

Robert Kelly

THREADS

First Intensity
Lawrence, Kansas
2006

*Concerning everything that cannot be grasped,
its question constitutes its answer.
Shim'on Lavi, Ketem Paz. 1:91a.*

In memory of W.G. Sebald
3333

THREADS

foreword:

Sentences have always haunted me. Diagramming them in grammar school (as we still called it). Parsing. Their shapes. The bones of meaningfulness on which scraps of flesh or silks might drape for a moment. And when they're gone, the framework is still there. The *armature*.

The skeleton at the feast of meaning, of love. The barebones, structures, structure itself. Articulate. Articulated skeleton of medical student: wired, wired to move as a body could.

Words strung lightly on a sense of form. *Threads* is my fealty to the tyranny of the sentence.

RK 2005

33

Contents:

The individual numbers threads have no titles – a rubric is given below to help remember what each sentence is saying.

1. A ship on the estuary
2. The Hammerkopje
3. The Hungarian Parliament
4. Derrida's Farewell to Blanchot
5. Proust on the Telephone
6. Answering the Angel
7. The Three Maries
8. Sir Christopher Wren
9. Achilles
10. War
11. *Reddis regis cellis arcis*
12. Bérenger Saunière
13. Oakland
14. Jack and the Beanstalk
15. Auerbach in Istanbul
16. Gosnold's Island
17. The Sea of Sodom
18. Art Has No Opposite
19. The Dictionary
20. Need
21. Flemish Annunciation
22. Kanji
23. The Seven Thousand Oak Trees of Joseph Beuys
24. Maundy
25. Abyssinia 1935
26. X
27. In the Juvescence of Oracles
28. The Persimmon
29. To The Luxemburg Station
30. The Reader of Novels
31. Looking Close
32. Oswiecim
33. The Woodcarver

1.
As a ship beating up the estuary
crimson sails disposed to take
advantage of so contrary a wind
brings you an awareness
that comes across an almost endless plain
every day a new geology
brings so many things to tell you
one has come here to you
by the act of knowing
one comes to enquire
because one wants to know all
because everything is now
about the little world that isn't you
the angel said,
now you can be known
because you live in ordinary miracle:
that things take up space
exist in places
and places extend through time
meaningful and with their various colors
new country for you
to be sure,
she went on, information must
be broken before it can be given away
or even checked out for an hour
like a chess set in Marine Park
for play on concrete tables permanently marked
with the alternating signals of the endless game
white square dark square
sparrow droppings random on terrazzo
your life also is a table or
something measured on a table
something shown
and now this also datum
this given thing
no longer sounds like only language
has time to give to you.

2.

Nothing is personal,
 the compassionate hammerkopje
 flies low overhead in the rainforest
 letting other birds know
 where it has built its large commodious nest
 where all birds are welcome,
 its head like a hammer, this bodhisattva of a bird
 as the intelligence of Africa
 welcoming those who have need of its silences,
 silences though early nervous visitors
 tended to hear as rhythm or drumbeats
 were dripping instead, raindrops to the forest floor
 and the beating of his big wings
 miraculously busy for the benefit of others
 and how close they soar downwards
 always showing the way
 through what people falsely call the jungle
 appropriating oddly a Hindi word meaning wasteland
 whereas here the opposite is the case
 as it often is
 —so much and so often so that as a general
 rule the opposite is always the case—
 this is not wasteland this is the giving
 this is the resolution of weather and the kindergarten of coal
 this is work working, what the Romans
 who never saw anything like it in their busy lives
 called *natura naturans*, nature
 naturing, *banausic*, a Greek word,
 might define the Roman attitude,
 workmanlike, work-oriented, work-minded
 any civic operation a sort of sunrise
 to which the *civis* bowed gravely
 citizen workman of so many miles
 the Roman road still goes on
 as from Mediolanum into Spain
 over this broken bridge
 and a dirt road, still easier on foot
 that takes like the road forever,
 but such a word does not describe
 the attitude of the African bird
 who builds indeed but builds
 with his mind on something other
 than material, to make a place
 for other animates to rest,
 safety being the closest

they come to Elysium,
o dear Christ the way they look
when they fall to eating
snatch a peck and look
around to see
who's watching
who might be coming
to eat them or least
ways snatch their seed,
nervous agitation of a beast at feed
every one a victim of every other
so for this one bird
to build some refuge in a tree,
the angel said, is impressive work,
opus magistri, a sort of alchemy
by which time is coaxed
to open up its nervous doorway
and let a poor bird in
to shelter with half-closed eye
not far from death's busy door
among the crowd of trees
so close
to other trees they could be people
on their way somewhere
all at once jostling and caressing
the loins as if by chance of
some beautiful stranger in the crowd,
lianas and leaf fall and coquettish frond,
pilgrimage to the sky.

3.

The Parliament building in Budapest
 floats over the Danube like a permanent sunrise
 a metal sun a grey sun
 finding its way over the river plain
 and dwelling there, a dome for the mind
 to busy itself, learning
 new languages all the time
 until the enchanted legislators
 —who harangued one another
 in Latin till the 1830s—
 finally come up with a series of numbers
 that count everyone who is,
 lovers, window-washers, admirals,
 even people who don't answer the door
 when a number calls, people
 who throw garbage out the window
 and never recycle, even these
 have to be subjected to the quiet
 hocus pocus of the counting system
 as if there were a census and Augustus Cæsar
 needed to know for certain
 how many faces he had to dream each night
 to reach the last frontier of the Empire before dawn,
 or one of the late King Louis's needed more taxes
 and who is there to pay it but you,
 you and the Gypsies, you and the Jews,
 you and the shadows of pine trees and yew trees
 on this long-armed street past the cemetery
 so eventually every logical system
 comes round to your door
 and curls up on your knees
 as if it were moonlight
 and you were your own mother
 asleep in a foundering canoe.

4.

Derrida in saying
 goodbye to Blanchot
 —long quiet lucid discourse
 printed in the newspaper *Libération*—
 says “through the *frayages*
 of a writing both austere and dazzling
 that without cessation and without assurance
 kept questioning its own
 possibility,”
 but the word wanted here
 is difficult, it makes its way
 through dense underbrush,
 it clears a path
 through what is terrible
 the undetected feeling,
 it travels by night, it is afraid,
 afraid the way you’d be
 to travel through a forest with no light
 and no path other than the mere
 impetus given by your last footstep,
 spring of a foot
 rising with hope and caution,
 ignorant as sweet childhood
 a boy, a sentence
 swinging forward in the dark
 to meet what, to meet
 the meaning of the encounter,
 move through the family
 as through the woods,
 an oak hurts you when you smash
 against it in the dark
 even though you know
 this is an oak, *quercus*, old,
 a hand hurts you when it smashes
 against you, you know
 it is your father’s hand,
 it hurts, hurt helps
 you to know
 to clear your path
 cutting through undergrowth
 family and circumstance
 and dark wood
 to which you come back
 cycle after cycle, how could you not,
 to be born is to be in place

and deny it with your first breath,
last breath, decades of years,
les frayages d'une écriture
over and over again writing
clears the way
facilitates the passage
from one darkness to another
the uncertain incandescent
lightning of the moment
sobre et fulgurante
austere and magnificent
when the words
break into the clearing,
a passage to the other side
but the road through the passage
is the passage,
a dark road cherishing its mystery
the mystery that talks
qui interroge whatever
asks itself also
at the same time asks you
sans fin ceaseless, so hard,
the lost direction,
travel in a circle in the night
come back, could it be sun
again, the light again, the certain
rising over the snoring rooftops
of nobody's city
et sans assurance
no way to be sure, no wish
to be certain, the only hope
is to have none
which is not so different
from wanting everything
the chance the risk the own
sa propre possibilité
the possibility proper to a thing
to be itself, to be one's own
no assurance, no end.

5.

Proust engaged the telephone
at arms length at first
his mother's arms
calling — they did not dial yet—
from a little cabinet in the house,
not his house, and reporting
to him later what was said.

Later the embrace
came to his hand
and he listened attentively
to a string quartet
he had engaged to play
a piece of music
over a special telephone
just to him
in his chamber
no matter who might have been
overhearing the music
where it rose
the concert room with its
newfangled mouthpiece or
along the way, music
is always on its way,
to us, to him
who evidently had as well
as the famous sensitivity
and astonishing eloquence
a sense too of what
was coming and would come,
the insolence of art
finding us in our little rooms,
Proust the first modern
music lover, first consumer
from afar
we now all are.

6.

Answering the angel
or the angel answering
it is not always easy
to see the light
between the thighs
of the approaching deity
the meity of you
she said, to walk
along the street
being nobody
in particular
to buy the freedom
time allows you
to move as no one
through a something'd town
as if they walked among you
the ones who know,
the ones you came out to enroll
in the ceremony of your identity,
young identity saunters
old identity
leaves itself home
to be nobody in particular
and be open
a latticework heart
a bower made of mind,
open, open, she said,
forgive the repetition,
it's when you are no one
you are most and most can do,
speaking the foreign language
light riles in you.

7.
 You've too many things
 not to know this,
 there were three Mary's
 and one ship
 a dove descended
 and one man rose,
 an old ship still beating
 up the estuary
 its sails are breath its wind is blood,
 near at hand
 the down dove
 strutting among local seed
 a timorous amorous bird
 fills the heart
 madrigali amorosi
 in the sagacity of desire
 and that blue courage
 goes with wanting,
 and what is this man rose
 you explain
 in your dream
 the angel explains
 night by night a flower
 that is something more
 an indigent embedded in luxury
 his yellow wolf eyes Jesus eyes
 restless as your heart
 and both of you determined
 to endure whatever music comes
 outside the walls
 where sickness and destitution
 and the deep-declensioned languages of death,
 as if all the messiahs ever are the same,
 the same sudden almost
 contemptuous
 shiver of love
 twisting away from all its easy targets
 to pierce creation with compassion,
 a creation that was never made, a world
 that always was, and pierce that
 with one compassionate love,
 could it be that?

8.
 But men
 who build great churches,
 one thinks of Christopher Wren,
 St Paul's of course but that
 strange little also
 church in the Strand
 full of altars now
 each one a different cult
 Nestorian or Jansenist or Coptic
 a church of churches
 what could he have been thinking
 to let the unifying design
 open to so many,
 but men who build churches,
 what can they be thinking
 to make for the citizen
 something to house them
 in the time of their turning
 to that other thing, the God
 imagined over them,
 the angel said, God
 is surely what they imagine
 but never how they imagine,
 the only image they have
 is a house, what it feels like
 in god's house, so Wren
 conceived Paul's church
 where the famous gallery lets
 the least whisper be heard
 forever coursing round the dome
 that means the sky,
 language listening to itself forever,
 a house of prayer
 says the book
 for all peoples, god's house
 is where the people pray
 and no one knows what prayer is,
 what can you conceivably be thinking
 when you pour those words out
 puritan or papist or swaying muslim
 all those words those chants those raptures
 busy answering,
 god answers prayers, prayers answer
 what agonizing wordless condition,
 feeding milk to stones

some words to feed
the endless silences of god?

9.

Suppose it is Achilles to be told
 in some language
 not London not New York
 some dyslexic dialect of prose
 called poetry, or poesy
 they used to say, the angel said,
 half mocking but half amorous
 of those elegant attentions
 Muses waft down on their minions,
en tout cas poetry tout court
 and the story had to ram
 for all time a bronze spear prong
 through the cheek and gums and jaw of a man
 who still alive would live
 immortal in the hour of his death
 forever after
 fixed in that agony
 for some purpose they knew, Muses,
 while the other man their scribble-servitor
 only dimly
 intuited in measure,
 to what end you ask, and ask again,
 three thousand years you ask about this war
 or any, the puzzle of it,
 the bronze spear breaking his face
 and taciturn Achilles leaning all his force
 to drive it in, and you go on reading,
 what are you looking for
 in this vulture feast of words, beauty,
 will you rewrite the canon
 to leave out war,
 baffle the Saracens with peace
 or leave unsmitten the lost Amelekites
 and take no vengeance
 ever for some smart
 you barely recall
 where someone touched you
 wing or gill or by the breast
 just under where it is heaviest
 and the satin falls away,
 forgiveness?

10.

As if war made language and language
makes war ever after
and Heraclitus was right
to say if he did say that Homer
was a fool to pray that Strife might
perish among gods and men for if it did
how would the bowstring hold
or the Pythagorean lutenist tune his cord,
how would frail molecules hold together
or Indra's net stretch softly taut
holding all things in meaningful relation
so that this kiss, she said,
though Heraclitus admitted no caresses,
might shiver out to the end of the world
and all creation feel
the amber of its tenderness,
the Weak Force, the sacred war,
but it cannot be so, because in language
a sympathy is loosed upon the world
that makes Achilles' strong arm falter sometimes,
o god let it falter, let the intended
blow and the intended victim
never meet but chase each other round the sky
forever, not round the city walls, not in dust
the starry hero and the starry victim hurry
slipping in cow dung and the shocked
laughter of the city people
trying to live their ordinary
way through even war,
let the blow dissolve in air
the way the lute's interminable harmonies
shimmer outward into silence
overtone by overtone away
and no one dies.

11.

You will make restitution
 from the treasure chests
 hidden in the king's chambers
 the Latin says
reddis regis cellis arcis
 but language says
 so many things
 and all that gold all those precious
 silicates embedded in the dark
 inside someone's ancient coffer
 taken out now, shaken loose
 massy chains and squeaking necklaces
 in the indifferent winter light
 and given back
 but given to whom,
 where do things
 intend to go, who does language
 answer, make restitution
 but it never tells you who
 is supposed to get the gold the jewels
 the paper money Kublai printed
 gold on black on mulberry,
 who gets the Hapsburg double eagled coins,
 ancient menorah shekels, the angel
 leaned forward, close, closer
 to your face, o fool
 to think things,
 and think things move, fool
 to think in language, language
 is anguish, is a shadow
 of something passing, overheard
 you never know who's speaking
 you never know who hears
 or what is heard,
 shadows of sounds,
 a word that leaves a taste of metal on your lips.

12.

They say that Bérenger Saunière
 found millions of gold francs worth of treasure
 in or under or near or through
 the ruined church of Mary Magdalen in Rennes-le-Château
 in the diocese of Carcassonne,

they say he left as much below the ground
or more as ever he extracted
they say his quiet friend another priest Henri Boudet
found even more, or had even more,
they say they never said where money came from,
the primitive accumulation on which society
begins spilling its cruel investment theory
labor value slavery Marx, something
was hidden in the church, something found
made a poor man rich,
but how does a man reach down and dig,
how far do you dig
and if you never come to light and
how does he read the parchments right,
Latin words are neat embossed on skins
of slaughtered beasts and men suppose
themselves capable of reading
just because they know what Latin means
how can they know what language says,
the world is full of treasure maps,
full of churches, dead kings, sepulchers,
Jerusalems, and in which one do you dig,
the angel asked, as if she didn't know
and maybe that kind of knowing
is not consigned to such as she
who knows all principles and so few things,
she said, admitting the vagueness of knowledge
and the hollowness of fact,
a man had gold coins in his hand and gave them
to many men to build his house, the house
was built, he lived in it, ate cheese and wine,
the foxes tottered through his garden
plump with what he tossed out at night
standing on his terrace, flipping
scraps of veal or salmon out there into the dark
off the elegant terrace of his curving belvedere
like a priest making offerings to the moon
and only the foxes understood,
they say he was a poor man again
by the time he died, they say
that money comes and money goes,
could it be language also,
spoken, heard, grasped, forgotten, stilled?

13.

Cities don't belong to anybody
but once in Jack London's Oakland
a man was walking up San Pablo
across from the hotel when
there came towards him
on the wide sidewalk another man
in no way like him
in age, race, rank, dress or disposition
and these two men
passed each other by
mildly and peacefully, the first
looking shyly at the second
with the second looking straight ahead
without attitude, just a man
on his way somewhere with somewhere
already on his mind and no hard feelings
and the whole sky was full of stars
shouting in their quiet way with joy
at this encounter, a passage
in the street of different men
with mildness and respect as if indeed
it were a city, civility, she said,
is the highest virtue of all, she said,
because without it no other virtue can endure
among men and women,
and this last phrase she spoke
somewhat sadly, as if some other race of beings
were differently disposed.

14.

You know what a wonderful story is,
 it's Jack and the Beanstalk
 because it has everything of which the world is made,
 consider, a young boy, a widow's son,
 goes out to seek his fortune,
 or maybe he's found it already, he has a coin,
 depending on the story, he has a coin, he has a cow
 he meets a man, a man comes walking,
 who is this man, we never know, hello young man
 the strange man says, hello, hello, nice cow you've got,
 yes, it gives us milk, it's all we have,
 and this is all I have, says the man, showing
 a handful of bright seeds, pepper and salt and
 blood red spots, big seeds, like beans,
 this is all I have and the cow is all you have
 and two things equal to a third thing
 ("all I have") are equal to each other,
 so here you are, my beans, I'll take your cow,
 but I'm a widow's son, it's all I have,
 but if you tell me the thing we do is right
 then we must do it, they do it, the man
 goes away with the cow, we never hear
 about man or cow again, they are the past,
 the past is the son of a barren woman,
 the young man takes his beans, comes home,
 his mother weeps, it's all the usual catastrophe,
 what have you done, I don't know, it seemed
 the right thing to do, the man said plant these beans
 and so Jack plants the beans, the beans
 start growing before the camera can shift its focus
 from Jack's bestowing hands to the first sprout
 already pronging from the sandy earth of home
 and up it comes, thick and fast, impaling a plump
 cloud just overhead, the cloud disperses, the stem
 or stalk or tree or rod goes up and up,
 again the boy says goodbye to his mother, goodbye
 to his body and begins to climb
 the dangerous eternity of a growing thing
 with one thing on its mind
 and then he's suddenly in heaven, weeks have passed,
 everything is forgotten, here comes the giant,
 a being incommensurable, no way for Jack
 who reckon with this overwhelming identity
 who says with thundering casualness some words

the different versions of the story mute
into tolerable menace, Jack is afraid,
but Jack has something in him too, a word,
a strength, a deed to do
and presently the giant lies before him
outstretched like a ship's mast
dreaming of horizons beyond horizons,
sunset in his eyes, the giant dies or seems to,
or maybe Jack's the giant now,
all the money's his, now, all the treasure,
opals sapphires and pearls, the missals to pray mass from,
the laboratories in the clouds where light is made
and poured down on mankind from the flasks
inconceivable servant girls have cooked
over black fire eternally for you,
and just for you, you Jack, you Jill,
you ambassador of people who live under the hill,
you still don't know who you are,
the angel said, which makes you almost one of us
when the whole story is told.

15.

Auerbach there in Istanbul
 listening to the leaves turn in his head
 of books he couldn't lay a finger on
 to cite a page or quote precisely
 just what Trimalchio or Sancho Panza said
 had to rely on the shimmer
 of light from the famous water out there
 that ran between Europe and Asia
 and famous men and women swam that reach
 and famous domes floated in reflection there
 shimmering vaguely in the oil sheen
 of busy ferryboats and cabbage barges
 like lines of poetry he was trying to sort out
 reweave into a sense of how men made sense
 of the world around them, usually
 by mentioning it thing by thing
 until the listener gets the point and falls asleep
 into that strange false dream called reading
 the Gate of Ivory master Virgil called it
 through which one slumbers into the strange daylight
 coming up from Galata and Persia and China and such places
 seldom mentioned in the books he wished were spread
 out before him, books of our western masters
 and how they seduced us year by year
 (but really page by page, but there are no pages,
 just his memory, whatever is left
 in him from the war
 against him and his kind of people
 the kind who read books and remember,
 the people of a book,
 to be here by the water that flows between
 one knowledge and another, cold
 for all the summer light,
 cold as the separation the Styx
 between the recent dead and what comes after,
 what does come after, as cold
 as the separation between knowing and forgetting)
 into a world we think we share,
 the angel chided, there is no we
 where a man falls asleep over his book,
 the one he's writing from the one that wrote him,
 no we, no intimate pronouns left
 in a world they run inside you, she said,
 signs giving birth to signs
 in blood and shadows and crying out.

16.

If the name of the drum
 is exaggeration, she said,
 and Gosnold's men
 wintered only once
 on Cuttyhunk
 on that isle of moors and larches
 before returning to the *Theatrum*
Britannicum across the ocean
 to articulate their narratives
 (an example lies before us
 in the log of the *Concord*, 1602,
 speaking with amazement of the girth
 of the strange black and white serpents
 Judith Archer was frightened by
 four hundred years later
 on the neighbor island)
 before admiring amateurs
 in the dingy but exciting upstairs chambers
 where alchemies of various orations
 were going forward
 no less in the Queen's mind than in the queenly
 minds of her subtle scientists
 of whom of course he was one and,
 unknown to his Sovereign by necessity,
 Gosnold's friend *Mr. W.S.* another,
 to whom he communicated the shallow
 grassy cliffs and snarling nor'easters
 fell quick out of nimblest sunshine
 over easy growing maize and climbing beans,
 drenching but not killing the wretched poison ivy
 no one had seen the like of before
 he turned into Caliban, a plant that talks
 and comes home with you and whispers
 painful secrets to your daring fingers,
 yet who was the other one, the airy one,
 the laughing 'Lion of God,' what strange
 roaring in that name for one so yes nimble
 again it must be said, fleet as thought
 and perhaps no more consequential,
 here now and gone and there then but not long
 and maybe all animals
 are of that swift transiency
 and God lasts no longer, could he

fleeing from that harsh winter
have come back to the City with a story made
of islandry alone, sheer location, bluff
and rock surf full of striped bass
as if fish knew more than lions did
and hid their knowledge in the never pausing sea?

17.

As in the famous photo now a hundred years old
 one guesses of the man in a hat and shielding his
 head anyhow with a large dark umbrella
 floating politely in the Dead Sea
 illustrating salinity and buoyancy
 seems most often a matter of incongruency
 rather than the actual upwelling
 that for example holds this building up
 or any house rests slowly bobbing up and down
 on an essentially elastic earth
 or you stand now listening, she said,
 or sitting there as safe as you can be
 in the overwhelming arguments of gravity,
 mass, inertia, repose,
 while that old fellow one supposes long dead
 floats on as a memory of a picture of a picture
 of a man or something like it floating
 in some sea, a sea
 better known for Sodom and its chastisements
 from on high, geological and smelly,
 Sodom apples full of nasty grit, no, not nasty
 since that means wet, or meant wet,
 and these apples have a dust in them
 that chokes the soul, unlike the juicy Sodomites themselves
 who were young and limber in their loves,
 unbearably happy in their strained encounters,
 knowing as they did that pleasure
 is the only thing there is
 that lasts, even the pleasure one still can take
 watching a dry old picture of
 a dead man in his dead hat smiling on the Dead Sea,
 would that be what they call a permanence,
 an innovation, a contribution to the order of the world?

18.
 Art is
 what has no opposite
 so how do you know
 as one must know
 everything that's going on
 anywhere, everywhere, in the world,
 art has no opposite
 so this thing that is seen or made or sounded
 brooks no contradiction,
 does that mean it has no meaning
 technically, by those philosophic rules
 life is guided by
 candle by candle in the Bohemian turret,
 brick work clammy with river damp,
 o what do you see, Dr Dee said to Sir Edward
 what do you see? and it seems that Kelly
 said "It sees a language
 that desires us, or is that misreading, wait,
 language desires us, and it sees another language
 inside language, always another one
 that discovers you, or is it me,
 you are its me,
 there's no life left to us,
 we have been spoken"
 and this depression kept him
 from seeing any more for hours
 till the doctor took him down
 to the Circassian's blonde café
 to drink a smoke of that opium,
 so accurate its fragrance
 Turks were bringing to the city in those years,
 so that one lay back upon the neat divan
 and dreamed all the way to Persia
 where the sky is made of blue tile
 and yellow tile subdues the earth
 and Sir Edward woke a morning later or a noon
 ready to read the pitchy stone again
 while the doctor fretted and learned Czech
 phrases from the innkeeper's chaste daughter,
 such expressions as The oleander's poison leaves
 cast healing shadows or What time
 has left undone space must conclude
 or folkloric wisdom of a dubious cast
 like Seven crows crying mean a day without dying,

phrases for which the doctor felt a strange gratitude
as one does at outlandish things
one never would have thought oneself
and so pressed little silver coins into the cool hands
of this quiet girl, little more than a child,
who hoped one day, after her father's inevitable death,
to become a nun with her life,
and had her whole vocabulary to use up
before the silence of the convent
closed on her and the summer stars

19.

But it was a matter of wondering
 she said, and of being dull,
 to a beautiful boring
 animal, a book, and feeling
 down along your skin
 to apprehend, maybe with almost
 a shiver, what the dictionary is
 and how it came to be written,
 such a book as this
 so tiresome because everything,
 she said, is in it, every story
 you can imagine is told there
 splinter by splinter until
 the whole tree magnificently means
 and people contented for a moment
 drift away from its shade
 to find some other, other fruit,
 a differently shaped shadow,
 since everything you ever heard
 she said, lingers, shadow-shaped,
 shadow distorted, around your footsteps
 before you or behind you
 often so that often
 it is other people who can read your story
 better than you can, or what your story
 left behind in you, as you,
 the whole dictionary you carry out,
 running on the green fields outside Verona or
 sleeping on the daybed in the nursery while
 your infant children suddenly repose
 wordless in sweat, prickly heat
 peppering their tender necks,
 miliary rash they call it
 in the dictionary, why, look it up,
 she said, but who made the first one,
 dictionary, what language did it try to count,
 the words that Homer used
 and all the forms that showed up, several or many
 for each word, a verb
 could have three hundred variations
 to your paltry sing sang sung she said
 but even all the words of everybody
 complete with all misspellings and mistakes,
 who are you then
 when the word is wrong

and the book you marry
being full of strange exceptions
have to share the flesh of ignorance, is
a word dead when it's written down
and only alive in the bazaar of the dictionary
or dead even there, who made it,
who hides behind the dictionary makers'
names, Suidas, Dr. Johnson,
Webster, Grimm, Littré, Murray, no matter,
nobody knows, Liddell or Scott, Monnier-Williams,
in the bleak Antarctic of so much paper
the words are sleeping, your children sleep,
you are the widow or the widower,
organ music drifting from the church beyond your window
rose-petalled in lead and crimson,
stabbed through with Mary's color, her mantle,
whose secret is lost in the dictionary, put
all of these words together someday
in the right
order she said and you will see maybe
stretching to the horizon
the story come to claim you at last,
her blue.

20.

Need, or needing,
 in an age that seems an age of that
 in that the slimmest desire,
 what Schoolmen would have called velleity,
 is always represented as deepest need,
 where the word itself
 connects with old words meaning famine,
 ruin, emergency, catastrophe,
 utmost downfall of hope, but now
 seeming to imply all that without saying
 any one story about it,
 leaving the entitlement to be expressed
 all by the sound, the nasal obstruent
 followed by the mid-height tense front vowel
 itself often pre-nasalized in some dialects
 concluded by an alveolar consonant so hard that
 emphatic personalities, when annoyed
 at their interlocutor's lack of acuity or empathy
 might say that such and such is what they need-duh
 so strongly is the final stop articulated,
 almost doubled, the way people
 double up and dance
 even in wartime, even in the strangest weather,
 one body with another as if,
 and more than one Greek has
 intuited this sort of built-in loneliness
 one body cannot hear the music by itself,
 cannot even touch the ground or move
 coherently without its partner,
 or many partners, all the wives of Solomon
 dawdling by his throne in the cool of the evening
 and wanting things of him or of one another,
 things that only that one can give
 on whom the starlight of need has fallen,
 is all we know of the molecular,
 the physics world,
 deep urge to share the properties of others
 and cast out into them, those wives, kings, lovers,
 high priests in their ridiculous clothes,
 all the meaning that one cherishes a whole life long,
 the scientific thing, the self, the thing that needs.

21.

On the day of the conception of the redeemer
 the angel called attention
 to a book of essays where the novelist
 William Gaddis,
 asked about the role of religion in his work,
 how it declined from *The Recognitions*'
 fervid mystic craziness
 to the tent show pratfalls of the later work
 said that in his case religion just
 "went away"
 and said things do go away,
 the gorgeous ultramarine
 of Mary's robe,
 sumptuous even this day,
 before she's the Mother of God,
 when she's just any day,
 just a girl, before she heard the word
 or whatever it was coming
 down the angel stairs right through
 the Flemish brick work of an unlikely Northern city
 where this poor little Jewess
 took her place
 beneath the accusing ray of glory
 only one of all the world
 or one among many
 how can we know
 how many angels
 even at this hour
 are breathing quietly
 on the nape or in the lap
 of how many virgins
 or not virgins, docile or not
 tame at all, Mary is mariam means bitter,
 rebarbative, maybe even disagreeable,
 but she agreed
 perhaps just this once,
 this poor little girl who bore the weight
 of the incomprehensible presence inside her
 as every mother ever after has to do,
 who can say why, even angels
 are not privy to the meaning
 of this mysterious physiology
 by which one makes another
 and loves what it has made,
 it is the mystery of the world

that nails itself to the cross
of meat and bone
and dreams forever after
that pain was a man
and the man had a mother
and the mother heard
something from the sky today.

22.

A Japanese character
 like the sun
 rising over a fenced in
 rice field, how rich
 the landlords must be here
 to fence a whole field in
 or how many depredations
 hungry wildlife make
 or bandit chieftains
 who hardly have to motivate
 their little bidi-smoking henchmen
 to steal, so much is there
 in the world and so easy to carry,
 and donkeys help, and horses even,
 though they make slow passage
 in such soggy terrain,
 the aqueous humor
 of the planet
 watching them and laughs
 as they stumble in the mud,
 the messenger explained,
 no one from Ajax to these days
 ever slipped in cow dung but a god
 somewhere was laughing,
 Aias the Greeks called him, *eye as*
 witness to one's own disgrace,
 the shame of falling,
 all one's shames,
 which is maybe what the fence
 is meant to hide,
 not the tender rice shoots,
 for who steals grass?
 but the shamefaced gleaners
 who each time they bend to
 pluck or tend the rice plants
 see their own faces come towards them
 in the unforgiving calm water of the paddy,
 their faces yes but that inscrutable
 hieroglyph also
 apparently so simple
 rising over their shoulder
 condemning them to life,
 she wiped her eyes
 as she said this
 as if she too were of that company

who study their faces
in the morning mirror and somehow
find themselves
and see they're weeping.

23.

The seven
 thousand oak trees planted
 at the prompting of Joseph Beuys
 himself a node of intersection
 or island where the profound current of art
 — always driving mysteriously forward
 yet always multiform — joins the chimerical
 water flowing from the western
 theosophical tradition, Goethe,
 Steiner, by many hands
 cooperant there
 on the Hill of Uisneach
 in the heart of the middle of Ireland
 —there is a photo of them
 redhaired, with flutes and beards
 doing it on a chilly sunny day
 on the day of Samhain in the Christian year 2000,
 crossing of registers, account books
 kept by messengers hidden from the world,
 these poetries, these alkahests
 dissolving paltry governments in time,
 the universal diluent,
 and the strong sunlight — sun is *Grian*,
 a girl — makes the greenyellow big oakleaves
 on the saplings glow against the sky
 like of course a queen of the Sidhe, a fairy
 in November blue in David
 Levi Strauss's low-angled photograph,
 these trees,
 or gods, or what are they
 actually, seven thousand promises
 to a cranky child, seven thousand
 answers to nobody's question,
 having by now been subjected
 to three years of the ordinary
 weather on a hill in the middle
 of ordinary life,
 may need counting again after all,
 crying out from their veined silences
 for King David, old now, knees bare
 under his scarlet kirtle, a girl it is to be hoped
 at either elbow, to come tottering
 but still with a harp in his hand
 to break the Lord's law
 by counting, by taking like any

theosophist a forbidden
census of the actual,
by taking
pleasure in what he barely sees,
has to count and count
again, forgetting, seeing
music on his tinny strings.

24.

It is said that when he
washed their feet
in the evening of that day
when the first daffodils
came out on the hill beside her house,
a yellow flower
that the Dutch called *de asphodel*
since it grew, or reminded them
of some flower that once grew
in the Elysian Fields
and the dead feasted their weary
eyes upon it, *de asphodel*, daffodil,
and she had even brought
a few of them into the house
you can see in the shadows
at the far end of the table
as if a little sun were blazing
in its private dark
but it was after sunset of course
and Passover had already begun
and any such sunshine
would be a delicate transgression
of time's intricate commandments,
he looked up from the basin
after washing their feet
and without drying his hands
any further than they got dried
by the act of drying
the feet of the last friend,
or it might have been a stranger,
it would have been better
to be a stranger
in that house that night,
the sudden tenderness
something not to be forgotten,
would remember itself inside
for a long time
no matter what happened
or what one happened to hear
later about what happened to him,
the touch of his hands
perhaps would linger in the mind
the way things do
that surprise by coming so close,
and said a few words

to make what he had done
fit in the minds of those who saw,
who felt the hands,
words that long afterwards
were called the mandatum, Maundy,
the commandment, that as he did this evening
so tenderly caring for the feelings and the flesh
of all the others, indifferent to difference,
touching them all, washing them all clean,
so they should do
ever after
to all and everyone,
simple as that, and that
was the commandment, the only one,
so called, of all the suggestions he made
in his short life, the only one
to be called The Commandment, Maundy,
no matter all the other celebrated
institutions, hocus, pocus, all the beauty,
beauty, no, no,
just do this, take care of each other.

25.

Perhaps everybody wants forgiveness
 for a sin that is not so clear
 etched in the glass of their conscience,
 conscience, what is that,
 a kind of mercy
 the mind feels for itself
 to illuminate the shadows
 the way an Abyssinian rebel in the massif
 would squeeze into the narrowest shade
 to ambush from on high
 the strolling Italian lieutenant
 pondering his last letter from home
 unsatisfactory in her signals
 and smoking a slightly effeminate cigarette,
 real mean smoke cigars,
 falling abruptly to the old Jezail bullet
 with a loud whimper that given
 his sparkling white uniform
 and the triumphal lighting of the noon day sun
 seems operatic, a little silly, and he dies,
 just so a mindless and invasive sin
 might be nicked and banished
 by the poor frightened desperate unity of mind
 that holds itself aloft
 in those mountains
 where no one comes,
 no one ever, where the mind's mind
 is alone in a terrain
 it knows by feel and there is no map,
 the mind's mind that is a rebel to the mind,
 that will not tolerate the humiliated unease
 the sense of being wrong
 brings into the house of thought
 and so must prey upon its instincts,
 inclinations, appetites, convictions,
 to find the wellspring of the actions
 of its person, that animal acting in the world,
 or perhaps there is no forgiveness
 and the old rifle shatters in the sniper's hand
 hurting only him,
 wounded by the healing,
 lying there exposed in sunlight
 now that the sun has moved
 because situations change
 merciless light pricking his eyes

and nothing to do about it,
or perhaps there was no sin,
no act, no deed,
nothing to think about, nothing to change,
bare rock stretching as far as he can see.

26.

X, pronounced iks,
 the overplus incomprehensibly
 still logged in the till
 so that it rattles around
 the back of the mind the
 “primitive accumulation”
 clamshells of speech
 wampum of listening
 shored up from
 mesolithic fancy weaponry
 “my violences, my violences”
 when all is a day
 only a day
 when Marx and Tennyson between them
 exchanged the torpid Holborn airs
 sojourn in transport
 for men are ravenous for rapture
 chattering moorhens on the Serpentine
 as if *sound* were the capital
 from which all the culture came
 nations torture one another by
 the compulsion to repeat,
 caught on the fly
 by the blue ears of strangers,
 and by the proprioceptive fibers caught
 a web of meaning
 following the goosamer of which
 even northern people
 came to learn
 to walk as Michael Ives says
 “the scrutinized way,
 for there is no other”
 and one’s eyes are in one’s fingers
 and one’s eyes are in one’s ears
 and the skin knows how to hear
 “the terraced Hesperides
 of unmoved music”
 like lunatics in love
 listening to Mahler
 one of those sweetbittersweetbitter movements
 midway through the night
 before the uneasy grandeurs
 of his triumphs,
 when snare drums and oboes and
 for Christ’s sake tambourines dispel

the gravitas of love
with innocent anxiety, oldest
living adolescent,
 x , nestled
in the lost equation, the factorial
habits of the least remark,
everything, everything ever said
pooling out to the end of
well there is no end to it
but that place, to the end of that
place that has no end,
there, that is what it means,
when the thing is not solved
but obeyed, that's what it means,
the messenger insisted,
say something
and follow it all the way.

27.

In the days when oracles
 state-funded and much visited
 before that withering of prophecy
 reported and lamented
 by Plutarch in several essays
 yielding more cogent evidence
 of what later Europeans presumed
 to call the Greek Mind
 than all the subtle equivocations
 of Broadshouldered Aristocles
 or the certainties of Aristotle,
 still tendered to the anxieties
 of politicians on the warpath
 or fathers of unwed maidens
 or victims of a lingering, baffling malady
 some shaman had inserted
 or could not banish,
 there was a woman frequently
 who would arise
 from early adolescence onward
 unasked
 and enter into trances, her trances,
 and she would in time
 go down into the cave
 where such logic was transacted
 typically beneath the earth
 or in those oak groves so dark
 that midday seemed just glamour
 playing on the quick uneasy roof
 as if she were just as much a part of earth
 as any rock or snake or dark thing
 lording it down there
 and she would speak
 and since the speaking was going on
 the way speaking does,
 all answer and no question,
 people overhearing came to fit
 questions to those answers,
 using commonly the technical services
 of some sort of clergyman
 standing beside the woman
 and noting down her ravings
 in decent verse,
 some text (words already
 were weaving)

so that they could bring home
on leaf or bark
some talisman that spoke
to what concerned them,
a magic spell
that subjugated no other demon
but the anxiety that summoned it,
when they stood around the reeking cavemouth
bellowing their questions
and some nameless to them priest
heard with his two fine ears
what they were raving about
and what she was murmuring
and fitted the two together
as described, and inscribed the result,
the perfect answer,
the written thing, rune or charm, equation,
proof, the demonstration,
the voice of silence,
and gave that to the questioners
half-crazed with asking and asking,
thus a souvenir
of where they had been
and what they hadn't quite heard
and certainly did not understand,
standing among others like them and unlike,
each with different calamity
to be addressed or soothed or borne,
all of them weltering with doubts and hopes
and going home with something in their hands,
the birth of poetry.

28.

Portions of the good
 brought to one another
 hand to hand
 only, never
 further from the giver
 than the given's skin,
 touching in the act
 as might a messenger
 meaning well deliver
 to an irascible potentate
 locked in struggle
 with one of his wives, the one
 who brought him closest
 to that barely conceivable theology
 called 'satisfaction'
 offering him
 as if it were a simple persimmon
 in season, ripe beyond question
 and tender, his mouth keen
 already to embrace it,
 a rule to live by,
 a rule like a fruit perhaps
 not without something astringent
 especially the rind
 but when the travel
 comes to the interior,
 the dark red orange moisture
 of that murk, then sweet
 were Torah and the dharma of men,
 a ruse to tender him
 excuse for loving her best
 who gives him most,
 would that be so unusual, no, but love
 wants more, to speak of that
 barren tree to be seen on the hilltop
 visited too often and too early
 until the sap of it died down
 into the desperate poverty of earth,
 no persimmon, no permission,
 but something palpable
 and very quiet, every quiet
 knows something of it,
 given now

to each citizen, lost as each is
in the endless war
they call The City, the civil
animal, the snake biting its tail,
a city is forever, isn't it, what can they do
to shorten that agony,
this portion of the good
men give to men, women to women,
while in the dark kingdom
something waits to take.

29.

Let some be saying
 while others argue
 against the drift of light
 conditioned by history
 towards a secular alarm
 unsoldiered through sheer
 monetary velocity
 breaking the dukedoms down
 into a countryside of ornate railway stations
 like the tall towered central station in Luxemburg
 for example by which visitors
 orientate themselves to the fall of streets
 on what seems like ordinary terrain but soon
 turns out to be the high bluffs above
 the slender Alzette which for thousands
 of years since long before Frankish times
 has been incising itself deeper in the throw of land
 until it is a living shadow
 in which, down there,
 children play and old gentlemen
 silently serenade the moon,
 whatever's left to them, duke or doom,
 dalliance or doctors' bills, doesn't matter,
 the little ravine is there, a pleasaunce
 such as one hopes to find in every city,
 god knows, the messenger said,
 Civility is the highest of all virtues
 since in its absence no others can flourish,
 while at the same time as the former
 some other others
 might be busy transcribing the flow of money
 itself, where does it come from,
 where does it go, the whole Arcanum of accounting
 meant to conceal the actual
 disposition of things and personnel,
 for whom did you buy this coat, for instance,
 dark red, with a quite collar
 of a fur-like unnatural, but comfortable,
 material, this very coat
 with a not very clean hankie in the pocket
 and a strand of rosary beads in the other,
 mother-of-pearly luster, Christ in silver,
 one stiff arm come loose from the cross
 and she doesn't dare to hammer it back in,
 for who would crucify him again

for any money, wasn't money the problem here,
where it comes from, what it sees
as it walks along the interminable
boulevard towards the central station
what it sees in window shopping,
what it buys, what it changes into,
a ticket to Nancy, a Tournier novel,
a sandwich of some sort of sausage
that reminds you of an afternoon in the Alps
when you wondered what spices exactly
flavored the flesh of precisely what animals
you held now in your hand,
and the money is still there,
while let the third and last group assemble
under the empty bandstand on the Places des Armes
to try to find a god across the money,
another one, the other's other,
on the other side, uncrucified as yet,
perhaps not yet even called out to
from the dominant agony of poor men on earth,
but there, surely, surely,
not even up there where the moon is still far from rising,
but everywhere, when everywhere
is the other place, or only other,
from which the voice comes
they pray to hear, they howl in the square
their tuneful miseries to make
an imaginable absence speak.

30.

As a man through the long
 glaze of summer
 hammocked against the sway
 of business counter-swing
 on his own agenda
 that private zeppelin flight
 beneath the carapace of trees —
 walnut, maple and even suddenly
 an elm from nowhere, its pale keys
 settling on his pages—
 pursues with a real seriousness
 he disguises from his wife as laziness
 or vacation or repose
 after a generation of jobs well done
 searches his way through novel after novel,
 starchy classics guiltily attended to and the new
 his friends talk about but mostly he is ashamed
 to avow the same
 old novels he's read twice or thrice already
 in one life, adventures or the golden
 spill of hectic afternoons among the gentry
 or just some idiot on a silver stream
 pondering trout rise and looking at the moon,
 remarkable how much pleasure
 there is in reading about someone
 doing nothing but staring at the sky
 or not even bothering to tickle fish
 in the glamorous Highland stream but just
 keep watching, watching like a man
 falling asleep, watching like a water-
 fall in a dry season, watching a dollar bill
 float on a desert wind when you drop it
 in the gas station, the angel was saying,
 as he searches his way, she said, but for what,
 what does a man search for who reads
 and yet his whole body is arched
 into reference, his spine quivering with desire
 his brain filled with images not even yet
 focused finely enough for him to call out
 there, that is the place intended,
 the place or machinery all these books
 were aiming at, blundering old weapons,
 pikes and halberds and arquebuses,
 aiming at, traveling towards, broken arch,
 sloppy travois, bent wheel, towards,

not yet, but whatever it is, the search,
the actual transaction, the reading, the man,
the hour after hour, the man, from childhood,
the reading, the man reading, the man
with that paper stuff in his hands, the ink of it,
the smell and mildew of the wisest books,
the one where he has passed before
and come to a or a kopje
in a landscape he has always known
and to which this is the only road,
each line of type a step to climb a line to follow,
there, obedient to the search, the text, the
ancientest machine.
so also you, unfolding your hands
and choosing a direction
from where the wind seemed to blow
and following what you take to be an actual
road while thinking about something
you read in a book remembering
no, being sure, that this
is the way, the only way,
will actually get there

31.

Looking close
 closer than comfort lets
 considering the condition
 of human eyes
 usually getting worse day by day
 though slowly it happens,
 no hurt without its blessing,
 the myopic gradually able
 to see a little further away
 as the eyesight of old age
 makes the object recede ever further,
 the focus, what is seen
 being always on its way
 away from human seeing
 only briefly
 shaping its light towards the eye,
 close, close, looking no longer
 at it but in it, a Dutch still life
 by a contemporary of the great Pieter Saenredam
 or a little later
 a platter of autumn fruits
 on white napery, sunlight
 looks in one window and night waits
 in the other corner
 darkness always at the right
 in those days, those strange narrow houses,
 hours, and between them
 six apples, three fat quinces and two
 overripe pears almost bursting
 with sweetness, brown flecks, a hum of must
 or mildew near, in Protestant light
 a Catholic ripeness swelling, spoiling almost,
 and the painter, Joseph
 de Bray perhaps, has been patient enough
 to inscribe a squadron of tiny fruit flies
 modestly hovering over the ripe fumaroles of the pear
 where one much larger of course housefly
 has settled busy eating, and looking closer
 until the eye has quieted its metabolic
 fluster of blood, pressure and pulse,
 valve and recurrence, all the doorways
 the fact comes through,
 beauty and truth and all those binaries
 silenced into the silent body, looking close
 the eye would see in the stillest

moment of the still life the future stir
when the delicate banquet these insects make
is ended by the fall of light
perhaps and they recede also, everything
recedes, and the little flies
(*Drosophila* sp.) settle into the coma
that spells their short lives
(though everyone lives the same time
from the beginning to the end
logarithmically divided
seconds hours months years,
a life is whole
from end to end)
but the big *Musca*, black and roily
from all that sweet dinnering arises
and sails out the glassless window
and the eyes looking close, so close,
can follow it as it humbles through the low sky
all the way to Palestine
where at a late hour it will perch
awkward on the sweaty face
right under the corner of the eye
on the zygoma, the arch
below all human seeing
where it will dwell
as long as it is able
in order to drink what oozes
down from the crown of scabs
on the forehead of
a crucified man, the same
fly, still drunk on Lowland fructose
sucks the redemptive blood.

32.

What the eye falls on
feeds the soul, the curious
relationship or
appetite lodged between
or amidst the ever-arising
and the never
completed edifice you are,
she said, quoting
from the book whose flimsy
dead elm leaf
colored pages still
managed to bear
the dark of word
after so many
fingerings, looking,
looking o they wear
things out
with their inspections,
checking the window sash
every night to know
what's locked out and
who's trapped in,
o tender curtain
of you,
words as words are
boundaries, words as
things, though,
her sweet
cuneiform, are doors,
so meanings trap you
and the wolf runs free,
but look
without reading
the shape
that matter dances
your way,
it is the property
and necessity of love
to be so ignorant,
just the ferocious
quiet pressure in you,
she said, reaching
you think the thing
beyond the shape
written before you

you stare at,
it could also be a plain
stretching through Silesia
shabby under old snow
and no one waiting,
as rails go on converging
in the ashen distances
and the Allied bombers
curiously spare
the lines down which
the already dead are
wagoned to the actual
article of dying,
their 'throes' the strange
letters on her page
and the reek of gas
till no one left on the earth
knows what it means,
smell of a word.

33..

From the big screw
in front of the Munich museum
taller than a man
by far, weighing
thousands of pounds,
the screw propeller
of a huge steamship,
calqued into German as
Dampfschiff, when northern
Germany and Western
English made the great
cargo ships and liners
long enough ago so that
nostalgia hangs heavy
on the machinery inside,
turbines and generators
from the beginning
even unto this now,
where it is at last
Riemenschneider
whose work
comes to mind,
never reached before
through the dark faces
of his medium
his saints and burghers
all the same face
all the high
nobility of ordinary
men stretched tall
into godliness
pretending to instruct
those citizens who look
like them a little bit,
legs and hair and eyes
full of learned sorrow
previous to any theology,
a saint made out of a tree,
a virgin of one substance
with the house she stands in
as one stands among them
in the dark museum room
almost closing time
and so cold outside
to hide in here

among the resemblances
and the shocking acts of art
that resemble nothing
or only resemble, faintly,
faintly, far away,
those who behold them,
hide from the wind the wild flags
among these faces,
long lines of their noses,
fingers, grain of their
intimate persuasions,
how they are penetrated
by the years,
dry seasons and wet
winters and god help them,
permeated with identity
without personality
without desire
in Heideggerian suchness
standing there
pure presence without saying,
their god looking
just like all the rest
of them, the same
eyes, the sheer
accusation of sheer being,
reaches for another piece of wood.