

David Kirby

THE HOURS

I love you guys. There are so many of you!
And look how chummy you are: I can fill you
any way I like. I can do the work that pays
the bills or pursue a hobby or take a walk
or rub cat Patsy's belly or just do nothing,

just lie on the couch and stare at the ceiling,
although some people would say that's doing
something. Some people would say I'm on
a dopamine fast when I'm doing what
I call nothing and they call something, that

I'm dialing down the onrush of the compound
that the brain associates with pleasure.
What's wrong with pleasure? Plenty,
if you get addicted to it: the more
you have, the higher the bar for your next

dopamine rush. Actually it's cat Patsy
who is asleep now on the couch and doing
nothing, though far be it from me to
second-guess a cat or any other
of God's creatures. It's hard enough

to second-guess myself, which is why
I'm going to rely on you hours to lead me,
to open one door after another and beckon
me through. Look, it's time to make lunch.
Look, it's time to go back to work. Look,

it's time to rub cat Patsy's belly again,
but then it's always time to rub cat Patsy's
belly. At night cat Patsy stays out till dawn,
putting the hours that are available to her
to best use, and then she shows up again

as I drink coffee and make my way through
the paper, which brims with everything
everybody has been doing since the last paper
arrived just twenty-four hours earlier.
Twenty-four of you! See what I mean?

And that's just in one day. I have a question,
though: why is each of you divided into sixty
minutes and each of those minutes divided
into sixty again? Answer: the division of hours
and minutes this way comes from the Babylonians,

who derived it from the Sumerians, who were
using it as early as 3500 bc to make
mathematical and astronomical calculations
and were smart enough to figure out
that the use of twelve subdivisions for day

and night and sixty units within each
of those subdivisions was more useful
than using the more obvious choice of ten,
since twelve is divisible by two, three, four,
six and itself, whereas ten has only three

divisors. Further, sixty has twelve divisors,
and because sixty equals five times twelve,
it combines the advantages of both ten
and twelve—in fact, both twelve and sixty
share the property that they have more divisors

than any number smaller than themselves.
This is so fun! And what is more important
than fun, as I have already noted, though
I have been accused of having too much of it,
first by my parents and then by the people

I work with. Phooey on you both!
Though I love my parents to distraction,
and get along with my coworkers just fine,
at least most of the time. Hours, you are
my new best friends. I wish I treated you better.

Sometimes I squander you by being mean
and petty, though I'm working on that.
I never take you for granted, though,
for you, too, are as fungible and tractile
as cat Patsy herself, seeing as how seconds

were once defined as a fraction of the solar day but are now measured against the energy transitions of a cesium atom, meaning that, in order to make atomic time agree with astronomical time, leap seconds must occur

at the rate of about eight per decade, during which period roughly eight minutes contain not sixty seconds but sixty-one. Oh, look, here comes a leap second right now! Just kidding. Like I'd know, or you, either,

unless you were a quantum physicist, and maybe not even then. But this is such a pleasant day: wouldn't it be nice to have just a little more of it? Let's have tea. Gladstone said that if you are cold, tea will

warm you, and if you are heated, it will cool you, and if you are depressed, it will cheer you, and if you are excited, it will calm you. Gladstone was prime minister for twelve years. Can you imagine how much

tea he drank in that time? Gladstone was known affectionately to his supporters as the "G.O.M" or "Grand Old Man," although his political rival Benjamin Disraeli said the letters stood for "God's Only Mistake." Virginia Woolf used

The Hours as the working title for a novel that eventually became *Mrs. Dalloway* because not only is that groundbreaking work of a circadian nature, meaning its events take place within a single day, but it begins

at ten in the morning and ends just after midnight, the chimes of Big Ben dividing the novel into its successive units. "There! Out it boomed," says the third-person omniscient narrator when Big Ben rings for the first time.

"First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air." What a story! It begins with Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh, who were once in love years ago and might be still, but who knows?

All sorts of things happen, and then the book ends much as it began, with Clarissa and Peter as far apart as ever and Peter asking himself what is this terror he feels, what ecstasy, what extraordinary excitement. Oh, sure,

Woolf could have written some tedious conclusion in which the two hesitant lovers have a grand affair and get married and bore each other to sobs, but why? Let the novel be endless. Let it ring down through the ages

just as you hours will. You'll outlive us, though will you even be around if we're not here to count you the way the Babylonians did? I bet you will. I bet you'll miss us! I bet you'll give yourselves a new name.

DAVID KIRBY was a finalist for both the National Book Award and Canada's Griffin Poetry Prize for his collection *The House on Boulevard St.: New and Selected*. He is also the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, a *Booklist* Top 10 Black History Nonfiction Books of 2010, which the *Times Literary Supplement* called "a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense." His latest books are the poetry collection *Help Me, Information* and a textbook modestly entitled *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them*.