

# STEPS



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# STEPS

## *Thirteen Flights of Steps*

Robert Kelly

*Steps are discontinuities. They make progress possible, ascensions, descents. To move at all must be a leap or a fall. Up to our bedroom on creaking wood, up the Buttes-Chaumont on faux-logs made of cement, up the fire tower on Mount Rutsen wood and steel, down the Brussels Bourse in heavy rain.*

### Acknowledgements:

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## STEPS 1 DÆMON

energumen of  
actual speech

to chisel stone  
guide the other

to altars  
everywhere

don't believe  
the woods say

*thou art !*

2.  
hawk in oak  
was thought  
a species of god

arms around  
soft memory  
say all their names

curious mental  
metabolisms  
recurve (unbend)

the strip (ship)  
of time  
and there the Mother

is at last  
nude of her need  
and all giving

the arms she gave  
you are the arms  
you hug her with.

3.  
Greeting card philosophy  
this religion plays

two tongues in one mouth  
Olympics of the kiss.

All suicides suddenly undone.

4.  
Blessed sacrament of split  
the Emperor free again

for new mistakes! tree drift  
sparrow spasm and love

comes thrusting self anew  
this robot heart this thirst.

5.  
Let welter what wants  
no story to tell

waits the fuller word  
to spill seed its seed

it is the heart of pale sky  
blank check rose tree

we are descended  
from the left eye of god

markworthy moral:  
workfit we saw

we a faery and fled  
but became one so

embraced the marble  
maidservant, wrote

our will left  
all our windows to the door.

6.  
selfsame stranger  
bitter gourd

the all-creating  
measure only

the need to trust  
shoehorn sympathy

into the shabby  
obvious of wanting

as tops of tulip trees  
our loftiest twilight.

7.  
not so much a question  
as a shared mistake

kiss me for example  
or a weekend in Québec

but where's the blue  
girl who stole all

color from the sky  
and left her lovers

only night behind  
the beautiful nothing left.

## STEPS 2 SABBATHS

1.

Not hear from all sides  
the listen one  
nor message brutal  
into the calm wake  
subsiding of a self.

2.

Sabbath commandment  
or a bird

a leaf knows its way  
to the ground

sometimes devious  
the roots of gravity

we also fall

3.

but who insists  
is evidence  
"I" want "you"  
for a church  
say mass in  
pure motion in  
personless glory  
now arrives.

4.

gatekeeper carry  
the frontier these



pale rememberers  
drunk on mere dawn

5.  
younger heal faster  
universal suffrage  
ages the commonwealth  
all leaves no fruit  
watch the dancers  
decide

6.  
Wotan's madness  
is to think  
worlds can be created  
or otherwise  
he did it or someone —  
gods rage against the real

7.  
it hurt it hurts  
the moral estrangement  
of narrative  
then it was night

8.  
dense branches bare  
shredding sunlight  
into denser  
intervals  
                  looking  
discovers what  
music actually means

9.

do I have the authority to say so

it's all a museum anyhow  
one day a week is always closed

my breath is short but my arms are long  
so you don't leave without saying goodbye.

### STEPS 3: WEST

1.

And this to be  
to say to you

a lamb bleating for its mother  
holds this gold world

the natural *is* the supernatural

this gold leaf and bracken  
the backyard is  
of a high strange house

palace of the way it will be.

2.

Think on it  
every pain  
and small delight  
a guerdon is  
or recompense

*amor fati*, then,  
everything I do  
happens to me —

not a circle, liebster Fritz,  
but a spiral  
of reciprocals  
twists till it comes  
to the point of all this

*hurt nobody help all  
and watch the watcher watch.*

3.

We come back to get done to  
what we did

but there is no we, only you, only me,  
this desert island with everybody on it.

4.

Graven image: that means coin  
means property. Increase and divide.  
The locusts were crying when I crossed  
knee-deep I seemed  
to stand among them.  
Then a river then a woman  
reading on the porch.  
One of the billion faces of god.

5.

But god is not natural.  
Though lovable,  
this import from Palestine.  
Or Egypt. Who knows  
the whole sentence of which  
God is the verb?

6.

Never have been comfortable  
in my 'own' name.  
And my shoes are tight.

7.

And so we come back to California  
where most of me began  
and the santa ana blew down Lake

and scoured me clean of East New York  
and I bought big sneakers at the original Van's  
and lapped up menudo nights at Barragan's  
and fell in love with one more librarian  
but what broke my heart were the poor  
old shuffling waiters at Kabakian's  
who would lift the first forkful to the diner's lips.

8.

Because it's mostly about eating  
isn't it and being fed  
that's what the lamb wants  
or thinks it does, thinks  
it is Food  
was the first accident  
replacement of the genuine  
sustaining flow.

It was supposed to be love  
that does all the answering.  
Don't give me food  
the lamb says, give me  
what I need.

9.

And I misheard your name  
and the red leaves still blaze on the burning bush.  
Tell me again where we first met —  
but there is no we, I said,  
there is only geography,  
naked leather couch.

10.

The shadow of the house I'm sitting in  
stretches out on somebody else's lawn.  
I have no shadow of my own, or am included  
in the shadow of where, not what, I am.  
It chastens me to see the somber grass

charmed by the bright green, and I recognize  
all I am is in that shadow, indistinct,  
a company-man of everything that is,  
indistinct, my voice a rumble  
in the tumbling stream across the road  
where still blue herons stand.  
As if the Ancients had written: Hide  
a shadow in a shadow. Live forever.

11.

A song bush  
an afterplay  
the glow  
of knowing  
all of you  
all the glad  
pretending  
makes us true.  
The odd number  
of me and you.

## STEPS 4: E R O I C A

made room  
to be wrong  
a sign  
is just a sign

does the diamond remember  
its native coal

heat and pressure clarify

does a sign remember  
ever what it signified

a kind of blasphemy  
sometimes to think the world is  
so pure it looks  
out from the pale forest

early snow mild winter.

2.

Limbs of us sorted in the bed

linden love and yew tree live forever

frail as we are but hard to kill

imagine me another

not a rhythm but an array

synchronous elsewhere  
with soft loud mouths

lips of another place

the need to chat a blue flower

hold this in line  
a thought to see again  
frangipani Waikiki  
doves over whiter  
than surf

the hollow wind that wakes the heart

that winds the clock

3.  
to be another always  
to cheat a flower

low-lying land  
floods at first time  
when the church bell rings

did I dare I did to climb that tower  
steeple

so sharp the sky



wounded

and there was Paris like something I held in my hands

listen to the river  
rivers always know  
rivers divide and unify  
rivers save us from the other  
till we become ourselves  
a river is a crucifix

— they called her Sequana  
*\*sekw-ana* water of time  
and come again  
flowed through Lutetia  
the mix the marsh the mud

now mild sky a signifier

4.  
Not long to taste a take

her chariots unhorsed  
white and the warrior  
sly coaxed into battle

a hero is one who'd listen to rivers and trees  
rather than hang with friends and finger a harp  
one who is talked to by the Other  
a hero is one who is persuaded

otherwise the red dragon and the white  
struggle beneath the earth  
or in the clouds to no purpose

a hero has no purpose

listening to Debussy with thumb in mouth

someone else's mouth

is mine

nobody's kiss

go be among those rose petals  
turn them into scraps of paper  
each with words on it

or one at least.

5.

Or contend beneath the earth  
so much to get done

the red  
mark on his forehead his mother's name

O just be now for once  
this glass handed you long before  
drink now while the water's new

old water is the saddest god

6.

has to be more

coat with a better fit

long arms in it

it was Waikiki the waves  
came in from nowhere  
from the tower we looked down  
and saw the doves below

the white and the red  
contending  
with the earth

contending with the cloud

we saw this diamond see  
we knew how pale the yellow was  
our legs unsorted on the bed

7.  
walked halfway across  
the Delaware in summer season  
on pale stones – no mud that river  
dryshod children  
their heads in a book

you probably think I'm a terrible man  
a hero a heartless heath a hood

I am the horseless headman of your dreams

strange music the meta flows

a hero is a priest  
a book on two flat feet

8.  
as if the sun were always there

do not turn away  
the city is so far

sometimes night roads appall

don't struggle with the beasts  
of us go  
let them sleep

the spruce is conical  
the yew trees untamed

by nature and by nature we

no leaves on whose tree?

## STEPS 5: ALETHEIA

*for Charlotte*

You are what is not forgotten

the opening of the first door

you are what I have not forgotten

you are what I will remember

you will be the always and the next thing and the again

opening of the second door

sometimes people remember music

sometimes people remember

sometimes the pianist forgets the keys

forgets what white means

and what does black mean

and why are they so small

and far away, or she remembers them

but forgets what's she's supposed to say

what is music supposed to say

what does music say

the opening of the third door

sometimes she forgets her hands

sometimes the hunter

stands in the woods at dawn

wondering why he's there

he forgets what his business is

and why he has a shotgun in his hands

an arrow in his fingers, why

does he study the vanishing darkness  
for a hint of something moving

he forgets he is the only person in the woods

the only person in the world

opening of the fourth door

when you know you're the only person in the world  
it all depends on you  
this is the moral universe  
that penetrates our world like a sheet of light

headlights scrape our bedroom windows

and the cars never know what their lights show

blind lights

they forget to know

you never forget

you are the only person in the world

opening of the fifth door

and there they are  
the unforgotten the animals  
the Greeks called them *aletheia*,  
the unforgotten, the truth

the whole truth of the world is an animal

truth is an animal

a bird at dawn

a wild duck evades the hunter's shot

duck now

safe in the darkness safe in the light

forgotten into the unforgotten

the opening of the sixth door

and there the light is

waiting

and you are often standing there

standing in light

standing in for light

when I have forgotten

everything but you

no one but you

says the light

there is only one

only one light

a door is to go through

to go through and see

where this leads

because there's always another

chamber of you

another place to go

I can't remember

I can't remember all the places you are

places we have been

forget forgetting forget remembering  
a door is sometimes the only

only a door and no rooms on either side  
that is a door

a door is a moment that lasts forever  
they call it a life because it lingers and it lasts  
because it is a wife  
and doesn't know how to forget

and everything always  
and everything always  
aspires to be music  
the thing that is always on its way

always on its way to you

always on its way to each other

opening of the seventh door

and here we are  
where there are no numbers

they are not numbers  
not shadows not doors not animals not birds

they are a little like arrows  
flying very high and no one knows where they fall

a little like arrows  
only there is only one of them

only one

pure going



as in going with you

in going with you everything is all it can be

and here we are  
nothing forgotten at last.

## STEPS 6. THE RATTLE

*for Jerry Rothenberg*

The ache of every  
clatters in the man's rattle

it says we're hurting here  
come near

come share our pain

The ancestors take  
deep breaths using our lungs  
our breath

now they breathe in us  
rattle clatter

dried beans in dry hollow gourd  
you know how it's done

every heart is hollow  
pebbles in a shell  
every heart knows how to holler  
tree gum seals the shells  
dry they are dry

they are the driest word  
a hand can speak

the ancestors swim towards us  
through an ocean of

what we think is air

it is not air we breathe  
it is a special gas of seeming

no animal inhales

we are alone in the earth

they swim towards us  
to be dry again

to celebrate the ritual  
for them we are silent  
ritual of silence

it is so noisy being dead

they come to us to hear our silence  
do you hear me  
silence is a rattle

silence wakes the heart

the rattle calls them

calls to dry comfort  
dry joy of being  
being only one person at a time

joy of being one

you don't have to be special to know this  
don't need a priest  
to do this

a rattle rattles in anybody's hand

but to speak to them when they come  
that is not easy

especially when it's for silence they come  
silence of the rattle

the ancestors are very young  
they have forgotten a lot  
they count on you to remember

forgotten how to understand  
things so easy for you  
the way a knee bends  
only one way  
or a tongue curls in so wet a mouth

the ancestors are younger than you are  
the ancestors are your children

they want to come again  
sometimes you see their footprints in the mud  
the snow  
rattle of hail on a tin roof

you had to pick the gourd up  
you had to shake it

you shook it

a rattle means silence

the rattle woke the dead  
the cloud heard you  
rain hurried to drown the dry sound out

you shook the rattle and they came  
and they are here

now you are the one to whom they came

deal with them  
take their silence into yours

and speak it

This is how the people learned to sing

(singing is learning how to leave space  
learning to let the groin speak through the throat  
to come to life again  
singing is the ancestors in you  
force of their silence

singing is turning the body inside out.)

## STEPS 7: WOOD ASH

To wake from  
this life

like any other dream

the bicycle

red velvet like iron  
inhibits the feel of things

are we surface only  
is there in the midst  
a meaningful plural of us

something like fish  
uncountably many

2.  
we live by guesses

of course I hold her hand  
of course I pray for her

hand of a ship  
prayers of a sleeping man

Benefit Street? Downhill sight.  
Old tall white pine tree?

some girl knows  
what she knows makes her sail away

to stretch  
a few words

around her hips

travel in the north country  
speaking what I see he said

a pale house in the woods

the next morning  
came like an osprey clutching a fish

3.

Pry the song out of the stone  
translate the Latin  
back into Etruscan silence  
their full lips pressed together  
no word escapes a kiss

a humming sound  
as of bees roused by warm November

nature but not natural  
not what we mean

sometimes brightness hurts

sometimes you know too much to go on

4.

shiver when his eye is on you  
the eye on the church wall  
and what does he do with his other eye  
the one we never see

he sees her  
she is his shore  
pure theology

the edge of someone going away  
is as much as we know of god

you've got to want it  
the sea, the selvedge of desire  
you call the Other  
and keep giving human names to

and sudden makes them there for you  
approximations of alien energy  
you suck them into your lifespace

you have come to the edge of him of her  
you have come to the edge of being

burn the ash to diamond now  
close your eyes now  
both in and out are closed all blue now  
the deer on the edge of the forest now  
can't see you when you close your eyes now

and only the trees know how to listen

language  
our only flower.



## STEPS 8 MERLIN

Become the because

life is a job of editing  
a call from your master  
rebel rebound

off usura's track  
liberal plenteous and dark

night nurture

now let The Cantos spend their song  
for I have worshipped  
thine interruptions  
and called them Form,

Nietzsche comely  
new structures  
are the best gift  
for we too were slaves in Ægypt  
our DNA compelled us

to assume the likeness of clouds!  
we dissipate by noon

rules of the house  
from which we went forth

travelers and too sure  
amend by autumn  
dread Michigan winter  
where Merlin raves

for he eats fallen apples  
dines upon fungus, bitter acorns

he has made the winter  
his special liberty  
scorning in treachery of court

laugh at fidelity  
all his money safe in his mouth

till some virtue hips so sleek undo him  
and he pretends to banish  
himself into what sustains him.  
But the man himself is gold with grief.

## STEPS 9 MATHOM

who have, gave

gave witness  
in a park  
a park had eyes

break bundlers of derivatives  
unspoken usury of speed

not a blue vein  
fact to be seen  
the carpenter nailed to his wall

Feelings free'd  
no Mind to mind 'em

for Gold hath every Pleasure in it  
& every Metal yearneth to be Gold

the internet the instantaneous  
*mathom* means treasure  
Madoff is just one who got caught  
fallguy for all bundlers

so we who were born in the Depression  
are a strange generation  
we expect nothing  
tried everything  
but the church was always burning down  
the war was always beginning  
every Sunday was Pearl Harbor  
every weekday morning 9/11

but we could speak  
could chew our savage songs  
in grunts of licit music

— not a generation, we are a mistake  
answering always the wrong question

they thought money bears no karma

money *is* karma

parcels unceasing  
arrive the doorstep

the drone  
the shame  
works a little while

tax everybody equally  
remove the cap  
make average means requisite for public office

cherish every difference

lose power gladly

build a system and walk away

greed is a symbol of insecurity

make greed as shameful as impotence

new blood is always somebody else's

sit still until you know what to do

Occupy  
must not be a performance but a method

not just one more spectacle

I fear for America  
if it doesn't stay linked with labor  
doesn't house the dispossessed  
doesn't feed the hungry

the art market is just the market  
art is empty when it connives with number

a young man emailed me his rhymed words and asked me to tell him  
about the poetry market, where he could sell his protest, read to acclaim at  
Zuccotti Park

I shared his shame and did not answer

the society of the spectacle breeds only spectacles

a spectacle for every shade of opinion  
a show of hands  
I just another kind of show

far from knowing the answers  
I don't even know the question

I know about looking away  
and making love to things that seem permanent

why I called my paper Matter  
when I still felt there was something to say.

## STEPS 10: SORROW

catch them while they're thinking

the need is clamorous  
an image  
slides off the wall  
and waits.

an image is pure waiting.

If a breath can't say it  
it can't be said.

A flashlight on the moon  
in other words  
a hammer, a naked foot  
a Roman arch in Gaul  
in other words  
a sparrow from melting  
ice drinks this  
very morning  
in other words  
in other words this fingernail.

Hope to have  
so many kinds of sparrows  
are they races  
or little artworks each  
the painted pattern  
the price of beauty  
gallery of air?

At least they're here.  
The broken mirror  
Mary's cat the blue  
futon, shadow  
of the full moon  
not here. Not here.

Keep trying.  
Like is like that.  
Love is like this.

And be done with it.  
The critic of the passacaglia  
left during the allemande.

Things leave us with ourselves.  
This is the sorrow of great art.

## STEPS 11: THE ROAD

Small lost things.

Saved by wearing shoes  
we tread raw earth  
it is almost music  
the stuff we forget

2.

And comes back at midnight  
eyes close enough to see.  
We belong to each other  
naturally, then decide  
to live apart. This  
decision is called language.

3.

I am lying  
with the sky

the whole sky  
covers most of me,

it goes me  
to sleep

there is a part though  
of me it can't see,

all of the words  
the same all

meaning different.



4.

I who am a young god  
appear before you as a fat old toad —  
turns out it's up  
to you to know the difference

It takes so many years of living  
learning things before a man realizes  
he must already be an old man  
before he knows he's a young god.

5.

Somewhere else I am waiting  
for me to move  
An empty house learning to breathe.

6.

We made it brittle  
so it breaks  
otherwise you couldn't say it  
it couldn't mean a thing

7.

Infamy of old roads  
never went anywhere  
no such place as Spain  
Sant Iago still is in Jerusalem  
we all are just Romans  
just remembering.  
Nothing is as it was  
but it's all still here.

Delicate features  
of a frightened girl  
a fairy tale  
telling itself in the empty woods.

## STEPS 12 FUNCTIONS

Be my new sister I pry you  
free from the rock, you need  
my water round you  
and I have no well but you.  
My pump still works  
though faucet stilled for winter.  
You came out of nowhere  
to find a way home  
through me to you  
we deign to enter  
the green mystery  
deigns to receive us  
together who were so  
you were so  
bold as to speak.

2.  
slim equation  
rests quiet a moment  
solving itself.

Count the hairs  
the decimal point of the lips  
excitement never far  
from the forehead  
No image in the imagine.

3.  
Derivatives of an absent function  
we are. That makes no sense.  
A bikini, a shuttlecock,  
a plaster bust of Haydn —  
those make sense.

You buy a man's image  
and lose it years later  
in the cellar of your mind.  
One of them. Where silverfish  
and spiders. Owls outside.

4.  
*m'introduire dans ton histoire*  
he said, he meant  
your mathematics, the reckoning  
inside you that brings your life to you  
friend by friend. Number is karma.  
To be part of your equation.  
So that approaching zero  
both he and you would be solved.

5.  
That day the flowers came creeping  
their blue cabbagey heads  
just a glimpse above the windowsill.  
They were looking in at me again —  
to endure the thousand-glanced  
inspection of the hydrangea!  
To be seen for what I am,  
even flowers move faster than I do.

7.  
Civil contract. Centipede.  
Heap of oranges. Pollarded  
elms on the plaza.  
Key-cold her husband lies,  
all his Mexicos are gone.

## STEPS 13 THE LEFT

What could be left of the left  
that isn't the anyhow we are  
left from some other was,

a world?

So what's  
left is us, panoply,  
north star, red flag,  
pale cheeks,  
synthesizer  
fried in a brownout,  
pine tree, you.

Left  
of center was a loft  
downtown  
to kiss in,  
grow up  
in the last  
hour of the world  
we called  
comrades each other

music paid the rent

nos jours, nos jours !  
and a bus packed with your own kind  
glory!

Glory left over  
from a world before the world

all the bright red Christians and Jews  
same shiver in the same park

nothing is left of America

just enough to stretch your knees  
or let your hair down  
midnight moonlight Yosemite

left is a place you come back to

in the only mind

we turn away from the word we meant  
the spasm comes after

a tree's left a yew an arbor vitae  
tree of life the deer came eating  
tree of life is all a beast itself

the world before the world was here  
before we learned to talk

or we are what is left  
after they'd come down and eaten and gone.