

Poems from Kenilworth, DC

Some lines from my experience as a white man in Kenilworth, DC.

Kenilworth Praise Hymn

Kenilworth, DC

Give praise for all the city things. Give praise for the created things.

Praise for the highways glistening with cars. Praise for the crack pipe and for the good rolled leaf. Praise for the sirens on the avenue and praise for the machine that shreds the cars to chunks and praise for the Christmas star on the crane by the looted Safeway.

Praise to Piney Branch and to the waters of Watts Branch. (May they roll down like justice, like a mighty stream to the wide, wide Chesapeake.)

Sing for the joy of shrimp fried rice from the carryout, sing for greens with vinegar and for home-fried chicken and for baked foil pans of macaroni crusted with cheese. Praise for the tiny ziploc bag and for the dirty needle. Praise for the line of rocks to jump the stream. Praise for the Tarzan rope to swing across.

Give thanks for the cape dress and the veil. Give thanks for bobby socks and halter tops. Sing of the good days, sing of the old days. Tell of crab feasts and makeshift clubhouses, sing of virginity lost in the weeds. Open wide your mouth and praise the Rec; the open, empty lot; the softball field.

Hallelujah for broken glass!

Hallelujah for wide-eyed lilies!

Lift up the lotus stems, heavy with blossom. Lift up like the osprey and the snowy egret. Sway like the wild rice afoot with red-winged blackbirds. Lift your feet and step like the blue heron padding through the ponds. Take flight like the eagle who soars above the Anacostia River hills.

Now sing, you hills, and join in you monuments and government buildings. Sing of rivers deep and wide. Sing of hills rolling down to swamp, the marshy flats and ooze.

Sing of anthraxed offices and blighted housing projects. Sing of well-oiled transactions and oil slicks on lakes, sing of power and of the poor. Sing of K Street in the daytime and sing of Quarles Street in the evening. Sing of drug wars and rumors of killings. Praise the gunshots in the night.

Glory to Mr. Jefferson, powdered and great. Glory to Mr. Lincoln, tall and shot. Glory to Ms. Kimi, wide and powerful. Give thanks for the plantations which you now manage! Give thanks for the fields of corn and souls! Give thanks to the offering plate, the welfare check! Give thanks for hogs and gardens!

Sing like the bell of the ice cream truck. Sing acapella with four part harmony. Sing the old shaped notes of freedom. Dance and shout to the go-go beats.

Sing like sons and daughters of the plain people. Sing like sons and daughters of the slaves.

Anacostia Access(ion)

I grew up beside this river, fortunate
to see the trees before the water
where others see dark smokestacks,
car-strewn highways cutting off
their view. In Kenilworth the marsh
is in our face, the river only reached
by winding trails or back the park
that used to be a dump. I played
there once by muddy water's banks,
rolling down the grass to seawall's
edge, panicked on approach of two
strange teens — the strict 'hood-lines I knew
'd crossed. 'd been attacked
a time or two, or feared attack,
inside that park when dark-skinned lads
who saw my pallor judged it weakness. Now
I take it as a kind of hundred-year-old justice,
recompense for that day when,
with riflemen instead of footballers
at play, two drunk white men
stood in their skiff upon the open river
and dropped two Negroes minding targets
at the rifle club. My white skin
had never floated on that waterway,

I thought, when I returned to Kenilworth,
all grown up. I met a city changed,
or changing, not all of it appealing. Tony
knew a dirty river when he saw
one, though, and threw down
the clean-up challenge. I saw the plans,
got jazzed about that stream whose marshes,
diked by W.B. to grow his lilies,
I played by as a kid. Back then
I idolized the ranger, Mack, who taught about
the bullfrogs, lilies, lotus; that jewelweed
could soothe the poison itch; that orange lovevine –
chucked over a shoulder – could cause
the next person that you met to fall
for you; that curly dock, once threshed,
could be ground like wheat for flour.
It was he who, knowing my adult search
for history, dug up a pic
of my young self paddling that river
whose skim I thought my hands had never
touched. Now I feel a certain kinship
with this watercourse so tucked
in back of parkland, marsh, and trees.
’m no Carl Cole, of course, expounding on
long decades full of history while sailing
down the river toward the bay. I do
get out on kayak now and then, though,
lugging the shell along that winding trail
I walked when young to put in
at a river shore that I, back then,
barely knew existed. I paddle ’round
the peaceful upstream parts, then, nosing

along the banks, sometimes plucking cans
from out the water. Back in Kenilworth,
I watch the young ones growing tall
and hope they'll take more than a frog
or turtle from those ponds, hope they won't trade
the free outdoors for three tight walls
and bars, hope they will find their early way
through marsh and woods to that brown heart
that keeps its sluggish time
behind the trees and marsh and ponds
hard by their stoops and dirty alleys.

The War From This Side of the Anacostia River

Kenilworth, DC

The Mennonites came to Kenilworth to beat the draft, legally,

nonresistance exiling them from Midwest family farms

to their alternative, 1-W service in hospitals in town. They knew

my parents, Beachy like themselves, ran a mission here, and so

they came. Tom Brown will tell you that they wore white suits,

walking up Douglas Street to catch the bus out into the hills

of P. G. County, past the giant neon "Pepsi" sign, to help the X-rays

see through skin to bone. They lived their pacifism —

came to Kenilworth and turned the other cheek at home.

Here is Oren, for example, his glasses flying one way, the ladder the other,

rolling on the pavement thinking, "Thank you, God, for my suffering.

Thank you, God, for counting me worthy to suffer for you,"

after a stranger walked up and knocked him off the ladder

where he painted windows at the mission house. I grew up

with these men, my heroes, the ones who stayed home from "Nam,

then stayed in Kenilworth even after their war-draft debt was paid,

the ones who didn't want to leave for farms and closed communities,

or maybe felt so guilty to be alive — their fellow men ground up

in Vietnam — they had no choice but give their lives

to serve the God they loved. Like them, I still don't vote,

all that change-the-world cheek rubbed raw by power in the end,

all that politics, when you see it from this side of the river,

polluting the air like the smoke that used to rise from Kenilworth,

all the city's trash burned in the city's marshes, beside the river.

That dump is a park now, but still the stench of war boils up

from downtown buildings, roiling clouds of wasted lives and cash.

I prefer to fight my own way, bring peace to neighborhoods

like my hero-men kept peace within themselves. I love to stay

over here, where long-suffering mothers forgive the ones who kill

their sons and daughters, don't cry out in papers for hell and death

like those well-to-do white women who emerge from court

in smoky sunglasses and dark pantsuits, bent on damnation

and revenge. Can nations turn the other cheek and still survive?

Can we forgive and not be on our own death-chair?

Can you picture our presidents rolling on the pavement, letting

a stranger beat them, thinking, "Thank you, God, for my suffering.

Thank you, God. Thank you for counting me worthy to suffer for you”?

Turning Over the Corpse

Kenilworth, DC

Walking in the woods that day in back

of Quarles Street as the pair of osprey

swooped and dove overhead, just past

the spot where I saw the fox last fall, I paused,

and there, between a vined hulk of rusting car

and a stagnant pool where cans and plastic bottles

clustered, under those trees

that sheltered once the old McCormick house,

I found a body, maybe four days dead,

its head bent to one side, torso spread

on the leaf-composed forest floor, now

bursting with late spring.

“This is strange,” I thought and gazed

with wonder more than dread.

(Yes, there was a smell, as bodies four

days dead will have, but that

seemed unimportant at the time.) I stood

and looked, and soon began to ponder

what had brought this body

to the woods, and why it fell just here.

I turned to poke around a bit, and found

a green beer bottle not much exposed

to wear, a pair of glasses and, nearby, a spatula

crusted with egg, though I could not tell if these

belonged to the deceased. I stooped down then

and examined the corpse— a male, and in the prime

of life, draped with heavy jeans and a dark t-shirt,

stomach to the ground, tattoo on the left bicep

that read “Sean.” I could find no other

clues, no hints to his identity or cause

of death, and left the pockets for police to search.

Then the spirit came upon me and

I said, “Sean, arise.” But he did not

get up. Still, I reached out to touch

him where he fell. I turned him over,

the stiffened bulk, and found the purple flowers

that his fall had crushed. And then,

right where hip had met the ground,

I saw an orange. Taking it from leaves

his weight had squished it into,

I rubbed it on my shirt and peeled a half.

I wedged a section out and bit,

and juice burst in my mouth like wine.

A drop ran down my chin,

and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.