



The World Is Filled With Empty Places

- | | |
|-------|--|
| I | This is not a poem |
| II | Things without names are the ghosts of things |
| III | There is no color in an empty place |
| IV | It is late on a spring day |
| V | Eden is just another name for need |
| VI | Imagine a table |
| VII | There can be no argument in an empty place |
| VIII | A stuccoed house |
| IX | There can be no sound in empty air |
| X | Who is the diva who sings Dame Vida? |
| XI | I bite into a peach |
| XII | Someone strung a wire over town |
| XIII | Our mouths tiny o's of desire |
| XIV | In the nursery the Madonna suckles her babe |
| XV | The architect declares the building |
| XVI | A mind filled with empty places is a mind filled |
| XVII | The first letter was the first letter |
| XVIII | The texture of the bloom |
| XIX | Shut down the bells |
| XX | A leaf falls. Then another |
| XXI | You walk in the shade of a lane |
| XXII | Like a breath of fresh air |

“A good image is never alone.”

— René Magritte

The World Is Filled With Empty Places

Samuel Jay Keyser

Cambridge, Massachusetts

I

This is not a poem.
It is an image of a poem.
Imagine a word, say apple.
You speak its name.
The sound fades.
There, behind it, is the fruit.
You say it is round. That won't do.
You move the word aside to see the roundness.
How round it is, you think.
In that instant, the apple vanishes.

II

Things without names are the ghosts of things,
images bobbing in empty air.

Imagine a dark street, cobbled, a gaslight flickering
at the corner. To your right is a brick wall,
to your left an open field sprawling to the horizon.

You are alone. Something brushes your cheek.
You raise your hand to your face. It isn't there.

III

There is no color in an empty place, only the sound
of color that we cock our ears to, like gaudy birds.

The world is filled with such birdsong,
each an exclamation point without a sentence.

Where shall we find a grammarian
to make sense of the sound?

IV

It is late on a spring day on a country road.
Clouds open and close like the petals of a flower.
Inside the edges of the afternoon
objects compose themselves:
a farmhouse, a porch swing, a barn.
They have become their names,
scrawled across the evening.
A haymow is smoldering in the coppery light.
When it bursts into flame, will it burn,
or decompose into fragments of spent type
strewn about the ground like some printer's
upended alphabet?

V

Eden is just another name for need.
The garden is in the gardener.
When the gardener sleeps, it is winter.
Everything is fungible.

VI

Imagine a table surrounded by guests.
They eat; they smoke; they laugh.
Suddenly someone vanishes. In anguish
the host cups his hands, whispers a name
into the bowl. Each syllable drops
like alms for a beggar. Only the more
the bowl fills, the poorer he becomes.
That is how we are made paupers
by the names of those we love.

VII

There can be no argument in an empty place,
only the air of an argument. For example,

two people leave the hall. Each thinks the other
follows. In the black street a lamp is burning.

Each walks toward the light. It is the color
of an old man's teeth. Both arrive at the same time.

Each turns to the other. No one is there.

VIII

A stuccoed house, white on a green hill,
the wind blowing through its untended windows,

raising the curtains on an old argument.
Inside, a table, dusty, an upturned glass,

in the corner a dead moth fluttered by the breeze.
Why are these images of emptiness?

They are bookmarks
without a book.

IX

There can be no sound in empty air, only the sense of sound.
You sit, for example, on a stone bench.

The bougainvillea places you in a hot clime.

The sky is a shade of blue you will never see again.

White rollers lick the shore. Perspiration gathers
at the back of your neck. It is your turn to speak.

You adjust your collar, take a handkerchief to your brow.

The wet air swallows the dregs of your sentences.

X

Who is the diva who sings *Dame Vida*?
Her strings are sea birds;

basso ostinato,
the hum of the ocean.

On cloudy quays she sings threnodies
that leave the heart gaping.

When there is no one to sing to,
she is her own song.

XI

I bite into a peach.

It is bitter.

This does not stop me from eating.

Orchards of bitterness are everywhere.

I live in their shade.

XII

Someone strung a wire over town, says Mr. Porzone.
Have you seen it?

No, says Mrs. Porzone, hefting a melon for weight

I have, says Mr. Porzone. When the wind blows,
it sets to thrumming. Have you heard it?

No, says Mrs. Porzone, What would you like for dinner?

Dead souls hang from that wire, says Mr. Porzone,
they flap like laundry in the wind.

Alvin, from the market, died last month, says Mr. Porzone.
He's up there flapping now.

Hard for Alice now he's gone, says Mrs. Porzone.

Dead souls are wet, says Mr. Porzone.
God hangs them out to dry. Sooner or later we'll all be up there, flapping.

How does pot roast sound? says Mrs. Porzone.

XIII

Our mouths tiny
o's
of desire,
we are lonely
monologs.

XIV

In the nursery the Madonna suckles her babe,
cradles it gently against her agate breast.
She stares through an open window
into the blue and white sky.
Life streams from her nipple.
The babe begins to tremble.

XV

The architect declares the building
Facades take on an air of air.
He fingers his lapel. There is a monument.
He closes his eyes. The monument crumbles.
Entire cities float below the surface of his brow
where the sun neither rises nor sets.
It is always the next day and the day after.
Light plays on the walls of his sala.
Alas, when the light goes out,
the door will shut on sable hinges.

XVI

A mind filled with empty places is a mind filled.
A mind empty of empty places is a mind filled.

XVII

The first letter was the first letter.
Let me say that again,
only linger in the retelling
so that the spaces between the
words become the words.

XVIII

The texture of the bloom
is the color of the air around it,
its shape the shape of the space it fills.
That is why, when the flower dies,
it is only the flower that dies.
The world is filled with the ghosts of blossoms.

XIX

Shut down the bells.
There is too much clang in the air
portending our going.
Take no note of it.
Silence after silence is sufficient.

XX

A leaf falls. Then another.
Soon the tree
and its shadow merge.
Having known the sun,
you watch without expectation.
There is no wind.
Even so,
you hear a rustling.

XXI

You walk in the shade of a lane.
In the distance, through the trees,

there is motion perhaps, or lack of it.
Beyond the farmhouse and the barn

the ad for Red Man flakes in the sun.
A tractor rusts in a field of spent corn.

The day has been a scudding of sky against sky.
There have been small things as well, a snail across a leaf.

Late afternoon portamentos into twilight,
twilight to dusk. You have been alone all day.

Only now you are not alone. Railroad tracks stitch
the horizon. Where its needles touch, sky and earth

are a single garment. At your feet the track of a snake
in the dust, one more line you dare not cross.

XXII

Like a breath of fresh air,
before the beginning,
the sea washed over words.
God held the primer in his hand.
Now that he has closed the book,
the universe is merely poetry.

This collection is dedicated to my wife, Nancy Kelly, who filled the empty places.

Samuel Jay Keyser (b.1935) is an American theoretical linguist and authority on the history and structure of the English language. Keyser is the Peter de Florez Emeritus Professor in MIT's Department of Linguistics and Philosophy. He also served as Director of the Center for Cognitive Science and Associate Provost for Institute Life.

We can't live without water,
Nature's rock star shapeshifter: solid, liquid, or gas.
The remarkable thing is its chemical composition,
two hydrogen atoms (a gas) attached to one oxygen atom
(a gas) that magically yields something that can
float an ocean liner.

This CD tries to recreate that miracle.
It combines one part music and one part poetry to produce,
what? Let us call it a musoem, a new art form, if you will.
It begins with two separate elements, poetry and music.
It does not pin one to the other the way a child pins a tail
to a donkey. Like oxygen and hydrogen, it seeks a
shapeshift.

The album begins with a low rumbling monotonic fanfare
followed by the line This is not a poem.
Dear listener, take that admonition seriously. Do not
attend, as is usually done, to how one genre supports the
other. Listen, instead, to how they flow into one another
like a watercolor on a wet canvas.

If you hear something rising above the chemical
components of this album, then we are glad.
If you don't, please forgive us. We are ever mindful of
the words that Robert Browning put into the mouth of
the painter, Andrea del Sarto, "Ah, but a man's reach
should exceed his grasp,/Or what's a heaven for?"

— Samuel Jay Keyser

ARPAVIVA

©&© 2025 ARPAVIVA RECORDINGS
WWW.ARPAVIVA.ORG