

Robert Kelly

**ARIADNE**

*St. Lazaire Press*

*Rhinebeck*

ARIADNE, by Robert Kelly

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Published by:

St. Lazaire Press

4 Patten Road

Rhinebeck NY 12572

St. Lazaire books are composed using Ventura Publisher:

The text typeface is Bitstream Charter.

for Charlotte

sea otter

in the scoop of wave

one more island

Dear Ariadne,

the womb is full. Black tufts of autumn corn sag under the weight of their damp silk.  
It springs up as my foot settles, down in, everywhere, grassy mud. Womb happening  
hour, speak  
my baby for me,

I mean my body,

this piece of farmer, meek silo lofted, sleek money, hum, drum, valve of the day  
sluiced clean, hum of sun in the corn stob, hum of wind in stubble, sum of yearnings,  
touch,

touch!

Christ hears you from the dead, valve of Easter, lich gate of the tomb, broken barrier,  
bound over boundary, steep deciding, comes,

comes to town.

Do you hear all the things I am trying not to say?

*Never* is a sumptuous music, isn't it, more like Bruckner than Brahms,

bring me a glass of water, pour it in my lap.

Say: here I reverse the agon and the aion, both at once,  
here I transverse the ancient flow,

Water of spine water of life cold by conjure swear by

I baptize thee stainless, woman.

So saying, look me home into the paradise  
we keep for each other, lakely, neat in each our faces.

\*\*\*

Are the soundings in feet or fathoms,

Men or women

Drowned to approach you

Over the drone of seas

How cool you are, clear,

Born after storm

'I am full' means 'I am pregnant,' you said, and the car  
slewed a little to the right, cars can't hear quotation marks

Map you sent

Feet or fathoms

Miles or message

Solve these numbers

Pick the thread of them

Out of all the million

Million threads in all her weaving

*Homer to Ariadne:*

Think of all those poets, or these poets, the lyric ones, the ones  
who are brief and tuneful:

They won't have the least idea. Or all they'll have will be *idea*,  
not a trace of substance,

the animal

I followed

all my life  
through so many thickets  
and slew on the white sand

at last and the sea was always egging me on.

They will not know, these poets to come, lost as they are in their little poems, their  
will to be short, and sweet, and go to sleep,

they will not *know*. They will make fragments of fragments, cast shadows of a fake  
ego, make an echo shout.

Look at any line of mine and you'll see a dozen of their small poems waiting, *breathing*  
*there quietly, waiting*, waiting for the mind's body's chest's breath's heart to release them,

a dozen you'll find, easy, and in my whole work  
uncountable myriads.

Look at a line like \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*

and Homer couldn't find the line the line  
he meant or of the myriads he meant  
lay quiet in the fallow of his mind,

burnt brown and grown a little back  
sweet under May fog, cool drizzle

couldn't say the line he meant, the meaning  
faltered under the bleak apple trees  
unhinged for spring, with blossoms  
sub-odorous, with pale rose tips to petals,

until he thought the whole world round him was the line  
he meant,

I wrote all of this he said

and thought he said no more than I wrote this.



*[the Opera:]*

Cold and rain happy drizzle trees

a mist veil let slip

the vanity of creatures that I am

o mirror me long,

quicksilvering night cloud,

against your opaque honesty

I read my face.

Fates. An arquebus or cross-bow stretch't,

something old, aimed

long ago, the bolt

let fly, long ago, finds me now—

o there is arthritis in the world

and answering

and being vague and high colloquial of praise,

how can you let your body ache

I pose

this music

as music,

poise peas on knife tip even

to nibble before opera

reeling,

blanched bone of my shirt cuff

in half-light suddenly shown.

Shone. This was the first act:

Now see

in pain herself outstretch'd upon a Rock,

hear her lover idling up the straits

get wind of her

(the sea bruit, sea

vague, sea holler,

hallows him on)

and all his little intellect

must strive to this

so not-so simple

strand, whoosh of surf

on shingle,

to arrive.

In pain he found her

(founder in the shoals, mere man,

try to lift

the weight of her in your eyes, the glory

stored for you in her hips)

arthritis of the mind, a truth-ache,

nightscare, wer-crow, lye-a-bed-ease,

some bad sick, can't her and leap rosies,

all those she flew)

till he on smite-rock smote

and by the say-rock spoke:

Ari my lioness lonely lying

lie on this my me,

Adnai my mistress liege lovely

be my siege my empery

and all such boyistries he babbled

nor did she wake.

Not yet, not to such wordage bound

—and all he meant to say was "I am nigh."

And he was night, so the third act began,

tocking of tam-tams and outrageous ordinaries,

a splinter of sense off some pinging triangle

and then the flab of orchestra o'erwhelm'd

the frail safe-conduct of the melody.

Flimsy book! Portage perilous!

Unhand my omnibus, you cloud,

and let me carry her.

But she is the property of her own mind, that *God*,

and will in her own time incarnate

Herself as Him to rescue her.

Torrents of applause and major thirds,

and thus an end make to your Grand Uproar.

And now we are quiet on the streets outside,  
hand in hand remembering each other.

Now that the opera is over it is sweet. In Strauss's magnificent opera within an opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the early summons of the Baroque is heard —Barock, the Germans spell it— casting its spell on the early twentieth century, Busoni first, his Bach transcriptions, then Strauss's love of Mozart, then finally Stravinsky, imposing/posing his cool baroque, pre baroque harmonic locutions on our suffering age. So the language of the Opera section of this letter, this is a letter, to you, Ariadne, you who are and aren't she, who, she, the Lion Lady, the Tamer of the Proud, the Lady of Beasts, she who on Naxos and in loneliness, approached by so many males, but so few who knew, know, the power and energy of that fire to which, feebly and goopily and sloppily, they aspire, try, try to come to, forget, wander boyishly off, meaning no harm, traipsing off to the Next—boys always move to the Next—the next who is, also, in her measure, you. Who is not you. Only you are you, and like a dandy slain with eau de violettes, some dreadful Montesquiou prancing in Versailles, I do not dare to say your name.

Your name is Ariadne, and you are you.

So the music (=language) of the opera is baroque. There is air. There is color, mostly pale blue-green, like the appointments of the monastery church of St.Gallen. There is space. But the language has to be teased from inside itself, a tickle in the ass, a slight but persistent runny nose.

Running noise, her lovers fleeing. I am afraid of women. Only the sea consoles me in the extremity of commitment to which I have at length come. So many commitments. So many meetings.

Meat. He runs from his body, which he recognizes despite the artful way the gods have disguised it. That is his body on the spit slowly turning over the coals in the restaurant window in Chicago, South Halstead, Greektown, that is his body being hacked by the monk on a chopping block, chips of cow shank and cow meat flying off the shambles, still mostly tree stump, on a hillside in the Himalayas. That is his body close inside the reddening lobster shell, stifling in the steam released from the sea-weed it's packed in, inside the big blue enamel pot that sinister small sky. That is his body with the gaping yellow teeth pronging out of the brown dogshit colored unwrapped mummy in the case at the British Museum, a smelly rainy day the stink of old men in their woolen suits, the smell of mummy, my meat.

To the exact measure of my love for you I have been fleeing. Your tongue spoke inside my mouth: *Be afraid!* I am so afraid of falling in love with you.

And Homer laughed,  
to see such deedless passions,

traits of mind

traits of union,

such quarrelsome joinings,

for a man's mind

to find a woman

like an arrow killing a deer,

folly upon folly

welded,

and the woman wanting it!

And women wanting men,

that is the funniest of all,

that cast away as she is,

in fact abandoned, she still

wants another one, some other one,

one of those, that kind, that

gender of betrayal

to come to her now  
and speak to her tenderly  
and mean what he says.

Alas, Ariadne, he can

only mean what he wants,  
a man can only mean what he wants—  
and Homer laughed  
at his own heart crying,

at his own heart hungry  
for every seabird he heard  
screaming through that invisible sky  
to the one place Homer

divided as he was  
could never come,  
come home.

For he came from many



and to many he returns.

A word spoken

in a crowd, a name

not clearly spoken, barely heard.

\*

allá seu hè kámatos poluáix gûia déduken

"your limbs are weary from stormy meetings"

he reads in German and he wonders:

did the world mean that with my meaning?

And you there, woman of such beauty,

bright brow and clear sailing, quick

to smile and understanding, you—

what do you take to be my meaning?

\*

We must return to the chaste ordinary, the language of everyday, even if only our own  
extraordinary everydays, our loving cloudbank and the fierce sun cutting aslant just

before setting -- when we cross the bridge to go to eat --

who eats?

What is the restaurant to which they go each week a different judgment a woman  
standing over

or a man

saying What will you eat? or

Who are you that you take

this into you

and later sleep?

The teeth. The smear of honesty

on a white plate. The remnant

and the market place. The slave.

He sleeps on his arms and sunlight plays in his hair.

Old now, a freeman almost among all those slaves,

remembering

what Helen doffed to go to bed, remembering

the flurry of bed linen in the dawn light as the wind  
lifted from both of them, sweat weary from the ape of love,  
those soft sweet rags. "There is so much to remember,"  
he remembered he had said before,  
gold-greaved, passing masked among Achaeans.

\*

It was the last night they could be together.  
He was leaving and he couldn't tell her,  
leaving and he couldn't tell, leaving  
but not over the sea,  
not even over the dry bare belly of the land away,  
he was leaving inward and he could not say.

Always he is leaving, the boring hero,  
the would-be-fascinating aging poet,  
the lost schoolboy who thought she could find him,  
they all are, all are leaving.

Homer is Theseus. All the distinctions we were so trained

to cherish, these are empty now. Words solve their meanings the way the sea solves salt.

All grief is this, and all  
grieving

is within me, I am the bosom of it,  
broad, uneasy,

an easy broad, he thought, and meant for leaving.

\*

The letter inside the letter, neither sent:

These are the reasons I am leaving:

- 1) I am too old.
- 2) I am too young.
- 3) I am too young to stay with one.
- 4) I cannot count
- 5) I eat too fast.

- 6) The ship is swift,
- 7) the island small.
- 8) The island's green
- 9) I had a dream
- 10) my mother spoke
- 11) my father held a hammer in his hand

he twisted and untwisted,

    tied a mule

    to an old pole,

    old mule, dead tree,

    tied it there and looked at me,

    looked at me

    both man and mule

    and I was young and full of fear

    I was young and full of fear.

- 12) But there are no reasons,  
    not even rhymes,

because a woman met  
is a song locked in my head

I think in bed  
to get the best of it  
to kiss it out, to tease  
it from its lair,

tickling hair, stubborn whimsy,  
unsaid sweet velleity  
or rodent doubt  
chase it out

I think and think  
and still the song hums and hums and hurts,  
no bruise like longing,  
no cut like leaving.

13) Because I have come and come and come again

I don't want to come to anyone

I want to be where I am

I always was

till all the coming went  
and left me far,

I have come enough and come back and come  
plenty and come home,  
and now to be where I am  
I must always be leaving,

must always be leaving to be where I am.

- 14) I leave because a disproportion,
- 15) I leave because the tide
- 16) the way a father looks at his son  
the sun looks at the earth  
until the very leaves on the linden  
tremble in the fear of judgment  
when a father looks
- 17) Lachrymose I go and day is weary.

*Weariness has walked itself into your members,*

weariness from so many meetings,

or not meetings, blows,

or only meetings the way the flesh meets

fast its kind and love forgets

to shape the hand soft to the handled

and it hits.

\*

It finally is simple.

It is his body always

a man is searching for.

(Venus in Virgo locked in the House of the Scorpion,

dark in the dark and

she feels in him, feels inside him,

he goes to find her there.



Even Theseus, that blowhard, even  
he hoists the black sail  
of those who run inward  
against the wind

by marvel moving,  
against the current

by wakefulness and prayer  
to come to himself in the coils of the sea.

And Homer predicts and predicts:

*flesh worn, arm and sinew weary*  
from so many blows

he turns away  
he leads himself out of the fray

down the slippery steps  
into the abandoned kiva  
after silver-seldom winter rain

to watch the dark:

*we built this house to watch what can't be seen.*

He deduces himself from her rules,  
he waves her hair in the air of his dream,

his mind's eye squinnies to perceive her  
dwindling on the noisy shingle,

he twists her colors round his throat  
and everything he does he does for her

and to her brings every newborn thing he finds or minds  
foundlings of his forest

and leavings, leavings, leavings

-- he is not Homer, he is not Theseus.

\*

Only when the man leaves can the god come:  
that's the first rule of islands.

On my patchy lawn the ground is soaked still

hours after rain,

so soggy that the ca's content to stay,  
fed a little, never sated, waiting for you.

\*

All that's just thinking  
all this is just feeling,  
a bunch of birds flying by fast.

And past them the sky.

\*

And past the sky  
another bird

a bird  
maybe

something anyhow with wings,

something that casts a shadow

that shelters,

something with wings.

His letter grew diffuse -- was he dreaming? He meant to be a  
homer, to come home fast to her, over the fences of the world,  
a poem in his mouth, rapt raptor, glad to be seen, he hoped.  
He meant to be homer, home to her, and there he was on the  
brink of folding, the fold of falling, fall of finding a way out  
from the only place he ever wanted to be in.

One by one rested his head on her breasts.

He brought her his hands and said Touch me,  
brought her his mind and said Know me

*these were the instruments --*

but why did the language fuse,

confound in simpering rhetoric

that taught of love and leaving?

LA GUAGE

they paid, the wage  
of thinking, the coin  
of being wrong.

It is the starlight that dissolves the sense, it is the weight of devious Algol and lordly Regulus that tips the scale pans of the world and sends the gold dust -- they thought it was sand! -- sifting down on her eyes so that she blinks, for all her experience in seeing sea. The words, so long past luster, cough in both their throats now, now a giggle now a hack to clear the channel of some importunate idea.

Into the lapis enters it, the archer wets the tip of his arrow and sends it back, blazing, to the zenith; but still the gold dust falls, sifts over them, notion by notion confusing the simple island of their love.

*Sometimes the body has to remember*

all by itself,

or, he thought, the body alone.

So that going for a walk in the woods was going to her  
stepping down the marshy path  
inside his body own

the straight place, the honest find. Was wet wood, path sprawl, forest spiral, being wrong and getting through, getting sick and getting better, wrong and through and do and wrong and I love you, all said and all forgotten time after time, the words fuse all right, and what they sinter is the gold dust of my little mind he thought, the thought

that comes. He came to her so often that he passed right through, and that was what she thought was leaving.

But this was wet, this path or tread, and so is honest, honest leaves tracks, a squelch of a sore foot maybe in what one more day of drizzle would make just mud but still was earth, plastic, kind in its response to the species of every shaping touch, a slow remembering.

He looked about him, the sprawl of it, the sprawl of all --

periwinkle, violet, wild geranium -- cranesbill, call it? --,

dandelion, herb robert --

how many facts does it take

to make a flower?

Things are wet and it isn't always the sea,

a word left out, or letter,

absence is a language,

(a word left

out over night,

dew-lipped now,

oxides of dawn,

what is the heart  
of weather?  
(To be gone.)

The noon of language is still far off,  
iron of words  
rusting by the salt lagoon.

Pease Ledge between the pond and the sea,  
there is a channel,  
(something stirring down there)

sea flushes it,  
down from the Middle Ground we come  
to taste our fathoms,

finding each thing in you precisely,  
how more you are, than adequate.

Is the language just a bunch of names?  
(How many facts does it take to make a man?)  
I want you can't tell that I can't face it,

a nearby country beginning with a No.

He could not move. He had to be summoned,

a god is what is *\*gandh-*, called on, called

in a great voice as a man to his mother or

in her hour she

called on the Aion to deliver her.

With an animal like him

she has to make the first move,

kiss him awake, she has to touch him,

Canopic channel broad just

enough for her sweet boat, the both of them,

-- its length the depth of channel there --

to sail him free,

and so at last she says. She says,

and this is the ocean and all forgetting

forgotten.

Forget this too, she says.

And then she *says*.



(What is that stirring?)

It comes again, the thinking and the coming,

the *thought arises from the mouth*

left over from the body --

(he is always leaving)

as the sun's a tongue, say,

or the moon's a tether.

Mule or boat

to tie to

this island you.

\*

There was something missing

and it wasn't a horse though it had a lot of legs,

was missing but was coming,

galloped through the slurry of wave and sand and shingle,

ran for its fodder on the hilltop stored,

cloud hay and that clear spring grass they call lucerne

-- earth lights a beast's way to it --

and she saw it coming,  
not horse and not mule and not a cow  
though she could milk it,  
hurtling overland to her, over her land

(you cannot reach the sky by sea

however far you travel)

(and for the fragrance of your body pay the sound of my  
speaking)

so the white animal she saw hurrying  
her way and panther-sweet and not a thought of Jesus  
and not a man and not a Greek, not far from rain  
(love is the past tense of leaving)  
and it wasn't a house though she would live in it

at last having said and said and said

it was the thought of a person yet brought to her

(his body that white shadow)

all tools and sorrows for her weaving,

brought everything to her to stand beside

and know inside her

the single purpose of the endless sky.

"You must be god" each thought the other said

(there is no ending)

and all it meant was

this mind will never leave you.