

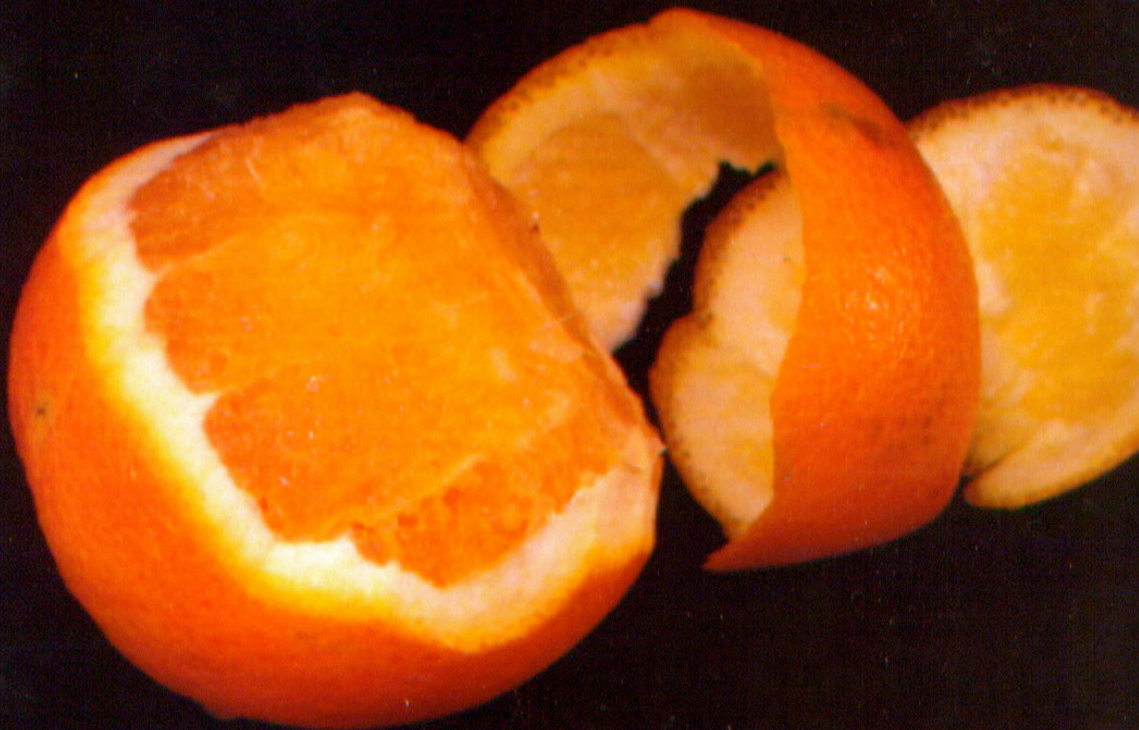


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ADELE KENNY

What Matters

By Adele Kenny

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64 pp. \$15.00.

Adele Kenny is the author of twenty-three books of poetry and nonfiction, and though it might seem one could run out of things to say after so many books, Kenny's most recent volume, *What Matters*, is a frank and beautiful journey into new poetic territory. Both her style and the painful yet comforting truths that she reveals glimmer with startling clarity and originality. A breast cancer survivor, Kenny writes a candid portrayal of life before, during, and after cancer.

Divided into three sections, *What Matters* begins with a past that is seen not just through the lens of memory, but through a lens that is colored by the brutal uncertainty of illness. Section Two features the agonizing time of diagnosis and treatment. And Section Three focuses on the aftermath of cancer, which, as we see through Kenny's eyes, can be a time not only of reclamation, but, even, of new unfolding.

Throughout the collection, Kenny's highly imagistic style makes the emotion of these stages palpable to the reader. The poems, through all the sections, are a swirling motif of bones, stones, pebbles, rocks and other such seemingly solid and permanent objects, as though the poet were attempting to anchor herself in this world with the heavy, dense solidity of matter. However, in light of the transitory nature of illness, even these traditional symbols of permanence are vulnerable to the ravages of time. For instance, in "Like a Stone Falling," a poem previously titled "Alignment" in the "Double Exposures" exhibit at the Silconas Poetry Center & Art Gallery, it is the dead rather than the living who throw the stones. In the poem "In Which," we see yet another sampling of the impermanence of all things in the image of the stone not as endurance but in the inevitability of its erosion:

*I'm told the odds are in my favor;
but it's simpler than that—the cure
works or it doesn't. I imagine a
stone, it's slow wearing down, the
light in which it casts no shadow.*

Yet, the impermanence we witness in these poems, and the unreliability of the physical world, paradoxically grant the narrator an even greater appreciation of tangible objects and experience, which are not desperately sought after, but, simply, savored. In “Where They Are Now,” for instance, we experience “God-shaped hills,” “the deep sky trestle,” “the way skin feels,” and “the tattered screen door” whose hinges still echo in my mind weeks after reading the poem. There is an authenticity to the description that can only be achieved by deep, careful, loving attention, and for this reason the images stick long after the reader has finished the poems.

As we see in Section Three of “What It Will Take,” there is a comfort to even the simplest objects, which the narrator uses as touchstones to know she is alive:

*I pull the sides of my jacket
close, check my pockets for
tissues and keys, familiar things,
still there.*

These basic items, things which we take for granted on a day-to-day basis and often don't even notice, here take on the significance of life itself, grounding the narrator and rooting her in this world.

Add to these more solid images the ethereal, wispy visions of feathers, wings, and flight, and you have the other half of Kenny's poetic equation, a stunning tribute to spirit, victory, and inner strength. In the poem “Of Feathers, Of Flight,” which was a Paumanok Poetry Award finalist and which also received a Merton Poetry of the Sacred Award, a small bird is released from the hand of a woman whose arm is stamped with concentration camp numbers. This sort of charged juxtaposing of images is one of the unique aspects of Kenny's poetry. The arm, the bird: each are meaningful alone, but paired together they are an image powerhouse, driving the concept home.

As with the stone and bone images, the wing and flight images do not merely conform to traditional symbolism but are instead delivered with a certain emotional and intellectual complexity that spins them on their axes and makes them fresh again. Take the following example from “Where Lightning Strikes,” when the speaker learns she has cancer:

*What I wanted was
glisten and shine, but in the space
between sip and swallow, the front
door’s flap and click, it is this,
explicitly this: no illusion of control,
a bird startled by the sudden sky, not
ready for Heaven. Suddenly furious
(and that a blessing), I think death—
that bastard, his hand on my breast, his
lips at my ear, his tongue clicking . . .*

Here we see the sky not as freedom but as an ominous and undesired destination. We are left off-kilter, like the bird, and like the narrator receiving the news.

I would be remiss if I did not also point out the beautiful, expert handling of sound and structure in this passage—the rhythm, internal rhyme, and alliteration all work together with the parallel structure and coordinating conjunctions to make us feel as though we, also, are caught between the sky and earth, between the bad news and living. This high-level sound and structural quality is maintained throughout the entire collection. It is never overdone, never obvious, but always in harmony with the other techniques she employs.

What Matters is a triumphant collection, matching a transcendent poetic sensibility with the small and large victories of the human spirit—its fears, its joys, its ability to persevere. As Stephen Dunn states, “In Adele Kenny’s finely wrought meditations on grief and loss, she never forgets that she’s a maker of poems; in other words, that the poem in its entirety is more important than any one of its utterances, phrasings, or laments.” Because of her careful attention to the smallest of details and the largest of structures, *What Matters* achieves the kind of overall cohesion that translates into complete, enthralled engagement at every level for the reader.

—Melissa Studdard