



"Night Flight" by Kenneth Frost
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Reviewed by Alice Weiss

Kenneth Frost is a native of crowded New York and environs who in moving to Maine and staying there, has become a poet of solitude. His chapbook, "Night Flight," is a publication of the Author's Choice Chapbook series and the recommending author is Jonathan K. Rice, the editor and publisher of the Iodine Poetry Journal. Frost's poems of winter and night, darkness and transformation compel by their play of syntax and metaphor. Everything is chilly, drawn through a winter's night and the source of light is reflected or occasional, the moon, or fire or lightening. The poems are brief, the lines are short. Many of the poems exhibit an underlying grim humor in their syntactical games.

"When the forest had burned down
to a cathedral

smoke
evensong

one branch kept falling
whistling to itself in the dark"

In a poem about trains, "Country Crossing", he identifies train tracks as "last century's flat ladder/to paradise." Indeed upending natural and human things that ordinarily operate in a horizontal universe is one of the constants of his poetic imagination. So coyotes float out of the trees, a flotilla bowing and twisting, "A heartbeat walks/on the moon's plague of eggs," or "The heart jumps over the moon/time and again trying to teach/a cow to be a hundred sheep."

Not content with nature only, he peoples the poems taking us into glimpses of the imaginative worlds they inhabit for him: Mandelstam in the gulag, Wittgenstein in Norway, a senile aunt who does not recognize the figure in the mirror as herself and waves.

Take this example of concise exploration of a dark figure in our cultural life:

The Assassin

lays
one
hand
on
the
clock,
pets
its

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daggers.

The simple comparison of the minute hand and the dagger is transformed by the picture of the assassin petting, suggesting an attachment both sexual and affectionate and reflecting an important aspect of what is strange about our current moral universe.

The poems do indeed take us on "Night Patrol" sifting through images of loss and disfigurement and moral distress. He grieves that "Extraterrestrial life/is answering terrestrial life/ No one should be here or there."

And yet the bleakness of this last quoted line does not, in fact, operate as the last word. Frost takes us into darkness with a commitment to an operating ideal of call and response. Images act on images, everything is connected by the interplay of language. Verbs are especially empowered to conflate disparate objects. Take the poem "Blizzard."

Snowflakes tear
their rags deep
inside alphabets
searching for vowels
to beat into
wilderness,

long hollow notes
finding a home
in a wolf's throat
where the wolf
before a bleeding
mirror drinks
each crack.

The verbs: tear, search, beat, find, bleed, drinks take us in surprising ways from unnatural nature through language into sound, finally expressing its mournful howl in a bitter synthesis of matter, animal and mineral.

Frost creates small dramas that have a large reach but not everything works here. There are poems in which the structure is rickety or the images banal, or the poem should have ended sooner. Sometimes the poet appears to wish the language worked better than it does. Writing for example about spiders he refers to their "tutu/ legs en pointe," which I found coy rather than arresting. But the truth is the tiny forms he uses throughout the book exact a hard discipline which he often turns to good use and the larger impression is that the book succeeds.