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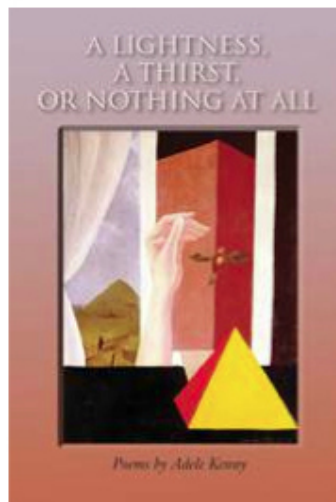
LITERATURE, ART, & THE CREATIVE SPIRIT

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A LIGHTNESS, A THIRST, or NOTHING AT ALL by Adele Kenny

Book Review by Alex Pinto



A Lightness, A Thirst, or Nothing At All

by Adele Kenny

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The fifty-two prose poems in this new collection by Adele Kenny incorporate both world and spirit through technical proficiency, haunting imagery, and rich meaning. As the front jacket flap states, these poems are “intensely focused, compressed, and sharp-edged.” In this work, Kenny turns prose poem form into a conveyance driven by poetic sensibility, word placements, and tightly packed language as in this excerpt from “Always That Thought.”

Always that thought when you least expect it—the one your life trips on—when the sky falls,
one blue grain at a time, and you tumble the way Alice did through the hole. (4)

By definition, prose poems are neither blessed nor bound by lineation. Without abandoning her signature elegance, Kenny incorporates such prose poetry elements as complete sentences and deliberate fragments; she speaks the language of dreams and nods to the surreal as in the poem “No One Said.”

We know something of what happened: the way she tied herself to the world through memory,
how she trusted the past, even the wreck and debris of it. Predictable diminuendos.
Tonight it's one part now, four parts déjà vu. A white mouse in the door of her dream looks into
the trap when everything, it seems, means something else. (12)

The mysterious poem “Oh, Leonardo” is distinguished by a touch of surrealism and dream-like imagery. Like a number of poems in the collection, this poem takes risks and succeeds because of its skillfully precise language and complex levels of meaning. Such poems call to mind Dylan Thomas’s statement, “You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it tick ... You’re back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps ... so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in.” Kenny leaves enough unsaid to invite questions, and there’s ample room for the reader to fill in the blanks; most importantly, there’s always an insight that creeps, crawls, flashes, or thunders in.

... What never happened will never change. ... Lately, I have this sense of nothing that makes sense; and these regrets, like all regrets, have come too late. I have no idea what I would do differently, what old hope we felt, or what the one thing was that neither of us could name. The dark is convincing but, oh, Leonardo, it’s morning somewhere and maybe, just maybe ...
(14)

In all of these poems, Kenny’s images are like suspended presences that begin and end with the feeling that there is much more subject matter than the obvious. Throughout the collection, there are bedrock themes of connection and associations, as well as voiceless communication in the spaces between stanzas. In “Just Perhaps,” we encounter Shakespeare’s Ophelia as portrayed by Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais and, then, there is an unexpected shift to a friend’s suicide. This poem, like so many in the collection, goes far beyond mere observation. As the poem moves from Ophelia to friend, the reader wonders if Ophelia in the poem, the one still alive and singing is, in fact, the author or any one of us who has been, in some way, left behind.

And just perhaps, as Hamlet’s mother said, she’s still alive and singing—see, her mouth is open, and her eyes; and just perhaps, she doesn’t know how close to death she is—or why this painting makes me think of you. *Your* death was not offstage the way Ophelia’s was (the ladder placed, the rope around your neck); nor was the way you parted from yourself, the silent swinging—only air beneath your feet. (33)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this collection is its sense of spiritual autobiography and the way these poems continue the journey begun in Kenny’s award-winning collection *What Matters*. As always, in Kenny’s poems, individual experiences may be different from our own, but the core of her reflections touches each of us. Consider this excerpt from “You Reach a Certain Age”

And sometimes the weight of it gets to you, this language of leaving, of holding on. It’s nothing to do with what gets lifted up—a river holds whatever the sky throws into it, a bird that has no need of earth flies away. You reach a certain age and begin to see how things unwind, the way it

all plays out. You learn what's essential, what's not, and it hardly matters what the world was like when you first tried to exalt it. (48)

Hardwired by Kenny's gift for dimension and her profound understanding of the human spirit, the poems in this collection show us the healing power of attention and awareness. Kenny's words move associatively (and swiftly) through image and sound, and she makes a particular music that is uniquely her own. Impelled by lyrical precision, these poems cast light on what we are learning, and what we already know, about ourselves.

All notion of distance disappears—what feels like entering. Suddenly (like walking into a light you know), you discover this: the certainty that nothing is certain, the deep relief of your own incredible smallness. (56)

This collection contemplates the ways in which the “interior life and the outside world intersect” and is a must-read for anyone interested in looking beneath the surface of things. In addition, through the process of these poems, Kenny leads us to see that, as C. S. Lewis wrote of the spiritual journey, “... there must be a real giving up of the self.”

“What You See All Night” bears the full weight of Kenny's message. It is the poem that gives this *tour de force* its title and for which the Magritte painting was chosen for the cover:

The wild bird you catch and let go—what you see all night at the corner of your eye (along the outline of unfolded wings)—when the self gives itself up (a bell diffused into air)—more idea than expression:

a lightness, a thirst, or nothing at all. (54)



ALEX PINTO is a poet and nonfiction writer from the former Portuguese colony of Goa. He holds degrees from Seton Hall and the University of Bombay and has been a Roman Catholic priest for 45 years. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Black Swan Review*, *Exit 13*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Troubadour*, *The Voice*, *Tiferet*, and others. He has served as a grants review panelist and guest artist for a variety of arts and educational agencies.