

# James Kelman and everyone else

Scott Hames

Published in *Honest Ulsterman* (February 2022)

<https://humag.co/features/scott-hames>

Winter quarantine is a season for James Kelman. Nearly all his fiction is about the dream of breaking routine, of getting outside a predicament while feeling time drag within it. I dedicate this sentence to my children: ‘He keeps imagining going somewhere else and taking a room perhaps with full board in some place far away where all the people are just people, people he does not know and has no obligation to speak to’.

But the dream of elsewhere and other people never lasts. Instead, Kelman Man ventures deep into his own speculation and self-talk, focused not on the possibility of escape but the reality of being stuck. Moments after a wild impulse to ‘pack his stuff and get to fuck’, the hero of *How late it was, how late* admits that ‘some things were gony stay the same. He was still the same, he would still be the same, that was the problem’. There is no running from this voice and what it knows. But embracing stuckness of this portable and fateful kind – really embracing it, as an experience and a style of living – can bring its own peculiar freedom. You may not be able to change your situation, but you can obsess about it, and conjure a new kind of reality from thinking about it in wilful and theatrical ways. Forcing your thoughts deeply into ‘the same’ can make something different happen, or become possible, at least for you.

This is roughly how intellectualism and its language work in Kelman’s fiction, always half-conceding its own vanity. By reputation he is a writer of torment and stasis, but his work is really about footloose mental adventuring. Slack journalism paints Kelman as a stern purveyor of Glasgow echtness, up to his ears in the textures of a real place, but there is a side of his work that scarcely ever touches the ground. In his third novel, *A Disaffection* (1989), a teacher drowns out the staffroom chatter by pondering colour theory and Goya’s late period: ‘This was him off with the concepts once again. Theoretical webs, dirty webs, fusty webs; old and shrivelling away into nothingness, a fine dust. Who needs that kind of stuff. Far far better getting out into the open air and doing it, actually doing it, something solid and concrete and unconceptualisable’. The very copiousness of this thought gnaws away at its healthy

resolution, and tells you what kind of stuff the Kelman hero is made of. The existential quiddity he is yearning for avoids the open air, and must be sought deep within his own clenched interiority. So down we dig, through the stony backfill of Scottish masculinity, clawing our way to deeper mine-shafts sunk by Dostoevsky and Beckett, veined with absurd vehemence and spiteful comedy.

This is Kelman's rightful company, and the paradox of his critical reception. As James Meek observed a few years ago, Kelman's problem is that 'great, radical Modernist writers are supposed to be dead. Dead, and wrapped up in a Penguin Classic: that's when it's safe to regret that their work was underappreciated or misunderstood (or how little they were paid) in their lifetimes'. Far from slowing down, at 75 Kelman has just published a collaboration with Noam Chomsky (*Between Thought and Expression Lies A Lifetime*), soon to be followed by a caustic lampoon of the contemporary literary world, the novel *God's Teeth and Other Phenomena*. A book on the Kurdish national struggle (*The Freedom to Think Kurdistan*) appeared in 2019. If certain aspects of Kelman's writing appear stuck, the wheels are spinning furiously, and this burst of activity invites us to reconsider the sheer range of Kelman's connections with other writers, traditions and artforms. For insight into the man himself, we can look to two collections published under lockdown, a collection of elegies entitled *What I do (memoirs)*, and a reworking of his shortest fictions.<sup>1</sup>

*Tales of Here & Then* collects nearly 70 of Kelman's smallest stories, including at least eleven not published previously. Their brevity sets them apart from the immersive fictions that made Kelman's reputation in the 1980s and 90s, with four novels bounded by the story collections *Not not while the giro* (1983) and *The Good Times* (1998). The lyric intensity of the longer fiction comes from the sensation of time stretching, and the narrator's inner life seeming to gradually engulf the reader's. In these shorter works we find more abrupt and abstracted versions of Kelman Man, a cavalcade of lessness and the standalone encounter: surreal factory yarns, snapshots from vagrancy and the urban margin ('What I fucking do is wander about the place, just going here and there'), dry comedies of anthropological summary. At greater distance from the novels are fabular, self-contained anecdotes recalling Kafka and Goya, like nightmares crisply filed away in a reference book. Duelling twins slash each other with cutlasses, a tartan-scarved man 'walks out of the sea one February morning dressed in a boilersuit & bunnet'. In the most powerful and uncanny tales, such as 'learning

---

<sup>1</sup> James Kelman, *Tales of Here & Then* (Glasgow: thi wurd, 2020), ISBN 9781838103026; and *What I do (Memoirs)* (Glasgow: thi wurd, 2020) ISBN 9781838103002

the Story', we feel much more than we know about 'an old lady sitting under a bridge over the River Kelvin'.

In this new collection the stories are printed in a range of typefaces, from cod-typewriter to fancy serifs, apparently to signal the different 'voices' or psychic accents of characters. The effect is unobtrusive, though their impact on the reader seems an afterthought to Kelman's own sense of vocation. 'I'm going for something visual in these stories, that treats the look of the text as part of the art-object', he writes, recalling us to his teenage fascination with Post-Impressionism. But the typography feels less like a refreshing new encounter than a return to old haunts. Kelman grew up in the blue-collar hinterland of fine art, with skilled tradesmen whose labour was expected to vanish entirely from the finished product. His father, uncles and grandfather worked as picture-framers, gilders and restorers, a 'luxury trade' mending and sweetening the work of more celebrated hands. Kelman assumed he would become a painter, but 'turned 15 and needed out'. He left school and started work as an apprentice compositor, setting metal type in a printing works. A whole world of everyday horror opened itself to him ('a drawback to hourly paid work is how it crushes the spirit'). For respite he would inject himself with lead. If the poison took, it 'ran a thin red streak up a vein in the inside of your forearm', and the boss would send you home. All you had to do now was stop it reaching the heart and spreading everywhere: 'You had to flex your upper-arm muscle as tautly as possible and grip your inside elbow very tightly'. This desperate tension, and its control, is the hallmark of Kelman's art.

At various points he earned his own living transporting paintings for galleries, pondering his own invisibility to art-world schmucks. As a youth Kelman was entranced by the lives of Van Gogh and the French Impressionists, and in some ways the strangeness and ambition of his writing is easier to grasp through analogy with painting. On his better-known realist side, Kelman insists on scrupulous attention to economic realities, rejects stereotype, and scorns the falsities of genre fiction. His outlook often carries an echo of Gustave Courbet's insistence that 'painting is an essentially *concrete art* and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*'. But Kelman is also drawn to Cézanne and Cubism, in love with the doubtful possibilities you can make by looking at the same thing a thousand different ways. On this side of Kelman's writing, really existing things are just a starting point, an impetus to stylisation and things unseen: a young man neatly dunked into a vat of industrial acid, the loving act of a father after a grisly accident.

This more experimental side of Kelman's writing is prominent in *Tales of Here & Then*, but sometimes cast into doubt, on the verge of sinking back into familiar sights and smells. A story entitled 'le joueur' crawls inside one of Cézanne's 1890s pictures of Provençal card-players.<sup>2</sup> The painting is remarkable for the lack of expression in the players' faces, stiff in their clothes and hats, engrossed in activity much closer to work than play. Static and unconvivial, it is a version of still life, but in Kelman's squib the whole scene is humanised and rendered homely, complete with pub dog: 'the widower has tugged this huge coloured handkerchief from his right jacket pocket, and into it has given a muffled honk; and sniffed while stuffing it back out of sight'. No real violence is done to what Cézanne's image is showing us, but what is frozen and serene in 'The Card Players' is made to defrost and puddle at our feet. It's a suggestive moment in which Kelman's powers of sympathetic imagination begin to work against him, insisting on points of emotional entry the 'art-object' is pointedly withholding.

The explanation may lie in Kelman's formative years, and his attachment to the lives behind the names. In a 2002 essay he recalls his teenage fascination with

both Cézanne and Émile Zola and I thought the discussions on art they had together must have been great. I was sorry about the violent quarrel they had and even though my sympathy went to Cézanne, I wanted to speak to him on behalf of Zola: 'If Émile is willing to forget all about it why can't you for christ sake Paul come on, shake hands, life is difficult enough'.

So passionate is his identification with these figures, Kelman struggles to honour the chilly distance that makes their work what it is. Even Kafka is reclaimed as a great realist. For Kelman he is a humane bureaucrat only dilettantes associate with mystery or metaphysics, who 'spent so much of his working time and energy trying to assist working-class people get their insurance claims settled'. The need for real and recognised things can be suffocating. Even the blanks on the page mask an underlying substance, as Kelman learned in his apprentice years in the printing works: 'every so-called "space" was a piece of lead, some metallic compound, or wood, even plastic'. All kinds of something are lurking behind nothing, and exploring them is an endless quest for what is solidly available to moral judgment.

---

<sup>2</sup> This one: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Card\\_Players#/media/File:Les\\_Joueurs\\_de\\_cartes,\\_par\\_Paul\\_C%C3%A9zanne.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Card_Players#/media/File:Les_Joueurs_de_cartes,_par_Paul_C%C3%A9zanne.jpg)

Repetition is the major trope of Kelman's writing, and also its reception. In an essay vindicating the Booker Prize awarded to *How late it was, how late*, James Wood aligned Kelman with the 'nihilist-stoics' Céline, Beckett and Camus, while commenting that he 'is a limited artist, who, like Nabokov's ape, tends to draw again and again the bars of our cage'. Perhaps, but the human ape never sees the same cage twice: the more Sammy goes over the events of his life in *How late*, the more mysterious they become. The fixity of Kelman's outlook and commitment is also its aesthetic strength. Repetition is a way of gripping and expanding the current moment, making a space for reverie and the elusive flipside of self-consciousness: 'I try not to think about it too much because that doesn't pay you don't have to tell me I know it far too well already then I wouldn't be bothering otherwise I wouldn't be bothering but just sitting here and not bothering but just with my head all screwed up and not a single idea or thought but just maybe the aches and pains, that physicality'.

Thoughts become an unfolding experience in themselves, reflection as queasy action. There is comfort in this compulsion, and sometimes a kind of freedom. In Kafka's 'The Burrow' the tunnelling animal falls in love with a house-prison turned gigantic art project. Taking stock of its achievement, the creature notes that 'all this involves very laborious calculation, and the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness is often the sole reason why one keeps it up'. There is plenty of this self-delight in Kelman's over-analysers, but his fiction also concerns the human limits of mental adventuring, when going off with the concepts leads to a cosy nowhere. If for Beckett 'nothing is more real than nothing' (*Malone Dies*), Kelman's genius is for making a whole dramatic and emotional situation from this insight. He grants realist texture and tension to the unpaintable activity of thinking, without making gilded art-objects out of complete thoughts. We often hear his characters chasing the tail of Descartes' *Meditations*, or grasping after all that is the case with the curtness of Wittgenstein, before stalling in a fog of known unknowns: 'And then there were his silences. That inability he had to get out of himself. It was not disgust, not contempt; nothing like that. It was something different altogether. But he had no wish to work out what the hell it was'.

Intellectual fiascos are not a proof or a punchline, but a felt predicament, and one we are made to sit with for a while. This is not the majestic draining of Beckett, conjuring the void as a kind of priestly comic turn. As the narrator approaches a 'conclusion to the whole sorry business' in *Malone Dies*, he pictures his end 'like the crumbling away of two little heaps of finest sand, or dust, or ashes, of unequal size, but diminishing together as it were in ratio, if that means anything, and leaving behind them, each in its own stead, the blessedness of

absence'. Kelman would break the surface of cool reason here with some stumble of logic, or employ a language so charged with profane social this-ness as to force 'thought' into concrete utterance, with a reality beyond its elegance. It is moments of failing scrupulosity that fully concretise the standalone existence of his characters. In 'On Leave' a father looks to his child, being gazed at by a stranger, and sees only that 'the baby looked like whatever it was, what it was doing in its own face'. The sovereign thingness of the face, beyond the exactitude of Courbet or Zola, is honoured by this shrug and smudge of whateverness.

This openness to doubt makes a stark contrast with the vatic pronouncements of Kelman's political essays. 'Those who uphold the Imperial Voice of Standard English literary form sustain its prejudicial and degenerate route, unwilling to tolerate a literature that takes as given that merit may be defined by criteria other than its own.' The furious exasperation is understandable – Kelman has been re-justifying his language for half a century – but it leaves a bitter taste. (A Kelman emotion cheerfully admitted: the teacher in *A Disaffection* says 'I canni understand people who arent awful bitter'.) As Douglas Dunn once observed, there is an odd conjunction of negative capability in Kelman's novels and stories, rich with uncertainty, and the adamant moral judgements of the non-fiction, unshakably sure of who is good and bad. This writing is at once a grappling with the mystery of the living moment, and the product of god-like artistic control. Kelman describes the genesis of his Booker-winner like this: 'I created the story from nothing other than myself. I sat down and began writing and the first sentences remained the first sentences. From thereon I moved, going more deeply, shaping and clarifying, staying with the moment'. Readers of Barthes might say Kelman writes 'Texts' which he expects to be treated like 'Works', monuments to his own rightness and mastery. 'The compositor or the artist is responsible for everything, not just the words but the spaces between', he insists, channeling the control-freakery of old Cézanne. Kelman's own mastery is not in doubt, but there is a fine line between total responsibility and unassailable power.

*What I do (Memoirs)* seems an odd title for a collection of obituaries and eulogistic essays. It gathers tributes to a range of literary and political heroes, including Alex La Guma, Mary Gray Hughes, June Jordan, Tillie Olsen, Amos Tutuola, and Agnes Owens. Midway through his eighth decade, Kelman seems to be displacing attention from himself to his comrades, while recording what they mean in his own story. There is charm and humour in his portraits of the communist agitators Hugh Savage and Harry McShane, not least because Kelman becomes an observer and student in their presence, relieved of the artist's grave

responsibilities. Elsewhere we feel the hazards of an over-passionate empathy, threatening to absorb the lives of others into the author's own narrative of self. 'While he took pleasure in local matters cultural and historical, it was from an utterly un-parochial and cosmopolitan perspective.' 'He was not the easiest of companions. The difficulty was if somebody came out with nonsense he was liable to confront them'. Anyone acquainted with the work or the man will recognise Kelman here, but these are in fact tributes to the Texan writer Joe Slate and the Glasgow communist Leslie Forster. There is a tender directness to these acts of memory, and important contributions to Scottish radical history, though the gap between who you were and 'what I do' can become precarious. In his funeral oration for the Glasgow poet Tom Leonard, Kelman argues that 'if all human beings are unique the story of each person's life is unique'. But the singularity of these stories is bound to fray when drawn into the mental webs of another unique individual, following their keen mind deeper into the murk. This messy, passionate entanglement is the stuff of love and solidarity in Kelman's art, a bond of tense mutuality always on the point of crumbling under strain.

In Kelman's writing introversion becomes a principle of expansion, a voyage beyond the limits of paintable reality. His existential humanism owes more to old-fashioned romanticism than he likes to admit. One of its formal problems is to render 'I' and 'here' as sharable realities, without simply spraying self onto world and erasing the space of a potential 'us'. And yet, non-connection of this kind gives us some of the most affecting moments in Kelman's art, failures to join the dots or share the moment. Near the end of a moving tribute to Mary Jane Hughes, the American writer who first helped him to get published, Kelman admits that their last meeting was sad and awkward: 'There was too much there for me ... too much I needed to say and did not or could not'. Here is the doubtful terrain in which empathy becomes something concrete and irreducible, an experience founded in the gap between reasoning subjects, not their merging. And adjacent to this feeling is my favourite moment in all of Kelman's fiction, on the heedless co-existence of strangers we're stuck with: 'I would just sidle by people, not looking into their eyes; I would gaze at the ground, a person who just gazes at the ground; I had done it before and would do it again, I could always do it again. There are these amazing escapes and we give them to each other, despite everything'. Here is the socialism of leaving each other to it, a republic of social distance in which people are just people, not versions of ourselves, looking and being whatever they're doing in their own faces.