

‘Not Without Violence’: The Disappearing World of Weldon Kees

A warm night in San Francisco, October 1954. Weldon Kees is enjoying an evening’s jazz. In nine months’ time, he will leave his home and disappear forever. But tonight, he is unwinding at the Aluminium Cherubim. To one side of him sits W. H. Auden. To the other, Walter McGrail, a moustachioed silent-movie star best known for *The Perils of Pauline*. Auden felt a little out of place, but Kees was perfectly at home, sat halfway between the definitive modern formalist poet and a relic of a misremembered jazz-age. In a sense, that’s still where he sits today.

Last year marked the centenary of Kees’s birth. This July will be the sixtieth anniversary of his disappearance. Almost nothing has been done to celebrate these dates. Dylan Thomas’s hundredth was greeted by a flurry of publications and re-releases. In the last two years, there has been only one new edition of Kees (*1926 & Other Poems*, Sick Fly, London). The print-run stretched to twenty-three copies. Several remain unsold.

Who was Weldon Kees? Try listing his careers in a single breath: poet, painter, musician, photographer, film-maker, novelist, journalist, sociologist, radio-presenter, critic. He was a friend of Elizabeth Bishop and a confidant to Ezra Pound. His poetry earned him a wide circle of admirers (including William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Rexroth). Though his music was little more than a hobby, Kees had a knack for being at the centre of things, whether interviewing Fats Waller for *Time*, or designing album covers for Jelly Roll Morton. Jesse ‘Lone Cat’ Fuller, the guitarist in Kees’s jazz trio, would later support The Rolling Stones and prove a formative influence on Eric Clapton’s playing-style. Kees was a supportive friend to

Nesuhi Ertegun, then just the owner of the little Jazz Man Record Shop. Ertegun is now known as the co-founder of Atlantic Records.

Kees had plenty of acquaintances, but few close friendships. Like many extroverts, he felt isolated even while entertaining at a party, cracking his strange jokes or playing swing-piano. For Kees, loneliness was an obsession; early thoughts of depression and suicide grew into a lifelong artistic preoccupation. His poetry is filled with empty rooms, and the sense that things are getting worse. Its humour is certainly too dark for some tastes. His world has the bleak, unflinching persistence of Beckett's, or Kafka's. The first of his 'Five Villanelles' captures this mood:

The lease has warnings buried in each clause.
We must remain until the roof falls in.
These nights one hears a creaking in the hall,
The sort of thing that gives one pause.
The crack is moving down the wall.
We must remain until the roof falls in.

Kees was fascinated by death and disappearance. He began, but never finished, a compendium of literary suicides, which would have included many of his favourite writers: Ambrose Bierce, who vanished after leaving America for Mexico; Hart Crane, who Kees believed had faked his death, swimming to safety after jumping from USS Orizaba, as it passed the Mexican gulf. On leaving New York, Kees described himself as 'fleeing a stricken city... a dark and dreadful place.' San Francisco was little better. On July 17th 1955, Kees shared a few drinks with his friend Michael Grieg, explaining that he planned either to kill himself, or move to Mexico – the two ideas seemed inseparable in his mind. Two days later, his car was found empty by the Golden Gate Bridge. His watch, wallet and sleeping-bag had been taken from his flat. Kees was never seen again. As police searched his apartment for evidence, the phone rang. There was no-one at the end of the line.

All day the phone rings. It could be Robinson

Calling. It never rings when he is here.
Outside, white buildings yellow in the sun.
Outside, the birds circle continuously
Where trees are actual and take no holiday.
(from 'Robinson')

For the most part, Kees had a stoical view of life. Any depression took the form of a cool detachment, a perspective that he would often use for comic effect:

The day the fat woman
In the bright blue bathing suit
Walked into the water and died,
I thought about the human
Condition. Pieces of old fruit
Came in and were left by the tide.
(from 'The Beach in August')

He was always outspoken. Reviewing new paintings by Robert Motherwell, he wrote: 'I can bear it no longer. It is monstrous. It is unfathomable.' T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* was 'appallingly amateurish ... the worst play ever to get on the boards'. In James Reidel's biography (to which I am indebted), we find this anecdote:

The painter Mark Rothko said one evening that he had not felt anything when he saw the films of the Nazi death camps; they did not have anything to do with him. There was a shocked, tense little silence [...] and then Kees said quietly, 'What you mean, Mark, is that you're a moral dwarf.'

Unlike Rothko, Kees had no formal training as an artist. Nonetheless, by his mid-thirties he had helped to define the New York School of abstract expressionism. He curated the influential Forum '49 programme, raising Jackson Pollock's reputation in the process. In 1950, his work hung at the Kootz Gallery's 'Black or White' exhibition, alongside paintings by Picasso, Braque, Mondrian and de Kooning. All this has been forgotten. Not a single book has



*'Red Entrance' by Weldon Kees, 1948
Oil on canvas, 96cm x76cm
Copyright: 'Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors,
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been written on his art, and reproductions are difficult to find.

Like many left-leaning intellectuals of his age, Kees opposed America's involvement in the Second World War. Raised by a generation of the wounded, his horror at the possibility of joining another war – any war – was understandable. 'June, 1940' begins with an epigraph from Wilfred Owen, and ends with one of Kees's most memorable lines:

[...] It is summer again, the evening is warm and silent.
The windows are dark and the mountains are miles away.
And the men who were haters of war are mounting the platforms.
An idiot wind is blowing; the conscience dies.

It was one of his early hits. Following its newspaper publication, he even began to receive fan-mail. That last line would inspire a well-known classic by a later writer – Bob Dylan's *Idiot Wind*. Unsurprisingly, Dylanologists are largely unaware of Kees. It's a pattern that reoccurs elsewhere; to writers, Kees is pure catnip – with his fascinating life-story and distinctive voice, he makes excellent material. For scholars, the situation is different. Kees always felt he was 'born too late', and it would seem the academy agrees. Though his influences are clear (Eliot, MacNeice), his poetry does not sit easily with any particular movement, falling into the gap between schools; out of step with the Beats and far from Black Mountain, too late for modernism and yet not a post-modernist in any conventional sense.

Readers, however, are less concerned with categorising good writing. In recent years Kees's name has become something of an open secret, passed by personal recommendation or word of mouth. He rarely makes it onto student reading-lists, so the joy of discovery often adds to the pleasure. *The London Magazine* deserves part of the credit for bringing him across the pond; former editor Alan Ross was a keen and outspoken admirer of Kees's poetry. Like many others, he wrote an *homage*, 'Weldon Kees at the Golden Gate', picturing the poet as a 'Sleuth of the self, grey-gloved / Haunter of shadows, the ocean's margin.' Through Ross, Kees found another high-profile fan in Hugo Williams (recently nominated for the Forward Prize). In

his regular column for the *TLS*, Williams wrote: ‘The most battered book in my possession is *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* [... it] would almost certainly accompany me to that musical desert island, preferably without the Bible or Shakespeare.’

Kees has made a deep impression on several major writers, even if his influence is seldom noted. The ‘Robinson’ poems have been put forward as a source for Berryman’s ‘Dream Songs,’ and he is name-checked in poems by (amongst others) Robert Lowell, Donald Justice and Simon Armitage, who mythologised his first encounter with the poet in ‘Looking for Weldon Kees’:

I’d heard it said by Michael Hofmann
that *Collected Poems* would blow my head off,
but,
 being out of print
 and a hot potato
 it might be a hard one
 to get hold of.

For a 1993 BBC film, Armitage visited the places of Kees’s life, from the Golden Gate Bridge to his home-town in Nebraska, viewing them through the lens of his tragic disappearance. This sad returning, layering one past on another, defines one of Kees’s most personal lyrics, ‘1926’:

The porchlight coming on again.
Early November, the dead leaves
Raked in piles, the wicker swing
Creaking. Across the lots
A phonograph is playing Ja-Da.
An orange moon. I see the lives
Of neighbors, mapped and marred
Like all the wars ahead, and R.
Insane, B. with his throat cut,
Fifteen years from now, in Omaha.
I did not know them then.

My airedale scratches at the door.
And I am back from seeing Milton Sills
And Doris Kenyon. Twelve years old.
The porchlight coming on again.

Milton Sills and Doris Kenyon were silent film-actors, almost forgotten even at the time of writing. It's his favourite Kees poem, Armitage tells me: 'It's very affecting. I stood on that porch. I went to the house where he was brought up, and I went to his school and looked through his records.' And did he learn anything about the poet from this? "No. He was sort of mysterious, anonymous. I tracked down some old friends of his, two ladies living in a nursing home, and they just kept saying, 'He marched to the beat of a different drummer.' Obviously, it was this line that they'd rehearsed and spoken a million times. I went to his grave as well, in Nebraska. The fact that there's a gravestone there, but no body, is a perfect landmark for those Robinson poems."

For many, the 'Robinson' poems are Kees's greatest achievement. These four strange, eerie lyrics are almost a self-portrait; Robinson's various unexplained disappearances mirror Kees's own:

The dog stops barking after Robinson has gone.
His act is over. The world is a gray world,
Not without violence, and he kicks under the grand piano,
The nightmare chase well under way.
The mirror from Mexico, stuck to the wall,
Reflects nothing at all. The glass is black.
Robinson alone provides the image Robinsonian.
(from 'Robinson')

As well as prompting a whole book of imitations by Armitage (*Round Robinson*), they've inspired a novel-in-verse from the American poet Kathleen Rooney and a marvellous jazz-poem by Brian Johnstone, recently adapted for a twenty-piece orchestra. 'The image Robinsonian' is reflected in many places; in this blankness, some see not only Kees but themselves, or their

loved ones. ‘I’ve always been attracted to the dark side of things,’ says Johnstone, explaining that on first encountering Kees he ‘empathised hugely’ with the poet. Johnstone’s ‘Robinson: A Journey’, was informed both by Kees’s disappearance, and by ‘the recent experience of a bout of severe mental illness in someone to whom I am particularly close.’

Armitage felt a similar personal connection: ‘For a few years, I found a kind of companionship in his work. And certainly those Robinson poems became a means of expression for me ... I found it interesting to think what it’d be like if you resurrected him in late 20th century West Yorkshire. And I *think* he made a go of it.’ It may sound odd, but the Huddersfield poet sees Kees as a fellow countryman: ‘[His poems] strike me as quite British ... He seems largely out of step with a lot of what was going on in America at the time, and now. I think they are still contemporary, in outlook and attitude, and in their relationship with the page. [Robinson] reminds me of Larkin’s Mr. Bleaney.’

John Burnside’s latest book, *Something Like Happy*, offers a subtler tribute. One character is a lovelorn academic; each year she recites ‘The Smiles of the Bathers’ to her students:

The smiles of the bathers fade as they leave the water,
And the lover feels sadness fall as it ends, as he leaves his love.
[...]
These perfect and private things, walling us in, have imperfect
and public endings –
Water and wind and flight, remembered words and the act of love
Are but interruptions. And the world, like a beast, impatient and
quick,
Waits only for those who are dead. No death for you. You are
involved.

Something Like Happy is defined by this tone. ‘The mood overall is consistent with Kees’s worldview – and not just the one poem’, Burnside tells me. ‘If I were to summarize that mood, it would be to say that we *might* find

ourselves perfectly fine – something like happy – if we could just evade the impositions of ideas of self, happiness and relationship that others seem to want to put over on us [...] As one of the characters in my new novel suddenly said, out of nowhere, people seem so prepared to define themselves by somebody else’s idea of loneliness.’ Kees (who named his cat ‘Lonesome’) certainly invented a loneliness of his own.

Burnside’s story requires a suspension of disbelief; professors who care about Weldon Kees are practically mythical creatures. The indifference was mutual. Several of Kees’s poems are a Dadaist parody of pointless research and otiose knowledge. In Don Paterson’s words, one of ‘Kees’s shock tactics [was] making a little song of random snippets from some hellish Universal Biography of Anybody’:

Consider it. J. Hildebrandt believed
in a Virgilian nucleus. Skutsch added fuel
to the dispute; he mentioned Gallus’ name.
He died. After a while the twentieth century came.

‘Abstracts of Dissertations’ continues in this vein, until its deadpan final line: ‘Mortality of Fish: A Rational Approach.’ It’s easy to see the impact on later writers; John Ashbery, for instance, has built a career out of this trick.

While his contemporaries enjoyed comfortable university positions, Kees refused to settle down. As a result, he juggled his endless projects with no financial security, and had little influence on US campuses. One of the few American scholars to care about Kees is Dana Gioia, a man who enjoys ruffling feathers. His touchstone 1991 essay ‘Can Poetry Matter?’ swamped the mailbags at *The Atlantic*, reportedly provoking more angry letters from their readers than any other piece that decade. I asked Gioia what it would take for a major academic to take notice of Kees: ‘A revolver held to the temple for two years, though the professor would still demand the summer off ... There is a fundamental split now between the poets that writers prefer and those academics choose. There is little overlap in what they read and talk about ... Young writers almost always love him – perhaps because

they still believe that the total collapse of civilization is worth getting depressed about.’

Gioia makes a convincing case for his achievement: ‘Much of Kees’s special power comes from mixing high and popular culture as equal elements – as well as mixing humour and existential terror. Literature, jazz, painting, movies, newspaper items, and advertising mix on equal terms his poetry. No one else was doing this at the time. If poets mentioned popular culture, it was mostly to ridicule it. Kees was postmodern *avant la lettre*. His awareness of popular and commercial culture (as well as his suspicions about high culture) gives his work a contemporary feeling. His work presents the actual, confusing world in which we live. Poets who don’t live in seminar rooms understand this quality. Those who live in seminar rooms seem to miss it.’

In his omnivorous, egalitarian approach to culture, Kees fulfils T. S. Eliot’s concept of ‘good art.’ Those who have only half-read Eliot, and enjoy painting him as an arch elitist, would do well to reread his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*: ‘We should not consider the upper levels as possessing more culture than the lower [...] fine art is the *refinement*, not the antithesis, of popular art.’ He paints a bold image of culture operating ‘in a kind of cycle, each class nourishing the others.’ Remember: the author of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is also the Groucho Marx-groupie who taught Virginia Woolf the Chicken Dance. Like Eliot, Kees loved and detested modern life in equal measure. Like MacNeice, he believed a poet should be ‘fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter.’ Kees’s writing – urban and urbane, witty in despair and solemn in hope – is now more relevant than ever.