

A Sequence

A Sequence in One Place

Poems

by

Lenny Koff

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I. Too Much Light

Lenny Koff

One who would not sleep,
one too powerful to be ignored,
was pushed, half hidden,
always looking up,

waiting quietly for the opening
the pin needs, losing himself
in what he once was, from what
he had been separated.

Only the pin sees where it has to go,
and he sits there seeing the open.

Too much light, the interminable

white of tile. The dark,
the self, hidden from glare.
Where is the flexible?
It doesn't dare show its face.

The world in bed . . . why would I reach
to turn the light,
to force blinding distinctions?
What I do and what I want to do
are interchangeable.

If only I could dance
with one molecule of oxygen,
where the atmosphere meets
the inch beyond gravity
and step into no force.

Hope might reach this high,
proof in the face of the creator,
waiting for me to see high ground,
where everything has gone,
the ground of trust.

Lenny Koff

In Search of the World

1.

My mother's closed the kitchen window
in the nick of time. She knows I hate to play outside.
I'd rather sit and think.

But she has plans, reminding me,
in her own way to sit near the phone,
just in case it rings.

2.

My one good father's great.
He gets it wholesale.
Don't be fooled, however.
You'd better need it bad
or there's hell to pay.

He gives no privacy.
Your secret wish could be sitting
in the driveway.

His generosity compasses
all your boundless world: like a fish.
But to breath is to drown . . .

3.

Once I stared out the window with big eyes.
Now I'll go hungry.
Inner love is fathomless.

4

A Sequence

Once I dropped anchor,
salted my skin and licked by wounds.

But I climbed into bed as soon as you came,
willing to sink.

Once I jumped up and down.
I would have liked an audience.

Lenny Koff

My throat, a barricade

against my vocal cords, my past a memory
of cause and course I cannot prove.

My name is not like credible
etching on stone.

 Explanations now,
with time enough to make them—
who has time enough to hear them?—
have no face. Something of me
has been ground.

 And sand
that water thickens doesn't hold
the shape of action.

My inevitable stream hasn't yet gathered
on the ground of trust, despite my eyes.

The silent universe is noisy.

The sound of the big bang
moving out to the destruction
of boundaries.

Sound is a land mass
visible in all directions
from where I stand
at the side of hearing.

Lenny Koff

II. Wings of the Theatre

Lenny Koff

How will we open,
full of dread, concealing
what we never expected to have?

Our strength defies the water
that brought us here.

All we need is one tendril's inch
and we'd become marsh grass
moving the otherwise
billowing invisible.

.

We'd become a line of grace.
Who can deny us that?

I wait in the wings of the theater

without visible, or invisible, means of flight,
fastened here without history,
and the crowd calls for the play.

I can tear the pages of the script,
bring down the house,
the adoration I am waiting to see,

or wait to appear on the poster,
fame guaranteed for a lifetime of dedication
like a piece of theater furniture.

Which is it then? Another choice?
But where can I go to do it?
If only I could reach for the curtain
to cover myself.

Lenny Koff

I can't tell if I'm hungry or anxious—

that feeling . . . Perhaps not knowing is a kindness,
an indulgence, because I do,
raiding the refrigerator for leftovers.

I eat on the run, my stomach tightening around
less and less, giving me a sharp appearance,
which no amount of solicitation from those nearby
can make me give up.

I remain wanting and not wanting favors,
with shelves of unopened, or half opened,
condiments that, when I've run out of thin crackers,
I dip into with baby fingers
or, carefully, with tips of knives.

A Sequence

The magnificent tree, housed on the street,
shading the flat building with moving shadows,
securing dark places for small animals . . .
It has roots and branches. Who would cut it down?
Rooted in trust, it relies on the sun,
helpless and weeping.

I was kept in a crate,
wanting so much, a show dog, afraid of noise
and sudden touching, a grave hand
still teaching me, my wife doing the best she can.

Lenny Koff

There are no glasses for conditions of the mind,
hard to see in yourself, but so obvious to friends:
the obsession of one book,
playing itself out as if alive,
leaving hundreds of books unopened.

In these foreign pages,
some of which have not been cut,
lie characters of tree-like strength,
soft to the touch when they are . . .
holding on to fiction for dear life,
calling me wordlessly as I move
through stacks, pursuing one book
again and again, its story opening
in raw color, which even old films
require now to be believed.

The heart falls, like a rock on a cord,
descending without fail to the sea floor,
coming to rest, if luck is with it,
among barnacles and small fish
who'd mind their own business
if only they knew what was good for them.

They dart through reeds that move only
when the current changes,
riding a heavy medium so that nothing
violent happens and nothing
quits happening and it feels natural.

Lenny Koff

How we measure time when it sits heavy.

We feel it in limbs we can't imagine moving,
as if we wore ideas on our sleeve,
like feelings, having us, feeling everything.
We are horizontal, full as rock.

But when we suddenly push back
the reclining chair because clouds
begin pouring over the mountains,
we are subject to sheer imbalances,
forced to take back multiple senses,
like objects strewn around us,
of having sat there putting things
in perspective, now a series of stills
tucked away in the pockets of an album.

I've seen dining rooms

and people eating with silverware,
and I've sat long enough
to notice how I'm sitting.

My palms have a tender skin,
a thin, unbreakable layer.
Rows of forks to the left of the plate,
knives to the right, are implacable.
I cannot use them up.

They were placed
by careful hands amid the noise of china,
bright, irregular, like a chain of events
as steady as laughter.

In the endless service under chandeliers,
as if this were engagement,
my stride won't break
or my company depart.

Lenny Koff

How we turn objects into objects they aren't.

Projection is the most universal way,
and the most corrected. That's why
we go to shrinks—to be real,
to insist he's only there to help, which cannot help,
but only get us into trouble.

He, or anyone else, should be able to withstand
our innocent push . . .

We want so much to belong,
to grasp people who, sitting close by,
like flesh, make a difference.

And after each therapeutic session,
which passes for intimacy,
everyone goes home,
no harm done, the real happily
continuing to exist like stone.

Death is a kind of game.

The beloved is always where she used to be,
the other room, the other chair,
not sitting where we sit,
humbled by the low light and the mirror.

How long we keep this up,
the eternal game of death,
depends entirely on us,
lodging hope where hope
would disappear should we enter
too abruptly like police on a stakeout.

We can play it anywhere,
waiting for an elevator,
or if we go to dinner with another couple,
in the back seat, staring out the window,
objects rushing by with familiar speed,
remembering when we were children
and our father drove.

Lenny Koff

The defect of genes runs through everything,
and that is what we fear,
that we may shrink as you do.

Despite your words,
we have a real place in our being,
and we want that back.

And when we find the cure,
we'll bring you back because the two of us
belong where being is a steady skeleton,
our invisible architecture,
social order, the creator of everything,
the god within.

III. Taken by Surprise

Lenny Koff

Standing by the window,
the first to see the shore,
I divide the sky, a windless gravity.

I have fallen into body from a long way off,
changed loyalties to a generation
of photographs in the hall.

For knowing is remembering,
waking to a thought only fragments of which
we can utter, a phrase settling in ellipses,
an egg in a basket.

My shore is an alien miracle
to which I am only given the shore—
pools of green and red algae, teeming flies,
thick buzzing from a fresh underground.

A Sequence

They come at night, navigating blindly,
illuminated by something inside
even they can't see, driven from some upper region,
almost airless, through molecules so far apart
they pass soundlessly, until thickening matter
blunts their descent, and they drift downwards,
carried by indifferent winds to fields and pots.

By morning, they have grown
like mushroom clouds, hundreds of the lucky ones,
spreading wings as if to imitate flight,
fleshy, poisonous, nourished now by soil
around the base of plants taken completely by surprise.

Lenny Koff

Windows shatter and the world cracks,
glass strewn everywhere,
like voices speaking their own minds
without being asked.

Once our circle, calm as stemware,
went unnoticed. Now the air's untamed,
unmasked.

We are looking for polyphony,
complete as couplets,
eyebrows raised, arms wide open,
to put in front of us
so rage is only seen as decoration.

They speak about it euphemistically—
taking care of business, when the brain's
released control of bodily functions,
and we pun desperately
on the real moment of death.
The end of life creates the veil
with which we turn to it.

For I was there when a dose,
injected through a catheter in her rear leg,
holding her head, speaking
quietly, put her down.

And I hoped for comfort
at the moment when I found myself
in my own arms, remembering our last walk,
and my not letting her sit
at the far end of the parking lot,
so weak, fearing she'd not make it back
to the vet's office, where her fate lay.

My feelings now, after more than a week,
are still anesthetized, imitating
my own power to make life easy to slip out of.

Lenny Koff

There should be no difference.

But moths frighten. Perhaps it's their color,
the gray brown, or the fluttering around
night lights if you let them,
having left the screen door open,
perhaps unconsciously inviting your worst fears in.

Butterflies circle, too, but they remain outside
or you put them there,
treating them with the tenderness
their hesitant wings deserve.

How they make it straight to South America
may be the final mystery of their strength,
for they wait before the flight,
hovering near a single flower,
not wanting anything from it,
but giving something unspoken.

Moths should be set outside
by the icy dark along the bottom of the world.

IV. Allow the Street

Lenny Koff

Not an easy thing.

Legs have to hold without
folding at the knees involuntarily.

I'm my own blood,
a fragile membrane like gauze,
soaking up as much of the deadly spill
as it can, the fluids of the human body,
an unforgiving liquid.

The land is drying now
because the water is damned again.

This is blood we'd better keep to ourselves
behind unbreakable membranes,
behind the comfort of gloves,
the filtering masques, eyes
open to self-protection, big with the fear
of violation, a singularity of décor,
the whole world a corridor.

I allow myself the street,
waiting just this side of the door,
first one eye, then the other
between the top and bottom hinge.

Then Mitchel waved, his truck stuffed
with tomatoes, plums, the very geography
of my room . . .

I have wrapped myself in a paper bag,
hung on the scale and rode with him
to the next block: dirt sidewalks
overgrown along a brown edge,

then hitch-hiked home, thumbing
and walking backwards, eyes
on the traffic coming at me.

Lenny Koff

My dog unaccountably
attached to the world—
sniffing everything—
slows down around trees.

I've watched her
move up the block, making me
slow down and look.

What does she want to know?
Who passed this way before?
Who claims the base of trees?

I find I have for that one tree

a deep atomic sympathy.

Its elements, so near at hand,

are charged to keep it still—

my elements are moving.

Between us at the surface,

there're distinctions—all there is.

At bottom we have touched,

are touching, dots on a canvas

gathering as impressions:

below tells us how to read the world.

Lenny Koff

Change happens the way a servant

drops to his knees before the statue of a saint,
watching patiently for tears, like resin.

If only we could touch one drop.
A permanent shape like that
has a moving horizon.

The ignorant, the casual don't know,
but on some clear day, others
will yearn to listen, will call,
and they, circulating like souls
on the back of heaven
will fall into place again,
like tongues from the mouth of God.

Beside me, the necky lamp,
tenser bulbs in each casing,
like a flower in full bloom,
flooding me in infinite spots.

I position the light that bends
anywhere along the shaft,
the room as quiet as a garden,
ground covered in glazed white.

I'm here at the center of calm
that comes in maelstroms,
impossibilities that toss furniture
after arguments.

The stop sign is far away.
But what do I feel before I start?
To a change so unilateral,
I have not closed myself.

Lenny Koff

V. A Seed to Protect

Lenny Koff

There was a room at the back

I saw from here: statues, busts,
marble ready to be plied.

The dusty fellow with the blind glasses
chiseled the deities that stone holds.
He created real people, too,
living and dead busts of parents.

The place was full of presence,
first disturbing, then comforting
because every person worshipped
was flawed in some way, their terrible
power, covered in the sculptor's dust.

We are waiting here

for a seed to protect,
to nourish to a pearl,

and when it comes to us,
the touch of someone
from the next room,
we surround it like a mollusk,
letting our backs embrace
the treasure that has entered us.

Enfolded in our lap,
turned from everyone,
we keep damage away.
We have something sealed,
but still too tender.

Lenny Koff

I keep holding back. I fear

being dismissed,
like the courtier suddenly undressed.

I thought my care would protect me,
my attention to sense and nonsense,
my smile that no secrets compromise.

I thought I'd have infinite connection,
complete presence, not to rise to unseen heights,
but just to tread water,
my head bobbing up and down,
but still attached, my chin just out of reach
of the current that makes whitecaps harmless
unless, of course, you're too far from the surface
to trust your fool's cap.

When my parents

wore off, I found my skin
as impressionable as a baby's.

I date my awakening from then,
the rubbing and the scraping
as if I were vellum.

And lucky, too, for I found,
when raw emotion played on smooth surfaces,
the acquisitions editor,
bathed in music and soft light,
could turn me into almost sixty pages,
a requirement for publishing,
the perfect middle for an age
yearning to be reborn,
declaring all at once that karma,
not like other kinds of debt,
could suddenly be paid.

Lenny Koff

I was here. But where,
where was the heavy wooden door
on which I'd scratch my name,
something permanent that looked like
something archeologists would fight for?

What I found available were spray cans,
files whose drives
inexplicably became unreadable.

If only I'd believe that erasure was the secret
sign of presence and that coming out of being
was an irony of creation.

Lenny Koff

Once alien, only hoped for,
the stray word arrives, intentionless,
and the white blood cells
rush at the remark that wants to lodge,
that wants a companion to build a house.
No cell rejects it.

Cells know what a word awakens,
other sharp points, like objects waiting
to tell the old story on which
everything else depends, the master story
that hasn't gone away, but waits,
inhaled until it has a chance.

Sleep doesn't silence it,
and smothering it only makes it look
with more desire for a voice
to breathe out.

VI. Focus

Lenny Koff

I wake up in the middle,
hardly sure of where I've been.

She comes into the room
where company encircles her,
commanding infinitely deep space
between her and me.

Old castle walls remain her memory.
A circle of blue expanse with impenetrable eddies
impossible to cross.

 Only later
does she recognize her own arm's length.

You haven't gotten shorter

as the years have gone, only crankier.

No fears of bone loss or curvatures of spine
have shaped your frame,
only an impossible tongue that reins in nothing.

Truth and falsehood aren't distinctions anymore,
frames of experience, lies
that secretly know the truth.

You voice desire ruffled, wants wanted,
that love would rush to in a baby.

Secretly you're making your own bed,
welcoming no one to any final place.

You've made yourself impossible—
the only thing that's possible
is to leave you to your frame.

If I thought you didn't know your own behavior,
I'd begin to worry.

But you know
how I have come to love your every impossibility,
the mind you draw around yourself
is no possible barrier.

Lenny Koff

Time and Poetry

At the cocktail hour, when drinks
make all things equal, and lights smooth
differences on skin,
washing gullies, filling crevices
where no shadows cloud
our staring as close as possible.

At this translucent hour,
Half-way through the conversation,
I said I wished we'd met
when I was in my twenties.

Better now because the unpursuable
is only possible,
letting the conjunction of minds,
like the kiss of paramecia,
intertwine nuclear material.

Unborn generations
will know how much
we wanted to mean to each other,
how lines, filled with ink,
can safely smooth us.

Focus

It doesn't bother me the way the faucet drips.
I hear it only sometimes . . .
Its grip on my attention fades
as suddenly as my circle of care,
big enough to feed the world,
obsessively small like a sandwich.

I'm translated here and there I don't know how,
my flexibility a moving virtue
like incessant waves . . .
so water that annoys abates,
and then becomes my tow,
escaping breakers from an anchored shore.

Lenny Koff

Two balloons hover near the floor.

They are weak without air-tight flesh,
dreaming the same dream about us.

You move cross Peru on thinning legs.
I run to your neck.

You are as gentle as a llama,
closing your eyes, pursing your lips.
I am wagging at your silence.

Suddenly we breathe in
all the air there is, our lungs
filling like balloons,
one sentiment between us.

I stand here over boxes

I have made bite size, coherent,
big enough to carry objects
I have stored—letters, glasses,
my father's military coat
from the European war,
the black and white home movies,
the old projector.

Why these things again?
They've spent their years in closets
growing thick without connection,
and yet I read each one as accidental travel,
remembering old handwriting
and my living relatives
now on their last legs.

I remember me, opening report cards
that carried so much weight,
so much prophecy.

*Put away the lug. Your room,
the one you're leaving,
knows you well enough.*

Then the connecting train . . .
everything in boxes
when I arrive.

Lenny Koff

How many times

have I danced across the floor
hearing him rising on the keyboard,
Glen Gould striking note after note,
then coming to rest at the bottom of a phrase,
catching my breath, ascending,
a shape that was completely wondrous,
whose form I register forward
to receding ends I cannot see.

I can't look back
and know where I have been.
I can't look down.

But God, who must be listening now,
is also on His feet,
revealing complete concentration,
because you've caught—
He's caught—the mind's architecture.

And if someone walks in ...
together we have spun inexhaustible threads,
and she could see what Bach looked like
in a moving body.

 We were both moved,
for afterwards she said
she saw something transfigured
figured in the room
which I could only take credit for
because your shape made it possible.
I was your specter.

Some people see their lives
from the bottom up.
They fill the sky with beings
who care absolutely, or don't care.

But the lucky ones look down
from balconies and fill the earth
with beings who are uncomfortable
with assurances of favor,
or neglect, watching others write foolishly
on parchment scrolls.

Lenny Koff

The Abundant Truth

Now I see: up is flat,
not a pyramid,
 and the truth,
carrying the worthy on her back,
is more sure-footed than people
who slip on words.

For once we're there by a rocky grace
we'll have the whole mesa to graze on.
She indifferently feeds,
whoever comes to milk her.

We can drink it raw,
make butter from it, if we want,
or cream.

Making Love

I have walked around this lake before.
Whatever keeps me here, moving and not moving,
is a current more difficult than need—
the twin face of one body,
annihilation through the open door there
at the bottom of the sea.

I remember riding with a ghost ship
off the ice coast of Argentina,
curving into the white teeth of an oceanic dream.
My longing draws sentences as clean as these:
A sweeping prison journey.
Coming up for air.
I am Magellan heading straight for the wide,
discoverable Pacific.

Lenny Koff

VII. Afterword

Lenny Koff

Pride is like a gardener's string

that keeps a passer-by off the grass.
I can invite you in, but only to look.
You've got to walk cement: second nature's
monumental path around the garden.

It's trimmed each Saturday,
reseeded once a year. This gives nature here
a human look. We can behave
no less suburban-like when we find
we're in the rest of the country.

But if you get a dirty look
from the woman in the flowered housecoat
watering her pots, know her care for herself,
like mine, began in the dark.
The days out here, like sprinklers, start at ten.
That's all you need to know.