

THE BIRD PATH: *Collected Longer Poems* is the first substantial edition of Kenneth White's poetry to be published in English. Spanning his entire career, and introduced by White himself, this collection is long overdue in the poet's country of birth.

Including some of White's award-winning poems such as *Scenes of a Floating World* and *Atlantica*, this volume brings together the thematic and philosophical concerns of a lifetime.

Of *The Bird Path* Kenneth White writes:

"Rosy gull, like Boehme's morning redness, is prologue. Thereafter, out of radical ground (wasteland, yes – but ways out) come a hundred white ones, like the cranes of ancient Ireland and Japan, like Whitman crossing Brooklyn Ferry, like Nietzschean auroras. Pelagian space, down-to-the-bone philosophy, atlantic poetics. Winged colloquia. Figures various, languages diverse. As well as gull, crow, heron, swan, Han Shan, Hölderlin, Herman Melville – Whiteheads and Hakuins. All the deep divers, high fliers. On the bird path. Moving out from estrangement into openness, and from openness towards new-found-land. Migration, metamorphosis. Flying-flowing continuity, multi-dimensional continuum. Looking in, looking out, the whole way, the maximal field. Re-discovering the earth, re-wording the world. Displacement extravagant, and places, exact: European backlands and highlands, isles and plateaux of America, Asian archipelagoes. Geography, geopoetics. No certainties, but clarities ('there are lights' – Erigena). No paradise, but areas of beautiful, breathtaking paradox. Hah!"

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Photo J RENÉ JACQUES

Kenneth White has had an extremely distinguished career. Born in Glasgow in 1936, he studied at the University of Glasgow, graduating with a double first in French and German. After travelling in Europe and beyond for several years, he settled in France, where he now holds the chair of twentieth century poetry at the Sorbonne, and is renowned as one of France's foremost writers.

For years relatively unknown in his country of birth, White has been awarded some of France's most prestigious literary prizes – the *Prix Médicis Étranger* (1983), the French Academy's *Grand Prix du Rayonnement* (1985) for the totality of his work and the *Prix Alfred de Vigny* (1987) for *Atlantica*, which is included in this volume. His work – written originally in English, not French – has been translated into German, Greek, Spanish, Bulgarian, and Dutch and he has been hailed as 'the foremost living English language poet' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*).

**MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING**

Jacket Design by **James Hutcheson**

Painting by **Archie McAllister**

LABRADOR

In the saga times

I.

Another dawn
out from Greenland
whales bellowing in the icy sea
and the vast sky
resounding with wind

once more I felt that breadth of mind
like being drunk
but this was colder and more clear
than anything
that might come out of a jug
it was what I'd always lived for
what I always *will* live for
till they throw me
into the trough of the waves
I was used to dance over

there are those who delight
in the storm of swords
and those who make
public speech with words
these are the warriors and the governors
I have preferred other ways
the lonely ways of the sky of sands
the gull path

in all my lonely ongoing
I have thought of many things
I have thought of the earth
in its beginnings
when time was a sequence of cold dawns

and space was full of
the wings of hallucinated birds

I have dreamed of a primal place
a place of rocks, quick streams and emptiness
each morning
the sun rising in the chill sea of the East
and throughout the long day throbbing
above the rocks, above the waters

the earth then was a nameless place
I have been in love with nameless places
now there are too many names
Norway of the blue streams
is rank with names
the Hebrides and even Greenland
names, names, names
and a welter of angry clamorings—
it was time to move farther West

and so another dawn
out from Greenland
and still no other land in sight
only the green waves and the wind
and a vision strong in the mind

2.

I also named a place
a place of great rocks
and the sun glinting on them
a place filled
with a rush and a flowing of waters
I called it *The Marvellous Shore*

I lived a winter there
it was a time of white silence
I carved a poem on the rocks
in praise of winter and the white silence
the best runes I ever cut

men with long eyes and high cheek-bones
came to visit me
I gave them cloth
they gave me skins
there was peace between us

when Spring came
all the streams running with light
and the big river reflecting the sky
I travelled farther South
into a land of forest
I met red men there
dressed like birds

I was aware of a new land
a new world
but I was loathe to name it too soon
simply content to use my senses
feeling my way
step by step into the reality

I was no longer Christian
nor yet had I gone back to Thor
there was something else
calling to me
calling me out
and waiting, perhaps, to be called

something sensual
and yet abstract
something fearsome and yet beautiful

it was beyond me
and yet
more myself than myself

I thought of talks in Norway
the talk of poets and of thinkers
I thought of high talk in the Hebrides

here was no place for Christ or Thor
here the earth worked out its destiny
its destiny of rocks and trees
and sunlight and darkness
worked out its destiny in silence
I tried to learn
the language of that silence
more difficult than the Latin
I learned in Bergen
or the Irish in Dublin

3.

A whole new field
in which to labour and to think
and with every step I took
I knew a singular health
mind every day more sharp, more clear

I hazarded some more names
(after weighing them carefully each one
trying them out in my mind
and on my tongue):
Great Whale River, Eskimo Point
Indian House Lake, Caribou Pass

but still no name for the whole
I was willing to name the parts
but not the whole

a man needs to fix his knowledge
but he also needs an emptiness
in which to move

I lived and moved
as I had never done before
became a little more than human even
knew a larger identity

the tracks of caribou in the snow
the flying of wild geese
the red Autumn of the maple tree
bitten by frost
all these became more real to me
more really me
than my very name

I found myself still saying things like
'at one with the spirit of the land'
but there was no 'spirit', none
that was outworn language
and this was a new world
and my mind was, almost, a new mind
there was no such thing as 'spirit'
only the blue tracks in the snow
the flying of the geese
the frost-bitten leaf

religion and philosophy
what I'd learned in the churches and the schools
were all too heavy
for this travelling life
all that remained to me was poetry
but a poetry
as unobtrusive as breathing
a poetry like the wind

and the maple leaf
that I spoke to myself
moving over the land

I am an old man now
an old man very old
I have scratched these runes on a rock
to be my testament
perhaps no one will read them
and that is no matter
they will stand on the rock
beside the scratchings of the ice
open to wind and weather

IN THE NASHVAK NIGHT

A summer night on the Labrador
in the twilight watching countless birds
settled and asleep
only a few still on the wing—
that passing flight of Sabine Gulls

is this a death
or the prelude to another life?
the question is all too heavy
breenges into this rippling silence
like a bull into china
better simply to wait
taking pleasure in the twilight

tongues of water
tongues of water from the Labrador
running up the bays and fiords
lapping against the archaean rocks
will say the poem beyond the questioning

the birds are asleep
geese, duck, brant, deal, plover
all are asleep
as though this land were one great sanctuary

here
half-way between the Old World and the New
a stepping-over place
a place to rest
on the long trail of the migrations
North-South, East and West

a place to rest
and yet I am restless
walking here in the stillness

walking in the stillness
half-way between the Old World and the New
trying to move in deeper
ever deeper
into a white world
neither old nor new

white world
neither old nor new
the bird path
feeling it out

dawn comes
with the cry of the wild goose

Nashvak Bay, Labrador