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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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LETTER TO THE PAGANS OF MOMOSTENANGO

One part is preserved from the first time
One part is rescued from the bad time when the friars came
One part is now and always

always the face of this day
this one, the only
one that is true.

Now here is the problem:
what modern people mean by paganism
is a flabby promiscuous thing.
Promiscuity is flabby,

whereas you are exact, comrades, exact
in your visits to the mountains,

the exact places

and if we get those wrong
we will get everything wrong
inside us
and we will not know

the rivers of fire and sanity and help
inside us will not flow
and we will not know.

You are exact
in your places and your times,
the Day is a place
and is one, the Day

is the only one of itself,

the Day is exact as a mountain
and in place,
a Day is in place
and if we don't know its mansion
there is nothing that we know.

What we thought we meant by pagan
was a sad self-indulgent moody selfish liberal thing
it meant to be promiscuous and weak

it meant to complain about everything
and take no responsibility
and blame everything on some god
and hate some god we say doesn't exist

what we meant in America when we wanted to be pagans
was a sad empty fitful thing

doing whatever came into anybody's head
and blaming anybody in our path

a weak stilted angry restless uncaressing thing
no vine no root no car no moon no cow.

The age of the promiscuous is dead
the gods of the earth warn us

only a new paganism can help now
only the focused accurate act will help
only the faithful focused act
will satisfy

will satisfy the virgin and her groom
will satisfy the heart of sky.

You know this, pagans of Momostenango,
you with your candles of Petrofina paraffin
and your natural copal resin incense
weeping into the smoke the Earth likes to smell

the rational resins and the limitless fire
dances on your stubby white candles

the age of doing careless is dead
and dead are those who lost the craft of care,

you are accurate, pagans of Momostenango
and we have something to learn from your way

you keep one day separate from any other
until (and it may be a simple thing after all
made of remembering and paying attention and love)
we know the right address of every mountain

and know the places inside us
like people of sticks and sunrise and being at home.

10 November 1992

BECAUSE OF THE PECULIAR TREES

Crow forgive me, I thought it was some sleep!

It was a newborn snowfall
hurrying to earth.

Message from the Cloud
I every see!

I knead the dough among my hands
I semaphore for light

a celebrant and what she needs.

11 November 1992

CULTURE

Camille Claudel
didn't die until 1943
a year after the Vel d'Hiv roundup

so as she lay in the asylum
dreaming of the smooth musculature
she more than anyone at all

could find in horn and alabaster and bone
the Jews of Bobigny were creeping
terrified to their French beds.

11 November 1992

THE INFORMATION

Charlotte says:
in Rossetti's Annunciation
the feet of the Angel
are painted from life.

His friend
posed for the angel
his sister for Maria.
The flames at his feet
are drawn from life.

11 November 1992
[a note from London]

MASS IN TIME OF PLAGUE: *Grünewald's Altarpiece*

1.

The image of the Crucified
for all its green horror

appeals to the broken hearted
the damaged mind of our days

we see the twisted tendons, the ill-joined
mannequin a drunken carpenter

stuck up on a hillside as his mark.
This is what happened to a man.

2.

We see brown leaves and don't concern ourselves—
any summer that might be dying will come again

we see brown leaves and celebrate driest beauty
the witty wind in all its fitfulness

the arbitrary, being momentary, gorgeousness of cloud.
We see the one blow away the other,

the common transiency of order and of mess.

11 November 1992

WRIST

1.

Wrist to turn the doorknob cluster
 of writhing Sanhedrin arguments
 to repel a civilized invader
 problem of a supra-ordinate society
 whose language we Jews speak every day
 but they got it from higher people
 they also conquered

the sword's

the simplest dialect

for conquest

is a mutual thing a marriage bed
 no one rises from unfucked
 the place or land itself that counterpane
 guest house from which the ghost sets out
 smooth motel for all our whilings

2.

writhings from which new war's begotten
 victor smeared with oily henna of the beaten
 war is the chreode of public sexuality—
 invasion the metatype of intercourse — we
 suffer and in our millions perish — cells
 in the immune — encounter between
 two vast sexual bodies our nations
 corollary — promiscuous nations peaceful
 in the relative — repressed sail out to war
 — Bataille erroneous — *war* is coitus
 not crime — crime is only a forgetting
 — you must hate before you hurt —
 whereas a soldier lover hurts kills from love
 —errant surgeons blunder in their wake —
 so I have borne my song of public dying

3.

I hope my knowing know nothing but the year
 as long as we think war is fright and anger

we will never understand it — war is sexist and desire
swollen out of the smarmy horrid dreams of millions
we are not the warriors — a government
doesn't go to war a government is led along
by ovaries and testicles and made to fight
the government is bridegroom at the door of the bride
the bride is a government also longing dark
in secret urgency to be deflowered — a war
is not about men and women — a war
is a landscape rising and besieging other places
with throbbing violet roses of remorseful desire
overswarming life like dodder and ivy and dock.

12 November 1992

HOMAGE TO TIEPOLO

What is turning is a joint inside the sky—
Hobbema for example or even Canaletto
knows enough of that *release* Gian Tiepolo
made his special (hence our) own.
They come from the ends of the earth
to cover us with their painless structure
underlit by glory. The backyard of God.
All Italy must have waited for the morning
to check the light against his painted norm.
Go inside the church to see the sky—
light itself comes from between them and the earth
shimmering innuendoes of immortality—
a child unpacks his body as the world outside.
He alone knows how close we are to cloud.

13 November 1992

for Charlotte

At least the things I tried to do
was know you better than the weather
and wake with you and only
and be downstairs with the coffee
when you woke to me and came
shy footed every morning to me

or was I standing between you and the world.
The way it is. The way we are,
the cups and weavings and the long
story we keep telling,
 the true one,

to have lived all our lives where the city begins
and the green of it is also a marvel,
all the arrondissements all the cathedrals
our tender little parishes of bread and wax

I'm trying to say I know everything through
just you noble now.

14 November 1992

WANTING TO WRITE AS SIMPLE AS I CAN

for Charlotte

Would the kings of Edom understand this?
Who were they?
They were a conversation I was having with the earth
before the sky answered

or one part of it, the yellow one
that came and went and promised
it would come again and always did
but nothing changed for all that,

nothing changed. They were the kings
who understood the intricate simplicity of things,
the feel of a woman's arm or the smooth
slippery underskin of onions—

and I don't want the voice of what I say
to be smaller tighter than my voice saying it.
And who are you? I am the man who talks
and Edomite kings look at me from their thrones

fascinated by the boredom of always
and always having something to say. How much
a king wants to just listen! That is why
they pay me so well and reward me with winters.

And I stay. They look at me disguised as trees
and rivers and rocks, I talk to them
as if they were a company of exalted women
patient of my company. But they are not women,

only you are women. Only you are the earth.

14 November 1992

ONE FOR THE DAYKEEPERS

for Charlotte

Saying the different names of time
pleases me like flags

no flag without its kingdom come or gone
or on its way unlikely ever

no day without its paycheck and its sun
wait, I look around the room

"Moist & Natural" says the bread
"Front Rear Rear Front" are where the blue flames

and the heater calls out Q U A R T Z
letters spread out like geese on a corn field

inheritors of stob, wait,
my knees hurt from yesterday's meditation

old men like to watch grandchildren play
from the diffident Olympus of their hearing-aids¹

and what do I propose to watch
stealthy childless and magniloquent?

I compose my memoirs in the peace of feeling
(what is that supposed to mean?)

I shave I shower I look upon the calendar
as if a window onto maidenly meadows

and I the king of knights too skilled to tourney
resting sore ankles on my comfy dog

¹(an Audenish clench, disdain, disdain)

and I see the names of time: Gorffennaf,
Hydref and (here we are) Tachwedd

staring into the blasted frost-woods of Rhagfyr
I've heard you mumble them in bed

or roll them juicy in your sacred mouth
laughing at the sounds we set to time

as if its nervous hurried quivering line
were our only music —

peace, it is morning, that old word
—*morrowing*, where tomorrow becomes today

the light comes on, the crows soar off to work,
Violetta rises from the stage and come to life

in all the imaginary tragedy of our poor
miraculous actual lives. All you need

is time to see it (hear) all you need is time
the single sky behind the million flags.

15 November 1992

MORNING CHORALE

Don't know the word for what it
Doesn't know the bare leaves
Of what I don't mean it doesn't mean
A perfect consanguinity of ignorance.

16 November 1992

THE OBSERVER

The Pyramid is open now, the world
 Of trumpets answers the world of murk
 And congressmen come forth in linen aprons,
 Neat bald men with innocent polish skulls
 Waxy in candlelight. Blossoms swoon in the dark.

(A satyr peeks in through a wattle screen
 To see what religion means.) Flapping loud
 Of considerable wings — the sacred vultures
 Of the Indoor Mountain call half-loud
 In the experimental way that hungry artists use
 To feast one more time on a dead society.

The gilded pistol grip of the pharaoh holds
 Secure enough the Ivory Scepter of the Morning,
 Tax gatherers mew in the shadows of his throne.
 (A satyr tries to study religion — where are the women?)
 O this religion is a masculine thing, a game boys play,
 Their mothers and their consorts let them, only
 The birds are female in his place, the lofty
 Womby vultures that the air itself inseminates
 With a quiet meaning no dogma will degrade.

(Why do they do it? is what the satyr thinks,
 Why don't they stroke my flanks and I stroke theirs
 And pass the night in pleasant reverie
 Using every brain-cell of the skin?) Flowers
 Spring open at the high priest's persuasion,
 Everyone marvels at the sudden gladiolus
 Purply tremulous in the same fitful current
 That makes the lamp flames pucker. (Kiss me,
 The satyr wishes, What is religion if it makes men old,
 Me old?) The congressmen applaud and whimper

Happy because the dawn is coming and each
Will read his name fresh re-inscribed
On alabaster tablets by the Court House steps
(The satyr's fingers grip the wattles in his old despair,
No one loves the world enough to touch it,
Touch me, his furry thighs are itchy, palms hurt,
An old centurion of sorts looks over at the scratch).

Strong Nubians with elegant quiet minds begin
To crank the windlass, great creaking noises, wind
Whiffling, jackal snort, cheetah cough, hawk whistle,
The Mountain is opening to the holy ordinary light
And the ruling classes shuffle back to work.
(Alone on the mountainside the satyr fervently kisses
Forgivingly the smooth back of his empty hand.)

16 November 1992

AFTER THE WORLD

Email enamel antiques orchestra
of robots in the museum Aux Gets
for mechanical music. Visitors
crowd in the pale air. But here
"it's Eileen's waffle," the banana-scent
that began artificial perfumery.
Aroma of the wise. The amyl hope.
I made this tree, you Sentimentalist,
no demiurge to interpose
in your pedestrian philosophy. I lift
my roots into the air, the birds
can calculate my distance from despair,
the sun is my least fruit. I am mall,
market, environment, peace and war,
I am your all. Reflect on jurispraxis
and love me, relent your saber edges,
I am the meaningful frontier.
Inside me every country's safe,
warmed by my fine fire. Out there
a man with no teeth has a toothache
and the old moon drowns in the Aral Sea.

16/17 November 1992

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE

for Charlotte

Not a word I like to use not a thing
I like to see who am I I am Stentorgast
a ruly kindness at the back of your mind

that breathes hard in your head and heart
when you see say an animal killed.
I think the pressure behind your eyes

when you watch the killed doe bleed into snow.
You know it is wrong to know what they tell you.
You know it is wrong to walk the way they do.

17 November 1992

for Charlotte

Let us hope this is what Charlotte wants
because there is nothing
nothing more certain to be needed
than that curious absolute we call a "word."
We find it all by itself
alone
in very large books.

17 November 1992

