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Review of *What Matters* by Madeline Tiger
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Madeline Tiger

“WHAT LIES BENEATH”

A review of *WHAT MATTERS* by Adele Kenny

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“ *Language itself, not its emotive referent or expressive content, is the intrinsic aesthetic component of poetry.* ”

—Edith Grossman, from her introduction to *The Solitudes* by Luis de Gongora, quoted by David Orr in “Ways of Saying,” *New York Times Book Review*, December 11, 2011.

The poems in *WHAT MATTERS* by Adele Kenny are carefully wrought, held together by their images and the “music of ordinary speech.” The diction is spare, yet full of implications: the lines ride beyond initial impressions. If you enter this book expecting a narrative of survival you will be surprised: many of these poems do indeed deal with breast cancer and the writer’s surgery; but this is truly a collection of celebrations—of making poems, of river and sky, of life every day, and even a celebration of sorrow.

The reader is of course drawn into experiences of loss and medical threats. Several poems detail, frankly, Adele Kenny’s operation for breast cancer—her fears, her pain and struggle, her determination. Finally, the reader feels the deep breath of relief with her emergence into light and a spiritual lightness. The ordeal of coping with breast cancer is certainly a major topic, but the poems grip life with such assurance that they are more than reflections on endurance, they are detailed expressions of love. Throughout the book many images are metaphors for life: even in an early poem, children touching neighborhood trees feel the sap in their hands.

The poems include childhood memories— of a good father, especially; and of friends, animals, homes, back yards and maple trees.

The past is my first language... introduces a loving view of working class neighborhood life— scenes on front porches, beer-drinking fathers, mothers singing in the kitchens; even before the children knew about death, *the last stars took their places...like nail-heads on a dark and holy board*. What begins by seeming almost mythologized thus reveals an underlying awareness that can only be articulated by the adult poet, decades later. In that world, her father gave her the love of animals, of song, of all that “matters.”

This section of the book also deals with social class and upward mobility, in the same context as joy and grief, with surprising linguistic wit.

There is sadness, inevitably, but the poems keep us in view of the sky, in touch with earth, and enlightened by the dawning of images and the poet’s subtle wisdom.

...A river splits/the creased ravine... /And in all the grandeur, suddenly: ...a voice/ that’s barely heard belongs to you... The power of the river, of all natural forces, death too, is insurmountable; yet the poet captures this vast world, finding beauty everywhere: *...here: this wing, this living*, as the Prologue introduces the motif, this is what the poems teach, season by season.

When Adele Kenny writes about recovery (from cancer) in “No Word for It,” the lines are moving; but it’s the writing we dwell on, in images of *the heron’s glide and dive,/ wings part of the sky... or wind/ that hauled a cargo of clouds*” beyond the life story prompting the work. Dreamlike, her courage and movement into recovery are represented by surreal imagery, slowly, in a low key. The reader hallucinates with the persona and goes “through” the image, as the poem ends with quiet triumph: *“...a door that opens/ inward, and she’s / walking through*.

The path of recovery is strenuous, straining toward *...the road/ bent knee...*, but the poems amass witty images that keep our minds on this working with words: *No big epiphanies,/but smaller things/... moths that call the / porch light a party, my dogs asleep on/ pillows beside me...* The narrative never becomes a sentimental journey. It is just one’s person’s hard story; but these are well practiced poems, and we enter into the rounds they are making.

In a central poem of power and persistence in facing danger, an (imagined) angel is her prompt, the stave of her daring. But in the amusing images of a creaky angel, we see imagination, language, spiritual power: these are the real weapons a writer has. We also see her in her natural setting, among the ordinary details: *...Your dogs, breathless from running rabbits/ and weeds, sit at your feet, heads cocked, ready for home*. As the poet retells her world, *A small brown birds sings in its*

sleep, and (look at you)/ you are almost happy. That is how a poem raises one to joy.

Kenny notices much detail, here and remembered, huge and infinitesimal: *Dewdrops fall on/ the spider's web, small acclamations.../ ...This is the world/ flung from the sun's infallible fist...*

Even in shadow there is a semblance of life, as in the second title poem. Speaking of the dead, in assuming they remember and dream and feel hunger, she offers their wisdom, saying that they *...have something to tell us: / what matters is the quiet beak of a lark in the seed...*

Natural scenes reflect inner experience: in "What It Will Take" she has achieved a calm, stoic fatalism, like a *stone...wearing down to the light in which it casts no shadow.*

Many poems display clever devices of sound patterns, as in a poem that includes dreaming:

The trocheed tick of the mantle/clock is trained in the coming/ hour, tomorrow already taking/ shape... One notices an ominous undercurrent. Then, slowly, *The vision shifts*, and one feels the dream surrounding as *...my mother and/father dance beneath a willow gone.* Vowels open, image tilting. Sadness in balance with beauty. By dawn, one hears the onomatopoeia of consonants again: *...Fitful and faint, a/ night cricket rubs its forelegs together, the first pale bird warbles and weeps.* Sounds are always "in service to the sense," (as Alexander Pope said they should be!)

Little aural surprises are also introduced in "Snake Lady". There's a charming series of rhymed sequences as the carnival snake lady herself charms a tent full of youngsters, who see the snake *between her breasts* making its *thick descent along her thighs...* and releasing the *sudden milky venom*; this Cleopatra-like image turns the poem from innocence to the *easy way she made them burn.* The lines move so quickly one can barely note the paradox of snake venom's milkiness, or the surprises in sounds and meaning at the end: Oh what that snake lady did to those boys! It is Adele Kenny's wit that comes through, in her dextrous manipulations of rhyme and paradox, innocence and intent.

Kenny wisely appropriates the painter's image of Icarus falling to consider "mutability": On accepting failure, the poem declares *we all/ fail* and continues: *...life goes on: ploughman, shepherd / oblivious sheep... the garden passes its shadow to the fence...* and ends with *The earth curves into place. Water. Silt. / Sky. The moon rises and keeps on rising.* In the continuity of all things, loss and change must be acceptable as the fall of Icarus.

Several poems have a graveyard setting. One sees the *light moving across the gravestones...*, and joins the poet in accepting reality but also finding relish in such moments of beauty: *seed tufts float above the river* and *A wild bird pauses between songs*. There is loss, but no time now for mourning; rather, a delicate delight in the living of each day— if the spirit sings clearly, if the senses record precisely, if the narrative is laced with images of this amazing world.

Describing two people tending a grave, *We...thrust our/ fingers into earth...*, there is a tactile richness, and no fear of declaring that they *know what lies beneath*. Death becomes a familiar in these clear lines.

When the poet's dog dies, grief is fully accepted, but quiet images express the joy of loving as well as the sorrow: *...Like all deaths that summer/ remembers...* and *A patch of sun climbs the stairs/ without him...* Tucked into this scene is a telling turn of phrase, *...summer/ remembers*. Even the days and seasons have consciousness, have memory, have wisdom. *The stream remembers/ how to be a stream* (from "Tending the Grave").

Realistic awareness has its hold on how frail and temporal this life is. Paradoxically, such honesty staved by a powerful use of language, provides a strength that common conversation cannot offer. Poetry is meant for this—to serve the speaker and the reader not with certainty, but with strength, and with marveling.

Small details carry the themes: Body and soul are in touch through earth, river and sky. And the moon, *...December's / piebald light, white-maned and glistening/ the moon above us...* "What matters," is earth, sky, human life and death, is memory, is love, is vision, is the poem itself.

In a mystic poem near the end of the collection, major themes are echoed obliquely:

...what you don't/ hold onto, what you/ don't keep ... It's what/ you know is truth...One eye dark,/ light in the other... Here is that acceptance of not knowing, that assertion of "light" for whatever it may mean. Another lyric full of light touches on the details of an autumn scene: *...the way trees darken/ before the sky, the way light slants through / pines... Not the expected order of things but moments of/ other ...and the heaviness lifts inside you*. The poem becomes a parallel for the writer's own body: the poem discovers the body (the poem itself) as "a perfect mold of the light gone through it." Thus, as the poet has allowed the world into her imagination, has seen earth and river and sky, has found the words (which another poem said could not be found!), and has allowed the light to filter and shine on so many things in these lines, she has found the

light moving through her body. "A perfect mold" is the human form; it is also the well wrought poem.

The last lines of the collection serve well here: *We don't forget/ how it feels to rejoice.*