

6-2003

junG2003

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Robert, "junG2003" (2003). *Robert Kelly Manuscripts*. 1015.
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THE EMBRACE

Umbeset -- who used that word
to mean beset all round,
surrounded by, beauty was it,

or other enemies,
beating to a strange measure
tocsin of darkness and weird words

“no one strangled you
you choked on bitterness”
he seemed to say

but was he physician, glorious or not,
oily with redemption, anointed,
was he the one?

2.

Love summons us, the old
book says, but who can listen,
the rage inside these days is fear,

love is old-fashioned now, even lust
is set about with boundaries,
nomad in the stony plains of No.

3.

In this land we no each other.

Stones misspell the light

falls on them from somewhere.

It was the season of the caterpillars

countless on the stones and clay paths

nor would the birds consent to eat them

for all the prolixity of birds,

ill-savored vermin on the earth

who will destroy every flower

by summer's end a wilderness.

Stop reading from that book, this

is in your hands now, your lap,

that sacred valley, forget

the devious geography of the outer isles,

we are here now, almost alive now,

we are the only ecology

that counts, counting

the raindrops left on the leaf.

4.

So that is Mercury, the smallest

planet massed inside our own --

a common error sees them as outside

each other, ranged neatly round the Sun
umbeset with orbits, but not so --
that diagram teaches merely influence,

dignity, degree. The gods -- or
as we say, the planets -- are nested
inside one another inside the Sun

thus inside us, and when I say us
I properly mean me. But today
in lucent morning fog and sea roar

beating up the hill I mean you too.
We are marvels in how much we hold,
old pewter chalice full of winy mold.

5.

So it was Goethe you had to attend,
sitting close to his satin waistcoat
to hear better so sleek a wit,

you wonder sometimes how the world began
because it could hardly have gone on
forever as the Averroists claim

--my master Siger of Brabant among them--
or else why in all these countless years
would we know so little

and have learned not the simplest things
and civilization so young a folly
we can date its births and puberties

and still have not learned to feed
each other and be kind
and share our simple bodies freely

against the tumult of the lonely dark?
And what did he tell you, that Poet
in mauve satin, the Privy Councillor

with his vast mind all hardwood
wreathed with roses, did he
tell you where the sea is going when it goes?

15 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

MATERIA

We build our houses out of vegetables
then wonder when the wind or fire --
the wisest of us live inside a stone.

15 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

DAMAGED GOODS

for John Ashbery

Facing it backwards
we called it, that game
as at the San Remo
acknowledging our chosen
pleasures mine
Astarte yours golden Philip
which might have been his real
name as my zaftige
slightly shopworn goddess's
wasn't, while Jussi Bjoerling
sang *Nessun dorma* over and over
and nobody did, by the crapper
where the skinniest ones always
clustered wagging their tails
to the music, reading all the songs
on the jukebox but playing
that one over and over. The past.
Her tongue in my mouth.

16 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

Et

As if to label an urbanity
Brooklyn boys no claim to
et ego in Arcadia o that *et*

did it mean even I lived here
in such beauty
lowly as I am, these rocks
and dryads had a place for me,
before death got me,

or did it mean that even Death
lived here, was alive and well
and scything down
shepherdess and swain

or any of all the other wistful
wishful things that tomb inscription said,
Nicolas Poussin, tailor
of such mysterious veils,

nowhere to hide
from the past especially
and the future's full of teeth
so the present (Arcadia
if there ever was one)
is so pleasant
(forgive my Japanese)

nowhere to hide
from the evanescent
perfection of this
bloody miracle
the moment

of meaning anything
at all even, *et* or no *et*,
here or elsewhere,
et in such contexts means ‘even’
or as we would say ‘too’,
I too lived in Arcady
whoever I was,
swell or dingy,
vieux or fangled new
don’t matter,
it’s all now,

all the skeletons
dancing merry
in island sun

as if my father
were a lawyer after all
and wrote me a contract
the world could keep,

angel,
sing me that song.

16 June 2003, Cuttyhunk

RENUNCIATE FALSE OR TRUE BUT TIME WILL TELL

Watch the wind
walk off the cliff

blimy, the blarney
is so thick
around my heart
it slays me,

you heartbreak, you fish
in all my waters

you unwakable-up-from dream
you prancing pollster
who clocks my every whim
you dance me
on my own strings

because I give you power.
All my power.
Not I must resume
the ghost dance of the actual
and take control.

No more sandstorms. No more foxes.

16 June 2003
Cuttyhunk

SERVING

Let that be a lesson to me
a Mass begins with boys
itchy in embarrassing surplices
their billowy cassocks

only a moment later
does the priest appear
that angry man, torn
from the contemplation of the holy

to murmur to old women
who pray with their knees
and the boys are snoozing
inside their liturgy

words are pillows and comforters
words are the sleep of meaning
words are to keep from thinking
and the altar boys say them

with practiced insolence,
insolence of the holy,
public prayers, the women sob
their rosaries alive in puffy fingers,

why did I think that poetry was different
just because the church was as big as the world
just because I made the prayers up as I went along
just because nobody seemed to be listening?

16 June 2003

IN THE MEADOW

but I have never gone there
though I have been in meadows

in the sunshine
I never knew
though I have walked in light

there are places that it's a sin to go
because I have always been,

always lived inside the field
it would be sacrilege to walk towards

intending, intending
instead of just being there.

16 June 2003
Cuttyhunk

SENTENCE DIAGRAM

les droits de l'homme et du citoyen

It says it's flying
or a fish or speaks
Portuguese spices
in the air for dinner
a cardinal on the wind
and his white plane
beached on the headland
waiting, waiting

it says so many
boats or empty
and it says the women
walking on the cliff
or the blue truck
with a white cap
we're waiting also

it says electric
or yellow inside
scour the scurf
dried bilge left
it says the former
was an outsider
someone new
to all this ignorance

a black bird
it could be flew
the aspects align
the languages congeal
big deal it says
a cormorant a rock
a wave a goner
because in this story
nobody lasts the winter

it says the winner
is a paltry man
or woman broker
coarse uncertain
beer drinkers catch
fish before light
boys rhyme with noise

it says gay customers
with little dogs
also ascend or treetop
among grackles
Zeus's oracle not just
from birds it says
the partner was a priest
the ear ring glisters
the crucifix is in the shop

gilded lady it says or god
herself a radar pattern

arriving time no time
for Shakespeare who he
really was is yet to be
name of a null set
the future fills with
common words I know
my master he is me

it says the ranger
or the stranger
in love with death
because you wake
quicker than
than ever before
to that new life
where you are both
and all our suicides
come from singularity

no one wants to be one
when all the numbers wait
it says our incarnation
go up the steps or ego
two by two the sun rays
pour down between
the legs of leaping citizens
o god the country
is a color in our dreams
between lawn and ocean

decide it says
before they do
and then the pilot
flies you to the coast
and leaves you there
one more city
among the many
your tail lights dim
from all your fleeing

it says and then a sparrow
or some little sort of
bird begins to nest there
where there had been space
now a knot of branches
hair and filaments galore
inside of which some new
citizen begins to chirp
a story you have heard before

you run away again it says
this time to the kibbutz
on the moon why not
we are Jews everywhere if
anywhere and there
you have to stay a season
till the boat is born
so far from the shore
we went downstairs
and found that winter
had split the oar blade

in three long pieces

symmetrical as sin
it says and now there is
and is no going it says
and now there is no staying
it says and the pink
flowers in front of the house
and the plane is still there
no one to take off
no place to travel the oar
shards in whose hands
after all who owned us?

16 June 2003

CABALLERO

At the end of the swivel
the chin is pointed towards
the passing woman. No matter.
All stairs go up. The moment
is just that, a thrust
and then it's over. The woman
passes. She's gone,
the head resumes its northward prowl.
Somewhere in all this
a body goes downtown.
If we don't build cathedrals
what will we have to desecrate?
Not this body, not this beauty,
tell me that with your green wine,
Master Mason, your electric fingernails.

17 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

A mouth full of certified idioms

get out of town

my heart eats your heart out

you've got to live in the right cellars

to hear the right licks

but where am I

when we both are somebody else?

17 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

EPITAPH

Measure anything and find fault with it,
prisoner. In that Kipling story about the galley
slave remembering past lives, we learn memory

is authentic, imagination false. A brave
rejection. What has power
comes from what has lived.

Standing by tide flats at twilight
waiting for birds.
Living off what comes to feed.

17 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

THE FISHERMEN

Fishing smack through Canapitsit
into the sound. Introit.

Daycloud. The young water
is mostly breast, the men
if men they are, are silhouettes.

Remember. Go fish. The deep
old rape of the hidden regions
lingers as a sport among old boys,
to hang out there and dangle
their tools down in the invisible,

pourquoi, he asks again, mirror
of desire, gate of burning gold
spread open in the water
morning sun. Beware the god.
The thing that comes to you
is different from suppose.

Walk on the water to get there,
princelings, your sad appetite
brings home nice fish. Nights
we share your tasty guilt
flaking the white flesh asunder
from the grill and ponder
But why this? What are bodies for?

17 June 2003

Cuttyhunk

