10-1994

octC1994

Robert Kelly
Bard College

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ON BATTLE HILL

Some pipers near you some
harpers happening,
        you have come
to the famous place between the worlds
hillside in Wales
        and all your blood
moves curious as a spring rill on a sunken lawn
investigating
        what is low
what there is to know
        to go
because you have come to your moment.

No, it is autumn and your blood is usual
busy remembering,
        house in your head, you carry
the street,
        the long one,
from which you come.

You do not go into the street to learn the street —
that’s the secret city children know, the street
is the space between your eyes and the skies,
is your glance right into the heart of the president, the only one,
up there, in the blue house, god of energy, big you.

The harp is still. You wait
for all its trembling reminders.
How can a sound be gold. How can someone
you love be Aquarius or far away?
Let it be thin — an image
is a paltry trick, you see it,
here, even when it isn’t there,

this blessed here of all things,
Our Lady. We kneel to your green shadow,
the whole earth for all its colors
isn’t strong enough to bear
even your shadow,
and the worlds below it
reel under your circumstance.

We come to you as our only solution,
our watch stopped, our shoelaces broken,
our books very hard to read,

we hardly know you’re there, we’re here,
what is that commotion at the other end of the street,
the petite liaisons of our scary afternoons,
all the nimble forgettings,

meritorious castigations of our fugue. So they say.
For we have escaped the bitter bleakest classrooms,
meant to counsel your phony priests to run
back and wash themselves in you, whose purity
of uncontrived attention they forgot,

but we were children and could say nothing but our smell.

For a while now they pipers had been playing
and wise men rose from gold and silver pieces on the chessboard
over which they had been trifling our whole life,

they began to make funny gestures in the air,
flapping their hands and snapping their fingers,

the crows
heard, the crows came (o Mother what does it mean
when you say This afternoon someone will come calling?)

the crows called and called and maybe the wise ones answered
but I heard only crows and I understood,
I moved to the right as they instructed

and then I wasn’t a child anymore and wasn’t wise and
wasn’t a man and wasn’t me,
I was all waiting and water, I was attention and being hollow
so whatever happened would make a noise in me

and that would be crow enough for any day,
the harper answered.

Some music comes from touch
and some from speaking
all the words you ever heard at once.

22 October 1994
POSTCARD FROM AMSTERDAM

_Vijf_, pronounced not quite five,
nothing is quite the way we do it
but it seems, it counts, the big ANB office
gives me —a tad reluctantly,
they are Dutch, it is money— my money

and we are out in the pale winter of the flower market
adoring the promises of earth-reeky paper lumpy bulbs
from which the habitual miracles will spring.
You never have to wait long for a dog
to come along. Narrow sidewalk, luminous canal.

23 October 1994
Examine the hairband. See if telltale Prell stains linger. Or if in the barrette a hair or two’s still caught in the steel springe or trap behind the soft phony amber. Oh how we have to suffer to be anybody. Slices of lemon once I scrubbed on my young fingers to hide the yellow evidence. Virginia was worst, turkish bad. They were asleep of course, I hoped, and mother had left one almost empty catsup bottle to drain, upside down, into the neck of a new one. Thrift that meant, and memory, and night. I sneaked into my bed, and busied myself with those false hopes we call thinking.

23 October 1994
Red Hook
THE ORDER OF THINGS

A very bisque Nabisco in a plastic sleeve of ordinary 
tan light crisp—but not too—tells an overordinary story 
like a dromedary in the pasha’s tent—

it is time to remember the insightful clerics who proposed 
a seductive notation for ars nova music—interpreted 
nowadays for the guitar—o it is to 

wonder if the cascara-bitter laxative ceremonies of “our” 
politics is ever likely to cleanse this world we (complaining 
tone) require more of than the usual 

whereas that world and that alone 
has the mysterious—and glorious— 

*temptation to be difficult* 

from which girls’ first post-prom pinafores are made 
stiff-starched and shadow-shushing as they go

[23 April 1994] 
25 October 1994
In one particular the night is soft
and otherwise I thought I saw Orion
through the half-fledged linden tree

and it would be the first time this
season and it would be winter
soon. Or seem. The dead

are not particular, any guise
will answer their pressing need
for being seen. Wait for me

they say to the weather, shape me
they say to the tree
with your shadows and your sudden

nakedness, up there, so the sky
itself seems reticent
compared to you.

25 October 1994
Remain how long ago she was,
the Available, patron saint of what you need,
bright colors on a Mexican calendar
offering hands inside eyes one more embodiment.

26 October 1994
Something happens when you’re waiting for someone and they’re out there, out of sight, far down the street and around a thousand corners, in the night, in tomorrow wrapped in the sun glare, they’re in the moon, alone, in a throng of evildoers, you’re waiting and the waiting is in your chest, hard, big as a second heart in you and you feel it, throbbing, pumping the rivers of anxiety through the whole body and what do you do then? You wait, and wait harder and harder, you try the other world, the one that’s just here, the ground beneath you, the wall, floor, doorway they don’t come from, the street empty of anything you need, you try this other unwaited for world and it’s no good, it’s not what you want, waiting is terrible, and your body is no good, your body is just the place where waiting is waiting, where that wild alternative heart keeps banging and no one comes.

27 October 1994
Welcome the disappearances. There is a core of days I understand, the NET of Karma, SNAKE of suddenness, malice unveiled abruptly, surprise, and DEATH the diplomat exchanging subject populations from afar.

And then the transfiguration, the priest naked on DEER day to begin, then YELLOWCORN, the root fertility, then earthstorm old JADE then DOG intrigue and syphilis. Then with MONKEY ordinary life begins again, the days I always forget, days for novelists, “family and circumstance.”

Now I will tell, if I get around to it, an anecdote of how Andrews Wanning asked Robert Lowell a question at dinner: “Cal, when it comes down to it, isn’t all literature just family and circumstance?” (one Harvard old family money man asked another). Lowell looked at him with that crazy boiled eye of his and answered by a caveman grunt conceivably affirmative. And then months or years later I told this story (still feeling shock and tumult) to P. Adams Sitney, he said “Well, isn’t it?” And I cried out (did I cry out?) like Blake (I’m not in the least like Blake), No, poetry is glory and revelation and mystery unveiled, poetry is what no one knows, no one is given, it is not inherited.
If I get around to it
   I could tell more, the herniated happenstance, the strained
ligaments of honesty between us then,

and all a mirror’s ever worth is to break.
To see the honest paintwork on the wall.

And what am I going to do about that today
while the sun shines
and the sky from time to time fills up with geese,
aliens, legitimated by the local air,
the guns that wait for them down there,
among the Moses-lacking sedges, the broad-splayed water-caltrop
which has chewed up the river.

Bare patch for you, mes oies,
   my calendar. And you,
   impatient reader,

   why burden you with these
   commonplace details
of my frail autumn? Because
   you too are a leaf and brittle lavender,
a leaf and orange, you
   too are a bare tree and need to know

what this wind proposes. There must
   be a way out. Behold,
what I have heard on the mountain.

27 October 1994
We have been here before. On this shelf treading down from the Sierras to the sea, in between. We are people to whom a very wise thing happened or got air then we forgot, or it took itself away from us inside, and we were now.

Just now. Broken tablets at the feet. A word to share with you—each part becomes a whole, nourishes indeed but the meaning changes.

Bus us sin in nine businesses, the oracle of fraction. Clasis. Take a bus on our way to business, sin therein nine times, how so, a sense of skin curving to meet skin, sine waves, endless esses fleeing from a brutal war. Take a bus in sin to where we live, the use of us, the frantic readership of signs,

Lear grief and shattered wood, a hat full of leaves.

Interlude: Arion, weary of singing to indifferent merchant sailors hurls himself into the sea safe from all that local music, bears him simply to some shore like a melody from start to finish by which we recognize: a tune, someone means this. And there the youthful ears
cherish his melodious differencing.
A Carib sunset catexes his small world,
Berlin 1930’s jazz, secret casinos in Paraguay,
when the mountains rise it takes an age to heal.

Color is a kind of tautology, isn’t it,
that a thing should mean so much by dint of it,
and we make so much of what it means,

but what does it mean in secular spin, cycle system,
steampipes hissing in the dark?

Evening comes to relieve us from such inspection.
Yet color is introspection
and all night long we remember
the ochres of our anxious afternoons,
nervously re-reading the textbook
trying to remember why we’re here.

Or Amsterdam, is that far enough
from any mountain for the mere reminder
to spread out, a cool light of perfect humanness?
What a city! Casual as a car battery,
meaty as a circle!

There is a murk in mind now
keeps from simple things, a cat in a window, say,
something a house gives
to a street, something for pedestrians to seem

a little beauty for them, someone’s bowl of breakfast fruit.

28 October 1994
And now we’re finished with it, 
guide’s day coming home to house day, 
hiding in the reeds.

_Hiding in the river_ 
_from the water._

We bought this book in Amsterdam, 
a little snow dithering the fine steel-engraving evening air 
of the famous canals, a cold market street 
closed to all autos but Police.

Hiding from people in a city. 
Edging nearer to the sluices. Map of subways 
real enough beneath a ruined city.

Let things be where they are.  
Compromise 
with the constellations, 
faces face you, they talk, you drive uphill 
in a trusty old car, 
you see someone’s sister. You are surprised 
to see her, to see there are stars in the night sky 
after all the sleep of cities, 
still there, 
left over from summer. You name them 
and some of them have her name too.

29 October 1994
Every measurement becomes the same. The antique concept called a house or fingers or a hermitage. Bed rock shows through there. Fortress in the sky. I wanted a walking place in clouds, a small country that owned all the books, I wanted postage stamps. So sue me as God said to the disgruntled priest, I never said the matter-world would satisfy. Stone still is hard to lift. If you had asked I would have told you to go to the place beyond all this, the mind that makes stone heavy and makes you want to lift it. That’s where adjustments can be made in these bright wind-swept busy grail-thronged offices.

30 October 1994
FROM THE INFINITE INDEX FALL’N

No subtlety in some numbers, there is.

Walking away from temptation, we should be.

Clarity of limning in Great Painting, paucity of.

Hallways leading to other hallways, dream of.

Cheeses, imaginary kinds of fruits and, names.

31 October 1994