

12-1993

decC1993

Robert Kelly
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/rk_manuscripts

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Robert, "decC1993" (1993). *Robert Kelly Manuscripts*. 1291.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/rk_manuscripts/1291

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Robert Kelly Archive at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Kelly Manuscripts by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Comfort ye, kept singing as I woke, my people,

then no more words.
Square root of a round number
coming across to our side,
sickness of the Ulstermen
from any angle, *comfort*
ye my, that one would speak
so to us, from up over there,
a sickness in our hair, the grace
of breath turned mystery
so music'll cure us,

here, between the pipe organ and the Himalayas, how,
in middle air, full of love fierce
love no noisier than flame, a flame,
and that by power of such hearing
(but there was nothing said) and such seeing
(though there was no one there to see,
only the music) we

become whose *people*

†

Every window has its own supply of birds.
City by city I have paced out
the apparent boundaries of a not finite Domain.
Now here's another language for you,
jackass penguins braying at the harbor and
a soft mew from a local gull—

wonder what we look like from up there,
we who are the animal that's mostly head,

the way they look down and see us
and they are wings to us,
soft flames of goingness
who are in themselves snug
caravans of yearning, the *feel* of a bird,
never-ending excitement of its body
compared to our torpid derricks
shunting the heads around.

And those massed or balding crowns
we choose our Gods to see
posing Him above us as we go
flat-foot Platos on the listening earth.

For God is common and is fodder and not far,
beneath your Nikes and athwart the rain

but is not who you think you are.

†

What comfort in gun time, gone all
merit, heap of history splintering
the high courtesy of leaving me alone,
yankee poodles strangled on no leash.

Nothing easy (nothing's easy),
pinnaces racing down the bay
to please the ever-antiquarian sea
makes nonsense of our politics,

the large of water.
Comfort. Cow-chips smolder scentless
long hours in Tibetan stoves
little kind you move around the room

all night burn slow she said
shaping the referred-to fire
with her practiced hands

so that I saw what kept them warm.

†

Mostly we are heads. In Isaac Rosenfeld's wonderful story "The New Egypt," we learn that our identity arises from our deaths. I would put it this way: from the local perturbations of eternity we learn our momentary self. Immortals lose their identities, starting with their names. Perhaps that is why we say, have always said, the Gods, the Ancestors, leaving to poets and romancers the fanciful titles by which some functioning immortals consented to let themselves be called. Mostly we are head: the shadow of a body projected upward from the luminous ground onto the passive sky is called a head. We study these closely, one side at a time, the way children stare at clocks while they struggle (always reluctantly, have you noticed, however gladly they learn to read or reckon) to tell time. Tell time. Staring at that part of the shadow we call the face (the part that's least like the beholder) we say things like: I love you or Vote for me. And all the while away, the luminous clavicles rest in a dream of breasts and shoulders, and the delicate meat of the forearm's dorsum tickles in the faint wafture of sea air while she sleeps, cloud-shaded, on the island's sand, *first-fruits of the dead*.

And there are crows here too. One swoops down by the mansard of a peaked roof white with yesterday's new snow. If we tell of death, we tell the truth.

†

So why did I wake up with Handel in my head?
Proposing every order of renewal I suppose
Comfort ye, my people and what comes next
is only (always) music.

I want to tell about this, Fred,
and how Russ brought us good mock-beer
sans ethanol but lots of foam,
yellow succedaneum for this Dane's mead-hall,
it is the manners (precisely)

I can't mind.

Which makes my melody.

Charlotte plays and I am like a drum
resonates to neighbor fingerings
and all alone at night (or rarely)
vibrate to the traffic passing, ever
far away a single auto moving
cautiously in snow.

Now snow.

The crow

is my head, is all I mean,
the sky is all I've ever seen.
The way you hear footsteps on the stairs.

20 December 1993
Boston

OLEVM CLANGORIS

And let that be a lesson to me
the domain is body but the Queen
ah where is the queen in what
rank and file position has she hidden
fearing the reprisals of our lust
our sense of silence that projects a world?

Our violences. Oil of Noise, all
that racket is from inside me,
I see her shadow on the bathing pool
as if she walked sad with dusty feet
counting the petals of a left-hand flower
over the listless water
wet soles dusty ankles and the hem of her
has known the world,
her shadow I see, and the footprints
she is constantly leaving everywhere
—once when I was twelve I knelt and kissed one—

disguising herself as pigeons, numbers, doors?

21 December 1993

ROOFRAIN

Sound of rain on my roof, in downspout
down, the instruments
were there before we are, we shaped
our bodies to be apt for them,

a matter of scansion, simple numbers, Bobby,
you remember, always liked algebra better
where the sacred naked numbers hid
and left me struggling all life long

to multiply the square root of
Polyhymnia by Erato. O love
we do it better in the dark
—these are not eyes but they see well enough.

21 December 1993

M A D E L E I N E

What surprised me after all those years
was how beautiful she was, or her face was
for I was still in the business of seeing.

Beautiful the way I suppose such women
always are who love hard
and get themselves much talked about
a mouth unconquered

in its sumptuous chastity by a million kisses.
And her eyes startled me —remember
I was seeing her for the first time since my treason
(they call it when a man listens to his reason

and flees by night over invisible frontiers)—
her eyes had so much giving in them, color
was the least of it. She was sitting
on a stone at the side of my road,

knees drawn up like a problem in geometry.
Find the hidden angle that made the world.
And my body felt all over like the stone
as if she pressed against me everywhere

and was the only warmth and life I had.
As if she was waiting for me, I who never know
I would pass that way again
with eyes still in my head and a heart on fire.

She can give me everything I need I thought
and thought some day I'll ask how much she knows.
Till then I'll be silent as a crow in the sky
making noise and telling truth

but saying nothing anyone could ever quote

or memorize or trust. So I shuffled louder
as I passed her by, quick, as if
I were not the one she needed too.

22 December 1993

BEING SURE AT LAST

A Christmas Pantomime

Sometimes I just have to review their eyes
and summon red glowings in gaunt amber
or wait for the flock of sheep to pass
or forgive the sea. We both are shallow.
We are weather. Name tricks us.

Henna in her hair. We think:
I met him somewhere, under a mountain,
Wagner was playing. And then
everything in the kitchen begins to speak:

the turnip on the window ledge beside the kettle:

Marksmen aimed me
and missed the moon.
Eat me while you can, traveller
— I watched your grandmother
labor for breath in the dying spring—
remember all I bring you from below.

the kettle itself:

I burned your hand in Camden Town
you thought I was some water
I was a tank in Bosnia, a broom
broken on New Years, a jackass in the crèche,
a number between nine and ten,
behind me all the winter daylight,
see red berries ample in an empty bush

the coffee filter:

(arioso for male alto or high Russian tenor)

I am not food for you, not good for you
except as nature's bad
and so we are, except for dancing
in our red tunics our fluffy white costumes
our breasts our beards our dancing bears
right with us, I am not good for you
except as nature's worse for you
and so we are, in unison
instead of union, that's the human grief,
deploring the ordinary
till it comes for us
and then there's no more kissing,
a dark cone filter drowning all recollection,
her hair, her hair...

And everything is saying!

Maple syrup, organize the light,
wicker waste white basket small,
apologize! The rosary beads
("me leash, you mind,")
a cabbage stalk to beat the flesh,
a calendar and two big shoes,
the Christmas cactus blossoming on time,

one perfect flower for each one of us,
none missing and nothing over,

oh I am time enough for you and her,
you don't need very much opera

it all is when you follow
(here's my hand) the lines on your palm.

Chorus:

O mortal music!
A knife goes rattling in the sink

and nothing will save me from the spoon.

23 December 1993

CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

There seems to be something here
that understands
better than I do

And then my quarrelsome
investigations
disturb the lunatic quietly
analyzing his daisy
into impossible amorous promises

and I remember the war his mother.
Be sweet to me, with the chalky
dark blue of hyacinth in the lights of your hair,
Cupido, and save the dome above us
to shelter from the farce of weather
this little language that we are.

Breathless touching. Spill of hot wax.

23 December 1993

Alors, c'est le quatre Nivose

It is the fourth of Snowmonth and already dark
and who is dying?

Looking back at history and its actors

— Isaiah, Plato, Robespierre —

I wonder if any of them, any of them at all,
ever really meant what they found themselves saying,

or ever really got what they wanted.

Or did they just endure the day,
changes of public language,
put up with what people thought they meant
before they reached out and killed them?

Or let the weather do it. What a world!

So blue and soft the fields under my feet today,
the frozen mud, the tiny frozen pools of Tuesday's rain,
it could have been the sky I was walking in,
so silent was it. And echoless the word.

24 December 1993

Midnight Mass 1993

for Charlotte

When the Pope's hands handled bread last night
and lifted it up all white to show
in all directions to the end of the world
as he stood and tottered, old man in a circle,
so all could see, and raised it high
among the blazing helixes of DNA
Bernini twisted out of massive living bronze
to make a human room for this strange meal,
of course it was just television,

just light and satellite and prose.
But as he turned his body, keeping his hands still,
in the slow circle that any body turns
between the *This is my body* and the awe-struck
half-reluctant kneeling down before the power
the body's words have summoned to inhabit
one more time the mystery of now,

and his pink old puffy hands held carefully
the white disk that is all we have left of Jesus
I thought he was showing it to you, not just you
but specially to you, and I called you
from the kitchen, Come look at this. It is something
that happens by pure seeing. A lineage.
A connection with the oldest things. A tune
you can see. Something we should see together.
Since even God has such need for things.

25 December 1993

Even though we're at the heart of winter
it seems a long time since I've seen Orion.
More than a year it feels, more than a life
since I stood in the same doorway
watching him rise above the Major's apple trees,
gaunt sky man over gaunt branches and the air
sweet sharp with the smoke of apple wood
and I stood with my hands in my pockets guessing
how I too could burn my body to diamonds
and be famous for straddling the world.
For apple burns well, and has the meaning
of our Yankee places, modest values
in fine old shabby houses, not much said
and inside the modest heart a blinding gleam
of pure mythology that tells a man
Look up now, you will see her passing,
Look now, he is walking in the sky.

Christmas Day 1993

GLASS

I like glass-topped tables near windows
any time but most on Christmas
when looking down at your book or food or hands
you see a bird fly right through what you see.

And that tells you things are simpler than they seem,
but further away, more intimate, at hand.
Someday the word will slip right off the page
and flee the ancient tyranny of sense.

A word alone in the sky! Fast! And these hands
will not be anybody's then, and the human soul
is only glints and gists and gyzms gypsying
through all the movements of our frail attention

and once again the bird swoops through my bread.

25 December 1993

As if this were a last opportunity
to dismiss the light and watch the moon
lightless but full inscribe
slow-moving anadems of love
across the sky and the snow down here
look back up at it with prose in its heart
for all the beauty of this semblance
the ice will kill us and the road will laugh.
Unless it is that strange road with a heart.

26 December 1993

In the accomplishment a maybe bird
or habit of inflection Good
morning or the bus driver's cigar—
things have to be delicate to stay as they are.

2.
Toadflax on my hill? Well I never
not do I believe the pastor for
all his grasp of Chaldee
a fool with a cup of blood in his hand.

3.
So some do so some do not so
I'm going out to look for a bee in the snow
so many interruptions how can you disturb a hammer
the bus goes by chanting in ancient tongues

4.
A picture lasts a small part of a second
in the eye and all your lifetimes ever after
in the mind you have to watch to watch
the billion-footed predator wipe out the Jews.

5.
So much for you am I protected
in this endless movie? Sumac at my door
car full of dogs. I know my name at last
and will never tell it till a thousand years have passed.

26 December 1993

It's not as if I could have understood—
it was different that way, like a star
at the top of an endless staircase—
or have I betrayed the words by saying so?

Maybe it's the bottom of it that's still to be found,
where the lover waits, rarely dressed, in white clothes,
the Noble Suitor who spends (a strange
half-trumpery silvery rose with golden

rose leaves, copper thorns,
held before him
delicate with hope)
his whole life climbing the stairs.

27 December 1993

TO PAT & MARLA ON THE FEAST OF ST. JOHN THE BETWEEN.

We had a little snow but it fell just before the real cold
so when we walked down this late afternoon
down back along the Sawkill to the river
the ice was new,
new ice silvery all across the bay, locally smooth
but no wide simple sheet of it
heaped and hazarded instead in hummocks and smooths and sheer
ducklessness the gaunt vistas of blue shimmery sheen
except goldred where the sun happened, only the head of her
still over the low hills back of Kingston

we went along and stopped and started, the ground
sometimes just autumn of oak leaves and other
and sometimes winter, shaken with snow and slick
underfoot here and there under leaf fall
and the river was huge out there
though the big of it (beyond the track and trestle) seemed
no more than an afterthought of bay,

some little movement looked like water there.
And one solitary goose went over crying in the lost way they do
tangled in hemlock branches so I couldn't see but
Charlotte higher as we climbed up the last headland
by now could point to the pattern
so I finally saw, "at length" as the man said,
the sprawl of bird across the sky and the sun went down.

2.

So what is all this to do
and with you
I thought to tell you

something to do with the season, feasts
between Christmas and whatever comes next year,
St Stephen the stoned and St John now
and then the Innocents slain, the little chapel here
called after them, the exiles who chose the wrong time to be born
or the right time, the quick sojourn,
knives of Herod's hoplites,
what do we know of karma? 'Deed' or 'Action'
and its 'Result.' Nothing.
What goes on beneath the frozen river.

3.

A little rill still noised along
on the hillside, a sweet tinkling
under the ice it became
as if one part of it hardened to
shield all the rest of the flow,

the way words have meanings
behind which we have our secret meanings
hidden forever yet pushing the public ones on

till we say "We have spoken,
the afternoon was pleasant, blue lights on the porch,
a concession to something, yes, but one likes
blue lights, the elegant deviltry of them, the cool
in Uncle Benjamin's blue spruces forty Christmases ago."
And that's supposed to mean something
and it does, but how will I ever disclose it, dispose of it,
pour it out so under the freeze of it
you hear the tinkle of quick running water, icy cold,
still slithering down the mosses to reach

the preponderant gulley, the gone.

They died so he could live, as he so we could,
later, in the permanent
madness of the world.

It is getting to be time
for the Flight into Ægypt
where they're killing Europeans today
bomb in the bus
and the mother holds her baby snug
hidden under the Arabic paper,

we are alone on the slope up towards Blithewood,
last week there was still fresh ground ivy here
oakleaves and ivy, where
poetry is different from our lives is that it never sleeps
and even at its most boring drags a word
shambling into unaccustomed light,

but as I said the sun went down. What am I telling?
A frontier. A gauze mask
to keep small beings from our nostrils,
a mask such as Jains wear
who walk with such discretion on the busy ground.
At the top of the ridge I breathe deep through my nostrils,
the sinuses scorch with quick accessed air,
not used to that, I'm a mouth breather
but need pure intake now, oxygen
to fuel me easy over.
The little adjustments
the life of the body makes,
the few we notice.

4.
Patmos, I think, the Island
where we see what we mean.

An alphabet of walking in the woods—
I remember a long walk in Northampton

along abandoned tracks on a mile
of built up embankment
ended in a funny little park
where a peacock waited, screaming
from time to time in that pointless way they have
like love suddenly remembering the world.

[27 XII 93]

The little blue lights that make a tree
a cave of prophecy — midnight saying
and where are our children?
Is there a fire
into which these words are spoken and are lost?
Or found into smoke and savor,
a reek of meaning?

Will me an island
where the domes of the Logothete rise
white-dazzled mammaries in sun,
and the gulls carry, secure in senselessness,
everything I've ever said.
White so the birds
don't mark it with their droppings,
blue so our breath
gets lost in trackless atmosphere.

28 December 1993

The comfort of the situation is a terror in a bird's throat
trying to swallow the whole sky, and do it right now—
not taking a whole life to do it the way we do,
but right now, the blue of it, grey of it, the snow
coming out of it, the moonlight and the moon,
it all belong to him, to what
must turn into greed to be being at all,
up there goes in here, down here, the cry
I heard this morning of that opening beak
stays with the night, couldn't walk it away
by the empty ice of the silent suddenly motionless river
when the snow started to flake small out of the dark at me,
it's all right, I had a hat, but I am a bird
and what to do now, a cry, a bird's cry, something
like a crow's cry, and how can a man live in a cry?
How can the whole thing fit into something so narrow, so fierce?

29 December 1993

WALKING AROUND AMSTERDAM

comes back on me now
not the pretty parts in the apple of the eye of the town
the tall gentlemanly houses shoulder to shoulder by the canals
but the bleak newness down the Stadhoudersgade and the hotels,
and it was snowing there too, a month ago, and we tasted
the clean air and at night it was quiet enough to hear
the ducks snicker in the Herengracht and the black
coots hustle out of the way of sinister dark gondolas
circling the ancient hours, scows or business-minded
boats I am sure, and houseboats with bookcases you could see
past the little windows with geraniums and cats,
shelves full of books and I know that language,
the language books talk to themselves all night
while the boat rocks and the householder sleeps
and the city is planning to bring natural gas to every stove.

29 December 1993

THE NURSES

I don't think anything's ready to get
said yet. I don't think they want me
to be talking, them with their slips on
in the back room, their smoke and voices,
colors of the wind, sounds their lips make

wake me but tell Don't talk yet.
Let pictures in your head
go on talking to each other,
image against image till they breed
the kind of silence we can trust.

Now they move naked through the door called now
into the room where I am, when their door
opens I see more of them inside, clothes on, why
do I have to see them naked, all alone
as I am? Stop talking ever to yourself,

mostly to yourself. You can smell us.
You can touch the wall. We bend over you
and whisper names you must never tell.
When you're naked we'll take you with us
through empty streets to where the ships are.

30 December 1993

**Shy men have no time to be subtle
their hands tremble too much to keep still.
Only pressing them firmly on your shoulders
and hypnotizing my eyes by forcing them on yours
and saying clearly what I want to say.
Answer me without analysis. Doubt me,
reject me with a thunderous assent.**

30 December 1993

He wanted to ask
simply what he wanted he
wanted to be simple
would you help him if you
could would you?
Would you help him?

30 XII 93

Wherever people are, the gods are waiting
lined up like adults at a school yard fence
witnessing one more catastrophe. They watch
but care for only some, like parents too.
They move uneasily together, being similar.

A god can't hide her feelings. The weather
shows the truth. They invented language
as a way to tell lies. The children
scream at each other and ask for this and that.

It is strange, in the eyes of child and parent
I see the same terror. Is it the way I look?

31 December 1993