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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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THE WORDACHE

She was speaking in summer
in Hungarian dark,
explaining

that serious business of the eye
(*everyone who sleeps is beautiful* — Whitman)
decode a single world

what is spoken becomes your fate,
fate follows language,
is its shadow,

2.

on Church's Beach the immense blocks
of granite
(is it? granite is a word)

we leap from one to the next
following the shore
around to mid-June

where the gaudy
yellow sea-poppies make their home
and you are with them.

3.

And an old man with no arm
is selling red
paper poppies

buddy-poppies of November
under the el on Fulton.
I am frightened of his beery smell,

the grizzle on his chin
not so different from mine now
as I sit in a far country

guessing their secret names.
He is my uncle and my father
now he is me.

War made us sleep,
in sleep we fall afoul of the law,
and waking's liberty.

4.
That we can speak, can talk
my way into tight corners,
cleft of the rock

where at sunset (or: as sunset)
the seductive purple shadows
propagate restless alternatives

to all I am.
My head aches with liberty.
drawing a bead on the heart

inside the walls of you
I take my case.
Will I dare tell you what I was dreaming

into the dark of what only happens
this hollow word
shaped like a life?

5.
A word is the visible

intersection of events.
He stores his heart

safe in oak
cleft of a tree
the wind sings

over it
to silence all that waking
the leaves are so busy with,

the pain hidden as language,
even as another language—
this analysis

called poetry,
from *poetria*, from *poiein*, making,
making the best of it.

6.
A man woke up and told his dream,
something you know you don't know,
a room of your house you never knew was there,

the headache, undreamt, spontaneously
arose with waking. And the dream he told
was gone. The pain did all the dreaming now.

7.
Cyclone cellar,
hummingbirds
in azure wind

wound up from

Inca fairways
bombarding

comes memory
scattering lascivious
details—

We lived through
even the words.

8.
You can't see a thing up the streets in our head.
Grand Concourse jammed with who are they
and the Yankees won again

before Justine goes out for chopped beef
I gaze past her satin breast
to the endless streets into the unknown city

we're worried that her husband will come home
to find the one I thought I was, here,
But I was no one, and here is far,

the furthest of all our places is here.

24 June 1993 / 26 April 1994
23 December 1995

THE AIR

The air
is warm enough
to breathe
if you care
about breathing

just barely
and the snow
a little tamed
by one day
hovering at freezing
a few hours

before the cold
deepened, air
thinned
and here you are
good morninging
every blessed thing
you hope and the trees
move not

no air
sculpts them
into action,
branch and twig
go on as usual
with their motionless
Chinese

the air
amazes
with quietness
is it always
like this
beneath my fuss

trying still
to read this.
How can I talk
if no wind
speaks?

And then a chill
little breeze
investigates the quince,
twigs shimmer
like the stars
when I look to hard
straight up

what we have to say
must be spoken
from the corner
of the eye
the wind
lets it, the air

the ordinary air
is green
with everything we mean.

24 December 1995

UNIVISION

The Pope's last Mass
it said in me,
his old hands,
an old priest who had once
been the bitterest of lovers
touches shaky the diamond and the gold
this chalice the white
bread he had more firmly lifted.

And after the bread and after the wine?
What secret transformations of old midnight
wander the marble nave, the decent crowd
from everywhere, in their costumes, clean,

praying out loud, watching, watching
as we do at home, hearing someone talk
interminably in Spanish, over
the Pope's old Latin, the Pope's
old hands for an hour the center of the world.

25 December 1995

CLARET TULIPS

So the tulips are here in front of me
and I am an idle ghost this morning,
I died in the night the way a simple
sifting of snow came down and covered
all the shiny cars. Through the windshields
only a furry sort of light. Then nothing.

But the tulips are still here. I see them
having nothing to do with me. A vision
of deep Iranian purples, a smack of honey,
one sword-blade leaf has sagged, the others
go on defying whatever struck me down.

26 December 1995
Boston

- O L O G Y

Divisible by three, the human brain
is not content with sluggish electricity
but moves by way of Galactic Interzonance
to connect its wastrel member, me, its
Portugal / Spain demarcation twixt
the thing called body and the guess called soul

and God is a parasite trapped inside our thought.
Neither flesh nor energy, this brittle thing,
this thinking is a shadow of past times.
A thought is a shadow of history. Thinking
is an animal tethered to remembering
who runs fast and no further than the rope allows
woven of everything he's ever done and been and thought before.

By three means I and it and me. The wedding party that is our life,
drunk and always wanting to be dancing and proclaiming,
kissing this and that, eating and cheering on the hired band
till finally the bride and groom wave and dance and slip away
to the dark nuptials we call honey and call moon
and with their passing (he is I and she is me)
we carry on our frolicking no longer. And this is dying.

26 December 1995
Boston

The surgery of elementary principles
begins usually with jam — you like cherry
they like marmalade, before the morning's done
there is politics to reckon with, a colony
of nascent hatreds, a Balkan breakfast.
Morality arises from the senses. Don't kiss
me like that! as you might say to an aunt
or That skin is reserved for love
a better kind than aunts and uncles know
you think. Blood relations are the worst of it.
The family agony. The loathsome
preferences. The way they do it. Hate
watched the way they chew, I've seen it,
they stare at me also, waiting for my head
to topple from my shoulders or my eyes explode.
Nothing more beautiful than a winter morning,
a shimmer of snow mist on the hill
and not too many birds. You empty window.

27 December 1995
Boston

A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE PLAYING SOLITAIRE

Just tell me anything, that's poetry enough for me,
sound of your breath, licking your lips. The word.
What does a word mean. What do I understand.
Epic between top lip and the lower. Lady.
Burnt cards of identity. Erase tattoo.
Insert a sliver of silver dura mater
morning thorny moony theory.

All the wounds
of soldiers. We are just armies. Officers.
Raptacious dragomans. New Age assistant
I trusted every word but she not me
or mine. Whereby an altercation prompt,
a snug disaster. Far from bed, in blue
Armenian uplands. Speaking a non-
Aryan language, having a stone, a stone
and a tower and no town. Being glad.
Let me alone with my hulled wheat.

Words secretly mean the opposite of what you mean.
In her lap as she lay idly listening
autumn leaves by their own power happened
to accumulate, strange thing to see, I wrote
to all the papers but only my heart listened.
Lady. No one lets me call out any more.
Name all the flags you can, there's always another,
burgee of the tiniest yacht club or some stone
in the water penguins live on and six shepherds
with a seventh waiting to be king.

O god our time
in nations past, all our sweet ceremony
our lofty beeswax and a woman waiting!
All you are is obstacle and flow. And she
beside me answering the call of a candle.

No one hears the thing you mean. They all
hear the Judas shiftings in the words themselves,
so deep inside you they perform for you alone
but neglect to mean. Controlled environment
maybe like the Rainforest in the Boston Zoo
where African jungle birds roam the air with me,
zipping through the squawking trees above me
and the world is warm. But out there
outside this little steamy busy world
you think you mean, giant winter's waiting
and snow is on the dome these screaming red
billed ibises ascend to and swoop down
over slumbering gorillas.

That's how words mean,
all inside the head it's neat and keen and outside
nothing means. So much for reason.
There is something about the way men stand
when they come in especially in winter,
talking their way out of their overcoats
all words and faces and no bodies at all.
When will we inherit this body we inhabit?

Men! Idlers invented by novelists to explain
the hope of heaven in a woman's lap
but it all is night and silence
broken between us like a jar of honey.
The flag had purple in it, and gold.
The girl told a story about peasants,
pigeons, tulips, fences, hiding
from your mother, motor oil, crossing
a little stream, getting wet,
making one or two interesting mistakes.

28 December 1995
Boston

DAWN IN BOSTON

Before the news is known the sky relents
—I lived dissolute so long the blush of dawn
still feels like a reproach — and there the paper is
full of ordinary agony.

Too quiet to think.
The sky is pink.
The air is cold and still
I will wait for what is thought

to know me,
quiet me into speech.

Two blocks away the red and green lights play.
I think of all the bars at dawn
empty, remembering nothing
of all that angry music.
Empty streets, hope hurrying
to tie its shoes.

The illogic of going on
is our liberty.

Faced with dawn, no wonder I'm too happy to work.

A lute in winter
waiting for Leipzig
sparrowhawks. Forty-eight
crows in and out of one tree
in fluid passage, loud
over this street.

I will go out and feed the world
calligraphies of oil,
the fire cached in seed,

the scatter. Rhombus.

Trapezoid. Cube.
Eventually we lift off from the surface,
it's an Egyptian launch, everything
leaves Earth with me, everything I am
turns into stone and glass and fire, fire
frittering away the sky
like a drunkard wasting one more day.

29 December 1995
Boston

WE WILL TURN THIS SMALL WORLD ROUND

How dust is power, decay is color—
watch the paltry desires once invested grow
to be a sky that hides the sky,
a liner for reality and we are polymer.

Because I talked big. And the woman
listening hearkened to what I meant, alas,
not what I said, and so belonged like me
to the community of the conspiracy,

the secret garden, hidden from ourselves as well,
that sends us into politics. Too late
the plausible analysis of anchormen.

One drifts because one must. Where compulsion
turns into desire. Must is lust. Until you do
the whole surface of reality turns green
and threatens you with April time after time.
How good it would be to do it without wanting to.

30 December 1995

If we were not born children. Parents. A father
is not just an authority or judge or nourisher or loss.
He is a universe inside of which you grow.
He is like weather. The child is a parasite
born and borne inside the large body of the parents,
all its life it struggles to be free of them and to return.
Nothing is natural. We are not after all a part of nature.
Only our bodies are natural. But they are born so premature
we need the womb-world of the parents to survive at all.
Growing out of nature back to our natureless reality
when we are alone and beautiful and the other side of terror.

30 December 1995

A thing, being somewhere, touches everywhere
by hard continuity. If you change the size of what you see
the little café in Sunset where we drank espresso
—but most people didn't, tisanes
for them and herbal horrors, sweet, oh I
am all perfect and an ooze of honey —

becomes a kind of Venice. Americans
become civilized and quiet and travel
looking and understanding and keeping their peace.
Just don't say a word. Press my knee
under the table, press the leg if necessary,

keep firm touch with flesh and thing. Don't speak.

30 December 1995

THE LIVING ROOT OF US

The ground itself is food in which they stir
upwards and sideways and silent, a growing
that is all changing, *something of that*
becomes something of this,

the assimilation

nation, the dark
birds that flies through the earth.

(On the fifth day of Snow-month
they celebrate the circumcision of Christ—
let him be the last so tortured, first
of all the ways He died for us.)

The bird flies in me too,
an upward effrontery to know,
a passion over the eyes
feels like a headache,

sound of water

gushing, later dripping, later still.
The ice replied by being vast,
a continent pressed down beneath it, the bird
flies through it too but flies very slow.
My eyes blink in snowlight,
I shield my seeing against what is seen,

o life you are so choosy
and the bird is stirring, spiral after spiral
rising like a hawk towering
till it comes to the uplands of my head
and hurts there, and hunts,
and hunts until it finds
and kills all that it discovers
and that killing is called Thinking.

(The night before, the anthers on all
indoor flowers are delicately prodded

and yield a special timely pollen — grey,
gold, greeny-yellow, russet, all
depending — with which they spike their wines.
This annual alcohol unleashes honesty
and all night people do as they desire,
saying the truth of things, their silly feelings,
and in the morning nothing's left to remember,

since memory is only awareness of what is missing,
no memory can exit when desire's sleeping,
and all that flower wine annihilates
every wanting by fulfilling it. And then
the midnight comes and Time comes back
roaring and lecherous and all the sweet
peace of drunkenness is past. One wakes
sober in a hungry-headed world.)

Then the bird rests.
It is blue
in me
today.
The shape
of my desire
is a plum today,
a Japanese white radish,
a mango, a gourd
from Oaxaca, a cup,
anywhere a cup,

There is a moment when we wait for what we know
when the word that says it will not come.
In the cry that is the night
I cried out without waking
I need a ... and then You need a ...
and could not find the word
you said, you heard me crying loud
a need that knew no name
or I couldn't find the word in the dark,

that all was waiting.
Then the bird began to move, soar, its shadow

also is called thinking,
the shadow of a bird is not always,
not always shaped like a bird,
it is made by the shape of what it touches,

sometimes it is a fish an ocean a flower sometimes
a man a hungry exile foraging among the thinkable,

and this shadow, passing, passing, is all we know of thinking.

(Throughout the next day, it is considered very good luck to cross the thresholds of an many houses as possible. You must stay long enough inside each dwelling to speak and listen, to eat and drink something. The first place you visit that day is called the Sign of the House, and it is especially potent as an omen, indicating your purpose and activity throughout the oncoming year. When there, drink milk or water, taste rice or wheat. Usually it snows. The fields all the way from river to mountains are white and even with it, the trees are remarks, idle pleasantries dimly overheard in someone else's party. It is all white. Far away it might be an animal that is moving, like a deer or a horse or the shadow of a big bird.)

The bird has gone now.
For a little while nothing bothers the white mind.
Underneath the obvious earth, the hard
work of preparation goes on all winter long.
The visible sleeps while the invisible works.
Everything is ready and soon we will eat.

31 December 1995