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Adele Kenny

WHAT MATTERS

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It is no surprise that Adele Kenny's newest poetry volume stuns the reader with honesty, vulnerability, and strength. Those who already have read her work and listened to her read stand ready to step into an arena of metaphor and lyric worthy of song. In fact, Kenny's online blog "The Music in It" offers writers a bounteous stew of poetry, prompts, and news of the poetry world. The poem in the book by the same title, dedicated to her father after his death, speaks of the music of *grief like percussion . . . specific, slamming*. One moment he was there, *then in the crack between air and breath, it was done*, life's delicacy a theme that permeates Kenny's works. She is left with the memory of how the music in his voice turned the corner before he did — an astonishing perception, well remembered. Hence her blog's label, an everlasting tribute.

"The First Sorrow, How It Was" starts at a place where one might not expect music: *The day my father buried our dog . . .* What music will we find there? Kenny does not disappoint, gives us *trees giddy with wind, bagpipes [at a neighbor's wake] wailing like banshees* and we almost can hear the rhythmic sounds of a chair with one short leg keeping time on the floor until her father solves the problem with a carefully-placed matchbook. A spiritual child brought up to revere souls, Kenny admits that she *was prepared to die for a wake like that*. She doesn't cry, she doesn't die, she's only five, but that day of burial, treated with such detail, lets us into her heart, *my next breath already taken*, where we remain throughout the book.

What Matters is a journey through Kenny's childhood, through losses of those dear — *We took what was given: [her mother's] deathbed's window's outward arch, a crooked mercy, the rush of wings* ("Crooked Mercy"). She takes us into an adulthood where her body betrays her with cancer, which puts her into a sphere of fear and sadness. It follows her route to recovery — physical and emotional. The poetry order is carefully crafted, with sections specific to life's phases, but with a fluidity that allows her to look back and forward at will. Part of the first segment taps her childhood memories and beyond; the second — aptly named "Somehow The Angel" — explores the possibility of somatic pain and Death's looming shadows; and the third reconciles her present, her past, and her hope. Just as travelers whose trips to new locales uncannily remind them of terrains they've encountered before, the poems revisit common themes: grace, the constancy of nature, the changing of seasons, love of family, love of God, the warmth of animals, devotion to friends, and afterlife.

Although Kenny writes most poems in the first person, when the world becomes unbearable and the words too hard to own, she slips into the second or third person but there isn't a minute when the reader doesn't know that she owns these feelings, these reactions. She admits it in "This," writing: *she names herself in the second or third person — a way of distancing, a way of seeing*. In this simply named poem, one of many with compressed titles that belie complex messages, she speaks of the phenomenon of all life: *the backward steps, the step ahead*.

Kenny's backward and onward steps are filled with the juxtaposition of the tangible and physically



ungraspable. Stars recur several times. In “East Rahway,” a town tribute that represents the only three-page poem in a book filled with potent brevity, we cross busy Route 1 with the poet and her childhood friends *on a night overworked with summer stars*. They return home to the reality where their fathers’ *beer cans shine in the baritone heat*. In “The Sap Bush” the group *taps sugar deep inside those trees . . . and the tin pails hung . . . that place where stars pressed their imprimatur against the dark*. The poet’s words aptly capture what she felt in the joy of youth and the mystery of the tree under the heavens where *we feel the sap still flowing. Thick. Golden. Sweet*.

Kenny describes the depersonalization of her chemotherapy, where the nurses *know us by those numbers* [dates of birth] but despite her exhaustion, she finds comfort in her beloved dogs: *It doesn’t matter to them that I wear a wig, false eyelashes . . .* (“In Which”). She gifts us again with stars: *Something sings outside my window — birds or scraps of stars (if stars can sing at all)*. She’s been told *the odds are in my favor*; the reader will hope with her for those odds as well. The impersonality of numbered humans also appears in “Of Feathers, Of Flight.” When she and her young coterie find a baby jay, fallen from the nest, a neighbor cautions them that the mother will not take it back. Slowly the narrative takes us to a woman who knew many mothers without children, many children without mothers. As she guides the group to free the bird, now able to fly, [Mrs. Levine] *raised her numbered arm to the light and moved her thumb over each fingertip as if she could feel to the ends of her skin the miracle edge of freedom, of feathers, of flight*.

Bird clothing — feathers, wings — populates many of Kenny’s poems, and takes us to the skies, to the bones of those who’ve left this world, to the corporeal future filled with optimism. She references these winged navigators by name: we fly with airborne starlings, larks, crows, scarlet cardinals, wren and sparrow, all symbols of hope and peace.

Lest one thinks this is a book replete with sadness, it truly is a book filled with joy: children waiting for trains they’d never ride — *We were grubby and poor* — but could anticipate the thrill of *The wires strummed into sparks . . . the dazzle of shadows . . . the tracks’ reverent shudder* (“The Trains”). She laughs at her adult self — and we laugh with her — for a spiritual lapse: *Sunday . . . I didn’t go to church* (“Like I Said”). Instead she spends an indolent day talking to dogs, watching squirrels, and wondering *what it might be like to nibble Prozac from Johnny Depp’s lower lip*. We laugh with her and later we feel her heaviness lift as nature affirms her existence. She no longer feels like *a glass baton that someone else is twirling* when the surgeon calls with bad news (“Where Lightning Strikes.”) Instead, in “Of Other,” toward the end of the book, she moves ahead, leaving part of herself behind, setting free the person she has become:

Tonight, wind pulled leaves from the sky to my feet and, suddenly (without warning) a deer leapt from the thicket behind me — leapt and disappeared — past me as I passed myself, my body filled with absence, with air, a perfect mold of the light gone through it.

We rejoice with her and by the time we reach the title poem, we already know what matters to Adele Kenny and can identify with her appreciation of the comfort provided by life’s everyday items and events. In “What Matters” the poet, who remembers her family, friends, and experiences in exquisite detail, turns memory around. *We are what the dead remember, she says, they cradle us like violins . . . They have something to tell us: what matters is the quiet beak of a lark in the seed, the dead tree’s shadow that stretches upstream.*

What Matters is a volume that should be read over and over. Adele Kenny has shared her innermost thoughts and her spirit. She has allowed us to search for grace along with her and her words encourage us to discover what matters in our own lives.