

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Things I Carry: Technologies of a Homeless Veteran

John Farrell Kelly

*There are many of us homeless ones,
And our strength is
That for us, benighted and blind,
The house of God shines.*
—Anna Akhmatova, ‘You will live without misfortune’ from *Rosary*¹

Suddenly there is light.

My spirit slowly surfaces, and my mind gently moves and stretches. I pause for a moment to reflect on my dreams.

Then I open my eyes.

Above me, endless white ceiling panels extend in all directions, interspersed with occasional panels of fluorescent lighting. Beside me, endless metal bunks extend in all directions, laden with occasionally moving human forms.

I am covered by an old, white sheet and a thin, grey wool blanket. A neatly-folded black North Face Denali jacket serves as my pillow.

Beside my face, a small, black North Face Recon backpack carries nearly all of my worldly possessions. A navy homeless veteran wristband is attached to one of the zippers. I gather my glasses from a mesh pouch of the backpack, and I unclip a strap of the backpack from a metal bar of the bed.

The room is nearly the size of a gymnasium. Beige walls are lined with old, metal lockers that are reserved for the use of the staff. Four large, cement columns in the centre of the room provide structural support.

The large clock on the west wall reads 4:45 AM. It is a cold morning outside, so I stall for half an hour and then begin to move. I carefully climb down from the top bunk, grasping the side of an adjacent bunk for support, and descend to the cold, concrete floor.

My clothes and shoes remain at the foot of the bunk – I have won another gamble that no one will take them during the night. I quickly slip on an oversized navy tunic shirt, and then add a pair of black leggings over the black boxer-briefs that I am wearing. I quickly finish with black socks and grey Keen Arroyo sandals.

I walk along the painted lines on the floor to the bathroom on the southeast side of this floor. It is a large room that contains numerous stalls (without doors), numerous urinals, and two large, round, communal sinks. I remove a toothbrush and toothpaste from my backpack, and I quickly brush my teeth. Then I walk to the stairwell on the southwest side of the room, descend the stairs, and exit using the west door.

¹ Anna Akhmatova, ‘You will live without misfortune,’ (1915) in *Rosary* in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, 2nd ed., trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1997), 167.

‘Things I Carry.’ John Farrell Kelly.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

It is a cold, dark morning. As I walk north and then east around the corner of the large, brick building, I pass beneath a red, glowing neon sign, shaped like a cross, with the words 'Jesus' on the horizontal section and 'Saves' on the vertical section.

I enter the north door into a reception area. A few men are in line ahead of me, talking through a hole in a glass barrier to a receptionist working on a computer.

When my turn arrives, I state, 'John Kelly.'

'I got you,' the receptionist states, and I am in the lottery for a bed tonight. On a good day, I make the bed list – the odds are around 50 percent. Otherwise, I usually make the mat list and get a mat on the first floor. On a bad day, I don't get either, and the Denver Rescue Mission turns me away.

I have had bad days.

Jesus Saves

And for us, descending into the vale,

The altars burn,

And our voices soar

To God's very throne.

—Anna Akhmatova, 'You will live without misfortune,' from *Rosary*²

I sit on a low concrete wall on the triangle.

The triangle is a small park, just north of the Rescue Mission, that is formed by the intersections of Broadway, Park Avenue West, and Lawrence Street. It is home for about two hundred crack users and dealers. Most are homeless and sleep on the streets.

A dealer asks me again, 'You need anything?'

'I'm good,' I respond. By now, most of them know that I don't smoke, but some still ask.

My eyes glaze like a mystic, and I journey into what I call 'deep water' for about an hour.

When I return, the crack user sitting beside me appears to be confused. 'You were really gone,' he says. 'Are you sure you're not on something?'

'I'm just crazy,' I reply. But he doesn't seem quite satisfied.

After a while, Tami approaches me. She is a slender, beautiful woman, who moves like a pigeon – constantly scanning the cement for small, white crumbs. She sits beside me and starts to talk for a few minutes. Her words turn into sound and music, and their meanings escape me.

Finally, I apologise. I look at her and gently say, 'I'm sorry – sometimes my brain doesn't work normally, and I don't understand what people are saying.'

She looks at me with pure compassion and a hint of sadness, and then responds, 'That's okay.'

I gently place my hand on her back.

Two long lines are forming – one on the southwest corner of the triangle and one diagonally across the intersection. The men look like they have emerged from photos of the Great Depression. Finally, the front door of the Rescue Mission opens, and the two lines cross the streets and begin to disappear inside.

² Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, 167.

When they are gone, I cross the street and enter. Staff direct me to the chapel room, and I find one of the few remaining chairs. Soon, the evening's guest preacher arrives. He speaks sparingly and plays a number of Christian songs. Some of the homeless men join in song. His words are unexpectedly heartfelt and moving. The chaos of my mind and emotions finds a moment of peace.

As his hour winds down, the guest preacher invites us to be saved by Jesus. I don't know what that means, but two or three of the men approach him. He looks them in the eyes, one-by-one, wraps his arms around their shoulders, and bows his head with them and prays.

I feel that I have witnessed something essential – something beautiful.

A Good Day

*No, not under the vault of alien skies,
And not under the shelter of alien wings—
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.
—Anna Akhmatova, 'Requiem,' from Reed³*

After the first snow, the cold surprisingly dampens my spirit.

As I sit in my place on the triangle, the concrete seems to siphon away all of my warmth. Then Tami arrives. She gives me a long, warm hug, but when I look in her eyes, I see that something is wrong.

'My guy just died,' she says with great sorrow.

I look at her with shock and sadness. With immaculate compassion, she touches her hand to my face and caresses away the echoes of her own grief.

After Tami leaves, I struggle with the cold. The black Seirus hood that I wear keeps my head warm, but my coat is a bit thin for prolonged exposure in these temperatures.

For some reason, fragments of Akhmatova's poetry begin to slip out of my mouth in whispers. Sometimes, the words even emerge out loud – 'No, not under the vault of alien skies.' No one recognises the lyrics or grasps their meanings.

Eventually, the doors open again to the Rescue Mission. As I sit in the back of the chapel room, the energies of the men and the building begin to overwhelm me. I stare at the tile on the floor – beautiful blue-grey, two-foot squares with a black grout. Adobe accent tiles form a large cross in the center of the room.

When the service is over, one of the staff members gestures to one section of the room. The men in that section rise and disappear to the basement to eat. When my section is called, I travel east down a hallway, north down the stairs to the basement, and then west down a long hallway to the dining area. Volunteers hand us metal trays with a modest dinner. We sit in groups of six at small round tables and eat quickly. When I finish, I exit up the stairs to the west.

On the first floor, I glance up a long staircase leading east to the second floor and the beds. On the left side of the stairwell, there are two alphabetical lists – the

³ Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem," (1961) in Reed in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, 2nd ed., trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1997), 384.

first is the bed list and the second is the mat list. I unconsciously hold my breath as I check the bed list. I exhale when I find my name – kelly, john.

I walk up the stairs to claim my bed.

It is a good day.

A Bad Day

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.

—Robert Johnson, ‘Cross Road Blues’⁴

As I walk on back streets in the early morning light, waves form in my stomach, and I begin to sweat.

I stop by the St. Francis Center and ask for a couple of small plastic shopping bags, and then I head for the Sonny Lawson Park near the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library on Welton Street.

I don’t make it.

On a quiet back street, I step off of the sidewalk onto a small patch of grass, and I kneel down, like a pilgrim on a journey to a holy land. The contents of my stomach heave free of my body and enter into one of the plastic bags. The pain is terrible. A young white couple walks steadily by me without missing a beat of their conversation. My mind is disoriented for a few minutes, but gradually returns.

I continue a few blocks more to the park, find an inviting area of grass, and lie down to heal and rest. The earth is surprisingly comfortable. I gather the energies of the soil, the grass, the nearby trees, and the sky, and I move them through my body, like a long drink of water from a cold mountain stream. Then I fall asleep.

A few hours later, two policemen wake me. It is illegal to be homeless in Denver these days, even if you are a disabled veteran. Since it is daytime, however, they don’t arrest me.

Fortunately, the library is open, and I make a few trips to the bathroom to throw up again and to drink more water.

I skip dinner at the Rescue Mission, but I show up later to see if I make the bed list. I am so weak that I have trouble walking and standing. Unfortunately, I don’t make the bed list or the mat list. About 70 men stand in an overflow line, hoping that some of the lucky ones won’t show up. The overflow line across the street at the Samaritan House seems to be moving faster, so I decide to give it a try.

Most of the men ahead of me in the Samaritan House line seem to be holding a card from a deck of playing cards. It looks like it is some type of a counting system. In a few short minutes, everyone is admitted except for me and one other man.

The security guards talk briefly to each other, and then one states, ‘We have one mat left, and since there are two of you left, we will use our lottery system.’

The man ahead of me looks like he’s in shock – with glazed eyes – like he is struggling to complete a marathon.

⁴ Robert Johnson, ‘Cross Road Blues’ (Vocalion, 1936).

I look at the security guard and state, 'Not tonight. This is between me and him. He was in line first, and it's his mat.' The security guard acknowledges my words, and I head back to the Rescue Mission.

There are about 40 men left in the overflow line at the Rescue Mission. A half hour later, that number is down to ten. Then the security guard makes an announcement. 'I'm sorry,' he states. 'But we are full, and I have to ask you all to leave.'

Another security guard says, 'Hold on a minute.' He makes a quick phone call and then makes another announcement, 'Crossroads says they can take all ten of you.'

Five of the men take off like a shot. The other four talk in Spanish for a minute, and then set off quickly behind them. I bring up the rear. I don't know where I am going, so I try to keep up with the men ahead of me. They quickly leave me behind, but I try to keep them in sight.

The darkness and the artificial light give the evening an unexpected film-noir sensation. After we travel for a few blocks, we enter into an urban industrial area. I continue to struggle to keep up – to keep the men ahead of me within view. A long, concrete corridor extends beneath a bridge. One of the men stops for a few seconds to urinate and then quickly sets out again. I gain a few metres.

After about a mile, the men break left on a side street, and I see a large building that looks like a warehouse. A single man stands watch in the light outside of the door. The men ahead of me enter the building.

A few minutes later, I arrive at the Crossroads Center. I recognise the familiar Salvation Army logo on the outside wall. As I enter, I am given a couple of sheets and a blanket and directed to a large room with numerous mats on the floor. A man directs me to an empty mat.

I fall down on my knees.

A Beautiful Faith

St. Francis Center seeks to manifest God's love by serving those in need and allowing them the dignity and grace to choose their own path in life.

—St. Francis Center, 'Vision Statement'⁵

Something's wrong, I think, as I stand at the threshold of the St. Francis Center.

Outside, scores of billion-dollar skyscrapers reach for the heavens. Inside, hundreds of homeless men and women gather for shelter.

A nation, a state, and a city could do so much better, I think. Somewhere, people have told a large story as they discard something essential. And in other places, people are creating small stories as they struggle with limited resources in a practice of care.

I step inside.

Two long counters form a wide passageway into a large, gymnasium-sized room. Staff sit at the end of each counter below signs hanging from the ceiling that read 'Check-in, A-K' and 'Check-in, L-Z.' Behind the staff, there are hundreds of

⁵ St. Francis Center, 'Vision Statement.' <http://www.sfcdenver.org/philosophy.html>

homeless men and women sitting in plastic chairs pulled up to rows of folding tables. Mounds of clothing and personal belongings surround them.

As I stand in confusion, people periodically walk up to a counter, check in, and join the larger group.

Beside the check-in counters on a wall to the right of the front door, there is a sign that reads 'Intake Office.' I sit on one of the green wooden benches in front of the Intake Office and gather my thoughts.

I stare at the wooden statue in front of me – a bearded man in a monk's robe holds his hands up in the air, his palms forward. Small birds perch on each of his shoulders. Beneath the statue, there is an aged, brass plaque with words that are so worn that they are almost illegible: *For it is in giving / that we receive.*

After a few minutes, another homeless man approaches me. He reflexively pauses for a moment to look in a nearby trash can for anything of value.

'Are you in line?' he asks me.

'Go ahead,' I reply and gesture to the window of the Intake Office.

He talks briefly to the woman at the window, who hands him a clipboard with a few pages of questions to read and answer. He gets an extra clipboard and hands it to me. We take a few minutes to answer the questions.

He finishes first and enters the Intake Office. A short time later, it is my turn. The woman introduces herself as Dawn. She reviews my questionnaire and asks a few brief questions about some of my responses.

Dawn is a young woman who appears to be in her twenties, with shoulder-length, blonde hair. Her clothes are neutral – simple, classical styles. Around her neck, she wears an understated, slender chain with a small, silver cross.

As our discussion concludes, she hands me a St. Francis Center card and states, 'you can start getting mail here right away, and we also take phone messages.' I feel grateful and relieved.

The card contains a logo, an address, and a phone number. The logo consists of two concentric circles. The outer circle contains words – St. Francis Center: A Place of Peace. The inner circle contains an image – a tree of life with a bird on each side. As I gently observe the tree, two faces slowly emerge that were previously invisible.

As I stand to leave, I feel overwhelmed by Dawn's empathy and compassion.

In a nation that worships the opulent lifestyles of the rich and famous, I dream of a story that celebrates a day in her life.

I am astonished by the beauty of her faith.

Good Samaritans

*No way out of memory's
labyrinth.
Slowly life is running out
like drops along a drainpipe.*
—Tove Ditlevsen, 'Morning',⁶

⁶ Tove Ditlevsen, 'Morning' in *The Penguin Book of Women Poets*, ed. Carol Cosman, Joan Keefe, and Kathleen Weaver (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), 234.

My endurance begins to wane, and my body slowly begins to break down.

Then I hear good news – I have been selected for a veteran bed at the Samaritan House homeless shelter.

From the outside, the Samaritan House looks like a contemporary castle or monastery. On the first floor, a stone fence topped with iron bars outlines the grounds. A gated portal allows a path of entry.

The second floor contains an open, outdoor area. From the triangle below, the Samaritan House residents resemble castle guards, patrolling a curtain wall and a corner tower.

As I check in, I notice a bearded man in a monk's robe.

I later learn that Brother Joseph is a Capuchin Franciscan – an Order of friars in the Roman Catholic Church and one of the chief branches of the Franciscans, who trace their origins to their founder, St. Francis of Assisi. The name Capuchin derives from the shape of their hood.

I also learn that in Western monastic traditions, there is often a distinction between monks and friars – monks focus on devotional practices within a similar community, and friars focus on service to a broader civilian community.

A few days later, I see another Franciscan in robes working at the front desk, answering phones and attending to the needs of the residents. He is an elderly man who appears to be in his fifties or sixties. He moves with humility and devotion, and he answers a few of my questions with a gentle kindness.

I later learn that Father Michael is the religious leader of the Samaritan House. Slowly, I begin to heal.

Veterans Affairs

One can only wish these young people well.
—Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World*⁷

The light rail slowly brakes to a stop.

Chimes ring, and a pleasant female voice announces familiar words that I unconsciously ignore.

The doors open, and I step onto a sidewalk. I cross the street and walk north to a red-clay colored building. A large, white VA logo appears on a glass door. Beneath the logo, white lettering reads 'Community Resource and Referral Center.'

I enter into a small waiting room. A handful of veterans are already seated among the dozen chairs.

'Hey, Tara,' I announce, 'I'm switching the sign to open.'

'Thanks!' Tara shouts from behind a reception counter.

I walk to the counter and sign in, and then I find an open chair and sit down. Large, green landscape photos hang on each wall. Additionally, the south wall has two official color photographs – one of President Barack Obama and one of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki.

A few minutes later, Tara emerges into the waiting room and hands everyone a two-page form. Highlighted marks indicate where we need to sign.

⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 206.

‘We’re having a special visitor today,’ Tara announces with excitement, and she nods at the photograph of Secretary Shinseki. I glance at the consent form, which authorises us to be photographed and recorded, and I sign it without giving it much thought.

Another veteran returns the form unsigned to the counter and states, ‘This means nothing to me.’ Then he turns and walks out the door.

What he means is complex – in part, he has zero tolerance for political rhetoric or theatrics.

I feel differently. This means everything to me – it is an invaluable opportunity to advocate for the well-being of homeless veterans directly to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

I allow my panic to calm, and I ask Sharika at the front desk for a piece of paper. She hands me a yellow legal pad. *This would be better in a typed letter*, I think, but I make do with available resources. I pause for a moment and try to consolidate my thoughts into six concise recommendations.

Then I begin to write.

Fifteen minutes later, I am finished. I pause for a moment to review what I have written.

Then I fold the paper into thirds, sit back, and exhale deeply.

When the Secretary arrives, he enters the back door, and we do not see him. Tara states that his visit is scheduled to last for two hours. He spends nearly the entire time in the back, talking with staff who have never talked with me or the other veterans in the front. In the last five minutes, photographers emerge and prepare for a photo shoot.

Then Secretary Shinseki emerges.

He approaches each veteran, shakes their hand, and moves to the next. Cameras click and flash. His movements are calm and relaxed, and his eyes are attentive and relaxed.

When our hands touch, something unexpected happens.

I cannot sense his thoughts or feelings.

I feel certain that, as a retired U.S. Army four-star general and the highest-ranked Japanese American in the history of the United States, Secretary Shinseki knows the word *samurai*.

I also believe that he may not yet have learned the words *sadhu* or *shaman*.

Instead of a normal layer or two, his mind appears to contain scores of layers, like the rings of an oak tree. His current thoughts appear to be perfectly camouflaged among these layers. This does not concern me – I rarely pay attention to anyone’s thoughts unless they choose to speak them.

However, I always pay attention to everyone’s emotions, in this world or the spirit world, and no one has ever touched me before and successfully masked their emotions. Although I cannot feel his emotions, I can see their shape and color. A large, golden sphere radiates in his upper abdomen – it appears to be the color of great compassion.

As he turns to go, I offer him my list of six recommendations.

I never hear from Secretary Shinseki again.

Human Rights

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [or herself] and of his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [or her] control.

—United Nations, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*⁸

I dream of a story that celebrates the value of human rights.

⁸ United Nations, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 25.
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

'Things I Carry.' John Farrell Kelly.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>