Arts & Humanities

Poem: "Me and Kenneth"

By J. D. Scrimgeour '86CC, '87GSAS

Fall 2011

Hearing Dean Young on a Poetry Foundation podcast talking
  about Kenneth Koch
and reading his elegy for Koch,
and then, once I got to my office,
reading a few of Koch's poems in *Thank You*,
and then remembering Jeffrey Harrison's elegy for Koch
  that I read online,
and the AWP panel that Mark Halliday was on celebrating Koch,

I think: I should write an elegy for Kenneth Koch!
I was in a class of his at Columbia. We read the anthology
of modern poetry he had put together with Kate Farrell,
Sleeping on the Wing. I probably wouldn't have been a poet
without that class and that book.

I wasn't a dedicated student then. When I went to my classes,
it was out of obligation. But Koch liked D. H. Lawrence so much,
and Apollinaire, and Mayakovsky, that I went to class
to hear him read their poems.

That was the year I started writing poems.

It was the year that I would walk five long blocks from my dorm
to my girlfriend’s dorm, trying not to step on the cracks
  in the sidewalk,
seeing how many steps I could take without doing so,
  but not altering
my gait noticeably (I didn’t want to look nuts).
Why didn’t I look up, though? I was in New York City.
Numbers would always be there, and everywhere.
Irrelevant records would be set and broken and set,
yet I counted. And when I made it to Nicole’s door
(I changed her name),
I put the numbers aside and fell into her arms and her bed.
I wrote a sentimental love poem to her about those cracks,
  it even rhymed,
and when she read it she hugged me and kissed me and
  thanked me.

I don’t know where that poem is now.
Nicole is a pediatrician somewhere in Delaware — I Googled her
  a couple times.
I wonder if Kenneth Koch got to enjoy the word Googled.

And that was also the year that students put chains
  across the doors
of Hamilton Hall, where Koch’s class was held,
  and if you wanted
to go to class, you had to take a tunnel from Philosophy Hall,
so even though I agreed with the protests — I wanted Columbia
to divest from South Africa — I would go to class. Sometimes.

I didn’t go to class the day Koch read a few student poems.
I was telling another student how I had turned in my parody of
  Lawrence’s poem,
“Snake” — God, that’s a good poem. You should read that
after you finish reading this — and that student said,
“Oh, he read your poem in class!”

If I wanted to be maudlin I could make that moment
emblematic of my life:
How I missed the times when my words were read aloud,
and there may even be some truth to that. I’m a teacher,
and students, if they talk about me at all, probably repeat things
I’ve said in class outside of class, among themselves,
so I don’t get to hear my own words being appreciated.

If you’re interested, there’s more about me and Kenneth Koch
in my essay “Me and Langston.” But I didn’t write about
the letter that he sent me a few months before he died,
after I’d written to him to thank him for *Sleeping on the Wing*
because I’d used the book in my creative writing classes
for a decade and I still loved it, even if my students didn’t.
In the letter, he did what I did at the beginning of this stanza —
He told me about other books of his. “If you liked that book,
you might like . . .” he wrote.

Before I finish, I want to mention
that I was listening to the podcast about Kenneth Koch
on my iPod as I was walking to school on the day

after Halloween.

Did Kenneth ever hear that word, iPod?

And as I was walking, and listening to him read a poem,

and then Dean Young read his elegy to Koch on the podcast

through a cell phone —

“Elegy on a Toy Piano” it’s called —

I was seeing how many steps I could take, consecutively,

without stepping on a crack.

— J. D. Scrimgeour ’86CC, ’87GSAS

Scrimgeour is the author of the poetry collection *The Last Miles* and two nonfiction books. In 2010, he released *Ogunquit and Other Works*, a poetry and music CD. He is a professor of English at Salem State University.

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