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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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SLAVIC ELEGY

In the roux burbling in a tyro's poêle
read the same destiny as a Forest Dweller
reads from melt wax dropped in water
Baltic Christmas lead on snow or your
reflection seen a second on a passing car
or my shadow cast on the fire. Read.

The fat and flour grumble in the pan
sienna on the way to umber. She called me
Slavic. All my life I yearned for that
shallow sea below a white sky always.
Enough confession. I have to be
who you think I am, the long pagan
lostness of our lives, stumbling
through this Arab wilderness, abstraction.

Read these faces. This little girl
grows up to be your wife. This wife
is reborn as your little boy.
Finally everybody gets married.
Tell me the story again, the sunlight
shimmers in the well like golden eels
down there a star's caught in the pine tree
we cast a mesh of words around the world
and some things get caught in the net,
we can never work them loose,
they're always there, part of what it means,

they die and rot there, a bad smell
and a strange feel left over in language.
We hear a word or two and know
someone died here, someone
we tried to know and love.

2.

The asshole is the magic cauldron
of the child. The house of sensation.
All magic begins or ends there,
the dark mediation, the little house.
the cave from which the dead men come
dead babies that later come to life
under the sea or under the cornfield.

In this season you hear them again
their voices calling you and your mother
says its just the wind. Because children
too forget, and this forgetting
is called maturity. The mother doesn't mean
to lie. She just has forgotten to remember.

Everything that ever was inside you
has to come to life again.
When it learns to talk and sing
and dance through corn rows, dance
for quarters in the subway, prattle
to large audiences at the Sorbonne, then
you have said your piece, your magic

movie shows everywhere. New ocean,
new shore, a flat sea in a flat world,
your eyes a thousand miles above your feet,
the child's cauldron full again, the sea waits.

3.

Old but not mature
I venture towards the house of life.
I carry something precious
from everyone I ever knew.
Every touch I ever felt
makes my skin keen as a safecracker's fingertips,
every argument I ever lost
hones the dialectic in my head.
every reproach amended me,
every anger lit the simple torch
I hoist to find the broken path.
Everything you ever did to me
is me now and I'm on my way.

4.

This is an election of sorrow,
an elegy, a witness,
a liturgy, a grieving

a confession to the natural priest
suave in the curlicues of the human ear,

this is a rock by the wayside, you passed
like Mozart on the way to Prague,

this is a poem also, it started
with the worst line ever written
but what could I do, I heard some word
in another language, maybe
not even an other language, maybe a word
outside of language altogether
and I tried to write it down,

forgive this explanation, it doesn't mean
anything except *Here*
my witnessing begins, a knower
of the body knows you too,
a Slavic joyous grieving, we live
as close as trees, no end to the forest,
Slavic, sounds like swavic,
a slave and a seducer,
White Slaves of the shallow northern sea.

But what does it witness,
oil and flour bubbling in the pan
turning brown, turning burned,
feculent, fecal,
love's lucre staining clothes,
abandoned children touch all the trees,
hug every shadow, what does it witness,
the only sorrow is children forgetting,

growing up forgetting, why can't they
keep learning, adding to what they know,
not take away the anthem of their bodies,
the private song their bodies share with water
air fire forest animal and no other?

The child is her own mother.
That is the secret. The Lithuanian forest
dwellers, the know it or they knew it,
girls moving sly among the birches,
cauldron after cauldron, showing
only the eyes they see me with
stumbling through the same woods reading
twig and scat. We leave each other signs.

1 November 2002

DER ABSCHIED

The decisiveness of a number
even if it's wrong
be with you

a grace and a forgiveness
for all you decisions
the tiger nights
when anger was your only way to love

so I day it's 7, the day Seven Knife
in an old calendar of things and situations

every day knows its number
and you know it

it knows you
neuroma, a painful
swelling of the nerve body
encountering rough terrain

climbing up the number system

to touch not you
never you again
but the undemanding absolute
worth everything

we are as beautiful
as how we can let go

2.

I could not decide
to travel with you
to the next stage
of your imposture

so I gave you a number
instead, a small one
somewhere between
a fish and a pine tree

a real one, though,
even if it wasn't really mine to give.

2 November 2002

CHOOSING A

but then the language stops
I don't know the word
for what I want

there is no word
in French for it, or English
maybe there's a language where they have it
in some estuary where crocodiles play among motorboats
and people take death less seriously, so common is it.

no day when no one dies.
I don't know what to believe
I want the thing this word must signify
I want the sound of it fat in my mouth
and my whole body tingling
in subtle silence after I've said it

whenever I meet a certain kind of person
you're the latest I keep thinking
they know this word, you do, you will
teach it to me and we
will say it frequently together, choosing
our moment, the willed time,
I'm waiting, it's all right if you don't know the word
or even if you just don't want to tell me
you want to save it for somebody else
real or imagined, I have waited so long
I will wait some more, the word
must be there waiting for me in your mouth

as I have waited for it, waiting for me
at the end of the longest sentence
the word has to be there, its existence
is guaranteed by the fact that language
exists at all, and came into being
to make it possible to speak this word.

Sometimes I think I can have
the things this word is saying
without having to say it

Sometimes but I doubt this I think
there is something nearer than language
and it will take me there and hold me
something nearer than rain.

2 November 2002

OBEDIENCE

The chair outside was wet this morning
obedient to the rain. The rain
obedient to the calendar that says Day Eight-Rain.
Now the sun comes out and up
over yellow maples, trop de jaune,
obedient to the long cold autumn
every year is full of paradoxes
earth is going through some crisis
every year speaks some new flaw.

Obedient. Only I am not.
I break the law. Not the human legislations,
not even the natural ethics of us carnivores.
The law behind the law, the unbreakable
law I break, I break by even naming it,
the great Unspeakable, the weird
voice in Ahab's cabin, the unheard thing
that makes the birds fall down.

I do not know who I disobey
but there is someone there, with a voice
like an anvil, with a heart of gravel,
lord of X-rays, sobbing in the center
of the world because nothing's blue.

3 November 2002

ART HISTORY

In Istanbul the devils had
dark haloes and blue wings.
Square haloes and blue wings
to fly around inside churches
so worshippers got a sense
of who they had to deal with.
Most of them are covered over now
whitewash and smoke and now
the only place you see them is outside
where the blue gets lost in the sky
and the square dubious glory round their crowns
is indistinguishable from just standing on the street
waiting for the bus or something worse.

3 November 2002

NOW

Let this hour be the same as time
something real, something speaks
even I can understand

a memoir, a rule
to measure you or that you follow

a question someone asks me in the dark.

3 November 2002

ALMOST WITHOUT THINKING

we try to recover
the delicate sponsorship
that brought us blood

the words come out
without my meaning them

are truest then
when you hear what I say
before I do

you who show me the delicate
evidence I want
to have been born to read.

3 November 2002

THE RESPONSIBILITY

Carrying it in my pocket
we walked the cathedral home

too many cities have been lost along the way
especially while she stops at the fountain
to change her clothes

all that opportunity for being misunderstood.
So I had to hold it tight inside
my hand around it, the arrow tower over the nave
was a little painful, I worked the flying buttresses
between my fingers so it fitted neatly
like a hand grenade
but it broke the smooth line of my tweed jacket

as if I had a white rat in my pocket
finding a home for it in someone's apartment

so much as if. So little as is.
Except my jacket, which I bought from an Armenian
who said its strange mustardy color
came from wool of sheep that browsed
innocently by the cadmium mines of Izbad Lapp.
Little do any of us know
where our clothing lived and ate and drank
before it came along and swallowed us

but by now she was finished changing
had rinsed out the old clothes, so much salt

and we could go on walking

but meantime I was beginning to forget
losing the thread that leads to our destination
where should we be taking this cathedral?

though it fits in my pocket it's too big for my house.

4 November 2002

MILLENNIAL ANXIETIES

grip me every day.

The doctor is out of town

the newspaper looks at me in a funny way

I'm afraid to light up the tv.

Now what. My wife is asleep.

There are no birds at the feeder.

The sun looks insincere.

Maybe music would make me

feel better or some food.

But I took a vow against pleasure,

breakfast, changing my mind.

I think I should just get dressed

and make my way by fast trains

to some other city of the afternoon

I could be someone else there

with other anxieties, other newspapers.

Or maybe this is easier

stay home and go to the library

take out a big book about New Zealand

or learn Czech, so when the end comes

I'll have a thick new language

between me and anything inescapable.

4 November 2002

THE THOUGHT OF THIS PEN

came to me, I picked it up to see.
Enough truth. What flows out
for me to see, you to read
and you to translate into animals
walking slowly by the window
two by two, and every one a fake.
'There are no animals. Nobody
survived the flood. We all are Noah's
Dream, you are my daughter,
the wine is made from water,
the wind is made from wood.
All that happened is more ink
flowed out of many pens
and we believed. This delicate
stain-maker, shapely liar
against pale fact. A word can say
anything except what it means.
'That's over there, under a mile
of water, a gull is laughing at you
any time you speak. I'm wrong.
'The ants survived. An ant is actual.
'They walk in and out of the boards
he laid aside to build the ark
but never did. Ark is too odd a word
to build with his hands. Ants
carry on their backs the things they eat.
A simple cycle it seems, but it eludes me.

4 November 2002

AMASS THE EVIDENCE

here is a river.

It is yours

between your trees

your shores.

Wherever
you look, someone
belongs to you
like water.

Later you'll believe me
now is a meager hour
you'll outgrow

but here is where I leave you
I who am of the dying

touch me one more time
I leave my mask in your fingers.

4 November 2002

Amtrak

A SMALL FANFARE

of adjectives
then a eulogy of verbs.
He's gone
so we should do it.
Much larger than life
Maria Theresia
is bronze on her throne.
We lie in grass
at her feet
having to pee.
We live between
museums, eventually
what we call
the body wins.
I am too tired
too ignorant too
full of desire to
resolve this ambiguity.
I barely notice it.
But when I do
it's when I notice
the shadow of the train
skips along the lawn
the lovers the forgetters.

4 November 2002

Amtrak

POLICE ACADEMY

youths on Third Avenue
garrison caps and duffle bags
like veterans of the Civil War
dark blue. They will go
come spring to Rockaway
and do battle with the sea
the terrorist waves, the gulls
who strike me also as
agents of a sinister alien power.

4 November 2002

NYC

VENIERO'S : ESTABLISHED 1894

I too am founded in a year
I too have trees
they grow outside my head

and one old linden
shabby with hearts
grows inside

I am the express message
to you from nobody at all
you need so much

I will sit here quietly
until you understand.

4 November 2002

NYC

IN LIGHTS FROM THE STREET

the slender difference
between night and morning
in which we live

bending onward, I know
the body and forget the face

meet me on the discalced streets
the barefoot holy people
treeless forest, starless night

the moon asleep in their clothes.

4 November 2002

Veniero's