

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Kendall Johnson: Three Poems

Kendall Johnson · Tuesday, March 15th, 2022

VI. Florence's Story

Crimea, Winter, 1854

We lie in darkness. Medical evacs from the front, we'd been trucked and sailed to Scutari, near Constantinople, and here we lie. During the day the few nurses there are can't keep up with the waves of new arrivals: there's no time to shift us around, surgeons come to our beds and mattresses on the floor to work. We listen to each others pain, the gurgles, cries and shrieks as bones are sawed and parts removed. The sudden silence, and the muttered, "Let's move on."

After hours and the rats and ticks come to feed, we try to keep our moans down, that others might catch an hours sleep. In midst of that darkest night, when we all contemplate our endings, she would come. She brings a lantern, adjusts our bandages, checks on us.

Much later, I heard newspaper stories of her return home. How she got off the train on the wrong side, and walked off alone, to avoid the brass band, speeches and crowd. How she'd gone on to write books and lecture professors, and even start a nursing school. She was driven to pass on what she'd learned in Scutari, between her bouts of bedridden fever. I read how Ms Nightingale was forever driven by nightmares and terror, yet pushed herself on, that lady with the lamp.

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VIII. Ida's Story

Georgia's shouted "You're not good enough!" echoed into Ida's long night. Sister Georgia of the far western spaces, painting labial flowers, and transcendental skulls. Georgia the privileged, who got her leg up in the art world in her marital bed. Georgia who at dinner just tonight told her, "Your life is a waste," and "stay out of my scene!"

"If I only had a Steiglitz," Ida O'keefe thought sourly. But she had refused to respond to her brother-in-laws advances, and the easy bridge to the New York galleries had been burned. Now she was leaving the family behind to teach school in California. Another woman erased from art history, almost.

But that night she began the most wonderful dreams. A light house she loved in Cape Cod. It shifted in shape, the colors bold. The energy coming out of it lit more than the night. She dreamed

of planets, hanging in new ways in space. Energy fields exploding, rich botanicals turning liquid. Architectural angles, with lines of force. Dynamic symmetry, but impossibly true.

Ida's midnight salvation demanded to be poured onto canvas.

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X. Chuck's Story

Rounding the corner in the big art museum, I come face to face with a crowd. They stand and stare past me at the tall wall behind. I look around and glance up into a sea of small squares all over a huge canvas. Each square a miniature abstract. Yet seen from across the room, an enormous person stares back.

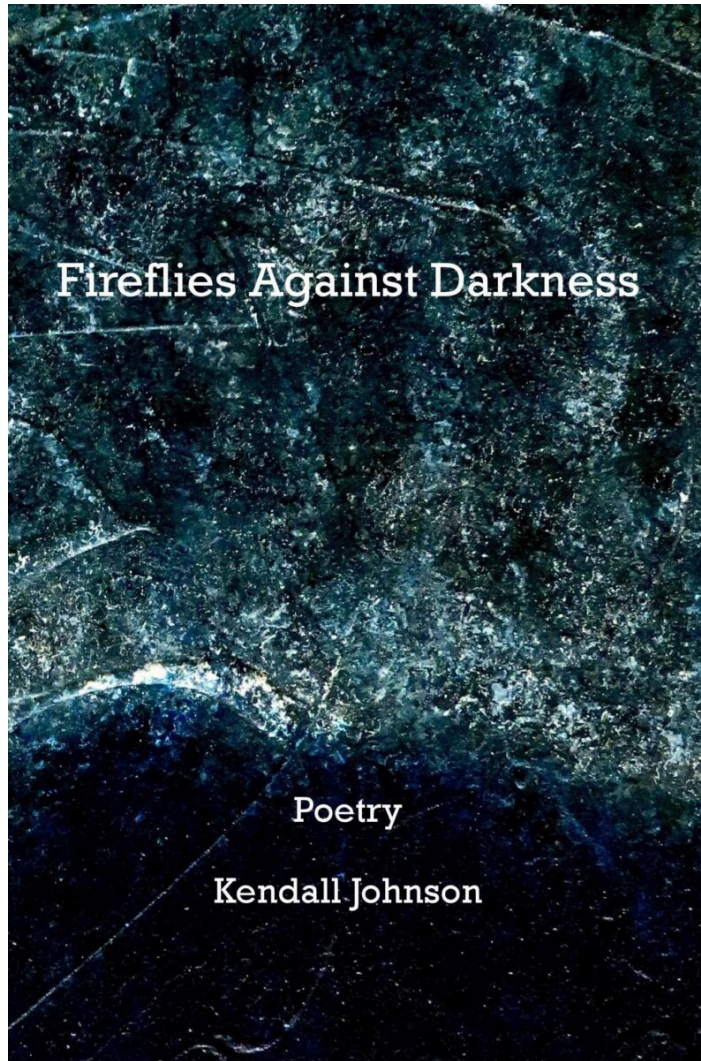
Chuck Close, the master of blemish, bruise, and infinite gaze. A poster boy of neural disorder, he grew up weak and dyslexic. He had a strange unrelated disorder that left him unable decode faces. Yet Close persevered to the top of the art scene through careful planning, technics and a drive to make meaning.

Then, at 40, a great fall. At what might have been his apex, a spinal stroke. Left quadriplegic, he could have hung up his brushes. Instead he developed mechanical aids to help him re-master his large portraits. A machine raises his huge canvases bit by bit, he paints by tiny square.

Standing in the darkened hall, the face raises questions in me: How do you re-knit the world when it slides out from beneath you?

And an answer:
Inch by inch.

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Fireflies Against Darkness by Kendall Johnson

To purchase *FIREFLIES AGAINST DARKNESS* by Kendall Johnson

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