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Introducing the Poetry of José Kozer

One of the outstanding poets of the Spanish-speaking world over the last forty years, José Kozer is a phenomenon that resists classification. Born to Jewish parents in Havana in 1940, Kozer became a poet in early 1970s New York, relearning a largely forgotten Spanish in order to write in his first language. Having lived in Havana, New York, Madrid, on the coast near Málaga and finally in Florida, Kozer remains most of all a resident of the imagination. A poet of varied and unpredictable fusions, of the widest layers of the animate and inanimate world, Kozer is a prolific creator with an output like Picasso's but an aesthetic continuity marked by a very specific set of poetic strategies and a single dominant layout for his poems. This stylistic continuity rests in turn on a vision of poetry not as autobiography nor as simply playing games, however clever, with words but as the deepest spiritual task, the daily zen-like practice of concentration and selflessness.

What are Kozer's poems about? Not surprisingly, for someone who has written a poem every day for more than forty years, many things: his parents and family home in 1950s Cuba; everyday life with his wife Guadalupe; his reading; the Buddhist experience of being in the present; stories of monks and sages from Chinese and Japanese literature (known via English translation); poetry and the act of writing; landscapes and the natural world; the illness and death of parents and grandparents; eating a brown-rice cracker, sex, preparing lunch, waiting for death. To list such content, like listing places of residence, tells us relatively little – for, if his poetry is not an exploration of ethnic identity in any standard meaning of that term, it is equally not a memorialization of a vast array of random events, objects or observations.

Two things stand out in Kozer's poems – the selflessness of the self within them, and their combination of experimentalism with a persistent focus on beauty, death, truth-telling and the merciless physicality of our world. Kozer seems always to be writing in the presence of ancestors and of other writers, poets and books, but above all, in the presence of death. While eschewing sentimentality and seeking the unknown in the trajectory of the writing, his poems offer the shimmering stillness of earthly things in their beauty, the frailty of our corporeal selves and the sense of truth being spoken in death's presence. An experimentalist who wants his poetry to have the edginess of surprise, Kozer does not seem afraid of beauty or deep emotion.

In Kozer everydayness and humor co-exist with a strong rhythmic sense and an instinct for a poem with a certain shape. Prosaic details occur but the poem

doesn't stop at that level – the colloquial “let's not be too high-flown here” is only a temporary gesture. To watch José Kozer read his poetry is to be very aware that this is not someone who wants to get away from poetry, not someone who prefers the low-intensity dimensions of plain speech in ordinary words. The poem may travel all over the place but typically lands on its feet in the end, delivering an unequivocal unity and rightness of feel. Rather than having as final focus the self or any grouping to which the author might belong, the poems follow a different aesthetic. Among Kozer's distinctive poetic strategies are the scroll-like layout with short run-on lines that both speed up and interrupt the poem's flow, the widest vocabulary from across the Spanish-speaking world, frequent changes in direction through disrupted sentence structure, the omission of punctuation and the use of parentheses to shift focus as we make our way through a poem that constantly twists and turns. With Kozer we do not stay in one dimension whether tonally, linguistically or in terms of a poem's location or content. Always there is a sudden swerve and we are elsewhere, directed along other threads, existing on multiple layers. This insistence on the poem as a vehicle for surprise combined with a strong underlying ethical or religious sensibility is at the center of Kozer's achievement as a poet.