On the Body, and Every Other Consideration: An Interview with Kim Addonizio

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Kim Addonizio is the author of five collections of poetry: *The Philosopher's Club*; *Jimmy & Rita*; *Tell Me*, a finalist for the 2000 National Book Award; *What Is This Thing Called Love*; and her latest collection, *Lucifer at the Starlight*, a finalist for the Poets Prize and the Northern CA Book Award. In addition, Kim has published a collection of short stories, two poetry craft books, and two novels: *Little Beauties* and *My Dreams Out in the Street*. Her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, a Commonwealth Club Poetry Medal, and the John Ciardi Lifetime Achievement Award. While she says in an alternate universe she'd be an old black man sitting on the porch playing blues harmonica all day and her previous occupations include everything from fry cook to tennis instructor, she currently teaches private workshops in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Josephine Yu: Your first book was published eight years after you received your Master's. Would you encourage writers to wait to try to publish their work? Does the rush to publish (usually in order to secure an academic appointment) compromise the quality of the poetry that's being published?

Kim Addonizio: *The Philosopher's Club* took a while. It was a finalist for something early on, and then went around and around to the contests for three or four years. And each time it did, I tried to make it a little better. From the original manuscript I started with, I must have changed about half of it by the time it got to Al Poulin at BOA Editions, and then, of course, I worked on it some more with him. I'm glad, now, that I don't want to shred my first book. There are poems in it that aren't that realized, but I think it was ready to be out there. And yes, everyone's in too great a rush to publish. It's like a sickness. I don't have it anymore, but then, it's easy to recover from once you're well-published. I understand the need and desire. But if you can wait until the work's ready, you're going to feel better about it later.

JY: Sex is a topic you write about frequently, as you explore the complex dynamics, benefits, and consequences of relationships prompted by our most basic human drive. In "Visit" a couple finds comfort in sex after visiting the man's dying mother, and the speaker protects him from danger, from grief, with her body. Then in "Theodicy," just as God is about to strike down the cruel and stupid couple he has created, they turn to each other and discover fucking: "God's head filled with music while the wild sparks leaped / from their bodies, bright as the new stars in the heavens." Do humans find redemption in each other's bodies? Or just distraction?

KA: Well, it depends on the humans, and on the bodies, doesn't it? We can distract ourselves endlessly with sex and desire. I guess I do believe in a kind of bodily redemption, though. Getting to the spirit through the body. I don't like the whole concept of renunciation, or asceticism. Going off to a cave to meditate. It seems to me the purpose of any spiritual practice is to learn to live in the world—to transcend it, yes, but to live in it. I consider writing a spiritual practice, and I think sex can be, too. Along with eating incredible food with friends you love. I'm tempted to say something New Agey, like, "It's all one."

In terms of poetic subjects, the body is a big one, for me, because it leads to every other consideration: suffering, love, loss, pleasure, connection, mortality . . . I'm not sure I believe in a body-based poetics, per se. For example, all that French feminist stuff, which I dimly recall, about how women's bodies lead to a certain kind of writing. Certainly there are cultural determinants, but I'm not sure I buy the idea that there are biological ones. Anyway, there is certainly a stance toward the body that my poetry takes: that it's interesting and important as a subject; that its knowledge is as important and crucial to our whole selves as intellectual knowledge. A lot of poetry I see now is in this sense bloodless—it privileges the intellectual. I don't want to privilege body or intellect or emotion or spirit—I want them all to be present.

JY: When you address sex, you also often address power, as in "Them," in which the speaker remembers the shifting of sexual power between boys and girls as they become men and women, and "What Do Women Want?"—a bossy declaration of desire for a cheap red dress and the sexual freedom and power that the dress would grant its wearer. Is there a sort of redemption in power?

KA: Some of my work has been concerned with powerlessness. I'm especially interested in the way girls internalize all this shit about what it means to be female and what we're supposed to be about. It's like this perverse focus on the body, isn't it? On the body as image, as surface.

JY: It seems something redemptive is desperately needed in this world so full of suffering. Yet the suffering in your poems is urgent, essential for the development of the complete person. The ones who escape suffering are disadvantaged, lacking. Take the ordinary man in "Suffering: A Game." The speaker decides to lift him from his comfortable life and put him with the survivors of the camps. Compared to them, he's "slower and probably stupider—and his face,/with no grief to give it character,/is oddly shapeless[.]" What

tension is then created by the desire to protect loved ones from suffering and the knowledge that suffering is a valuable part of human experience?

KA: That's such a Christian perspective—forging one's spirit in the fires of suffering. Maybe I connect to it through my Catholic childhood. I'm obsessed with suffering. I meant that line about grief giving his face character to be somewhat ironic. You take this ordinary guy, and pretend he gets dragged through all this horror, and in the end, all you want is to give him back his ordinary life, because of course suffering sucks. That's the little circular drama that the poem enacts. And not just ordinary suffering—the Buddha's "old age, death, and disease"—but these evils human beings visit on each other. Maybe, too, that poem is about the randomness of much of this kind of suffering. Perhaps a better word is "impersonality." Jews, gays, and gypsies in the Holocaust, the Armenians and the Turks, Tutsis and Hutus, Israelis and Palestinians, on and on—it's killing by category. We hate by category. And identify ourselves by category, too. I think good poetry tries to subvert that kind of thinking. Do you know that Wislawa Symborska poem, "Could Have"? It's a chilling poem, because it says that you were spared for no real reason. Luck of the draw. That's how I often feel. I'm uncomfortable when I think of the idea of suffering ennobling us in some way. Is suffering valuable in itself? I'd have to say no. It's inescapable, though, and maybe how we respond to it can be in some way valuable. The alternative, since we all have to suffer, is for it to simply crush us.

JY: I love the speaker's bold, direct moves to pull the reader into the poem even when struggling with feelings of helplessness, as in "Things that Don't Happen," in which the speaker attempts to turn a sense of failure and loss into a gratefulness for the loss that is held in abeyance each day, such as "the benign tumor, the wreckage / at the intersection where you might have been standing[.]" The

speaker assumes the power to determine the reader's future, yet immediately feels she has chosen poorly, lamenting, "I've kept you from a thousand better things." This brought to mind the economics term "opportunity cost." Is there ever a good choice, considering we're always sacrificing something else?

KA: I don't know. Is there? I'm just working through my own questions in these poems. Not necessarily discovering any profound or wise answers. I don't think the speaker in that poem is assuming the power to determine the reader's future. I think the speaker is just saying, "while this is happening"—i.e., while you're reading this poem—"something else could have been happening." And I never realized it's quite that self-deprecating—"I've kept you from a thousand better things"—but you're right. Yet the space of the poem is also the space of keeping disturbing things in abeyance; the poem is the known, and while the reader is inside the poem the reader is safe, in a sense. At the end of that poem, the reader is cast into the unknown, that "begins / as soon as you stop listening, and turn away." It's like, inside the poem, there are all these questions, all these strings of possibilities, too, but there's also a sense that the virtual world created in the poem is a safer place than whatever is out there. Hence the plea to the reader to stay in the poem. I often seem to plead with the reader, I notice. Stay. Stick around. It's a scary world out there. Stay and keep me company in here.

JY: Many of your poems have that intense, surprising way of drawing the reader in—not just into the poem, but the action, the *necessary* action. In "Collapsing Poem" the reading is told "this poem won't finish unless / you drag me from it." The speaker implores, "Just pull up and keep / the motor running and take me with you wherever you're going." Could you discuss the relationship between the poet, the poem, and the reader?

KA: My poems always imagine a reader. I was so amazed and gratified that Whitman imagined me. "Look for me under your bootsoles." He posited this continuum, this connection, and his example has influenced me profoundly. My persona whines more than Whitman, she's more desperate. Whitman just knew, or at least wrote like he knew, that there was this common soul we all shared, and that time didn't matter. Doesn't matter. He is this intimate, immediate spiritual presence in his work. That's very seductive to me, whether it's Whitman, or Sappho, or Donne, or any number of more recent poets exploring and extending the lyric tradition. I'm not interested in reading a poem authored by language. That doesn't mean I'm looking for autobiography, but I'm looking for a human being to whom something mattered in the actual physical world. If that's not the case, then truthfully, I don't give a shit. Machines can generate language for language's sake. You know, sometimes I read poems and feel slapped in the face. It's like the poem is saying "Fuck you" to the reader. Though anything so direct and clear would be, in fact, refreshing. Instead it's something like, "The bottle. Dimensional. What we began, what (in spite of) (listening) occurred. Scratching on the door until we let it in. The straw through the mask. Taped. Talked. Clocked." Blah, blah, blah. Private, opaque, boring. How have we come to this? Some of the theory I find provocative, until I confront the actual poetry. Then I feel like what a non-native speaker once said to me: "Oh, this English is like a stone on my head."

JY: Returning to the speaker's sense of helplessness, I was thinking also of "On Opening a Book of Photographs." After describing the bodies in one photo, the speaker says, "However I / tell this, they're not redeemed. There they lie." Why do we pursue our compulsion to write about the dead? What is accomplished?

KA: The poem describes a photograph by Lee Miller, who was not only a model and fashion photographer, but also took photographs

in World War Two. At Dachau she took this amazing picture, this very carefully *framed* image, of a pile of corpses. The poem tries to enact both our need to redeem suffering through art, and our ultimate failure to do so. "There they lie." i.e., the bodies are lying there, the people have been murdered, nothing can change that. And the obvious double meaning of "lie": The fact of the corpses puts the lie to the idea that the narrator might redeem their suffering through art—not just witness, but art. The poem is a sonnet, it's this formal, made thing, as the photograph is a formal, made thing. And of course, the fact that there is this poem, that something has been made in yet another attempt to speak about these things, goes back to the hope that we might not fail. I have another poem, "Cranes in August," that says it another way: "What we create may save us."

JY: Perhaps you would contrast "On Opening a Book of Photographs" with "Explication," in which the prisoners die seemingly due to the audience's lack of attention.

KA: Both poems are about looking. One's based on a photograph and the other on a film. And both are asking questions about what it means to witness something, and whether or not that does any good. "Explication" is based on a film I can't now remember the name of, but I remember how the camera showed us these people in line for the gas at whatever camp it was, and then led us away by involving us in other aspects of the protagonist's life. And that's natural, of course—to look away. It's even necessary. How could you live in the world if you continually confronted the horrors that are going on every minute? But, you know—what's the balance. When are we abrogating responsibility? What is our responsibility? Those are the underlying questions animating those poems.

JY: Then in such different poems—"What the Dead Fear," "Heaven," "Night of the Living, Night of the Dead"—the dead are so alive,

though often worried, confused, wistful, still adjusting. What prompted you to begin writing about the dead from this unusual perspective and in this intimate and tender way?

KA: I think I stole the idea from Stephen Dobyns. He has a poem that begins, "Here's how the dead pretend they're still alive." I just liked the idea of imagining the dead. It's just another way to talk about the living.

JY: *What Is This Thing Called Love* often addresses aging and death and the sort of terrible news that "Dear Sir or Madam" threatens to deliver: the knowledge that love is just a chemical reaction in the brain or, worse, "a dead girl winched up from a river," the news of cats dying of old age and friends dying of cancer. Death is always nearby. And yet the collection is infused with humor. What is the place or purpose of humor in the serious business of poetry?

KA: Well, humor in poetry has a serious purpose, I think. It's a way to talk about the harder issues without going under. A point of opposition or tension. Just as in life.

JY: Billy Collins called the poems of *Tell Me* "intensified versions of the barroom ballad." And you've said you like the idea of a book of poetry as a jukebox that you can choose a tune on. Music is an important aspect of your last two collections: *What Is This Thing Called Love* is full of blues and even one poem that wants to be a rock and roll song, while *Lucifer at the Starlight* has sections titled "Jukebox" and "Dance Floor." Can you talk about the connection between music and poetry?

KA: I wanted to be a musician first, and so music's always been a point of reference. You can very clearly hear the music in a poem that is paying attention to its rhythms. You hear the beat, you hear the pitches

of the vowels, the percussive or liquid sounds of the consonants. With some of my work I've tried to make the poems song-like: relatively short, with a series of rhythms you can ride from the beginning to the end. I'm not sure that quite explains what I mean, but I can hear it when I'm writing. I want a certain effect of intensity, yes.

JY: Are song lyrics poetry? I'm thinking of my students who bring lyrics into class when I ask them to share their favorite poems—and also singers like Jewel who have published collections.

KA: I think song-writing is a different art form, as is spoken word. Not to disparage either one. But to my mind, song lyrics need the music, and spoken word needs the performer. There are cases where the writing works alone, but mostly it's the synergy of the language and the other element that, when it works, is the magic thing we respond to in great songs and great slams.

JY: I've heard you admit you're a rather shy person, yet your poems, as Billy Collins described them, are "stark mirrors of self-examination." I wondered about our separation of speaker and poet; the reader makes an agreement, a sort of pact with the poet, that she will not assume the speaker and poet are the same. This provides the poet a sort of privacy, you might say an anonymity (even if a false one). What's your position regarding the identity of the speaker in your work?

KA: I look at it like stepping onto a stage—the page is a performance space. A dancer moves in her ordinary life, but the way she moves in dance, in performance, is different. A singer is herself, yet also this other character. She performs a song that may be about her experience—or not—and she inhabits the song while she sings it. If she does her job well, the experience becomes the listeners'. I hear Lucinda Williams do "Drunken Angel," and I think of people in my life who

have self-destructed. And I feel totally connected to her when I hear her CD, but I don't expect or need to meet her in person. For me, art provides both intimacy—a mental, spiritual intimacy—and a privacy, in terms of the personal. I *am* shy, socially. I don't do well in new situations. I'm a little hermetic in my daily life. But none of that is particularly relevant to what happens in my writing.

JY: You sometimes bristle at the term "confessional," which has been applied to your poetry. Does fiction afford a great distance from the autobiographical, or a clearer divide between the speaker and the writer?

KA: I don't mind the term confessional if it's not being used as a pejorative. The confessional is a mode, no better or worse than any other. Photographers and painters do self-portraits. All the arts have some practitioners who work with autobiographical material in some way. But to answer your question, yes, it feels like people will more readily believe in your imagination and your artistic competence if they encounter it in a work of fiction. Though there, too, readers sometimes seem to think that all your characters are you. They are, but only in the broadest sense. And I feel that's true in my poetry, as well. I make shit up all the time in poems, or twist it in some way.

JY: You're collaborating with other creative women on projects ranging from a word/music CD to a poetry writing guide. How did you and Dorianne Laux go about writing *The Poet's Companion*? In the text, you acknowledge the dual authorship, occasionally referring to the reader's two authors, yet you've achieved such a natural and seamless voice.

KA: It was pretty easy for us because we could always finish each other's sentences, anyway. In the case of that book, often one of us would write a chapter and the other would just take it and do what

she wanted and add her own stuff. We'd trade back and forth, or sit at the computer with one person typing and both of us thinking aloud. It's hard to remember who wrote what, now. Except for the grammar chapter. I wrote all that because Dorianne can't keep it straight. She's an amazingly talented writer who doesn't have to—she's just got the syntax already wired in.

JY: You once told a story about lying to get out of work and then becoming seriously ill. You said after that experience you've tried to reserve out-and-out lying for your writing. Could you talk about balancing truth and fiction? How do you write honestly, write about what you know, while exploring the creative possibilities of the lie?

KA: If you become any good as a writer, what's happened is that the shape you're making is so much more interesting to you than your own experience, or than gaining sympathy from someone for your losses. You have to be led by your imagination and your interest in the poem. The language, the patterning, the imagery, the music—those are what excite me. I often start from my experience; you've got to start with something. I'm not big on research, or science, or nature. I'm interested in human beings, usually. But I don't care if I'm faithful to "what happened." I can't imagine writing a memoir, where I'd feel like things had to more or less stick to that. I'd much rather make things up—being tied to "what happened" seems horribly confining.

JY: In "'Round Midnight" you point out that there's "No plot without desire,/the more desperate the better." In the book of your life, what desire drives the plot?

KA: Good question! The first thing that popped into my head was, "The desire to be loved." Then I wasn't sure I wanted to admit that. Then I thought, "The desire to be seen." So I guess I have internal psychic drives before I get to the acceptable stuff, like, "The desire to

create art and pass something on." But that's definitely there.

JY: Tattoos are fascinating and, as you and Cheryl Dumsenil point out in your introduction to *Dorothy Parker's Elbow: Tattoos on Writers, Writers on Tattoos*, people always want to know what you got, where you got it, why, what it means, and if it hurt. So I must ask you, in the words of Mark Doty, "What noun / would you want / spoken on your skin / your whole life through?"

KA: My own most significant tattoos, for me, are a chameleon, for change; and a lightning bolt, for love's realization. In the film *Holy Smoke*, Kate Winslett writes, in lipstick, two words on Harvey Keitel's forehead: *Be Kind*. I think they are the most important words. The one noun, then, I'd inscribe—but under the skin—is compassion. ■