

**Portrait of Willem de Kooning,
Spirals, Long Island**
31 December 1973

King of bluntness,
I paint those in my circle—
all the wounded and wounding,
their cigarette mouths,
sewerage hair.

I pace back and forth,
here in the studio,
pause to toast my imaginary brother
with another whisky.
From the mirror
he offers no protest
as I sway stained before
an overworked semblance of myself
that I may wrench from the easel,
stomp underfoot.

I have no steady compass or companion
only these brushstrokes—
yellow, blue, red flares
that I launch into the sky.

Paint fumes and fuming—
Sometimes I fall to my knees exhausted.

I'm looking for the door in each painting,
one that leads beyond the battlefield of my life,
where I can sit in a chair
and think about light,
the way it anoints a bared shoulder,
the paint-peeled hull of a beached dinghy.

I paint
out of knowing
and out of not knowing enough,
each granted day and night
until the brush falls
from my striving hand.

Peter Bakowski

Willem de Kooning
American, born The Netherlands 1904–1997
If Jackson Pollock was the public face of the New York avant-garde, Willem de Kooning could be described as an artist's artist, who was perceived by many of his peers as its leader. He was born in Rotterdam, where he grew up in an impoverished household and attended the Rotterdam Academy, training in fine and commercial arts. In 1926, the adventurous young artist stowed away on a ship bound for Argentina. While the ship was docked in Virginia, de Kooning slipped off, skirted immigration, and made his way to New Jersey—and so began the rest of his life. www.moma.org