

Classic Poetry Series

**Kenneth Patchen**  
**- poems -**

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## Kenneth Patchen(13 December 1911 - 8 January 1972)

an American poet and novelist. Though he denied any direct connection, Patchen's work and ideas regarding the role of artists paralleled those of the Dadaists, the Beats, and Surrealists. Patchen's ambitious body of work also foreshadowed literary art-forms ranging from reading poetry to jazz accompaniment to his late experiments with visual poetry (which he called his "picture poems").

In 1911, Kenneth Patchen was born in Niles, Ohio. His lifelong romance with writing commenced at age twelve, when he took up keeping a diary and reading the works of famous writers. His first published work was in his high school newspaper. After working for two years with his father, Patchen went on to college in Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College for one year, and then to the University of Wisconsin. He grew bored of his studies, and began to wander around the US. He continued his writing, and in 1934, he married Miriam Oikemus. Patchen dislocated a disk in his spine, an incessantly painful injury, which he lived with for a span of nearly thirty years, before seeking treatment. He died in 1972.

Over the course of his career, which included about forty books, Patchen tried his hand at several types of poetry: concrete poetry, drama, prose, jazz, verse, and the anti-novel. He even published self-illustrated writings, in his own words, were "painted books." Henry Miller called Patchen "The Man of Anger and Light". In his lifetime, he produced many books and poems. His poetry on atrocities of war is especially remembered.

# As We Are So Wonderfully Done With Each Other

As we are so wonderfully done with each other  
We can walk into our separate sleep  
On floors of music where the milkwhite cloak of childhood lies

O my lady, my fairest dear, my sweetest, loveliest one  
Your lips have splashed my dull house with the speech of flowers  
My hands are hallowed where they touched over your  
    soft curving.

It is good to be weary from that brilliant work  
It is being God to feel your breathing under me

A waterglass on the bureau fills with morning . . .  
Don't let anyone in to wake us.

Kenneth Patchen

# Be Music, Night

Be music, night,  
That her sleep may go  
Where angels have their pale tall choirs

Be a hand, sea,  
That her dreams may watch  
Thy guidesman touching the green flesh of the world

Be a voice, sky,  
That her beauties may be counted  
And the stars will tilt their quiet faces  
Into the mirror of her loveliness

Be a road, earth,  
That her walking may take thee  
Where the towns of heaven lift their breathing spires

O be a world and a throne, God,  
That her living may find its weather  
And the souls of ancient bells in a child's book  
Shall lead her into Thy wondrous house

Kenneth Patchen

# Creation

Wherever the dead are there they are and  
Nothing more. But you and I can expect  
To see angels in the meadowgrass that look  
Like cows -  
And wherever we are in paradise  
in furnished room without bath and  
six flights up  
Is all God! We read  
To one another, loving the sound of the s's  
Slipping up on the f's and much is good  
Enough to raise the hair on our heads, like Rilke and Wilfred Owen

Any person who loves another person,  
Wherever in the world, is with us in this room -  
Even though there are battlefields.

Kenneth Patchen

# Do The Dead Know What Time It Is?

The old guy put down his beer.  
Son, he said,  
(and a girl came over to the table where we were:  
asked us by Jack Christ to buy her a drink.)  
Son, I am going to tell you something  
The like of which nobody was ever told.  
(and the girl said, I've got nothing on tonight;  
how about you and me going to your place?)  
I am going to tell you the story of my mother's  
Meeting with God.  
(and I whispered to the girl: I don't have a room,  
but maybe...)  
She walked up to where the top of the world is  
And He came right up to her and said  
So at last you've come home.  
(but maybe what?  
I thought I'd like to stay here and talk to you.)  
My mother started to cry and God  
Put His arms around her.  
(about what?  
Oh, just talk...we'll find something.)  
She said it was like a fog coming over her face  
And light was everywhere and a soft voice saying  
You can stop crying now.  
(what can we talk about that will take all night?  
and I said that I didn't know.)

You can stop crying now.

Kenneth Patchen

# Eve Of St. Agony Or The Middleclass Was Sitting On Its Fat

Man-dirt and stomachs that the sea unloads; rockets  
of quick lice crawling inland, planting their damn flags,  
putting their maethings in any hole that will stand still,  
yapping bloody murder while they slice off each other's heads,  
spewing themselves around, priesting, whoring, lording  
it over little guys, messing their pants, writing gush-notes  
to their grandmas, wanting somebody to do something pronto,  
wanting the good thing right now and the bad stuff for the other boy.  
Gullet, praise God for the gut with the patented zipper;  
sing loud for the lads who sell ice boxes on the burning deck.  
Dear reader, gentle reader, dainty little reader, this is  
the way we go round the milktrucks and seamusic, Sike's trap and Meg's rib,  
the wobbly sparrow with two strikes on the bible, behave  
Alfred, your pokus is out; I used to collect old ladies,  
pickling them in brine and painting mustaches on their bellies,  
later I went in for stripteasing before Save Democracy Clubs;  
when the joint was raided we were all caught with our pants down.  
But I will say this: I like butter on both sides of my bread  
and my sister can rape a Hun any time she's a mind to,  
or the Yellow Peril for that matter; Hector, your papa's in the lobby.  
The old days were different; the ball scores meant something then,  
two pill in the side pocket and two bits says so; he got up slow see,  
shook the water out of his hair, wam, tell me that ain't a sweet left hand;  
I told her what to do and we did it, Jesus I said, is your name McCoy?  
Maybe it was the beer or because she was only sixteen but I got hoarse  
just thinking about her; married a john who travels in cotton underwear.  
Now you take today; I don't want it. Wessex, who was that with I saw you lady?  
Tony gave all his dough to the church; Lizzie believed in feeding her own face;  
and that's why you'll never meet a worm who isn't an antichrist, my friend,  
I mean when you get down to a brass tack you'll find some sucker sitting on it.  
Whereas. Muckle's whip and Jessie's rod, boyo, it sure looks black  
in the gut of this particular whale. Hilda, is that a .38 in your handbag?

Ghosts in packs like dogs grinning at ghosts  
Pocketless thieves in a city that never sleeps  
Chains clank, warders curse, this world is stark mad

Hey! Fatty, don't look now but that's a Revolution breathing down your neck.

Kenneth Patchen



# Fall Of The Evening Star

Speak softly; sun going down  
Out of sight. Come near me now.

Dear dying fall of wings as birds  
complain against the gathering dark...

Exaggerate the green blood in grass;  
the music of leaves scraping space;

Multiply the stillness by one sound;  
by one syllable of your name...

And all that is little is soon giant,  
all that is rare grows in common beauty

To rest with my mouth on your mouth  
as somewhere a star falls

And the earth takes it softly, in natural love...  
Exactly as we take each other...  
and go to sleep...

Kenneth Patchen

# In The Footsteps Of The Walking Air

In the footsteps of the walking air  
Sky's prophetic chickens weave their cloth of awe  
And hillsides lift green wings in somber journeying.

Night in his soft haste bumps on the shoulders of the abyss  
And a single drop of dark blood covers the earth.

Now is the China of the spirit at walking  
In my reaches.  
A sable organ sounds in my gathered will  
And love's inscrutable skeleton sings.

My seeing moves under a vegetable shroud  
And dead forests stand where once Mary stood.

Sullen stone dogs wait in the groves of water ...  
Though the wanderer drown, his welfare is as a fire  
That burns at the bottom of the sea, warming  
Unknown roads for sleep to walk upon.

Kenneth Patchen

# Irkalla's White Caves

I believe that a young woman  
Is standing in a circle of lions  
In the other side of the sky.

In a little while I must carry her the flowers  
Which only fade here; and she will not cry  
If my hands are not very full.

±

Fiery antlers toss within the forests of heaven  
And ocean's plaintive towns  
Echo the tread of celestial feet.  
O the beautiful eyes stare down...  
What have we done that we are blessed?  
What have we died that we hasten to God?

±

And all the animals are asleep again  
In their separate caves.  
Hairy bellies distended with their kill.  
Culture blubbering in and out  
Like the breath of a stranded fish.  
Crucifixion in wax. The test-tube messiahs.  
Immaculate fornication under the smoking walls  
Of a dead world.  
I dig for my death  
in this thousand-watt dungheap.  
There isn't even enough clean air.  
To die in.  
O blood-bearded destroyer!

In other times...  
(soundless barges float  
down the rivers of death)  
In another heart  
These crimes may not flower...  
What have we done that we are blessed?

What have we damned that we are blinded?

±

Now, with my seven-holed head open  
On the air whence comes a fabulous mariner  
To take his place among the spheres—  
The air which is God  
And the mariner who is sheep—I fold  
Upon myself like a bird over flames. Then  
All my nightbound juices sing. Snails  
Pop out of unexpected places and the long  
light lances of waterbolls plunge  
into the green crotch of my native land.  
Eyes peer out of the seaweed that gently sways  
Above the towers and salt gates of a lost world.

±

On the other side of the sky  
A young woman is standing  
In a circle of lions—  
The young woman who is dream  
And the lions which are death.

Kenneth Patchen

# Let Us Have Madness

Let us have madness openly.

O men Of my generation.

Let us follow

The footsteps of this slaughtered age:

See it trail across Time's dim land

Into the closed house of eternity

With the noise that dying has,

With the face that dead things wear--  
nor ever say

We wanted more; we looked to find

An open door, an utter deed of love,

Transforming day's evil darkness;

but We found extended hell and fog Upon the earth,  
and within the head

A rotting bog of lean huge graves.

Kenneth Patchen

# My Generation Reading The Newspapers

We must be slow and delicate; return  
the policeman's stare with some esteem,  
remember this is not a shadow play  
of doves and geese but this is now  
the time to write it down, record the words—  
I mean we should have left some pride  
of youth and not forget the destiny of men  
who say goodbye to the wives and homes  
they've read about at breakfast in a restaurant:  
'My love.'—without regret or bitterness  
obtain the measure of the stride we make,  
the latest song has chosen a theme of love  
delivering us from all evil—destroy. . . ?  
why no. . . this too is fanciful. . . funny how  
hard it is to be slow and delicate in this,  
this thing of framing words to mark this grave  
I mean nothing short of blood in every street  
on earth can fitly voice the loss of these.

Kenneth Patchen

# Pastoral

The Dove walks with sticky feet  
Upon the green crowns of the almond tree,  
Its feathers smeared over with warmth  
Like honey  
That dips lazily down into the shadow ...

Anyone standing in that filled with peace and sleep,  
Would hardly have noticed the hill  
Nearby  
With its three strange wooden arms  
Lifted above a throng of motionless people  
- Above the helmets of Pilate's soldiers  
Flashing like silver teeth in the sun.

Kenneth Patchen

# Saturday Night In The Parthenon

Tiny green birds skate over the surface of the room.  
A naked girl prepares a basin with steaming water,  
And in the corner away from the hearth, the red wheels  
Of an up-ended chariot slowly turn.  
After a long moment, the door to the other world opens  
And the golden figure of a man appears. He stands  
Ruddy as a salmon beside the niche where are kept  
The keepsakes of the Prince of Earth; then sadly, drawing  
A hammer out of his side, he advances to an oaken desk,  
And being careful to strike in exact fury, pounds it to bits.  
Another woman has by now taken her station  
Beside the bubbling tub.  
Her legs are covered with a silken blue fur,  
Which in places above the knees  
Grows to the thickness of a lion's mane.  
The upper sphere of her chest  
Is gathered into huge creases by two jeweled pins.  
Transparent little boots reveal toes  
Which an angel could want.  
Beneath her on the floor a beautiful cinnamon cat  
Plays with a bunch of yellow grapes, running  
Its paws in and out like a boy being a silly king.  
Her voice is round and white as she says:  
'Your bath is ready, darling. Don't wait too long.'  
But he has already drawn away to the window  
And through its circular opening looks,  
As a man into the pages of his death.  
'Terrible horsemen are setting fire to the earth.  
Houses are burning ... the people fly before  
The red spears of a speckled madness . . .'  
'Please, dear,' interrupts the original woman,  
'We cannot help them ... Under the cancerous foot  
Of their hatred, they were born to perish -  
Like beasts in a well of spiders ...  
Come now, sweet; the water will get cold.'  
A little wagon pulled by foxes lowers from the ceiling.  
Three men are seated on its cushions which breathe  
Like purple breasts. The head of one is tipped  
To the right, where on a bed of snails, a radiant child





Farther away now, nearly hidden by the human,  
Another landscape can be seen ...  
And the wan, smiling Queen of Heaven appears  
For a moment on the balconies of my chosen sleep.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Artist's Duty

So it is the duty of the artist to discourage all traces of shame  
To extend all boundaries  
To fog them in right over the plate  
To kill only what is ridiculous  
To establish problem  
To ignore solutions  
To listen to no one  
To omit nothing  
To contradict everything  
To generate the free brain  
To bear no cross  
To take part in no crucifixion  
To tinkle a warning when mankind strays  
To explode upon all parties  
To wound deeper than the soldier  
To heal this poor obstinate monkey once and for all

To verify the irrational  
To exaggerate all things  
To inhibit everyone  
To lubricate each proportion  
To experience only experience

To set a flame in the high air  
To exclaim at the commonplace alone  
To cause the unseen eyes to open

To admire only the absurd  
To be concerned with every profession save his own  
To raise a fortuitous stink on the boulevards of truth and beauty  
To desire an electrifiable intercourse with a female alligator  
To lift the flesh above the suffering  
To forgive the beautiful its disconsolate deceit

To flash his vengeful badge at every abyss

To HAPPEN

It is the artist's duty to be alive

To drag people into glittering occupations

To blush perpetually in gaping innocence

To drift happily through the ruined race-intelligence

To burrow beneath the subconscious

To defend the unreal at the cost of his reason

To obey each outrageous impulse

To commit his company to all enchantments.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Cloth Of The Tempest

These of living emanate a formidable light,  
Which is equal to death, and when used  
Gives increase eternally.  
What fortifies in separate thought  
Is not drawn by wind or by man defiled.  
So whispers the parable of doubleness.  
As it is necessary not to submit  
To power which weakens the hidden forms;  
It is extraordinarily more essential  
Not to deny welcome to these originating forces  
When they gather within our heat  
To give us habitation.  
The one life must be attempted with the other,  
That we may embark upon the fiery work  
For which we were certainly made.

What has been separated from the mother,  
Must again be joined; for we were born of spirit,  
And to spirit all mortal things return,  
As it is necessary in the method of earth.  
So sings the parable of singleness.  
My comforter does not conceal his face;  
I have seen appearances that were not marshalled  
By sleep.  
Perhaps I am to be stationed  
At the nets which move through this completing sea.  
Or I have hunting on my sign.

Yet the ground is visible,  
The center of our seeing. (The houses rest  
Like sentinels on this hawking star.  
Two women are bathing near a trestle;  
Their bodies dress the world in golden birds;  
The skin of their throats is a dancing flute. . .  
How alter or change? How properly  
Find an exact equation? What is flying  
Anywhere that is more essential to our quest?

Even the lake. . . boat walking on its blue streets;  
Organ of thunder muttering in the sky. . . A tiger  
Standing on the edge of a plowed field. . .  
What is necessary? What is inseparable to know?  
The children seek silvery-pretty caves. . .  
What are we to teach?)  
The distance is not great  
To worlds of magnificent joy or nowhere.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Deer And The Snake

The deer is humble, lovely as God made her  
I watch her eyes and think of wonder owned

These strange priests enter the cathedral of woods  
And seven Marys clean their hands to woo her

Foot lifted, dagger-sharp—her ears  
Poised to their points like a leaf's head

But the snake strikes, in a velvet arc  
Of murderous speed—assassin beautiful

As mountain water at which a fawn drank  
Stand there, forever, while poison works  
While I stand counting the arms of your Cross  
Thinking that many Christs could hang there, crying.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Hangman's Great Hands

And all that is this day. . .

The boy with cap slung over what had been a face. ..

Somehow the cop will sleep tonight, will make love to his wife...

Anger won't help. I was born angry. Angry that my father was being burnt alive in the mills; Angry that none of us knew anything but filth, and poverty. Angry because I was that very one somebody was supposed To be fighting for

Turn him over; take a good look at his face...

Somebody is going to see that face for a long time.

I wash his hands that in the brightness they will shine.

We have a parent called the earth.

To be these buds and trees; this tameless bird Within the ground; this season's act upon the fields of Man.

To be equal to the littlest thing alive,

While all the swarming stars move silent through The merest flower

. .. but the fog of guns.

The face with all the draining future left blank. . . Those smug saints, whether of church or Stalin, Can get off the back of my people, and stay off. Somebody is supposed to be fighting for somebody. . . And Lenin is terribly silent, terribly silent and dead.

Kenneth Patchen



# The Naked Land

A beast stands at my eye.

I cook my senses in a dark fire.  
The old wombs rot and the new mother  
Approaches with the footsteps of a world.

Who are the people of this unscaled heaven?  
What beckons?  
Whose blood hallows this grim land?  
What slithers along the watershed of my human sleep?

The other side of knowing ...  
Caress of unwaking delight ... O start  
A sufficient love! O gently silent forms  
Of the last spaces.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Orange Bears

The Orange bears with soft friendly eyes  
Who played with me when I was ten,  
Christ, before I'd left home they'd had  
Their paws smashed in the rolls, their backs  
Seared by hot slag, their soft trusting  
Bellies kicked in, their tongues ripped  
Out, and I went down through the woods  
To the smelly crick with Whitman  
In the Haldeman-Julius edition,  
And I just sat there worrying my thumbnail  
Into the cover---What did he know about  
Orange bears with their coats all stunk up with soft coal  
And the National Guard coming over  
From Wheeling to stand in front of the millgates  
With drawn bayonets jeering at the strikers?

I remember you would put daisies  
On the windowsill at night and in  
The morning they'd be so covered with soot  
You couldn't tell what they were anymore.

A hell of a fat chance my orange bears had!

Kenneth Patchen

# The Rites Of Darkness

The sleds of the children  
Move down the right slope.  
To the left, hazed in the tumbling air,  
A thousand lights smudge  
Within the branches of the old forest,  
Like colored moons in a well of milk.

The sleds of the children  
Make no sound on the hard-packed snow.  
Their bright cries are not heard  
On that strange hill.  
The youngest are wrapped  
In cloth of gold, and their scarfs  
Have been dipped in blood.  
All the others, from the son  
Of Tegos, who is the Bishop  
Of Black Church—near Tarn,  
On to the daughter of the least slut,  
Are garbed in love's shining dress;  
Naked little eels, they flash  
Across the amazed ice.  
And behind each sled  
There trots a man with his sex  
Held like a whip in his snaking hand.

But no one sees the giant horse  
That climbs the steps which stretch forth  
Between the calling lights and that hill  
Straight up to the throne of God.  
He is taller than the highest tree  
And his flanks steam under the cold moon.  
The beat of his heart shakes the sky  
And his reaching muzzle snuffles  
At the most ancient star.

\*

The innocent alone approach evil  
Without fear; in their appointed flame  
They acknowledge all living things.  
The only evil is doubt; the only good  
Is not death, but life. To be is to love.  
This I thought as I stood while the snow  
Fell in that bitter place, and the riders  
Rode their motionless sleds into a nowhere  
Of sleep. Ah, God, we can walk so easily,  
Bed with women, do every business  
That houses and roads are for, scratch  
Our shanks and lug candles through  
These caves; but, God, we can't believe,  
We can't believe in anything.  
Because nothing is pure enough.  
Because nothing will ever happen  
To make us good in our own sight.  
Because nothing is evil enough.

\*

I squat on my heels, raise my head  
To the moon, and howl.  
I dig my nails into my sides,  
And laugh when the snow turns red.  
As I bend to drink,  
I laugh at everything that anyone loves.

All your damn horses climbing to heaven

Kenneth Patchen

# The Slums

That should be obvious  
Of course it won't  
Any fool knows that.  
Even in the winter.  
Consider for a moment.  
What?  
Consider what!  
They never have.  
Why now?  
Certainly it means nothing.  
It's all a lie.  
What else could it be?  
That's right.  
Sure.  
Any way you look at it.  
A silk hat.  
A fat belly.  
A nice church to squat in.  
My holy ass...  
What should they care about?  
It's quaint.  
Twelve kids on the fire escape...  
Flowers on the windowsill...  
You're damn right.  
That's the way it is.  
That's just the way it is.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Snow Is Deep On The Ground

The snow is deep on the ground.  
Always the light falls  
Softly down on the hair of my beloved.

This is a good world.  
The war has failed.  
God shall not forget us.  
Who made the snow waits where love is.

Only a few go mad.  
The sky moves in its whiteness  
Like the withered hand of an old king.  
God shall not forget us.  
Who made the sky knows of our love.

The snow is beautiful on the ground.  
And always the lights of heaven glow  
Softly down on the hair of my beloved.

Kenneth Patchen

# The Temple

To leave the earth was my wish, and no will stayed my rising.  
Early, before sun had filled the roads with carts  
Conveying folk to weddings and to murders;  
Before men left their selves of sleep, to wander  
In the dark of the world like whipped beasts.

I took no pack. I had no horse, no staff, no gun.  
I got up a little way and something called me,  
Saying,  
'Put your hand in mine. We will seek God together.'  
And I answered, 'It is your father who is lost, not mine.'  
Then the sky filled with tears of blood, and snakes sang.

Kenneth Patchen

# There Are Not Many Kingdoms Left

I write the lips of the moon upon her shoulders. In a temple of silvery farawayness I guard her to rest.

For her bed I write a stillness over all the swans of the world. With the morning breath of the snow leopard I cover her against any hurt.

Using the pen of rivers and mountaintops I store her pillow with singing.

Upon her hair I write the looking of the heavens at early morning.

-- Away from this kingdom, from this last undefiled place, I would keep our governments, our civilization, and all other spirit-forsaken and corrupt institutions.

O cold beautiful blossoms of the moon moving upon her shoulders . . . the lips of the moon moving there . . . where the touch of any other lips would be a profanation.

Kenneth Patchen



# We Go Out Together In The Staring Town

We go out together into the staring town  
And buy cheese and bread and little jugs with  
flowered labels

Everywhere is a tent where we put on our whirling  
show

A great deal has been said of the handless serpents  
Which war has set loose in the gay milk of our  
heads

But because you braid your hair and taste like  
honey of heaven  
We go together into town to buy wine and  
yellow candles.

Kenneth Patchen

# When We Were Here Together

when we were here together in a place we did not know, nor one another.

A bit of grass held between the teeth for a moment, bright hair on the wind.

What we were we did not know, nor even the grass or the flame of hair turning to ash on the wind.

But they lied about that. From the beginning they lied. To the child, telling him that there was somewhere anger against him, and a hatred against him, and the only reason for his being in the world.

But never did they tell him that the only evil and danger was in themselves; that they alone were the prisoners and the betrayers; that they - they alone - were responsible for what was being done in the world.

And they told the child to starve and to kill the child that was within him; for only by doing this could he become a useful and adjusted member of the community which they had prepared for him.

And this time, alas, they did not lie.

And with the death of the child was born a thing that had neither the character of a man nor the character of a child, but was a horrible and monstrous parody of the two; and it is in this world now that the flesh of man's spirit lies twisted and despoiled under the indifferent stars.

When we were here together in a place we did not know, nor one another.

O green the bit of warm grass between our teeth. O beautiful the hair of our mortal goddess on the indifferent wind.

Kenneth Patchen

## WHERE?

There's a place the man always say  
Come in here, child  
No cause you should weep  
Wolf never catch such a rabbit  
Golden hair never turn white with grief  
Come in here, child  
No cause you should moan  
Brother never hurt his brother  
Nobody here ever wander without a home  
There must be some such place somewhere  
But I never heard of it

Kenneth Patchen