

**ROTC Kills: the Poetry of
Articulated Consciousness
Poems by John Koethe
\$14.99/96pp
HarperPerennial**

by Michael T. Steffen



Poets dissolve or digest their inherited turns of mind and come into their own unique idiom, and from there can talk themselves into what they become. Few un-shield this talent as does John Koethe. In “Like Gods,” one of the inserted prose meditations of his new book of poems ROTC Kills (HarperPerennial), the poet unravels this line of thought:

despite the certainty I have, I've no idea what I really am, or where, and as for "searching nature," I have no idea even where to start. These matters mean the world to me, and yet no matter how I come to grips with them, they slip away. I and here and now are ever present, yet they vanish in the act of apprehension, as a poem turns into language as you write it down (p. 37).

How agile a thought: something disappearing is like something appearing, so long present being, hello poem. The representation of a thing supplants the thing itself, which isn't even a thing since Koethe's scrutinized and elusive ideal, topos, inspiration is “the whole of creation, through the long song of myself” (“The Whole of Creation,” p. 21). For all the grandeur and homage to patriarchy in the spirit of this declaration, which underlies a continuity of optimism or acceptance throughout the book (“acknowledgment” may be the term, Koethe's correlative for Whitman's “embrace”), the composite of his discursive and fluent self portrait is well dampened, ordinary, anecdotal—and riddled with self-examining insights that transcend confession as they transcend personality into a broader sphere of cultural and philosophical supra-common place.

An honored poet disciplined in Philosophy, Koethe also surprises us with his utterly contemporary candor and unflinching fluency. In this sense, the poet makes himself plain, accessible, identifiable—especially at the opening of his poems which seem just to come out as from a breath momentarily held:

*There are feelings you expect to have
And satisfactions you hope to find
In the course of an ordinary day...
("The End of the Line," p. 1)*

*There are four movies that I saw
Between the ages of ten and fourteen that became
Parts of my life, for what that's worth...
("Alfred Hitchcock," p. 12)*

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Even Koethe's more speculative topics are brought up in this direct, easy manner:

*I love the past tense, but you can't live there.
I love the stories you believe add up to you,
Though they never do...
("Stele," p. 17)*

*No one has to write any special way—
You make it up as you go along. I started
Writing this way—no thoughts at first,
Then a lot of words in the guise of thoughts,
Then real thoughts—a long time ago.
You can write or think about death directly,
Or you can write about it by indirection
And delay...
("1135," p. 52)*

The self-possessed poet can also talk himself out of whatever it is from his cultural inheritance she or he can no longer embrace. Identifying illusions, specious persuasions and disappointments provides a major current in the poems of ROTC Kills. The mere passage of time makes an illusion of things and ideas which once were able to animate. This is a pivotal theme in the collection's title poem "ROTC Kills." In the articulate consciousness of the time being, memory, past events, for Koethe, crop up not to merge with and season the present but to stand in contrast to it, for comparison:

*I'm retired, I'm sitting in a house I made
In my imagination years ago, that now is real.
On the walls are posters from the Harvard
Strike in 1969 I saved for their designs
And then forgot about, and now they're here:
STOP HARVARD EXPANSION, STRIKE
FOR THE 8 DEMANDS, and then the best of all,
In small red letters with three red bayonets,
rotc kills (pronounced rot-cee kills). From here inside
Time seems unreal, I'm back in graduate school,
But then the mind ascends and time becomes objective,
I'm myself again, at home again, and sixty-four.*

Time becomes objective, not because Koethe is repossessed by lost time that has come to suffuse an otherwise tenuous, somewhat hollow present. Unlike Proust's madeleine, the posters from the 1969 Harvard student strike conjure nothing any longer memorably tangible or attainable for Koethe. In this instance of confronting particularly the cultural revolution of the sixties, time becomes objective because Koethe goes back and forth between the breach of then and now, separating himself from the perishable enthusiasm of that time (whose martyrs include John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and no less Janice Joplin, Jim Morrison and Jimmy Hendrix, to name only a few).

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Just what it was that made Koethe an apostate to the age of Aquarius, he himself is at a loss to pinpoint. Yet that choice, or inclination, has come along with him to this September day of his memory, metaphorically in the September of the poet's life as the days grow short, and also suggestive of another September day when the U.S. was again sorely protested, even contested. Moving from a Four Quartets-like aerial view of the big picture, with a pinch of Stevens, back to his personal journal voice, Koethe confronts his break-up with the protest movement:

*The particulars of a life, the pattern of a life:
These are the poles the mind, in the guise of a poem,
Floats back and forth between. The calm elation,
The deflating sigh: the trees are tossing in the wind, the leaves
Unfurl their silvery undersides, the soft clouds drift across the sky.
Time may be an abstraction, but it makes the days go by,
The days I never thought I'd see, when the music of the sixties
Lost its way, became too faint to hear, the voices fell away,
And then it all came down to me. What were those eight demands?
I can't recall to save my life. I lived there, I breathed that air,
And sometimes some of it drifts back to me. "You should join PL,"
Paul said as we were sitting in the lounge. Picketing
The GE plant in Lynn didn't much appeal to me, so I just
Said it seemed too hard to square with being married
And finishing my degree. "Yes! That's what's so great about it!"
He replied, as I rolled my eyes. Or Jonny Supak's plan
To hold the chairman (Rogers Albritton) hostage in his office:
"The kids are stealing underwear from Filene's Basement,
Asking for the Red Army! 'Where's the Red Army?' they're asking!"
It felt so all-important at the time, in a surreal way, the endless
Back-and-forths, the forums, teach-ins, meetings and analyses, strategic
Planning sessions ("But—but that would be capitulationism!"),
And look at what it came to. I didn't even vote in 1968
(Chicago was too fresh), but on election night found myself
Nostalgic for the Hump, only by then it was too late.
("ROTC Kills," pp. 30-1)*

This passage was especially resonant as John Koethe read it at the Lamont Library at Harvard on Wednesday November the 7th, the evening after this past autumn's elections. He chatted before the reading about the election results without indifference, though he wasn't demonstrably political either. An impressive introduction was made for the poet by the Woodbury Poetry Room's curator Christina Davis. She had just returned to Cambridge from helping her family in New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Koethe read from the book at a table in front of a microphone, being recorded—though this wasn't Beethoven's 9th, it was Koethe's 9th book of poems—for NPR.

Though nothing especially was made of it that evening, the reading at Harvard was significant as a return to the place of social events and the poster that gave the book its name. It may also be significant that very recently Harvard had occasioned another event which also marked a turn-around in attitudes between the community and its military presence. On September 21, 2011 Globe journalist Mary Carmichael wrote,

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In a ceremony freighted with symbolism, Drew Faust, Harvard University president, lauded the Navy's ROTC program and officially welcomed it onto campus yesterday, ending four decades of frosty relations between the university and the military and laying the groundwork for increased recruiting at the school.

(www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2011/09/21)

During the reading, Koethe clarified that he had taken the title for his book, not as a provocation against the ROTC, but in recollection of the posters as symbolic for the sixties protest movement, and went on to mention he had known many students who had benefited from participating in the ROTC by getting into good colleges.

These are considerations good to keep in mind approaching the title as it is with its undeniable self-contained meaning: ROTC Kills. And so Koethe gets to say two things at once. Poetry may differ from other kinds of writing in several hardly tangible or provable ways. Defiance of logic may have a special haven in poetry, where every coin can be turned for its two sides. Koethe's poetry, beyond the ambiguities of his feeling for the sixties, doesn't flinch at contradictions, which evolve rather as paradoxes and polarities.

Even one of Koethe's main premises, the song of the self, is scathingly self-examined:

*I'm a sucker for the private place,
Though it's boring once you've found it:
You're always right, which makes being right
Worthless, and yet you want to stay there
Even though you hate it...*
("Locus Solus," p. 39)

Good books of poetry surpass the simple review's capacity to betray them much. ROTC Kills is a work of personal mastery in its scope, generosity and forthrightness that holds the reader's attention with a lot of familiarity in idiom for our ease and some truly breathtaking insights for our wonder. It is good for several reads.