47 Make love not war…? (May 2022)

Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955 I got on a gondola and lay down with my duffel bag under my head and my knees crossed and contemplated the clouds as we rolled north to Santa Barbara. It was a local and I intended to sleep on the beach at Santa Barbara that night and catch either another local to San Luis Obispo the next morning or the first-class freight all the way to San Francisco at seven p.m. Somewhere near Camarillo where Charlie Parker'd been mad and relaxed back to normal health, a thin oldlittle bum climbed into my gondola as we headed into a siding to give a train right of way and looked surprised to see me there. He established himself at the other end of the gondola and lay down, facing me, with his head on his own miserably small pack and said nothing. By and by they blew the highball whistle after the eastbound freight had smashed through on the main line and we pulled out as the air got colder and fog began to blow from the sea over the warm valleys of the coast.
(Jack Kerouak 'The Dharma Bums' 1958)

I can't remember when I first read 'The Dharma Bums' – c.1965 or so, before coming to the better known 'On The Road'. It breathed a magical foreignness into my very unmagical Colwyn Bay world – it was 'hip' and 'cool' and name-dropped Asian philosophies, mixed in polyamorous orgies, travel, camping adventures up in the Rockies (so unlike the Snowdonian hikes from school). Anyway, the 'Beats' infiltrated my imagination and were in a small way influential in my later doing a year's VSO teaching in Senegal in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War (where the American Peace Corps Director chatted to us about the wonderful marijuana available in Dakar!) - and hitchhiking back across the western Sahara that was gearing up for war with Morocco, bumming rides on trucks with two friends, thereby meeting way-out philosophers and weirdos (but those are other stories).

Skip to 2022 and, serendipitously, Marcella, Pandora's lovely friend from Florida, tells me about Kenneth Rexroth, of whom I knew absolutely nothing. She had had the good fortune to study in Santa Barbara for a B.A. under his tutelage. He was, by many accounts, the spiritual 'father' of the Beat Generation but this was a title he came to dislike, even though he had by the time of the Fifties led a 'literary renaissance' around San Francisco and the West Coast. In

October 1955 he it was who emceed the famous occasion in the Six Gallery when Allen Ginsberg had premiered his "Howl" to an astonished world (alongside readings from other avant-garde poets). Rexroth had, after all, been writing and making a name for himself ever since the Thirties (with support from Pound and other modernist writers), so he might not have wanted to be lumped in with a whole lot of much younger poets who had achieved instant glory while he had had to scrape a living together more slowly (with the help of his various wives) over the years.

Hornpipe - The Sailor (Rexroth)

Plus, he *painted* (mainly cubist inspired abstractions – I'm not that sold on his painting of his wife and I think she was the better artist), as well as spoke at least five languages, read Latin and Greek, was deeply immersed in Asian literatures and philosophies, and he seemed to know everyone in the literary world between the USA and Europe! As with Ted Hughes (see a previous posting), his poetry is fine stuff but I think it cannot be read *other* than set against a life which contains a fair number of contradictions and ambiguities. For example, Rexroth 'loved' many women, but none could finally displace his idealised dead mother, and he could be heartless and unfaithful while also needing constant adulation and subordination to his artistic ambitions.

Portrait of Dorothy Von Hecht
By Andrée Dutcher

He had had a disturbed childhood; his adored mother died of illness when he was young, and his father died of alcoholism when Rexroth was 14. He went to live with an aunt, dropping out of high school at 16 and enrolling in the Art Institute of Chicago. Somewhat like one of the 'dharma bums', he hitchhiked across the country, taking odd jobs and working a stint as a Forest Service trail crew hand, a cook, and a packer in the Pacific Northwest at the Marblemount Ranger Station (whatever that involved!). Later he boarded a steamship in Hoboken exploring Mexico and South America before spending a week in Paris to meet many avant-garde figures, notably Tristan Tzara and the surrealists. Staying on in Paris was considered, but an American friend urged him not to become just another expatriate and he returned home. He married in 1927, aged only 22, to Andrée Dutcher, a painter.

Rexroth was a good climber, both socially but also literally. Many of his poems refer to climbing and the mountains. I never became a serious climber like him, but I did do some climbs in the Cheddar Gorge and in Snowdonia (including the famous 'Milestone Buttress' near Lake Ogwen) with some good climbers when I was a lot younger. Rexroth needed the wilderness at the same time as he needed sociability (so long as he was in the limelight…).

To begin with, Rexroth thought of his and Andrée's marriage as 'perfect' as they had many common interests, but it gradually deteriorated (extra-marital affairs didn't help, nor did his assumption that he had to come first in the relationship – her duty being to *provide* while he furthered his career as a poet – never mind hers as a painter!), and they divorced shortly before her death in 1940 from an epileptic seizure. The poem below, as a tribute to her, strikes a sort of Hardyesque tone of resolute but anguished mourning. However, like Thomas Hardy's great 1913 tributes to Emma Gifford, I think it should be read in the context of Rexroth's own complex ambivalence towards his wife's death (before she died he had already taken up with Marie, his second wife). The simple, quiet downplaying of emotion and the details of nature - the cold and darkness offset by the warmth of the fire - the sharing of food and the ironic promise that the poem consolidates ("We will remember That night…") create a striking picture of genuine grief. I like the poem very much but I can't help wondering how much guilt also feeds into this public 'presentation' of his bereavement.

Kenneth Rexroth: ***Your Birthday in the California Mountains***

A broken moon on the cold water,
And wild geese crying high overhead,
The smoke of the campfire rises
Toward the geometry of heaven -
Points of light in the infinite blackness.
I watch across the narrow inlet
Your dark figure comes and goes before the fire.
A loon cries out on the night bound lake.
Then all the world is silent with the
Silence of autumn waiting for
The coming of winter. I enter
The ring of firelight, bringing to you
A string of trout for our dinner.
As we eat by the whispering lake,
I say, "Many years from now we will
Remember this night and talk of it."
Many years have gone by since then, and
Many years again. I remember
That night as though it was last night,
But you have been dead for thirty years.

Portrait of my Wife

Here is another poem set amongst the Californian mountains. I found this comment about Hunter's Hill on a posting someone made in 2009*: "It is NE of the intersection of Hwy 80 and Hwy 37-Columbus Parkway and has coordinates of: 38 deg 08' 46.43" N 122 deg 12' 18.99" W. On Google Earth it is hideous and inconspicuous. It is on open grassland. We used to just go over the fence and hike up to the 60 or so faces. There are a few routes on it; it is steep to overhanging. A giant owl used to hang out in a cave just below the summit.")*

On What Planet

Uniformly over the whole countryside
The warm air flows imperceptibly seaward;
The autumn haze drifts in deep bands
Over the pale water;
White egrets stand in the blue marshes;
Tamalpais, Diablo, St. Helena
Float in the air.
Climbing on the cliffs of Hunter's Hill
We look out over fifty miles of sinuous
Interpenetration of mountains and sea.

Leading up a twisted chimney,
Just as my eyes rise to the level
Of a small cave, two white owls
Fly out, silent, close to my face.
They hover, confused in the sunlight,
And disappear into the recesses of the cliff.

All day I have been watching a new climber,
A young girl with ash blonde hair
And gentle confident eyes.
She climbs slowly, precisely,
With unwasted grace.

While I am coiling the ropes,
Watching the spectacular sunset,
She turns to me and says, quietly,
"It must be very beautiful, the sunset,
On Saturn, with the rings and all the moons."

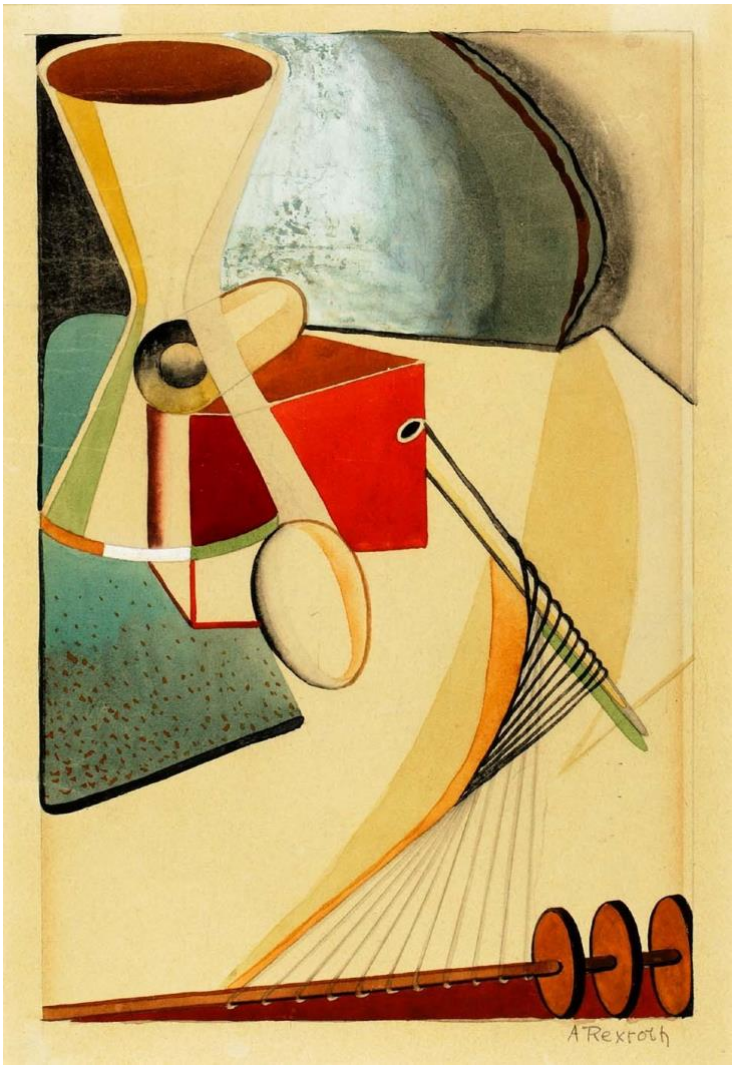
Was this an ironic comment on *himself*? A saturnalian presence circled by adoring, young "moons"? Rexroth was certainly *not* averse to female company (he was married four times

and was serially unfaithful to *all* of the wives) but this encounter is described discreetly enough otherwise. It's worth noting that the shortest line of the poem is "With unwasted grace" which is itself a graceful line.

I'm currently ploughing (very slowly but also very enjoyably) through *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* in French. So, I like the next poem with its neatly deadpan punchline. There's lots, however, left also unsaid here.

Proust's Madeleine

Somebody has given my
Baby daughter a box of
Old poker chips to play with.
Today she hands me one while
I am sitting with my tired
Brain at my desk. It is red.
On it is a picture of
An elk's head and the letters
B.P.O.E.—a chip from
A small town Elks' Club. I flip
It idly in the air and
Catch it and do a coin trick
To amuse my little girl.
Suddenly everything slips aside.
I see my father
Doing the very same thing,
Whistling "Beautiful Dreamer,"
His breath smelling richly
Of whiskey and cigars. I can
Hear him coming home drunk
From the Elks' Club in Elkhart
Indiana, bumping the
Chairs in the dark. I can see
Him dying of cirrhosis
Of the liver and stomach
Ulcers and pneumonia,
Or, as he said on his deathbed, of
Crooked cards and straight whiskey,
Slow horses and fast women.



Untitled Abstraction
By Kenneth Rexroth

I like the spare details and the underplaying of emotion. I imagine Hemingway writing something like this… (*Memo – check out Hemingway's poetry!)*

On the negative side, Kenneth Rexroth was given to self-aggrandising and he could turn on writer friends with unfair reviews (for example, when Marthe, his third wife, fed up with his philandering, had an affair with Robert Creeley, a poet and friend of Ginzberg and Kerouak amongst others, Rexroth, who had previously encouraged Kerouak, turned on him with some stinging critical pieces). Besides his constant search for enlightenment (in Buddhism, Taoism and even Catholicism as a convert on his death-bed!), a very positive feature of his life, was his political activism, as iconoclastic anarchist, communist and pacifist. During World War II, he actively helped many Japanese on the West Coast escape internment. The next poem, again set against a background of climbing, refers to the *cause célèbre* of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant anarchists convicted of a hold-up and murder in 1921, who were executed in 1927 in spite of strong evidence of their innocence and international appeals against the sentence being carried out.

Climbing Milestone Mountain, August 22, 1937

For a month now, wandering over the Sierras,
A poem had been gathering in my mind,
Details of significance and rhythm,
The way poems do, but still lacking a focus.
Last night I remembered the date and it all
Began to grow together and take on purpose.
  We sat up late while Deneb moved over the zenith
And I told Marie all about Boston, how it looked
That last terrible week, how hundreds stood weeping
Impotent in the streets that last midnight.
I told her how those hours changed the lives of thousands,
How America was forever a different place
Afterwards for many.
                In the morning
We swam in the cold transparent lake, the blue
Damsel flies on all the reeds like millions
Of narrow metallic flowers, and I thought
Of you behind the grille in Dedham, Vanzetti,
Saying, "Who would ever have thought we would make this history?"
Crossing the brilliant mile-square meadow
Illuminated with asters and cyclamen,
The pollen of the lodgepole pines drifting
With the shifting wind over it and the blue
And sulphur butterflies drifting with the wind,

I saw you in the sour prison light, saying,
"Goodbye comrade."
In the basin under the crest
Where the pines end and the Sierra primrose begins,
A party of lawyers was shooting at a whiskey bottle.
The bottle stayed on its rock, nobody could hit it.
Looking back over the peaks and canyons from the last lake,
The pattern of human beings seemed simpler
Than the diagonals of water and stone.
Climbing the chute, up the melting snow and broken rock,
I remembered what you said about Sacco,
How it slipped your mind and you demanded it be read into the record.
Traversing below the ragged arête,
One cheek pressed against the rock
The wind slapping the other,
I saw you both marching in an army
You with the red and black flag, Sacco with the rattlesnake banner.
I kicked steps up the last snowbank and came
To the indescribably blue and fragrant
Polemonium and the dead sky and the sterile
Crystalline granite and final monolith of the summit.
These are the things that will last a long time, Vanzetti,
I am glad that once on your day I have stood among them.
Some day mountains will be named after you and Sacco.
They will be here and your name with them,
"When these days are but a dim remembering of the time
When man was wolf to man."
I think men will be remembering you a long time
Standing on the mountains
Many men, a long time, comrade.

It's an impressive, sharply etched tribute to the injustice perpetrated, but it might seem a little self-conscious, self-congratulatory, as the poet reaches the top – maybe forgivable, given the historic importance of the events. The mountains, their strength and purity, will outlive man's wilful inhumanity to man. Rexroth is perceptive about and responds strongly to nature, and he was on the right side of history.

In the early Fifties, Rexroth led the charge creating what came to be called the 'San Francisco Renaissance' and he was instrumental (*sorry!)* in pioneering poetry and jazz together. This city was where the 'Beat' poets blossomed with his support as their mentor in the early days.

Here is a recording of him reading one of his poems with a jazz setting – nowadays, maybe this might seem a touch laughable, but then it was *so* hip, *so* cool!

In The Wood (by Kenneth Rexroth)
https://youtu.be/pdmDuV9pYsk

And then, in October 1955 (just as I was starting at the Cathedral Boys' Junior School in Bombay), Kenneth Rexroth was the master of ceremonies at that momentous occasion when Allen Ginzberg blew everyone's minds with his wonderful poetic diatribe, "Howl".
Here it is in a recording made just 4 years later in Chicago with Ginzberg reading it. There were no recordings, I think, of the original event.

"Howl" (by Allen Ginzberg)
https://youtu.be/WkNp56UZax4

Below is Michael McClure's account of that extraordinary occasion (taken from his *Scratching The Beat Surface*)

> *"(In 1955) I (gave) my first poetry reading with Allen Ginsberg, the Zen poet Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, and the American surrealist poet Philip Lamantia, The reading was in October 1955 at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. The Six Gallery was a cooperative art gallery run by young artists who centered around the San Francisco Art Institute…. On this night Kenneth Rexroth was master of ceremonies. This was the first time that Allen Ginsberg read "Howl". Though I had known Allen for some months preceding, it was my first meeting with Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen. Lamantia did not read his poetry that night but instead recited works of the recently-deceased John Hoffman – beautiful poems that left orange stripes and colored visions in the air.*
>
> *The world that we tremblingly stepped out into in that decade was a bitter, gray one. But San Francisco was a special place. Rexroth said it was to the arts what Barcelona was to Spanish Anarchism. Still, there was no way, even in San Francisco, to escape the pressures of the war culture. We were locked in the Cold War and the first Asian debacle – the Korean War. My self-image in those years was of finding myself – young, high, a little crazed, needing a hair-cut – in an elevator with burly, crew-cutter, square-jawed eminences staring at me like I was misplaced cannon-fodder. We hated the war and the inhumanity and the coldness. The country had the feeling of martial law. An undeclared military state had leapt out of Daddy Warbucks' tanks and sprawled all over the landscape. As artists we were oppressed and indeed the people of the nation were oppressed. There were certain of us (whether we were fearful or brave) who could not help speaking out – we had to speak. We knew we were poets and we had to speak out as poets. We saw that the art of poetry was essentially dead – killed by war, by academics, by neglect, by lack of love, and by disinterest. We knew we could bring it back to life. We could*

see what (Ezra) Pound had done and (Walt) Whitman and (Antonin) Artaud, and D.H.Lawrence, in his monumental poetry and prose.

The Six Gallery was a huge room that had been converted from an automobile repair shop into a gallery….A hundred and fifty enthusiastic people had come to hear us. Money was collected and jugs of wine were brought back for the audience. I hadn't seen Allen for a few weeks and I had not heard "Howl" – it was new to me. Allen began in a small and intensely lucid voice….(he) read on till the end of the poem, which left us standing in wonder, or cheering and wondering, but knowing at the deepest level that barriers had been broken, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh walls of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership-systems and power-support bases.. .."Howl" was Allen's metamorphosis from quiet, brilliant, burning bohemian scholar trapped by his flames and repressions, to epic vocal bard.

This is one of the poems that Michael McClure read that evening – it gives a good flavour of the poems of the time:

(When he wrote "The Breech", McClure had a night job in a produce market. Working in the dark streets made him think of Rimbaud, he says, and inspired the poem):

The Breech

—A barricade — a wall — a stronghold,
Sinister and joyous, of indigo and saffron —
To hurl myself against!
To crush or
To be a part of the wall…
Spattered brains or the imprint
of a violent foot —
To crumble loose some brilliant masonry
Or knock it down —
To send pieces flying
Like stars!

To be the chalice of the hunt,
To handspring
Through a barrier of white trees!

At work — 3:00 in the morning — In the produce market
Moving crates of lettuce and cauliflower — Predawn
A vision — The rats become chinchillas — I stand
At the base of a cliff — sweating — flaming — in terror and joy
Surrounded in the mist — by whirling circles of dark

Chattering animals — a black lynx stares from the hole
In the cliff.

Rotten lettuce — perfume — The damp carroty street.

It is my head — These are my hands.
I don't will it.
Out in the light — Noon — the City.
A Wall — a stronghold.

All right, it may seem now rather dated, a little self-consciously straining at the leash, but this was part of the rebellious, provocative zeitgeist. And here, for the fun of it, is part of Kerouac's fictionalisation of the same event in *The Dharma Bums:*

> *Anyway I followed the whole gang of howling poets to the reading at Gallery Six (Six Gallery) that night, which was, among other important things, the night of the birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was the one who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around in the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California Burgundy and getting them all piffed so that by eleven o'clock when Alvah Goldbrook (Allen Ginsberg) was reading his, wailing poem "Wail" ("Howl") drunk with arms outspread everybody was yelling "Go! Go! Go!" (like a jam session) and old Rheinhold Cacoethes (Kenneth Rexroth) the father of the Frisco poetry scene was wiping tears in gladness. Meanwhile scores of people stood around in the darkened gallery straining to hear every word of the amazing poetry reading as I wandered from group to group, facing them and facing away from the stage, urging them to slug from the jug, or wandered back and sat on the right side of the stage giving out little wows and yesses of approval and even whole sentences of comment with nobody's invitation but in the general gaiety nobody's disapproval either. It was a great night.*
>
> *Among the people standing in the audience was Rosie Buchanan (Natalie Jackson), a girl with short haircut, red-haired, bony, handsome, a real gone chick and friend of everybody of any consequence on the beach, who'd been a painter's model and a writer herself and was bubbling with excitement at that time because she was in love with my old buddy Cody (Neal Cassady). "Great, hey Rosie?" I yelled, and she took a big slug from my jug and shined eyes at me. Cody just stood behind her with both arms around her waist. Between poets, Rheinhold Cacoethes, in his bow tie and shabby old coat, would get up and make a little funny speech in his snide funny voice and introduce the next reader: but as I say come eleven thirty when all the poems were read and*

> *everybody was milling around wondering what had happened and what would come next in American poetry, he was wiping his eyes with his handkerchief. And we all got together with him, the poets, and drove in several cars to Chinatown for a big fabulous dinner off the Chinese menu, with chopsticks, yelling conversation in the middle of the night in one of those free-swinging great Chinese restaurants of San Francisco."*

YeeeeHA! Colwyn Bay blown out of existence!
But, back to Kenneth Rexroth…

Some say that perhaps his most lasting contributions to American literature are the translations he made of Chinese and Japanese poetry (there's even a Rexroth Day in Japan, says Marcella). These introduced western readers to a wealth of Asian poetry and thought. I don't really have the space or the expertise to comment on his translations as such, though I do think his translation of Bashô's most famous haiku is not as good as the Penguin translation in my beloved "*Lonely Road to the Deep North*". (Can't locate it right now…!) Bashô's Japanese goes:

Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

I'm old fashioned but I think the 5-7-5 syllable count *should* be respected if possible.

Here is Rexroth's:

An old pond —
The sound
Of a diving frog.

It's succinct enough, certainly. My own preference, keeping the order of the words of the original (the last syllables of the Japanese recreating the sound of water) would be for something more like this:

an ancient pond where
a leaping frog dives down
and water now plops

As he was doing these translations and elegant pastiches Rexroth was also compiling a series of erotic verses supposedly by a young woman called Marichiko. In fact it was all a complete fiction, but - so what? Well, these were written in his later years and while not straight-up pornographic musings (for there is an artistry about them), if he were writing nowadays, these 'tender', even 'delicate' offerings might be criticised as 'cultural appropriation' (or perhaps the inappropriate fantasies of a 'lecherous old man'?).

As someone who grew up at the time of the 'Lady Chatterley Trial', and read, at the time of its UK publication trial (1964?), 'Last Exit to Brooklyn', and followed the 'Oz magazine' trial ("*What do you suppose is the effect intended to be of equipping Rupert Bear with such a large sized organ?")*, I stand against censorship in general but am also against any exploitation or denigration of women (or men for that matter).

I think that here, however, it could be argued that in the context of its time, this pastiche was part of the drive towards greater freedom of expression and it can be seen as part of the push against the harsh sexual puritanism of the Fifties. Also, that Rexroth, by his commitment to promoting Asian literature, had earned himself the right, perhaps, to create a responsible, respectful pastiche of Asian love poetry. While it could at the same time be criticized for peddling 'orientalist' fantasizing (cf Edward Said…), for me, these are pretty inoffensive verses and form part of the landscape of the time – a time when many writers were trying hard to liberalise the repressive climate around sexuality. In that light (and putting to one side Rexroth's own possible exploitation of women) the verses can be read as an attempt, sensitively, to interiorise and empathise with a young woman's experience of love and sex.

A vous de juger…? Here is a selection, pretty much at random.

from T**he Love Poems of Marichiko**

IV
You ask me what I thought about
Before we were lovers.
The answer is easy.
Before I met you
I didn't have anything to think about.

VII
Making love with you
Is like drinking sea water.
The more I drink
The thirstier I become,
Until nothing can slake my thirst
But to drink the entire sea.

IX
You wake me,
Part my thighs, and kiss me.
I give you the dew
Of the first morning of the world.

XII
Come to me, as you come
Softly to the rose bed of coals
Of my fireplace
Glowing through the night-bound forest.

XV
Because I dream
Of you every night,
My lonely days
Are only dreams.

XVI
Scorched with love, the cicada
Cries out. Silent as the firefly,
My flesh is consumed with love.

XVIII
Spring is early this year.
Laurel, plums, peaches,
Almonds, mimosa,
All bloom at once. Under the
Moon, night smells like your body.

XXIX
Love me. At this moment we
Are the happiest
People in the world.

XXXIV
Every morning, I
Wake alone, dreaming my
Arm is your sweet flesh
Pressing my lips.

XXV
Your tongue thrums and moves
Into me, and I become
Hollow and blaze with
Whirling light, like the inside
Of a vast expanding pearl.

XLIV
The disorder of my hair
Is due to my lonely sleepless pillow.
My hollow eyes and gaunt cheeks
Are your fault.

XXVII
As I came from the
Hot bath, you took me before
The horizontal mirror
Beside the low bed, while my
Breasts quivered in your hands, my
Buttocks shivered against you.

XXXI
Some day in six inches of
Ashes will be all
That's left of our passionate minds,
Of all the world created
By our love, its origin
And passing away.

XXXII
I hold your head tight between
My thighs, and press against your
Mouth, and float away
Forever, in an orchid
Boat on the River of Heaven.

XXXIII
I cannot forget
The perfumed dusk inside the
Tent of my black hair,
As we awoke to make love
After a long night of love.

I leave the last words to Marcella, who was in fact Kenneth Rexroth's last pupil when he was teaching in Santa Barbara. She tells me what a wonderful and inspiring teacher he was – deeply interested in nature, with "a terrific sense of humor, a great heart", and was a "deep believer in the Socratic method of teaching by apprenticeship, which I fear has evaporated at least in the U.S."

I love Marcella's final comment to me – "He shared a girlfriend with Dizzy Gillespie (her choice)…. Aside from the womanising he was a devout humanitarian."

I think he was a true 'Dharma Bum' in the fullest sense of the term, living up to one of his sayings: "The meaning of life can be revealed, but never explained."

Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982)