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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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The other alphabet
the one that writes you
when I wake between your bones
holding your name safe in my teeth
like a Corsican bandit sneaking onto the ship

it is curved the way heat
lightning flourishes whole horizons
it is impervious the way night is
mostly till the crimson
tail lights of our departures
stain the road through the woods

the one I should never have taken.
I wake up in the subway still
between one grimy step and the next
still on my way up there

my way to the street.

15 November 20

They say that Calvary is out of town
but I say the way to it is human streets
human mockery and tenderness and sheer mistake
and every one of us does all of the above
to the broken-hearted optimist who drags his wood
up the cobblestones to any random eminence
they can kill him on while we look on
amazed to be part of such a common thing,
a man dying. Even this one who thinks he dies for us

15 November 2001

die brillen hoch die sonne fällt
die glocken stumm in ihrem turm

die luft ist starr in dem geäste
man träumt ein tiefes saft vom mond gemolkt

15 November 2001

but if it was
what we think it is
breath chopped
to fit anxiety

short views
the terror
lives so quietly inside
between a man
and his mirror even

between what he is
and what he's made

strategies of being
no one
a garage
still smelling sharp
oil of a car
wrecked long ago and sold.

15 November 2001

HORSES

It seems determined.

— What?

The answer to some question you were scared to ask.

— I'm never scared, to ask. Who would I be scared of?

Me.

— Why would I be scared of you?

Because of what I might say, might answer.

— Why would I care?

You do.

— What makes you think so?

I know, I just know.

— How do you know?

I don't know, I just know. You should try knowing.

— I'm not scared. Look, I'm asking you all these questions now, right? I'm not afraid.

These aren't questions, not real questions.

— What are they then?

They're handles or something, doorknobs, explanations. They sound like questions but they're not.

— So what's a real question?

That's a real question.

— Don't be cute with me.

I'm not, it's true. Real questions don't know their answers.

— Don't you think there are things I don't know?

Of course, but you do know the answer to the question you're afraid to ask me.

— Maybe I do.

You do.

— Is the answer I know to the question I'm afraid to ask, the truth?

What do you mean?

— Is it the actual answer, the one you'd actually give to my question if I asked it?

How can I know until you ask it? The actual answer needs its actual question too.

— So I would actually have to ask the question to get the answer I already know you'd give even though you don't know it until I ask?

I think that's right.

— But how do you know?

I don't actually know it, I feel it, I feel it in the way there are pauses sometimes when we're talking and I feel you thinking, and some question is happening inside you, and you wonder if now is the time to ask it, and then you shy away from it like a horse that won't jump over a fence, and walks alongside it instead, and goes away.

— I never go away, I'll never go away.

I think I hear that question again.

— No, I'm not asking you anything.

See, you're afraid of the answer again, that horse is on its way again, walking along the fence, sad, looking over the fence at what's on the other side.

— What is on the other side?

What a dumb question to waste your last question on. You're the horse in the story, you can see what you're looking at, what you see, over the fence, what you want.

— Maybe I am afraid to ask. I think you're right. I am afraid. You keep giving me the answer over and over, only I can pretend it's not the answer as long as I keep from asking the question. No question, no answer. That must be the answer.

16 November 2001

ALTA POESIA

As if to admire one passing by
or upside down at the feeder
smitten by the tyranny of birds
from whom no man can rescue the sky
the Greeks must have thought

so many languages did they determine weren't,
nothing but bul-bul murmurs of so many birds

hairy Varangians later from the north.
Unspeakable coincidence. You think
the plastered walls of old Herapolis
concealed the secretest deity of all,
lambescent teenie in a decade wife,

a small rat reading a book by her feet.
The sun that morning by no means Apollo.
And yet I come to you today with bird-soaked gospels,
ever the Bar-bar, you hear me you see me
smile and frown and wave my arms like music
but catch no clue to what I'm saying
if I'm saying anything at all you never knew
or haven't murmured a hundred times already
into the intelligent ears of your little child.

17 November 2001

A chickadee that almost let me touch it
so determined was it to extract
the last seed from the feeder I was determined to refill.
For Christ's sake is this a poem or something
the shifting planes of sunlight along the lawn the leaves
the war. An owl flies by on its way home.

18 November 2001

THE THING THAT REPLACES POETRY

The thing that replaces poetry. Or the thing that takes up and occupies the space, place, that poetry used to occupy, if any, in the world, in the mind of the world. Who are the ones who give us what replaces poetry. What replaces poetry, what is that thing? Less of a question than an anxiety, less an anxiety than a grief. It looks like poetry but it leaves a different thing behind it, though, when it goes. A different taste or glow, not the one you thought you know from poetry. You! It's all about you, or all you, or just you, or you. If you are there, maybe there is still poetry. Or it hasn't been replaced entirely if I can find you there.

I mean find you here.

In the dream, three young poets had published poems in a magazine I was reading. One of them struck me by the sheer density of its language, imagery and attentiveness to its own process — a poem rich and difficult. A young woman had written it. I could see her reading it out loud quickly, nervously, but effectively. She had dark-rimmed glasses, and was not otherwise distinctive. I remember nothing of the poem except the feel of its seriousness, density, the real thing. I woke up writing a poem in response to hers, about difficulty, being young, being willing to face it. I remember only these two lines of mine, that occurred a few lines after the beginning:

Those of us who sit and smile
Have paid a big price for our peace.

18 November 2001

Surrender
in the abstract
a point
of contact
union
of the dispossessed

even in the mildest morning
the dream kicks me out

no harborage no auberge
the daylight leaves

into the contingency again
after night's lucidity

19 November 2001

SENSUUM DEFECTUI

One impeded sense
impedes all others.

Sometimes I feel I can't smell where the smoke is coming from
because of my deaf ear

sometimes I think my skin no longer feels

an intricate system
depends on all its parts

breakdown
synesthesia

Rimbaud in Ethiopia
gangrene.

19 November 2001

ARCHITECTURES

Fantastic
you called it
the view
from the window

we had just moved in
as if for a week for a weekend
you called it mine
the place or mine the view^{1,2}

you stood at
seeing
from my window
praising as if this ordinary

river were something
I had made
between its neat shores
judicious mixture

architecture and landscape
late autumn green
grey trees
the air thrilling

with the far shore handsome
with a green dome
temple or monument³
I thought you would know

the identity
any contour hides
it was enough
for it to be as it was⁴

hence beautiful,
busy with details

here in front of us
alone and not far⁵

the curve of the dome
I could feel
soft in my left hand.

1.
did he give
you the way to see
with my eyes

colors
of my life
I have so many

2.
and who was he?

3.
I want to think it was more —
like a Freemason's temple or strange
old library open to no public

not some monument to civic virtue
we have no virtues left

4.
Voluptuous
conspicuousness
of being seen

5.
But the dream went on, back
in the room, away from any window,
we tried to piece together
ordinary time from the shards
of your moment of viewing.

Because a view is time, it is the sudden
presence of time in space, momentary
cancellation of process — surely delusive—
apparition of pure result, product,
a thing to share, this moment, view,
somebody's city, tel quel, place as it is.

20 November 2001

Where does the key fit
yes but where does the
door fit yes but where
does the wall fit, yet
where does the house fit
in yes but how can a
house fit in such an
actual world yes how
could there be anything
more than there actually is?

21 November 2001
(undated)

No poetry is nature poetry.
A crow
Said so.
They do it. They leave us to heaven.

21 November 2001
(undated)