

THE QUESTING



ROBERT KELLY

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An astro-psychical fairytale

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**Metambesen
Annandale-on-Hudson
2020**

**THE QUESTING
is the sixty-eighth
in a series of texts and chapbooks
published by Metambesen.**

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for Tamas & Lila

QUESTING, 1

Catch the other first
the side that faces Mercury
when it casts its tiny shadow
on the powder long ago prepared
you swallowed and sweated out and now
lies before you like a thin sheet of silver
with that shallow shadow on it.

Wake up! It is science calling
from all the stupid books you read
that made you wise, and contrariwise,
wake up and open up your door,
the animal is standing there
panting from the journey
and his rider beside him, her fur
glistening around her cheeks, eyes

closed, already dreaming you.

Go out to them. Your house
is gone the minute you leave it,
you are alone with beast and bride,
it is summer there and the rain mild,
you lead one another across the plains
days it seems but only hours pass
and then you're there, all of you at last,
the parchment wigwam, the leaden tower,
the pool of heirloom water, the little
footbridge to the island made of glass.
And there you finally all sleep.
I saw an old painting once
that shows the silk pavilion
where you rest, gold-helmeted
soldiers guard you, old priest
is reading by candlelight,
trying for once to finish his prayers
before he too is swept away by sleep.
Sleep n Mercury's faint light,
clutch his tenuous shadow.
This is the first day of the journey.

QUESTING, 2

Go on the Venus Highway then
the smoky roadhouse
where your mother learned to dance
and learned it was good to be bad
in her own pious way

and why am I holding you in my heart
like a surgeon tying a tourniquet on an artery?
Who has wounded us this way
so that we turn away from each other
as when the sun's too strong on our faces
and we should be hurrying into the Copper Land
where love turns itself and all things green?

No wound but the mirror.

From the cold crucible chip out
three flakes of what was formed therein,
put one under your tongue and hold
the others in each hand. See,
the shadow does begin to form,

a shape you can almost name
shimmers into being across the room

Throw the left hand flake at it –
it moans and gets more physical,
now throw the right hand and
the shadow suddenly has eyes.
Now spit the last flake at it
and at last the shade begins to speak.
Hurry to your stupid desk
and write down every word it says –
they aren't words but you think they are,
at least get something written down.
For the next thousand years
till next morning this is your bible,
I kneel before you and beg
you to share these vague instructions with me.
These guesses are our true religion.

QUESTING, 3

Sweeping done by asteroid
and laundry done by light alone
the measureless path
inches closer to some moonless orb
(what a word!). I heard him
talking Danish with the air,
it answered hm in some dialect
She spoke on Bornholm
three thousand years ago
give or take an afternoon
swimming in the Elbe with her friends.
How far *now* seems from *real*,
true sensations, wet skin,
roasted hazelnuts, the tribe's astronomer
spread legged in the shifting sand
counting the horizon. The wise
see the one as many, and the many one.

QUESTING, 4

To be perplexed is a small planet
sometimes orbiting between M and V
(the esoteric meaning of 1005) –
who reigned then in your Saxon heart,
your Irish fields of turf hummocky
in morning sun? Truth is an animal.
Strong, seldom fierce, it licks you
because the taste of you (and you)
is what truth feeds on – the knowledge
that it is known by us and in us
embodied. No bite is necessary.
Even the moon is optional. Just me
(you) truth and the Sun herself
reigning over the daughters of ocean
our mothers. Not in the picture
but safe below the saline layers
in that strange airy house at the bottom
of everything. You've done Mercury
now, and Venus, now you have to solve
that equation with three unknowns.
Hard. Toss a string into the sky and let it
catch the legendary diamond rain drop –
every day She lets one fall, I mean the Sun.

QUESTING, 5

Quest began as question.
A question you ask with your
whole body, planetary body
between Venus and Mars –
Earth is Hephaestus, tries
to keep those lovers apart,
we are crippled by love and war –
principles not unknown
to other species, angels,
whales, mountains. But we
are their *parents and originall*,
humans created all this stuff,
we limp from couch to battlefield,
beating our brothers with bats
stabbing our sisters with scissors,
you know the story, you too
were a child once. This is all very
theoretical, we'll get back
to images soon as the projector
comes back from the shop
and the girl who runs it comes
back from her snow date in Canada.

QUESTING, 6

Lift the magic off the meridian
she changed the curriculum
he has to run through panting.
Astronomy is like that,
full of laws, perturbations, sly
unexpected relaxations. He felt
his head was on a platter
like Saint John, he felt sleepy
as a marshmallow, abandoned
as a rain puddle in New Jersey,
he felt like a frog. Still he did
get through the whole syllabus,
passed all the tests she set,
now stood waiting his turn
at Venus's mahogany desk.
Learning cannot happen in any
other way. You lean on the ecliptic,
dude, you hang with horizons.
But despite this character's close
call with success we haven't
gotten past Mavors yet, whom
ye lastlings call Mars but we
dance up and down three times
in his honor, leaping thus thrice

for his two-breath name, Mavors.
Capisce? as we used to say
on Crescent Street when the moon
fell silent outside the old men's
Abruzzi Social and Athletic Club.
Why are all drug stores Jewish?
And shouldn't the Pope be Jewish too
considering St. Peter his original?
Grow up – that neighborhood is gone.
Until then he never realized
the need for calculus. Guess
and stretch the cloth, guess again
and fill the glass with cherry pits –
the kilo of black cherries you ate
all by yourself on Montmartre,
saved the pits in your pocket
and called them stones like the Brits.
Remember this carefully. Today
is somewhere else. Here is
passionate Tuesday, sky temporarily
horny with sunshine. Yes, you do
understand the other meaning
of mandolin, thin-sliced cucumber
you dare to paste on the evening sky.

QUESTING, 7

There are castigations, forced
chastity, shark pools, varicose
highways clotted with carts –
ox, ass, camel, zebu – we live
it turns out by alphabets alone.
Poor Chinese! They're here first,
this Asteroid Belt that buzzes
in my head ow ow like children
running up and down the hall
sunlight at every end of it, I feel
weary with childbirth, woozy,
wonder who I'm supposed to be
today. Cold north wind through
the whole galaxy. Local news,
stolen chariot, unicorns on strike.

They tried to tell me: every
asteroid's a letter of an alphabet
the solar system's main task
is to read, align, encode, decipher
bit by bit and inside out and we
are just along for the ride. *Jamais*
I replied, we come first, we
are the animals of mind, sans us

there'd be nobody to think.

QUESTING, 8

Leastways what I call thinking.
(Please, and I mean it, please
study Martin Heidegger on this.)

Then there was peace up there
(here) for half an hour (notice
that the Revelator understands
that time is just an aspect of place –
*silence in heaven for the space
of half an hour* it says in the Book)
so we're in a kind of trough
of a watertight canoe, a punt
in the isle of Ely, chapels and spires
point out the necessary constellations
just like on Earth – where you thought
(o faithless ones!) we were all along.

No. We are afloat. *The water of the wise*
(you're familiar with the phrase
and with the blessed juice itself I ween)
sustains the body just as it mires the soul
in unspeakable complexities of joy,
lust and higher mathematics. Return

now to the mother ship too long
left vacant for the ghosts of nowhere
to play tag in. Return and rev the engines,
the larger asteroids are studying us –
it's time to dine with Uncle Jupiter.

QUESTING, 8¹/₂ : CODA

It's unlikely for all our words and ways that we'll get much past Saturn. But we'll try. We're not even at great Jupiter they used to call Jove, from his Latin name in the oblique cases. Or is it Jehovah?

Remember that when our alphabet was cast in mind, and our language came to be, there was no planet beyond Saturn. That makes it very difficult to *say anything* on or about the new-known planets, Uranus (pronounce as dactyl, please). Neptune and the much maligned Pluto, not to mention the new-guessed wanderer newspapers chat about every last Tuesday.

We can learn about them by means of the *teskooano* (what do they call that instrument nowadays?) and mountain mirrors and mathematical jiggery-pokery – but we can't really *talk* them.

Saturn is the limit of our language. That is the problem.

And Quest, these questings, every question, all questioning, are devoted (if ill-designed) to carry our *articulable cognition* further out from the Sun Her Majesty. But do you think She wants us out there? I'm not sure.

I for one am happiest when I can see the shadow She makes of me. See it and follow it all the way home.

8-14 December 2016