
The birds are featureless, but her sight fails
Where these walls end.

Exile without remembrance,
Spawned in the heat to perish in this cold,
Ravaged by paresis, and her sight at last
A blackness in the blood, she moves her chair
Inch by excruciating inch, her face
Steered—raw, blank, aching—toward the beans:
The last survivor of the race.

Late Evening Song

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

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

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

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

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