

7-2024

## Metalogues

Robert Kelly  
*Robert Kelly*

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**Robert Kelly**  
**METALOGUE 1**

**Slip it in sideways  
so it's legible top and  
bottom and doesn't hurt.  
Pretend you know,  
and know enough  
about the nervous system  
to give grades  
to levels of love and liking.**

**2.  
It's all in the skin of the back.  
West of the spine,  
north of the hip—  
an area a little like Alaska  
but o such power in it  
sheer communication,  
every message hurries home.**

**3.  
That is the lesson.  
We are made of much.  
Much more than we imagine**

but why listen to me  
when you can run  
your fingertips down  
your soft throat below  
the right ear all the way  
to your collar bone  
and know all things for yourself?

1 July 2024

## METALOGUE 2

On a warm day  
from the moist space  
between great toe  
and second toe, right  
foot of course, draw  
with a thick blue Magic  
Marker a straight line  
up the instep all the way  
up the prow of the shinbone  
till you reach the knee.  
Far enough. Now sox & slax  
and so on, and out the door.

2.  
Follow this line with care,  
even a certain reverence.  
It will lead you preisely  
where you want to go.

3.  
Do you really want  
to go there? Is an old  
high school friend worth

all this fuss and scurry?  
Probably, if you still  
remember each other's smile.

4.  
But it's your body,  
and the blue line loves you  
better than Eddy from Algebra.  
Trust the line, have a coffee  
with them and keep going.  
The line will take you  
where you really want to be.  
The line knows.

### METALOGUE 3

When Auden identified  
the human navel (sunken  
variety, *insy* we used to say)  
as the receptable nature  
provided for us to store  
salt in when we find ourselves  
eating celery in bed,  
he invoked a world weirder  
than first millennium Cathay  
or shadowy Ottoman harems.

2.

So who are these naked young  
men idling in bed, presumably  
with one another, lying there  
calmly enough not to spill  
the salt, and why celery,  
of all pleasures, maybe sounds  
like the Latin word for quick,  
but they are slow, jaws  
noisy on those bland juicy  
fibers, their elbows touching?

3.

And who is anybody  
who does anything  
that I don't do, skiers,  
motorcyclists, peyote  
prophets, elegant  
smoker of hand-rolled cigars?  
And why can't I  
be someone I am not?  
What is this horror  
called identity?  
I need some place to keep my salt.

## **METALOGUE 4**

**From Gettysburg  
I followed him  
all the way to India,  
they call it Pakistan now  
but there I stopped.  
How far can ancestry  
lead you? Gold mines  
or no gold, Australia was too far,  
too much, too south.  
It was years before  
I found my first wombat.**

**2.  
But that was right  
under the Catskills  
where I have pretended  
to live for many years.  
But that was someone  
else's animal, somebody  
got to Australia and brought back  
what my own DNA  
could not deliver,  
a furry creature dozing at my feet.**



3.

But we had fingerprints  
before we had genetics  
to think about, I wonder  
whether I could still  
find his in Australia,  
on a book he read. Or wrote.  
He did that too  
before he disappeared.

4.

I mean the guilt  
is hidden in our bodies,  
pores and scars,  
hairs and twitches,  
fingerprints and nails.  
You can tell the way  
the barber looks at you  
when you're young  
and in the chair,  
no secret safe  
from those smart Sicilians,  
but they say nothing,  
just smile a certain way.

5.

I am a lizard  
scrambling up the wall.  
The only wall I have.  
I mean I'm trying  
to analyze my ancestry.  
Nobody in the room to watch,  
I can slither down  
to the floor and take a nap.

6.

But one is trying  
to be brave,  
Gettysburg and all that,  
Col. Berdan's regiment  
made up of immigrant Brits.  
Just some more fingerprints.

7.

But real enough,  
the whorls and ridges,  
I thought I caught  
geology from touching stones.  
Who knows how much

**of what we touch  
lingers ever after?**

## METALOGUE 5

Shame on me,  
up an hour and haven't  
looked out the window yet  
sunlight oozes through the shade  
busy as I was and am  
writing about the body,  
not mine or yours  
or anybody in particular,  
just what it means to trot  
around the planet  
carrying a hundred  
pounds or two of evidence  
and never knowing  
evidence of what.

2.

Someone in the room  
behind me is waking up,  
and I know who. But am I right?  
Every statement  
has some hmmm built in,  
don't be so sure,  
fratello, we're all  
in this together.  
A sound is like a touch

on the back of the neck.

3.

Yes, back. Yes, body,  
the bird that flies inside,  
your private sky.

Toe to knee to hip,  
shoulder all the way  
to fingertip, all you,  
all me, all mystery.

4.

Open the curtain,  
nod to the maestro,  
let the overture commence,  
it is the opera  
called Tuesday on Earth,  
a world premiere  
and I'm in it,  
so let me lift the shade  
at least for love's sake.

5.

I wait with binoculars  
hanging from my neck  
in case the music summons  
something I must see

close enough, clear enough,  
to see if it is he at last,  
the one I thought I was  
when I began but I forget.  
The eyepieces press up  
against the supra-orbital ridge.  
The bone remembers.

**METALOGUE 6**

Then the question  
of pubic hair—  
shave it or show it,  
be smooth  
as marble Aphrodite  
or hairy as Genghis  
raping his way west.

2.  
Maybe let the matter  
issue in silence.  
Underwear was made for this,  
ask no questions,  
wait till bedtime,  
try not to notice  
even then. Mothers,  
guide your progeny,  
hide all you can, show  
as little as you dare,  
We're all made of meat  
and fur. No difference.  
And mind. But never mind.

2 July 2024

## METALOGUE 7

Wrist of batter—  
we're talking baseball  
not baking, one twist  
and everything changes.  
How far the ball goes  
is part of it, the angle  
up or down the real  
difference. Twist  
of the wrist and everything  
changes. Think of how  
Greek gods hold their hands  
in ancient statues,  
bronze or marble,  
he or she. The hand  
is always waiting. Even  
Michelangelo knew that,  
God's hand resting  
in the sky, Adam's  
anxious fingers reaching out.

2.

And we strap  
time around them,  
and devices to tell



far more than time,  
tiny voices of your friends,  
horror stories they  
peddle as the news.

3.

But we can take them off.  
The bones are otherwise,  
permanent as anything  
can be in this slipshod  
commonwealth, dear world.  
Bones and ligaments,  
the rubber bands that  
keep us to our tasks.

4.

This is not about me  
but my father often  
shamed me by his skill  
at skimming stones  
across the pond, at times  
getting three full bounces  
before the pebble sank.  
I was lucky if I could get two.  
Ask yourself  
the next time  
you shake hands

with anyone  
How many, how many?  
and try to tell the truth.

5.  
Brothers and sisters  
now join your hands in prayer.  
Notice the palms kiss  
but the wrists stay  
far apart, each wrist  
waiting for its next command.  
What to do now?  
What comes after prayer?

6.  
They used to use the wrist  
to take the pulse  
but now they use  
a little clip on fingertip  
or else the doctor's  
cold hand on the carotid.  
The wrist rests  
but not for long—  
cold in these offices.

7.

I try to wave good-bye  
but it looks like hello instead.  
The bone has  
ideas of its own.  
The friend approaches,  
comes out of the sea  
straight towards me,  
Is she the one I thought  
or someone else?  
Wait and feel her hand  
if I still can. Hands  
are just another kind of dance.

2 July 2024

## METALOGUE 8

1.

Pretend the obvious.  
Nothing really is  
if you think about it.  
So don't think? Maybe.  
Eyelashes, for instance,  
they get loose, lie  
on the curve of  
your own sacred eye  
and bother. You need  
a skilled epillatrix, woman  
who eases your eye again.  
I'm Irish, sort of,  
I'm lucky, I married one.

2.

How can a tiny little part of me  
stand in the way of what I see?  
And the lash is not the smallest  
or the creepy-crawliest—  
think of a corpuscle in my blood  
toting its new-found germ  
through my unsuspecting brain.

3.

O body is a scary  
neighborhood indeed  
but where else can I live?  
But sometimes the sun  
feels so good on the cheeks  
or breeze caresses  
so I forget to check  
the real estate for other places.

4.

This is the mildest metalogue,  
a little shivery here and there  
but no big oratic stuff,  
twinges, not tragedies.  
Eyelash indeed. The things  
that clutter the surfaces  
of our discourse. I can't  
begin to tell what logic means  
let alone what comes after,  
where we actually live.

3 July 2024

**METALOGUE 9****1.**

**Don't get too intimate  
or they'll be peering  
down your collar,  
tugging on your zipper  
and who knows else.  
That doesn't even sound  
like English, but they don't care,  
they come in without knocking  
and leave without good-bye.**

**2.**

**So careful, careful  
what one says  
about one's body  
or anybody else's,  
there's that word again,  
sounds like a girl  
a little, doesn't it—  
that's how they get me.**

**3.**

**But we live in this house  
all our lives**

(if you can call it livin'  
as the old song asks)  
so be nice to it as I can.  
It takes a thousand words  
at least just to mention  
all the parts of it.  
So here goes: crown of head,  
tip of the great toe. Schluss.  
You know the rest.

4.  
Again lives anywhere  
we can begin.  
When I walk more  
my feet hurt less. Fact.  
A tree came down on Pitcher Lane  
and hurt a woman's house  
two hundred miles from here.  
I feel faintly guilty,  
we all are part of the weather,  
the wind breathes from us.

5.  
Innocence is like an itch  
in a secret part, no one knows  
how innocent you are  
and you keep trying

expensive dangerous creams  
to soothe the call of it.  
See, I'm daring (and one must)  
to use the skin  
as metaphor, and all  
that happens to it  
year by year our  
pleistocene geology.

6.  
Hot sun cool breeze  
what a cocktail  
for the knees,  
the skin drinks up  
the urgent now.

7.  
See, that's a little  
song of it, but it  
doesn't need my music.  
But just in case  
I woke at dawn  
and wrote it down.

3 July 2024



**METALOGUE 10**

So what comes after logic?  
Faith. Faith that words  
mean what they say,  
faith that there is something  
really there the word  
is pointing at.  
Not just you, or me.  
A tree, say. But no tree  
need be present  
when I say 'tree.'  
That's where the problem starts.

2.  
I said all this to a holy man  
I met in the woods  
at the back of my head  
and he said: Simple,  
just follow the word  
as far as it goes  
but you keep going  
and hey, you're almost there.

3.  
So I still keep going,  
the sea right there

a hundred yards away  
so he must be right  
and the sun is shining—  
I forget how far away she is  
but here we are,  
islanded in comfort  
that comes after logic--  
worry the word  
then fall asleep.

4.  
Children know that trick,  
they use it the way  
grownups use money,  
to buy pleasure, satisfaction,  
relief from pain.  
Children know so much  
we pay them to forget.

5.  
In the dream put on  
a scarlet coat and learned  
to whistle Baroque tunes  
but then met a woman  
who plays the oboe or bassoon  
and I stopped musicking.

Shame dries the mouth,  
with dry lips a whistle fails.  
But she speaks Latvian  
and has lots of wonderful words.  
I wake and write in a diary  
A word is better than its thing.  
But I still can't whistle.

6.  
So some days even I  
must trudge up those steps  
to where logic waits  
on the mezzanine of the mind  
halfway to truth.  
And I must wait my turn  
in the chilly waiting room  
till the roses bloom  
and their scent can  
send me back down  
to the imaginary real.  
After logic I feel clean again.

3 July 2024

## METALOGUE 11

1.

In this post-binary  
world of ours one  
plus one equals one.

Which is to say: two legs, one walker. Two arms,  
one swing of the bat.

Two eyes, one sight.

It is as if our bodies  
themselves mean to cure  
the bad theology  
of good and evil,  
the wobbly aesthetics  
of this vs. that.

And we is one.

2.

Back to those legs.

Consider the thigh,  
muscular, streamlined,  
skilled translator of  
the solidity of hip  
into the swing of knee.

At least it was  
last time I looked.

3.

Because you can't  
be too sure these days.  
Every black bird  
is not a raven, every  
tune doesn't lead you home  
and hop in bed beside you.  
And look at the temperature,  
118 in Vegas! I fear  
we're getting binary again.

4.

So hold off on the monument,  
send the sculptor back  
to drawing school to learn  
pretty faces. The bridge  
will take years to rebuild.  
Stay home till it's done.  
You live where you do  
for a reason. Find the reason.

5.

But I hear older women  
laughing down the block,  
no privacy in summer,  
I join their gaiety

without knowing why.  
Safest is to think  
they're laughing at me,  
at who I am and what I think,  
laughing their heads off and  
they don't even know I exist.

6.  
So I stand as they say  
corrected. My mistakes  
swirl down the drain,  
soap stings my eyes,  
a robin rude on the fence.  
Dear sun in the sky,  
if I am old, let me be  
your own old friend,  
let me be right for a change.

4 July 2024

**METALOGUE 12**

**A maypole? Wrong  
season, wrong religion.  
We need a new thing  
to dance around,  
spin around. Spine!  
There it is, all the while  
inside us behind us.**

**2.  
So the back is what's  
behind us, say,  
and the buttock remembers,  
say, and the belly  
lurches forward  
into the future.**

**3.  
So the first sin  
was no apple,  
it was eating  
anything at all,  
trying to swallow,  
engorge, all that is,**

the world in front of us,  
the one we should be  
going to instead of  
killing into our anxious now.

4.

That's what my  
own spine spoke  
when I spun around  
as best I could  
to interview it.  
And then it smiled  
(if bones can smile,  
surely the nerves help)  
and grew explicit:  
dear person, the only  
one I have, your  
round dance must be  
going straight ahead.



**METALOGUE 13**

Scary---you mean  
eat nothing at all?  
That's what I think  
it means to have language,  
mind, not just teeth,  
those fossils in our  
otherwise articulate mouths.

2.

But how can that be?  
When I was a child  
there was a famous  
holy woman in Austria  
maybe named Therese  
Neumann of Konnersreuth.  
She ate nothing at all,  
for years, except each day  
the tiny host at Mass.  
For years she lived like that.

3.

I thought about her a lot  
while I was stuffing my face  
with cheese and bread and

corned beef but mostly cheese  
until I weighed but never mind.  
The thought was there  
and now comes back  
and I remember the Lama  
saying All eating is sinful  
but not much we can do.  
Or not yet. Is there a way  
we could live on words alone,  
words rich as Bible  
or Sir Thomas Browne or  
Omar Khayyam or you tell me?

4.  
Sorry, this grows rhetorical.  
But rhetoric might even help.  
If boring speeches  
put us to sleep  
why can't thrilling text  
wake us all nourished?  
No, not far enough.  
The body has to teach us  
and we must listen  
more than we like to.  
Start thinking now  
and in seven generations

maybe humans will be born  
who don't eat baby cows or  
white ducks playing on our pond.

5 July 2024

**METALOGUE 14**

Climbing cautiously  
into the rose bush  
clutch hold of color alone,  
color doesn't sting  
as horns do, color  
has its own way  
of slipping in.

2.

He dreamed there was  
a famous painter  
whose works were on view  
nearby so he went  
as if to church to praise them,  
pray to them  
as we do with goggle-  
eyed gaze in museums.  
The gallery was crowded,  
white wine (why always white?)  
and Pellegrino on offer,  
crowd murmur, he edged  
his way around the room  
to see the paintings.

Every canvas was empty—  
primed and varnished  
but not a hint of image  
or of color. He woke, rose,  
realized the way we do,  
he has to see the picture by himself.

3.

Hence the roses.  
Hydrangeas actually  
in his case,  
blue as Monet in his  
neighbor's garden.  
Thornless beauty  
so close to home,  
what could be better,  
a bird could ask  
for nothing more,  
And birds usually leave  
this kind of flower alone,  
leave it to plein-air poets  
and cautious Bavarian  
philosophers, though  
he couldn't name one  
to win an argument.

4.

But hydrangeas will do,  
climb among their colors,  
the multifoliated sky  
of their sweet domes  
fluffy as childhood.  
Absurd, he thinks,  
my childhood was all thorn.

5.

But babble on, mon fils,  
the pictures will come  
by themselves, harsh  
as crackles, soothing  
like raindoves this  
very morning, window screen  
full of raindrops you  
never saw falling,  
aha, the artist's hand.

6.

Love lies all round  
the waking self  
like seamist  
with sun soon,  
love is a metric system,  
in love we view

far islands close, close,  
and clamber through the surf  
to come ashore. Or love  
is all shore and no mainland.

7.

Lovers are littoral,  
the painting tries to prove it, shows a thoughtful woman  
in a long white gown  
walking on the sand,  
two seals are playing  
in mild waves and watch  
while she watches them.  
She seems to hold a camera  
or some sort of looking device  
then suddenly he sees  
the picture she took,  
big round dark head  
lifted from ripples,  
big nostrils and big ears,  
with that look of intelligence  
all creatures have when  
they look at who looks at them.

8.

That night the gallery again,  
empty now, the wine all gone.  
A few canvases had come to life,  
a seal in the sea all  
brown in silver blue,  
a fat flower on an open book,  
a woman walking  
from the sea  
to me he thought,  
and prayed,  
then signed  
his true name  
in the visitors' book.

7 July 2024



## METALOGUE 15

1.

Wait till the right word  
comes along by itself  
like a distant kayak  
nearing you,  
the long hair of the rower  
swishing in the wind,  
wind that comes  
and wind they make  
by rowing.

When it comes close enough,  
write it down.

Don't wait for it  
to come to the jetty,  
this is about going  
faster than any boat,  
get going, up the road  
into the woods,  
the river has done its work,  
now seek out the trees,  
you don't need many,  
one will suffice  
if you listen hard.

2.

I keep saying this  
and why not.  
Even I don't always  
listen, so much knotwork  
littering the mind,  
wants and fears and  
all the fuss of being anyone.

3.

The great globe dense  
sycamore-maple on the hill  
assures me repetition  
is not a sin, despite  
the way it can annoy  
in Baroque music,  
no, repeat all you like,  
say it again, listen to me,  
count my leaves  
and cast out doubt.

4.

So I've had my lesson  
my morning prayer  
sun getting stronger,

fog welcoming  
all that new golden  
light inside its grey.  
Talk about education!

5.  
Here is summer.  
There is Portugal.  
Islands are the first religion,  
I love to walk by  
the little chapel here  
with a fish for a weathervane  
instead of a cross or crescent.  
I don't go inside,  
the words are all out here  
already, but it makes me happy  
to think of people in there,  
tiny building that it is,  
praying to and praying for  
and all the other prepositions,  
word after word  
and sometimes they sing.

6.  
But I'm on my way  
to the modest yacht club  
elbows the inner harbor

and the kayaks speed  
among the sleeping sloops  
(O I like that phrase!)  
and one of them is sure,  
isn't it, to come towards me,  
water flashing from its oars  
bright signs I try to read.

8 July 2024

## **(A NOTE ON METALOGUES)**

**Meta-physics meant originally just after physics – the Aristotelian essays came after the text called Physica so they were known simply as the After Physics.**

**Thus metaphysics represent the mechanisms of the outer world, now recast, reflected, corrected by the operations of the inner world, the mind.**

**So metalogic must mean after the logical, and must refer to that operation by which the logical faculties are transformed, diluted, reinvigorated right there, with the best efforts of imagination and thought -- but working from nothing but the words themselves.**

**Not just words that make sense-- our metalogic pursues the words beyond the sense they seem to make. So metalogic works to follow the words all the way or at least as far as any one of us can, given the limitless powers of imagination, breath, memory and desire.**

**Through a metalogue an essay can follow the words far further than the word wants to go. And we will be with it all the way.**

***4 July 2024***

***Cuttyhunk Island***

## COUNTING

1.

Aloha, imagine  
a number  
greater than ten,  
gulls stepping  
on asphalt  
north of you,  
remember?  
Is that enough to go on?

2.

Somebody else  
lives there now  
of course, the way  
they always do.  
A corner up north.  
Larger by far,  
the loose number you need,  
like the -ty's you puzzled over,  
thirty, sixty, ninety, then  
or tell at one glance  
forty eight from forty nine?

3.

But aloha anyway.  
Say hello to the nice  
blackboard, the young nun  
with her mind on something else.  
Numbers always feel  
a little immoral, don't they,  
as if they'd hang out  
with anybody at all  
and they do.

4.

But also why these islands.  
Dear Friends, I am writing  
(I wrote) to you from  
an archipelago—a live geology  
where numbers  
fight the ocean to a draw.  
An island, even Manhattan  
(remember her?)  
is a word shouted  
silently out loud,  
the clean surf

shushes it but still,  
but still...

5.

So if you had to pick  
one number, only  
one number, never mind  
for counting what,  
just what number  
would you choose.  
Don't think about it too long  
and whatever you do  
don't tell me. Or anybody  
else, we all have  
problems of our own.

6.

All rock and questions  
and no flowers, not nice of me,  
the nun is fingering  
her long rosary  
that swings from her waist,  
all the fifteen mysteries  
in one sentence  
between index and thumb.  
I think she's from Indiana



where nuns seem more  
exotic than in New Jersey.  
Though there is Notre Dame,  
a touchdown counts as six,  
doesn't it, and a huge  
painting of Jesus  
blesses out at all of us  
from the stadium wall?

7.

Stadium! Greek stadion,  
measure of distance,  
how far we must march,  
how many, how many  
miles to get here.  
Love's own temple,  
the empty air  
above this island.  
Any number can play.

8.

The nun is praying  
for the children at her mercy,  
she wonders why  
she has to bother them,

curriculum, the long run  
to reach the exit,  
why do their fresh young bodies  
need to learn arithmetic?  
What did the numbers  
ever do for Christ?  
Can't we live joyful  
in a countless world?  
But she obeys the rules  
and goes on teaching  
Long Division, which  
after all has a charm of its own.

9.  
I hurry home  
to those white birds  
on Oahu, not gulls  
but I said gulls to give  
a quick idea, a picture,  
dozens of them,  
white and big as gulls  
or egrets, I asked around  
and nobody said their names.  
So I am left with only  
colors and sizes and numbers  
to give you.

10.

But I give with all my heart  
and I have only one  
though they tell me  
there are numbers  
even in there too,  
chambers, from Latin camera,  
a room, come live  
with me, but where  
did that B come from?  
Maybe a bird flew by.

6 July 2024