junC1994

Robert Kelly
Bard College
I’m not sure I have the elegant American clarity
to deal with this spider web, jewel garlanded with raindrops
between me and the sea, an unlikely flower from the windowbox.
Ratnamala, a wreath of gems. A rosary of rare.
How can I count them? These drops are magnitudes
like stars, and range in size. Sizes. Sixteen jewels in one length.
Twenty four lengths on the outer ring. Nine rings in the most regular
regions.
Seventeen radiuses, each with jewels of its own. Survey of reality,
small, nearby, preparing to count the rain. Twenty-three drops on one
radius
I happened to count. Some more, some less, some other
longitudes cut or incomplete but with their perfect raindrops too.
Webs don’t have a center they have a zone
(but I’m supposed to know the flag of every nation,
a need I make me have, a lust to know
but fruitless so
((as the rain drops dry it is as stars go out)).
The only thing he brought home is one jewel. Every journey
he makes he takes it with him, and brings it back
each time more lustrous till it’s perfect. By evening the web’s
invisible but the spider walks on it now, stops
when I sneeze and looks at me, then goes on with her tireless
geometry. Down by the beach in fog strong scent of the sea roses
hovering in the wind. Low tide, ducks courting on our lawn. My breath comes back to me from the other side of the sea.

14 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
The composition is always waiting
beneath the intention,
it tries to know itself clearly
through the scrub oak wilderness outside the city
where mauve tail lights of furtive autos tell
all there is to know of motivation.

15 June 1994  Cuttyhunk
AN EXORDIUM TO THE PORTUGUESE IN ME

who came here
to salt our fish
inevitable karma
consequences
of what we find

put up
with where it goes:
the immigrant

sea— namely order
(blessèd order)
and glasses of 1798 malmsey
such as Sidney Smith set before me
once at St Catherines
when wet clematis was blooming on the crescent
and these things I can stop trying to forget

find
me the catalogue
I have exhausted the patience of the wise,
a blue god
bothering sleeping heifers
with sudden bliss

the dark skin is what does the love

the is
and the is not are both
at our disposal

And so the smallest thing is ready to help me decide.

15 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
ISLANDS ARE PROVISIONAL OBSERVATIONS.

Manhattan. Kowloon. Esmeralda dances, Phœbus falls—There is a difference, island people however city, an island knows more about the sun, no phase of Her unvisited —spray of mist— why wake so late, my bride, it’s almost seven, the vicar’s on his way to heaven—heave your horns and join her twice—we were talking strictly about weather— Singapore. How much of me fits in this destiny? A schuhglanztuch foil-wrapped like a condom, souvenir of a German hotel, to wipe shoes bright. An island seems to be the place to get it right. Or at least to drag by tide or shoulder everything you ever thought. Things. And the thing to be wary of is lyrical. Or: what comes in winter has another meaning. Try to place it in the moon. Watch the satisfaction on his face as it goes in, mirror of your pleasure. There is no measure for that geology except the oil we think.

2.
Keep this book safe from floods. How can you resist the rabbit on the lawn? Folk wisdom of the long migrations, soul by soul, a little sailboat shrouded and then the summer comes of gay marinas—where’s my wise winter then? Be wary of the lyrical, it turns into a guitar sleaze-strummed on Mass Ave to beguile the demoiselles of despair. Be wary of the song lest you be sung.

3.
One rests from what seemed to be labors, and you are one. Work does itself, we’re just along for the ride, muscles on their own. We climbed the hill in the dizzying southwester, no part of us dry, a joy to carry, no differences perplexed us, the slog uphill was beautiful in wet. Wade on through. Fake science is enough for me, calcium to smear on walls, phosphorus to make the sea a script at night—
all midnight long umbrella lightning shimmered constantly. 
Only hours after did the thunder come —junor— who wakes?— 
and the paltry genocide of fishermen suspend in mist. 
You think at first: the world doesn’t know what I’m thinking about it 
and then you realize: you’re just a part of all that you suppose. 
Your thinking is just a part of what thinks you, cause upon 
cause without end — what we call ‘effect’ is just some sudden now, 
a lull in the weather of neglect. It means you notice it. 
And it is all there is of all that was. Then it’s gone into the west— 
don’t worry, by then you’ll be thinking something else.

4.
Go to a place to guess the mind free there if you can. What happens 
in your heart there in your head. Travel, like every masochism, 
is a quest for knowing, the irrefutable evidence of pain. Voices 
rise in mist, “I didn’t really like it,” a woman says away, 
and that’s all the information comes, a preference floats in fog.

5.
Steel straight, like a bridge between two maybes, and it sure is river. 
Tom-tom. Cruelty is an island in the mind where no one lives but me. 
I rule ruin. Things fall for me. The fog came thick tonight, sea loud 
and nothing seen. A house is a light in the dark, that’s all. We really 
are for other people, if we only knew. Or knew how. I don’t, I faint 
at every doorbell. I pretend to be the wall. For wall is ecstasy 
and silence and come true. At dusk at Gosnold Pond we saw three 
crows— first I’ve ever seen on this island. They lurched through dead aspens, 
a hawk there was also, and two swans, in godly mist the light stayed 
firm. 
Bayberry anecdotes rustle in cold wind. War memories to invent.

15 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
There are many here, the struggle for union
Taking toll. Pineapple, a piece of chocolate,
And Hamburg burns. All we mean
Is to be each’s other. There is no issue
Past that. And past that there is only
Freedom. The sticky flower no one knows.

2.
I thought about the old Crayolas stuffed in the glass,
ultra blue, orange, fluorescent green, and gray.
The least popular colors are what get left
After the noble primaries have found their Mondriaan
And left for weddings. Dinners. Men with striped trousers
And dove-grey waistcoats, high priests with watchets,
Typewriter salesmen in the desert, fleas. Smoothness
Is a matter of ratchets. Ice hockey. Semaphores. You know
I can keep it up all night. But in the small hours Lady Iris
Half-watching herself in the ceiling-tall gilt-rimmed pier-glass
Begs me if I know no better game than names. A leg
Thrust out beneath a redingote. A tulle surprise.

3.
So I summoned for once the Supreme Council of the Knights
Paladin of Indianapolis of the Second Order of the Third
Arrival — those who had been waiting at the door all night
Knowing they’d be needed — and asked them for the oil they saved
Like prudent virgins from all the years of harvests, tree
Upon tree. They had no answer but their black fingernails.
And all my royal state is known and shattered, free of inference,
Blank as binomials. But what they had they gave me I brought home.

16 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
Not having to know what came before — a kind of humor — a sputter of downhillness in the fisherman’s old car — the sea is waiting.

“Yesterday,
at twilight we came to the pillboxes high on the western bluffs. The sea fog was meeting the land mist, and the low trees and bayberry thickets down there around the cove were green and new like the first morning of the world come back just before dark. We called it matinee when we were kids, the morning that leads to night. Three crows were there,
first we’ve ever seen on the island, and a hawk. Two swans were plowing the relaxed lagoon.
No sound except the surf out of sight beyond the pebble beach we saw the near flank of, where deer run but none did.”

In the delicate web system (DWS) of these lower stars, a hunk of bread changes everything. A gull is always waiting. Feed the gull. Everything causes everything. No neutral on these gears. Save sleep maybe, when I am done without doing. Be it done to me according to thy word. “You lay alone those weeks of isolation, how heavy the body is, but how also far away. The doctors watched
in their absent-minded well-meaning way, almost you wished they were indifferent, their tender glances asked too much of you, as if you had to heal yourself for their sakes, their spirits part of your burden, the part of you that must be gladly. The dance.” Bodhicitta. “Go shelter in the house of abstract love, sweet innuendoes of the living.” Sea march I hear but I don’t see. Gull conversation. Yellow aftermath of too much blue. The sun on its shield, those old high reciprocals of ancient obvious heraldry, both hidden now. “A mist is mercy when you’re on the land, the sailboat with lowered mast dreams on the lawn, its sky a brown tarpaulin no smaller than those starry canopies of Egypt inches above the snoozing noses of mummied pharaohs, the actual stars. The accurate. For in a special sense all beings are asleep and mummies just make it obvious. Think when you stroll through Cairo or Berlin and smell that mummy-stink: those characters wrapped up in agony are me, for I am sleeping now, afoot in the interminable museum. All we’ve made!” The choice of wrappers: the long drivelings of Bacchylides (just like these) tear into strips and wind round your chest. We dress in the fashion of departure, a body and an island, no more need I! sang the cold paladin in the empty sky.
They want the weather for what it lets them do. Kill fish for instance or play on sand. The cooperant Jupiter of our wishy prayers. There are words we won’t let our fingers write. Not found in official poetry. These words agitate me in the night—a hat, a scarf, how could I dream about a woollen scarf? It was a book at bedtime that dreamed for me. It wasn’t Zurich on the Limmat, it was Austria, a lake with many swans and a woman with dark eyes, pleading like a Catholic saint, forward crest of her perfect baroque profile towards sleazy older lover, bleak noncommittal businessman. Her urgency and grief. Beauty. And the swans poured by us both, and I was full of her grief, poverty of my understanding, why doesn’t she see through him, through me, see through all her pain the quiet light of no more hoping, afterglow on the lower Alpine ridges, and still she wants something of us all.

16 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
Heigh ho, what shall the measure be,
stress in the wrong place and music listening?

Not to Sheol go by refining
afterthought or meta-fire
as a bee
might aspire all its life
to just this flower
never knowing so,

we go
where our need
is obvious,
the compulsion
is miraculous
and plain,

every instant
instant afterlife.

17 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
[20 June 94]
The d-minor symphony begins like Homer “in the middle of things,” tune-up and suddenly you’re right in the story, some story, gasping for breath, who are these people?  
Or Prince Andrei, how could that sky have been there every day of my life and I not see it?  
Do I see it now? Mist hides the Vineyard, the slow poignant second movement, a gull glides off the world forever.  
To have reached the ocean beyond appetite and still love you.  

17 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
The island—how to be hot and cold at once
the mist the sun the clammy wind the sweet
freshness and the glare all one, all dawn
on Cuttyhunk this little Albion
and so to map it, Druid stones and Pict fort
up the western bluffs three wars ago
some strange antediluvian strategy decreed
pillboxes of concrete were needed, gun emplacements,
rotting iron fences, cubic caves to magic enemies
or ships or stars or what do wizards see
when they send, Henry, one country at another
like a dog at the throat of a dog.

18 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
for Charlotte

In this fog now grey as churches
if anyone comes sailing Buzzards Bay
they’ll slip past us unseen
even if from the Rhode island shore
a thousand flaming Manitous
glimmered our way low on the wave
as if those angels too were
fishermen or cormorants
but nothing kill. The land
has its own gods, they live in hiding
or they live hidden, but now the sun
comes through the mist like the full
moon on a cloud thick night
and hangs there in the grey uncertainty
full of the energy that agitates us
also to seed and help and sympathize,
quiet sun like a word from her mouth.

18 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
IN ISLAND MIST

The apparition is not simply what appears, it has a mind too, a Japanese turn of shoulder towards the tree, pine, a whiff of oil, motor oil, clump of bayberries by the cliff, a monk peeing in the mist.

2.
Down the hill a woman’s washing windows poised under the eaves on the shed roof with the vague sea behind her — an old man it turns out to be, the wild white hair made me think otherwise. But that’s my business, thinking otherwise. And the language of the pine, rare here among the stunted bays, the measled plane trees crouching in mist-twilight, hung with catkins smoky pale.

3.
Nadis. The channels of entitlement that make me me. Through this neck or sly canal my mother goes, casting me right and left until I am or be. Teach a child an unknown word, what else do most of us have to give, or a word in that unknown language called Language, what happens in the mind in a child when the word says and hears itself in a child’s mind and never mind who’s talking? Or the mind of a woman washing shadows. A word is enough. A little knowledge and pebbles on the beach, sea shushing, dare me to appear. And there I are. Bullseye in the empty channel, heeling hard. What appears only happens to be there. But there’s nowhere else for it to be.

4.
Sundown anticipated midmorning. The scratch of noise
against irritable tissue, one man’s music.  
Founded in aggression, a sound colonializes.  
Empire of space, while you can hear me  
I must rule. Listening to other people’s radios  
is like being made love to by the wrong people. Skin  
has this awful insistence on its own.

5.  
I don’t like weddings though I like marriage fine,  
too many people at the ceremony, too many words, sounds, foods,  
informalities. A word is enough. I fear it is a formal one I am,  
having the need of circumstance and stanza, forest-green  
my Gypsy caravan, and silvergilt with fixed stars most orderly.  
Sway through beech woods! Annihilate the obvious!  
Or everything but the obvious. The sun, you oldest hammer.

6.  
The flamenco dancers have gotten mixed up with the carpenters,  
heel taps and hammer taps, the differences disappear, a shout  
names the local deities, they come and drink with brazen throats  
the delicate arrangements of bride and groom and money and a little  
house with roses just planted at the door. Muse me more money, quick!

18 June 1994  
Cuttyhunk
Should be impossible, like pottery,
something turned, then shaped carefully
by hand, like the lips of a mouth
formed over accurate teeth or
a room painted turquoise everywhere
and furniture carved of color, a game
they play with light. The light loses.
Between hot and cold, a castle on the horizon.
Of course it’s just an ordinary house,
people stand on their feet, the wind
coils around them, words are misunderstood
everywhere. Or not heard, wind
hissing in the privet. Far out a schooner
self-consciously a blade of light.
A man carries a boy down the hill,
the boy makes himself stiff, like a log
the man carries in front of him
like a sign of something. There is humor
in them, some kind of dialect of motion
being spoken. My eye keeps going to the little ship
light-hearted on such an earnest old ocean.
I love the world because it’s far away.

18 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
MUSIC THERAPY

You tell me how music makes men better
and I’ll teach you a song I learned in the marshes
when a stray bittern off his course began to boom
and the hunkathunk of his Mahler mind
opened a moony heaven to me cloud by cloud.
Since birds are always there. I think you’re wrong,
and the only thing that heals is silence,
real silence, not just some truancy of sound.
I was absolutely alone — the way young men are
but also the way we all are when we die. Alone
I watched the marsh turn limitless at twilight,
edge turning into edge forever, the sea was there
by intuition and since by day one saw the sea.
But now was nothing but that grey of timothy,
eelgrass, terns complaining I was near their house.
Alone — and all the music that ever came to mind
had some of that distance and dismay in it,
that huge awayness that a marsh at evening has
and never came home. Almost it could cure me of me.

18 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
As if a cause knew its effect
only by the sweat on its hands.
Or is it a rock, rough as a wasp bite
that lies there, red when you look
but who knows what when you sleep?

18 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
It’s time I learned the gulls, they’re troubadours like me, greedy gallants of the lower airs, *Larus* I suppose *orpicus* or something like it, shrill prophetic bird diving white but black-rimmed past the sun as if the sun meant nothing to him, just one more god? No, I should go look in the bird book, every house has one by the sea, yesterday the catbird where two years ago you saw your first scarlet tanager in the low maples themselves rare on the island — who needs a bird book when he has a wife, quick to note the blaze of crimson, depth of color on a she-mallard’s wing, the rank of blackbird by the hue of his chevrons, you! Meantime the sun’s a little higher, sheen on Barges tide, three slim pleasure craft from Moneystan moored in the outer harbor silhouetted, bows towards me into the west wind. The prevailing condition of our flowers. Weather reports, that’s all this is, like Mallarmé’s leisures of the mail in this respect alone: making something our of nothing, rhyming
the weather with who you are. To my wife Charlotte (rhymes with scarlet) in her house by the sea.

Of course the sun sheen aims at me. That is the nature of nature. (The weather.) I hide my eyes behind the windowframe but keep my face in the wind. Low chiming of wide sea, the hush of her, no traffic but the intermittent gulls.

19 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
It is, I suppose, a letter. An ask-you clocked into sunlight (the wind suddenly fallen for one hour and for the first time in a week the cliffs at Gay Head were visible, white, the typography of the sea. The mother and her daughter sit as usual across the way on the stoop of their white sided house, nothing to do but look around and smoke in the passing evening light. What do I ask? A white boat in the channel. Someone to set these words to quiet wishful music, à la Rorem maybe. For music should find its own measure, chew its own gum, leave me loose with logaœdics as I choose. I am too Sunday to play Saturn for conservatory graces. Be sinewy with listening! That’s what I’m asking. Or suppose me water into which you half-reluctantly descend, quick surf cold still at just the start of summer. I see the musculature of a grandiose upper arm wielded in half-light to make song possible, grisaille maybe of some neglected double-entendre in the passagework of The Creation of the World, somewhere between the sixth and seventh days. An arm that might be music. Or the shadow of my own.

19 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
First morning Gay Head’s visible, last night first light (white, pause, red). A week of tender haze goes by and now the shield is struck in heaven, the Yellow Warrior is back shouting outside my cave. But the sheen of him is beautiful on water, after all, and his sparkle further out, and his cormorants slink by in heaven, and his white boats.

20 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
windless
this misted hill an island too
I hear the sea through the front windows
and at the back door
the hum of bees in Betty’s garden
bees in deep sea fog
working.

21 June 1994
I could have wondered what that was
the solid look the sea has today
as of a piece of steel
uneasy below the solar fugitive
cold wind. Summer starts today.
I could have wondered why time
has such detail in it (so many hours,
so many weathers, the heart
a lexicon of terrors, o love,
why can’t I bring you where a gentle
habitant renews the earth
with animal gentleness and human
tenderness, a hobbit or a marmot,
something private, public
as a chair, banana peel, newspaper,
radiance a sleeping person yields
into the astonished darkened room,
why is it always me again
me with my sea and my sun and bafflement
like the wind trying to turn a doorknob

forgetting the threshold and merciful space?).
Instead I took it as it came, the Absolute,
the hurrying encyclopedia, and trusted it
the way a gull trusts the sky.

21 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
Suppose I was that boat out there
the one I can barely see
where the channel pours into the sound
black with a hint of red

and nothing was near me and I
hardly was near myself
so busy would I be
with the waves and the wind

just something between
ocean and sky
made up of a few colors
and busy not sinking

would a house be different from it’s me?

21 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
A THEORY OF LITERAL THEOLOGY

There are some people who
are sunrise but not many
how many days are they?
By clock time the boat never makes shore.

So it has to be a narrow thing to say,
has to be glamor and blackbird—
something happens by just saying it.

22 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
And doesn’t know why it is as it is
yellow tapestry of the butterfly and Archer’s daughter zapping
grass borders with a string-cutter the snarl of things
and the bluest sea today waves high and the pale
lemon of the butterfly the waves
a kind of fish you don’t see sparrows here
there are sorrows the postmistress knows
blackbirds and catbirds and sleazy yachts far off making for
Menemsha
the commerce of the island largely conducted in golf carts
though there are several trucks red the worker grey the carter
green the garbage slung in a mid-island dingle
you see it smoke at sunset you see gulls patrol it
just takes it as it is the pause the listening.

22 June 1994, Cuttyhunk
Deare heart, how like you this?

And suppose you woke up one day
from a life you inherited just like everybody else
and discovered you were suddenly
at the mercy of small peculiar perverse desires
and these alone could satisfy

and all the scheduled comforts of your station
meant nothing or not much
just this touch or that beholding
in the bosom of some special fragrance and
who is there to tell?

Who is there ever to talk to of what you are?
Wouldn’t you try to forget the whole thing
and pretend for a long time to be not somebody else
but the self you were before you woke,
whoever that was, you impostor of an impostor?

And how hard it is when people ask you
how you like this or like that
and you have to answer with what you think they do
and all the while there’s nothing but that picture
of what you want to happen, it never happens, it never

will, it hangs there in your mind, un-touchable horizon.

22 June 1994, Cuttyhunk

This ought to be dedicated to John Cowper Powys, bard of the impossible heart.