

KENNETH LESLIE

SEA SONNETS

Kenneth Leslie (1892-1974) was born in Pictou and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he attended the Arnold School and the Alexandra School. He attended Dalhousie University at the age of 14 and earned a bachelor's degree in 1912. He then earned a master's degree from the University of Nebraska in 1914. He continued his graduate studies at Harvard University, but did not earn a doctorate. In the mid-1930s he published the poetry collections *Windward Rock* (1934), *Lowlands Low* (1935), and *Such a Din!* (1936). The following poems were published in the July 1935 issue and included in the collections *By Stubborn Stars and Other Poems* (1938, winner of the Governor General's Award) and *The Poems of Kenneth Leslie* (1971). They are part of the sonnet sequence "By Stubborn Stars," which Zachariah Wells described as "one of the most moving and perfectly made long poems in Canadian literary history."

Once as I watched the clear air of your eyes
the shadow of a wildly beating wing
touched the horizon of their candid skies
and broke their brightness with sharp winnowing;
passion was swift upon us, sweeping us clean
into the straits beyond the harbour wall;
the hooded hurricane curled, the raging green
swallowed the light, swallowed the bell's call.
And yet, not even when the reef had swung,
slow and implacable, its iron gate
out, out against us till we heard its tongue
clicking the cruel knowledge of our fate,
would I believe its stupid blinding lies,
remembering the clear air of your eyes.

There was no time to talk, maneuvering through
those hungry waters, not time to draw a breath,
beating between the teeth of gales that blew
us inch by inch upon a jagged death.

A hand could touch a hand changing the wheel,
an eye could catch the quick glance of an eye,
clawing from hell with one sail and a keel
against the stark persuasion of the sky.

Now we have time to tell the worth of waking
through the long watches of the screaming night,
tell it together with the dawn-light shaking
our sails to life, proud wings of a bird in flight,
now tell the tamed sky and the quiet blue,
the canvas filled with air, I filled with you.