

STERRETT SMITH



BLUE TONGUES OF FIRE
Paintings and Drawings

with responses by
ROBERT KELLY

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A Note:

In January 2016 I began working with some remarkable paintings and drawings that Sterrett Smith had shown me. With a personal generosity equal to the generosity of her intense images, she allowed me to write from them - not about them, but to write what came to mind as I studied her pictures. The reflections and poems that follow are the result, and they are offered to her in homage and collegial salute.

—RK

*Prima la pittura
dopo la poesia*

The fact is
the poet knows nothing,

only what he says.
And that's not a fact
exactly but is something made,

factum, something made
as opposed to *fictio*, making something
something up.

The painter makes something
up on the wall it goes.

I saw them there
alive and squalling with color
so I said.

(ORIGINS

The first poem happened
when a child looked up
at the ocher and lampblack
painting of a horned beast on the wall
and said what does that mean
and somebody had to open the lips and say:

*once there was a hunter
his spear was sharp and long
whenever he went hunting
he would say this song*

*and the animals with horns
came to the sound of his say
and one of them would let him
kill him while the others ran away*

Something like that,
so the child would think
there was nothing
so evil in killing for meat,

and poetry has been
a little like that ever since
telling half the truth
and wise animals still run away)



It is said that the great Carl Jung diagnosed his patients by the way they wrote the numeral 8. Lopsided top, bottom, both? Snowman? Upside down?

A circle is implicitly symmetry, makes everything in it

symmetrical, even if it isn't.

Work of the circle.

Sterrett Smith must have said one day with Yvan Goll:

O pour briser un seul cercle!

so she did.

And in her breaking of the circle
this story has to begin,

and it has to be avowed
that her circles were amazingly beautiful,
rich and meaningful as bruises, as maps of the world,
NASA shots of new planets, dense with detail,
and every detail a color
and every color had a way of thrilling
through the landscape of what our seeing
really amounts to,

and sometimes they looked like this:



**So there was a circle
no there is flesh
bruised into beauty**

**no, take it back,
the round world**

planet all colors
in it a bruise

a bruise comes from looking
color comes from wound

the natural world is colorless lightless
night

art is the most unnatural thing of all
our eyes intercept the invisible rays of the sun
and reflect them back onto things
thereby made visible.

Is that how it is.

I don't know.

There is a circle full of colors and sounds
shapes in movement challenging each other for space

for room

So I will describe nothing
he said
I will let

the things I look at
talk in me.

I am what they happen.

I can't help saying what they say me to say.

Lies, all lies
but on the way to truth.

So how can she escape from this beauty?

It's all very well for us to linger in the glow
but she must be on her way to the never-yet

where we try
to meet her.

Head her off at the pass.



The folds are love are crows
the world is an accident
so I confess I was an ancient pompous
scholar I wrote this parchment
and you erased the words
thank god for rough hands and
what did you use to efface
the wisdom I smeared on the sheet?
Not parchment. Not exactly papyrus.
Something I found inside my sheets,
oil-spotted, lipstick on my
collar even then. We ancient people
had no cigarettes. Culture was slow,
meanings clear, children noisy
but vaguely obedient. Like colors
bleeding and blurring in the rain.



I was drowning and she wanted
to talk about our relationship,
baseball, the curve of the pitcher's
arm arcing the ball to the goal
she called it, the water rippled
around my red neck, any minute
it would come up to my lips
and I was round, I huddled close
around myself, little reckoning
that small pebbles sink in big
streams. And this was water,
clearer than I've ever seen it
soon it will wash my color away.



Come to me out of the night
and be my eyes,
turn them so I look in,
I'm tired of just seeing the world
I want to see the one who's seeing it,
the one who keeps saying me
whenever I ask. So bring
your red animal eyes out of the night
(is it the sea?) and understand me.
You're safe – I just pray to people,
I don't lay hands on them. *Venga,*
ojo, and all your red sisters –
don't understand me, just show
me the fruits rotting on my tree.



When your heart stared at me
that time in Thessalonika
when we tried to speak Hebrew
all you could see was a foreign
accent bothering the whores
along the harbor wall. Really
I was praying, but my clownish
lack of gravitas made you laugh.
And laughter brought us together –
flee persecution, escape
into each other! The bishops
and the brokers can't decide
if it's worth learning hieroglyphs
just to read our secret scribbles –
other chalk marks on the sidewalk,
and from the wrought-iron fence
meaningful chewing-gum curlicues.



The hand opened
and what it had

out of the courtyard
pokes up a fountain

today the water is green
tomorrow blue

a church long desolate
on one side but birds

still roost in its steeple.
I hear bells
when I look at you
they sang, two tenors
vying with each other,

you sat on my lap
pretending to listen.

The fountain pretended to spout,
the water feigned wetness,
everything was in its place,
after a moment of silence
the tenors shook hands and took off.

I pretended you were on my lap.
I pretended to be there
watching the empty courtyard sing.

Truth vanishes when we open our eyes.

Truth is that real state 'inside',

the Quiet Mind.

**The glory and spiritual power of art
is to restore us, open-eyed,
to some of the truth the senses blur –**

**this is the ancient secret of alchemy,
whose medical word was homeopathy,**

**to cure the senses by the senses
changing the seen into the known**

or part of the way there.

**The greatest art brings us furthest to that truth –
awe at the end of Beethoven's 14th Quartet.**

And that ceiling once you saw

and that picture dangling in the Louvre

awe is silence, leads us by the hand back home.



**My wife came from Catalunya
talking about great Gaudí,
how the stones twisted
their way up into the sky.
She said yellow she said red
she said culture is the same as bread,
a slice of decent bread
with cheese on it,
from sheep's milk,
firm and pale and strong,
the kind the Basques make
who have no country of their own.**



I can't understand easy things
a parrot pecking on an orange
or a persimmon divorcing a lime
and there's always a priest looking on
or a notary or judge or a nun
or your Uncle Fred with attitudes,
no, I can't understand simple things,
resemblances are so painful, almost
the worst things in the world, all
wars arise from bad metaphors.
Sometimes something roundish
and softish rests in my hand – that
I almost understand. But conscious
of the dangers of too simple a
comprehension I usually let it fall.

Of course all these paintings are about me –

how else could I see them?

It says in the Bible we see only ourselves –

that's why we have eyelids

(we don't have earlids or tonguelids)

so I can get away from myself

That's why art is holy and so dangerous,

I keep thinking you're talking to me.

Things we try to believe.

Sensory evidence.

**The things that fooled Wittgenstein
fool me most of the time too.**

**Imagine a chessboard
two women playing chess
seated on cushions on the floor**

**on the chessboard
there is one piece too many.
Only a skilled player
would recognize that in a single glance.**

**Thirty-three pieces of wood
one for each year of His life.**

**No. There has to be a meaning
relevant to chess, the play, the gambits, the losses.**

**There are so many losses.
It is hard to imagine.
What is the thirty-third piece?
What can it do?
Is it you?**



When the Apostles stood around waiting for the word
some flames came down from heaven
reversing the curse of Babel – now
everybody could understand everything anybody says

because these blue tongues of fire swept down on their
heads

and still do, the painting proves it,
we look up and the blue flakes fiercely down
and we understand and understand
until we're sick of understanding

and just want the soft blue tongues to lick us
quietly, or whatever they do.



You begin to wonder sometimes
why the grass grows up.
What is this 'up' that everything
seems to want to reach?
And yet if you let anything go
it just falls down.
Paul Klee could have given me the answer
or Léger: down is the way up.
Out is the way in,
making art is the way to the unmade,
the Uncreated, the actual.
All that is true but god those
gorgeous little colors acting up,
a great army marching inland
to enforce the peace, gonfalons
and pikestaffs and the smell of grass.



I have been here.
I drowned once off this beach,
the broken stones from glaciers
are what I remember best,
beauty of stone in water,
the opposite elements attuned.
And then I died, consoled
by this cool alchemy.
But when you die, you know,
your dreams go with you,
maybe they're all that's there
beyond the persuasive undertow.



The army marched through me
as if I weren't there
but I was trees and fountains
and rocks and roots a-plenty
to stumble their horses
and the Sun was my sister
and still they came through.
A man is whatever passes by.
Definitions are easily
lost in the woodlands. This
was North America once
when I was. The Moon
squats in the sky and remembers.
Daylight is all that counts,
daylight and battle.



My days in the leper colony
I still have to tell you about.
None of the patients really had the disease,
not even me. But the trees
were protected from us
by huge bars, thin, sleek, that went
all the way up to the sky.

But we all thought we did,
have the disease, I mean, because
of how the animals looked at us
and ships passing by the coast
came close to shore but never
landed the beautiful people
we guessed were on board. Life
was not too difficult, the medicines
were cheap, the food adequate,
a nurse came once a week to
laugh at us and bring the news.
That's how we heard about war,
the puberty of child movie stars,
new heresies, the internet.
We loved his visits but hated him —
isn't that always the way? The news
is the worst disease of all.



So many flags, so many cities.
I had a message once from Ezra Pound —
he offered to pay me to translate
Leo Frobenius's *Erlebte Erdteile*
in six small volumes. I balked.
I wanted to do my own stuff,
I was young, I thought there was
an own stuff one can have and do.
How did I dare to deny the one
living master I knew at that time?
What a swine I was, was I right.
So many flags it's hard to tell.
So many cities, women walking
languid through the streets
summer in the old downtown.
Everything is uptown now,
everything is money. I guess
money is a simple line to follow
through the parrot-shrieking
jungle wilderness of what
or who we really are. We are
made of colors, don't we all
really know that? God knows
I am indigo. Or so Ezra
must have thought when I said No.



I'm told in California
there is a place where women dance
Marxist in the soft Bay air.

I'm told that what they do
can only be a dance, and dance
is rigorous, theoretical

the way a body is when we say 'a body'
and attribute to it
powers of agency and movement and meaning.

And here they leap red across the world
and leave as shadows
the things I think I'm thinking.

Or is it all just one more alphabet?
every food we eat is a kabbalah of its own
when all I really want is bread —

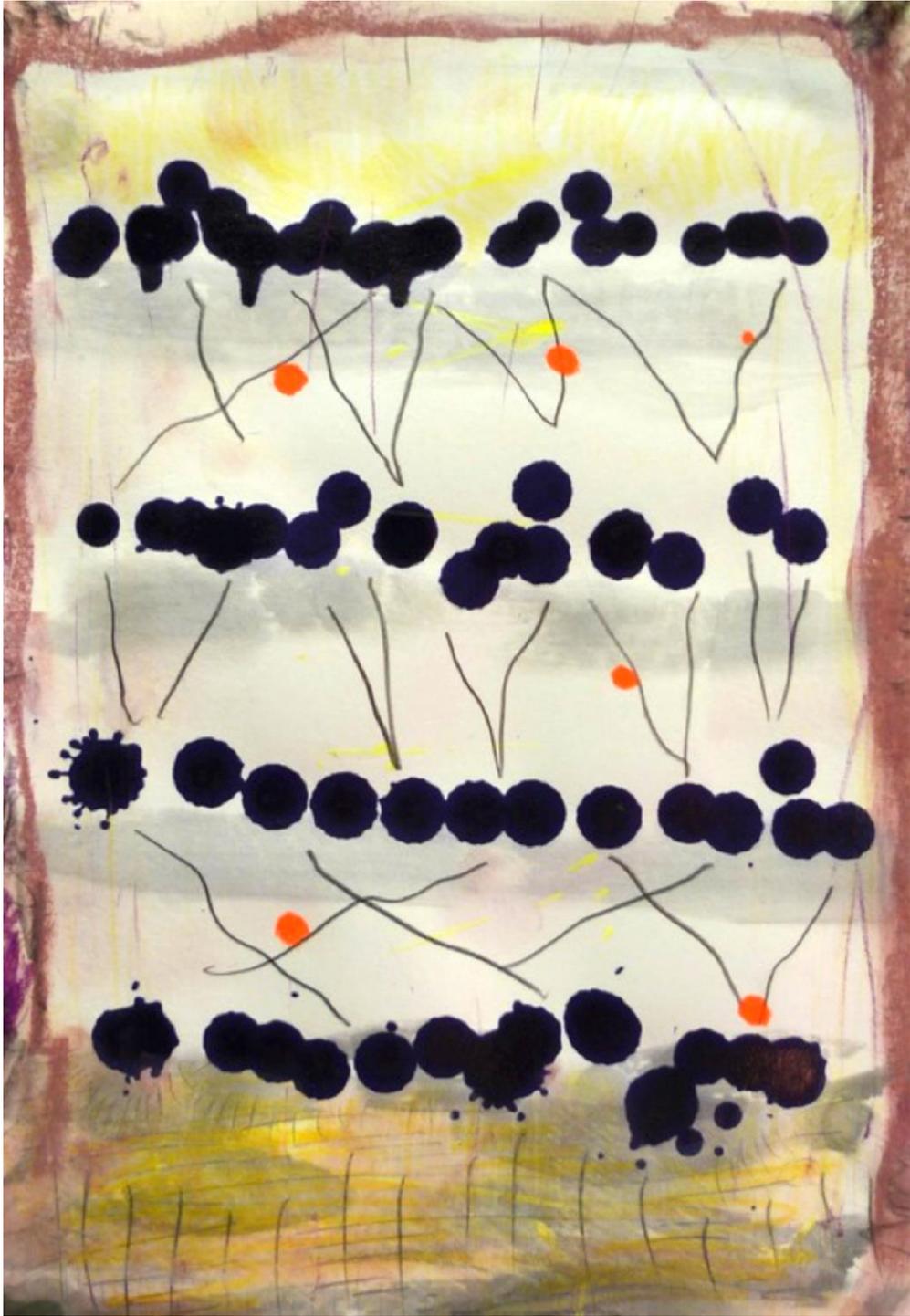
That kind of dance.



The cathedrals have fallen.
The priests, displaced,
drawl their sermons in the street.
I am one of them.
My house fell down.
I stop people on the street and say
something about Beethoven,
they always want to hear about him,
or I tell about the brown café where
Thomas Bernhard whiled away
his short supply of afternoons.
Everybody knows me.
Everything turns into a story
usually stupid, just men and women,
just deaths and diapers,
no surprises. Every now and then
a troll comes through, or slippery
Melusina. Between narrations
I pose for artists, they seem to like
the slightly crazy look men get
from years of seeming to be civilized.



She gave me alms and took me home.
I wondered why he told me that,
then I saw her muslin sheets
he'd wrapped around his bare shoulders,
poor young man. He taught her to sing,
she taught him to ride horses
then she threw him out. Always that way
he reasoned but I assured him not,
the out she threw him to was his own fate
and she was generous in giving him to it
and it to him, otherwise he'd have no
song (as he'd call it) to pester people with,
this interminable poetry. Here, take my horse,
you need it more than me. Away he rode
and left me with my hand outstretched,
cupped, waiting for her coin.



When I read your letter
I began to worry – were
all the words mine? I wanted
it to be from you, to smell
of your hands. The alphabet
reigned supreme, alone,
and I had to make do with
meanings, when I wanted –
what did I want? I read
the letter again, this time
in Akkadian, then Chinese,
looking up every mark online.
They still gave me only words,
sentences, propositions,
histories, parables, adages,
smokescreens of the heart.
I didn't want meaning, I wanted
the one who means. Between
the lines, you idiot – I heard
you say that and stared into the
pale places where I think we are.