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**What Do You Call This?**

**Carmine Starnino**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of English at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## ABSTRACT

### What Do You Call This?

Carmine Starnino

Many of the poems in this collection deal with issues of immigration, exile and cultural loss. The emphasis, however, is not placed on ethnicity in any strict sense, but rather on taking the, by now, familiar premise of the immigrant subject and giving it back to the reader, as the Irish poet Seamus Heaney writes, "with a clean new music in it". The Italian-Canadian identity of the poems – or its Italianita – is enacted either through autobiographical narrative or by mediating on certain relevant cultural and societal artifacts. The collection ends with a long poem devoted to reclaiming and celebrating old, forgotten English words.

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ONE

## DID YOU SAY YOUR PRAYERS?

I did. Hands clamped, kneeling, I radioed my S.O.S. into the coldest reaches of my six-year-old cosmos and waited. They were simple prayers, standard distress calls. Afterwards my bed became a listening post

homing in on every sound around me, the night's ceiling sickle-mooned and starless. If it was a "step" that led me closer to God, there was an evanescence to the feeling prayer left behind: a wet footprint that soon started

to fade. Older, I learned to use the rosary, each tiny bead I tweaked between my fingertips a spiritual dollop I could measure. I prayed for friends, for family, my every concern calculable, although miniscule

in its unit scale. I stopped that too. Each night I fussed with a metaphysical ledger -- how much I'd asked for versus how much I'd given back. The rosary, an abacus I grew tired of. But I've begun to miss it, prayer, or

maybe not exactly prayer, mostly just the suspense of an answer. I like to think those childhood signals still travel through deepest space, and if not his absence, God's silence the reason I now count these syllables.



## PRAYER

God like the hidden wanting to found.  
-- Mark Jarman, "Unholy Sonnets"

God the bright wattage of an oil-lamp  
on a kitchen table. God the whiff  
of woodsmoke. God the clarifying zinc sound  
of a goat being milked into a pail.  
God idling above us like a thundercloud

draining color from the hillside.  
It has rained for days, storms so fierce  
God himself is clutching at us.

God lured to earth like a mist,  
lilac bushes and daisies condensing

into memory, snuffed like wicks  
turned too low. God the mud that belches  
with each step we take. I wake cramped,  
the room damp. Coruscation lighting up  
the darker dusk, God seething in the branches.

## MALOCCHIO

is more than a brief affliction of clumsiness:  
stubbing your toe while hobbling from the bathroom  
to get the phone, pants puddled at your ankles;  
or dropping your favorite coffee mug, the one  
with The End written inside along the bottom  
of the cup, while absentmindedly drying it.  
Both can certainly be tallied in any inventory  
of mishaps. Yet those gaffes are coincidental,  
small spills easily sponged with pep-talk phrases  
like "that's life," "things happen", or (best of all)  
"this too will pass". No, what I'm suggesting  
is a big, 24-hour long, rollercoaster-loose-from-  
its-moorings catastrophe, where every bout  
of errors (light-bulb flickers out while shaving,  
you lean on the sink to change light, sink crashes  
and water spews out of wall) prods another  
calamitous turn (park car at the top of a hill,  
rush into hardware store, spend 600 dollars,  
race out to watch your car slowly roll downhill  
into another car) until the whole day achieves  
a certain momentum, a lift-off that breaks  
the how-bad-can-it-possibly-get gravity barrier  
to orbit forever around your life. Now that's  
malocchio. The Evil Eye. Someone's hateful,  
envious thoughts (think, think, was it that man  
across from you in the resturant sneaking a look

at your new shirt, or the compliments Mario lavished on your hair-cut) irradiating your body with bad luck. You've been left unprotected, vulnerable to the squadron of blunders, debacles, freak misadventures, screw-ups and disasters zeroing in on your position. You need to disappear, reenter the slipstream of your uneventful life as quickly as possible. The universe now alert to every detail of your happiness. So what to do? You visit your mother. She pours some olive oil into the middle of a plate of water, and if the bead breaks apart like a cell dividing, there's hope.

## SAINTS

St. Sebaldus tapped two icicles to spark a flame.

St. Florian doused a blaze with a glass of water.

St. Wennelin can himself be invoked against fires

because one, during his lifetime, snuffed itself  
when his name was uttered. The cherry tree's  
brief, begrudging miracle of white blossoms

bores me. And if I never have to hear another  
song sparrow or eastern bluebird it will be  
too soon: I want real wonders. So you can keep

your autumn with its surfeit of colored leaves  
mass-produced to impress. Give me St. Adelelm  
in a storm, at night, with a one-of-a-kind candle

that stayed lit until he found refuge. Give me  
the withered tree that promptly burst into leaf  
when the crowd pushed St. Zenobius against it.

## **SAINTS, AGAIN**

On display in a cathedral in Naples is a vial of red substance said to be St. Gennaro's blood which liquifies and bubbles at certain times

of the year. The spiritual temperature at which this occurs can probably be attributed to a unique confluence of faith and expectation. The same

mixture which gave St. Francis of Paola's cloak sufficient wood-buoyancy to boat him across the Strait of Messina; that furred St. Wilgefortis'

cheeks with a full beard to help her discourage a suitor; or freighted St. Peter Martyr's words with enough sincerity to persuade the brothers

of his Order that the female voices overheard in his cell at night were St. Cecilia, St. Catherine and St. Agnes, each visiting him from heaven.

## EX VOTO

Upon visiting the ex voto sanctuary in Pompeii

I

It's 1927, and the doctor's stumped as to what's unravelling your mother's health to the feverish, frayed, penumbral edge of life. You say a prayer, and wait for the intervening selvage of God's rescue. The ex voto, then, is the grateful

emblem of that blessing. The scene is painted. Its message furnished by chairs, a night-table with medicine, the testimonial of relatives around the bed, and the sick woman vomiting blood onto a cloth. Other ex votos are spare and elliptical,

find their devotion in the specificity of detail. A walking stick, a crutch, a cast, a splinter, a gall-stone. Or they're small sheets of silver embossed with the body-part once evaporating with illness. A leg, an arm, a hand. All nailed to the wall.

## II

If I had to choose I'd choose the shipwrecks, how their votive veers into art: sudden wind, eruption of ocean (its deep blue bruised black by a darker sky, then dabbed with white to revive the distressed surface of the water), one end of a schooner

swatted down by a backwash of waves. There's a persuasive terror to these storms. Artists who never forgot to imbue each swell with musculature. Or include a deck's plunge and heave tossing a sailor overboard. Details make the adventure true.

María di Pompeii, writes one survivor, in beautiful cursive, sank in the waters of Montecristo on 15th April 1911. Crew miraculously safe. The ship's being pulled under. Its prow, a sieve sifting out the extraordinary. A rowboat provides the clue.

### III

A stage-coach tips over – the two horses galloping too near the edge of a ditch – and the door swings open on the mystery of little Clorinda Carola's escape from death. The kids never get off easy. Lairetta Zanfardino slips right through a balcony

railing. Maria Caccia is snared by some vertiginous stairs. Gaetano Casillo's son tumbles off a fast-moving cart, his body nearly crushed by its wheels. Rosaria Lambiase's daughter plummets the length of a cliff, arms out, knees bent slightly,

like an acrobat, afloat, reaching for the bar, or a figure-skater, after a jump, touching down on the ice. Look up, you'll see Impaziente Guiseppa's bad luck with a train: mid-flail, mid-air, doused in a brightness spotlighting her fall. She lands safely.



#### IV

In fact, almost everyone recovers. Take the freakish circumstance of Alfredo Rispoli's home collapsing as though a hurricane funnelled down and frisked the walls into an efflorescence of fragments. He survived. His ex voto lauding his sanctioned

ransom from death. But sometimes there's no second chance, the ex voto too small a hinge to swing your prayer between the longed-for rescue and its fulfillment. A routine resurgence is no doubt what Antonio and Maria Luongo expected when

they painted their sick-bed drama. We ask God's omnipotence for the return to health of our ill child. I'm left with the pain I imagine at the final outcome: the wall catalogues no subsequent praise for a miracle granted. The ex voto now elegy, not paean.

## WHAT DO YOU CALL THIS?

My grandfather kept his in his pocket,  
taking it out only at dinner. I own one too.  
More emblem than tool really, but I love the way  
it answers my grip, perfectly weighted,  
light, the small crook of its handle  
hugging my pinky, the blade curved  
like the C of my own name, so that  
whatever I need to cut, I need to cut  
towards me, my thumb steadying  
the object, then a surgical half-sweep  
my grandfather used to shear away  
a bit of cheese, a chunk of bread,  
or to divvy up a peach, piling the pieces  
in his glass of red wine. And me, what  
do I use it for? To sharpen my pencil.  
Its crescent tooth bites into the wood, moving oh  
so quick and deep, this doohicky sickle,  
this whatsit scythe. Rongetta. Ron-get-ta.

## THE TRUE STORY OF MY GRANDPARENTS

No squeak of grackle or buzz of lark sparrow.  
The pig's last squeal as my grandfather's mallet  
struck forehead. The sty-stink whelming up.  
No well-water sipped from a palm or cupped  
handful to cool a face. The quails my grandmother  
drowned in a bucket of water. Thrash of wings  
until a red bubble, opalescent, escaped the beak.  
If there was tenderness, I never witnessed it.  
If there was sweetness, they found it elsewhere.  
Away from the carcasses swinging on ropes.  
Away from the emptied rabbits, skinned and pink.  
Away from the glisten of kidney and heart.  
Away from the goats steadied between knees.  
Away from the knife wet-bright with blood.  
Away from the bowl used to catch the gush from  
the throat of a pig hung upside down to drain.

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## PEPINO'S POEM, "GROWING UP IN NAPLES"

Keep your father's vineyard workers snoring  
in the shade (the image of them spooned together  
under the oak like five-year olds at naptime  
is good). Keep the cow-bells, the old man singing,  
the thwap thwap of his stick steering the herd.  
Keep the hoofprints baked in mud. Cross out  
the bit about the goat that gobbled your breakfast  
(too cute). You can do without the long stanza  
on your favourite wool sweater (irrelevant).  
The image of sleet glittering at night like moon-sparks  
is ok; unsure about the olive leaves whispering  
as they rustle. Keep the shrill peeping, each morning,  
of those black-capped sparrows (I can almost  
hear them). Keep the harvest baskets of chestnuts  
and figs, the baskets of apples. Keep the wedge  
of bombers arrowing overhead. Find another  
word for rubble (you use it twice). Keep the old  
harmonica that goes off like a factory whistle  
when blown. I like your mother's black shawl,  
worn from spring to winter; the jugs of wine,  
your father's wild glare. Keep the wind-panicked  
newspaper that leaps from the soldier's hand,  
its flurried pages flapping frantically on the grass.  
Keep the wooden boat with the glass couple  
staring out, the woman holding on to her hat.

TWO

## THAT'S MY STORY, AND I'M STICKING TO IT

The night before she left Sipicciano, Tomaso  
was asked to play his accordian, an instrument  
so old it resembled a crushed cardboard box  
he fanned out in his hands and carefully

creased again, a motion that managed to force  
a sound, a low wheeze that now my mother  
recognizes in my father's sleepy breathing, a long  
O of moaning, full of cold rain, dirt, and chaff

and whatever else the wind needed to gust  
headlong against a window a little girl drowsily  
glanced at, so that years later dream-branches  
still bang and clack, leaves still darken

then blanch as the wind flips them up into  
sunlight, the black shine of a car driving past  
a boy nudging the keel of a broken walnut shell  
across a puddle that shimmers like a little sea.

1955

The year Albert Einstein dies my mother is taught to balance a jar of water on her head. She's great at math, so when she dunks the jar into the well I have her count each gulp as the clay belly grows

heavy in her hands. The year a UK team conquers the Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, the highest unclimbed peak, the village boys take a tippy-toe peek over the stone wall behind her, using a pile

of rocks to stand on. My mother lifts out the jar, places it on the ledge, and while the BBC reveals the world's first color TV, she pinches two opposite corners of a white handkerchief, skipping-ropes it

into a long finger which she coils around the top of her head as a cushion. Not exactly Marilyn Monroe over a subway grating, her skirt huffing open in an uprush of air, but for the boys enough to exceed

the imagination's 200 mph limit, like the record Donald Campbell broke in his turbo-jet hydroplane Bluebird. Yardbird? That's right, Charlie Parker died too. I'd love to introduce some bebop into this,

trumpet and saxophone, a crazy tune each boy



improvises in his heart, as my mother crowns herself  
with the jar, and climbs the hill home, keeping  
level the concupiscence in their bodies, the water.

## TERESA MASI'S PASSPORT

Profession: Seamstress

Height: 1.60 m

Place of Birth: Galluccio, Italy

Date of Birth: 15-10-1942

Eyes: Chestnut

Hair: Chestnut

So far, in reading this, I'm fine.

A little fulsome with nostalgia

but nothing I can't handle. It isn't until  
the final entry -- **Marital Status:**

Single -- that joy taps its finger  
on my heart and I want to praise

this book: each corner crushed  
like a pugilist's nose, the stippled

sea-green binding, the cover's  
imperial star. A book so perfect

it looks fictitious, a movie-prop,  
an object to whet some cinematic

expectation. And the photograph?  
She's beautiful. Is that too much?

Possibly, but she is: chin raised,  
smiling, a wet, feral brightness

to her eyes. I imagine a long pause  
as the Canadian customs officer

stares at this picture, the clipped  
click of his stamp, and as he hands back

the passport, I imagine myself,  
anonymously in line, eyeing her.

## THE GOBLET

A set of twelve bundled in a suitcase and cargoed  
to Halifax. One survives, living its second life  
on my kitchen shelf: no longer to drink from  
and be refreshed, but to remind. Stained-glassed

like a chapel window; like a chapel window,  
fogged, calciferous with age. The clink of a spoon  
smites a clear-belled note for a wedding kiss.  
Sibilance of wet finger whistling around its rim.

Filled with water, it is the well my mother  
broke the ice off every morning. Filled with wine,  
it is the Mediterranean darkening deep-red  
as rain glooms and prepares to pock its surface.

There is a couple on a ship's prow. I blow into  
the cup's mouth (diminuendo-of-trapped-breath)  
and neptune the weather I imagine spreading  
over them: sea-wind, white hurry of stormclouds.

## THE CLOTHESLINE

was the first thing they repaired. The Indian couple, recently arrived. The husband winched the rigging that sagged to the ground. Now everyday their wash billows in its kaleidoscopic charm: yellow T-shirts, red blouses, white shorts and blue saris that banner like flags for their new life, the New World held together by an anachronism: a long looped cord bicycling two runneled wheels which honk whenever the line is launched. Launched. The word itself a reminder of a long voyage by steerage (clothes begrimed and foul from the stay belowdeck); or how yanking on a line surging with laundry is like luffing a recalcitrant sail to pocket the wind blowing westward; its sea-roar.

## ITALIAN CAMPAIGN

It's 1943, Salerno, and a British soldier has just stepped on a mine. His buddy doubles back, makes sure he's still breathing, then retrieves his leg, blown a few feet away, and places it

next to the other, hoping that if he wakes up, he won't wake in shock. I was told this story by Flavio Di Basio, a young, scared carabinieri hiding in the house the two British soldiers

were approaching. My history books have rescued happier acts of charity. An American soldier bending among rubble in Nettuno while his friend crouches behind him, sewing a rip on the seat

of his pants. Or how, in 1944, after capturing the monastery at Monte Cassino, Polish troops grouped together for a photograph and each turned to the other, chins raised, rubbing mud

off their smiling faces. But it's those British boys I can't forget. His friend got down on his knees, and then I knew the guy was finished because his friend lifted his head into his lap and cradled it.

## THE ITALIAN DIASPORA AND A MUTT

A blast, and the swallows dropped to the ground  
in a spray of leaves and branches. He picked off  
a cat feeding behind some hedges, the field mouse  
still claw-gripped in its paws. My old man loved

to fire his shotgun. He'd then use a spent shell  
to toot a tune by blowing across its metal cap  
as if it were the top of a bottle, Zelino at his heels  
yapping and yapping. God that dog adored him.

They still talk about the morning Zelino nosed  
my father's door open and found an empty bed,  
a cleared desk, the Winchester left leaning in the corner  
(too big to fit inside the suitcase), and then how

the dog scampered off to their spot in the woods,  
returning late to crawl under the stool on the balcony.  
For two weeks he woke up, patrolled the woods,  
limped back when it got dark. They say he grieved,

was inconsolable, so lonely that the two-note trill  
of the balcony door's hinge had him running in circles.  
He was found dead one morning, killed overnight  
when the loss rifled through his heart and broke it.

## THE IMMIGRANTS

The New World, like the afterlife, was the Old World, but heightened: oak-shaded gardens, windows open over endless breeze-fragrant fields. Many believed this and spent their lives learning to weigh their hearts against a feather, and be found true. When they died, they died interred in their homes. A token of wood to build a boat; cherries, some fruit for their journey.



**THREE**

## INSOMNIA

The faucet's drip drums some tupperware, and the whole house  
brims with the sound: the staccato knocks of a woodpecker  
punctuating a foggy summer morning in the Laurentians;  
or, back in Montreal, the bicycle I dropped on the sidewalk  
as I bounded upstairs for lunch, the spinning back-wheel  
clipping a hockey card in its spoke. I count each water-note  
the way my father counted every tap of the jeweler's chisel  
against my mother's engagement ring, the hammer-strokes  
a tinny arithmetic that kept him sleepless adding up his love,  
as I am sleepless, the far off ticking of my sink keeping time  
until late one night he stands outside her bedroom window,  
bold with his question, rapping softly on the glass to wake her.

## ORNITHOLOGY

If my father whistled he whistled Sunday mornings  
after his shower: door half-open, an exhalation  
of mist. He rubbed the steamed mirror, brought  
his nose close to his reflection, introduced the tip

of his scissors into a nostril, snipped, slapped away  
the tiny hairs dusting his upper-lip, and then,  
turning his head, trimmed the other nostril. And all  
the time warbling. It was like an ovenbird's call,

a tune you'd hear on a nature show, powerful  
and irresistibly beautiful. The male ovenbird's song,  
the voice-over explains, grows more complex  
during its brief mating season. My father trilled

from the branch of a twenty-five year marriage,  
and if he stopped he stopped only long enough  
to smile a sidelong smile as my mother knocked twice  
and let herself in, shutting the door behind her.

## WHAT MY MOTHER'S HANDS SMELL LIKE

Right now it's obviously garlic. She's chopping a little of it for tonight's pasta con alicia, my father's favourite dish. The sauce calls for three cloves and three fillets of anchovies, mashed with a fork, all brought together to fry in some oil for about two minutes. But after dinner -- after she's scoured the mucked pan and scrubbed the smeared plates, after she's flushed the glasses free of wine-stains and wiped the grease speckling the top of the oven -- take her hands, ruddy with the scalded burnish of hot water, bring them to your face, breathe deeply, and somewhere, worked into her red knuckles, is the cool stowed in a pile of sheets just off the line, is the scent of one's soul in a dry dwelling-place.

## A FATHER'S LOVE

At four, maybe five, I'd hand-and-foot my way  
into his lap, and, sleepily perched there, let my mind  
tip back from that high ledge until I felt myself  
plunge through the air. I say this and you think  
it was a test of my trust in him, my imagination  
having me plummet as he held me, knowing his love  
would never let me hit the ground. Yet he'd slam  
the front door, late from work, and stomp past  
as I ran to greet him. He'd toss his jacket on a chair,  
take a plate from the cupboard and pick among  
the leftovers. He'd sit in the den, switch whatever  
I was watching, and eat, slumped, in front of the TV.  
That's when I'd hoist myself into his lap, scaling  
his granite unconcern; and, drowsing, dropped away,  
slipstreaming in his arms, hoping he'd catch me.

## STOP ME IF I REPEAT MYSELF

Get this. My mom, while brooming, elbows a mirror. It shatters. That same moment, as it's later revealed, my dad is strolling along the beach, the brittle uproar of surf smashing into his ankles, and splits his heel

on a buried bottle-shard. Her bad-luck a shockwave that derails his step. But couldn't that have happened regardless of her accident? Wasn't that single stave of glass a random danger? Maybe, but it's my duty, when

coincidences become that suspicious, to try and draft the bloodstained sandprints into a complicity so pat it survives your smirk. "Some things Mr. I'm-So-Smart you just have to believe." my dad told me, "Got that?"

## ROPE HUSBANDRY

Lark's Head, Cat's Paw, Monkey's Fist, Constrictor. I've mastered each. I can show you, step by step, a Flemish Eye, a Granny. But if you ever come back I'll start with a True Lover. Its breaking strength (dare I say it?) is very low. Or better yet, the Thief: capable of holding a large load (the fleeing bandit, no doubt) but confuse the wrong end of the rope and its quick release can be disastrous. I think your favorite would be the Wagoner's Hitch, a method that bowses down fast on an object but secures a temporary purchase, and can therefore be easily undone. I'd rather offer you a simple, well-made knot, nothing too fancy, one that grips very tightly and stays tied. Hangman, Strangle, Shroud laid.

## ROME

If I remember right it was at the excavation we stopped arguing. Wow-would-you-look-at-that. I took the binoculars and tipped my gaze deep into the crater, a close-up peek at a lodging we might have lived in: palatial, built with gypsum from the Judean desert, granite from Sinai, me an aging doctor, you a much younger woman whose body I could only browse. Was it jasmine that scented your neck? Forgive me, the scrim of centuries hazes everything. But I haven't forgotten this: our dinner with Quintus, your laughter at his jokes a pitch too high; your gaze when he handed you the mulsum sauce held a moment too long. I confronted you -- there, right there, beside the fountain, the cherub blurting out a clear continuous note of water (where now one in khaki shorts and dark socks bends low, cheek to its surface, and blows and brushes away the sepulchral dust). Some blurring; I nudge the view to the right. Two muscled workmen, drinking Brio, sit on a just-exhumed column, meet my gaze and are waving at me. I glance at you. You're waving back. "Let's go," I hissed and tugged at your arm, the old anger returning.



## MY OBITUARY

If I write Suddenly on October 18, 2035 of a heart-attack, did I just make all that up, or have I somehow foreseen it, my imagination briefly heightened by a surge of omniscience? I read once, in some science magazine, that physicists now believe the particles of our time collide with "tachyons" traveling backwards from the future. I've experienced that prescience, I think, the uncanny moment those two forces hit, where I scribble down "bird" and a flock of sparrows fly over. But is there another explanation? If, let's say, I continue with Beloved husband of Patricia Giannone, have I received some tachyon-enriched matrimonial message, or did I now send one out; like the idea of "bird" I hurled into the world through language, only to find it boomeranging back to me, sending quick shoals of shadows across the yard? Can writing be that self-fulfilling? Dare I have children? Twins maybe?

## **AFTER CARAVAGGIO'S DAVID WITH THE HEAD OF GOLIATH**

On my twenty-eighth birthday

It's not Goliath, but himself  
Caravaggio beheads. A chore  
so shitty he has his younger self  
perform it. The boy suffers  
the duty and dangles the head  
for our inspection: the shock  
incised in its frowning brow,  
its eyes inky and unfocused,  
the mouth's exaggerated gape,  
the neck's leakage. He'd just as soon  
toss it in disgust, this skin-sack  
heavy with one man's sense  
of blasphemy. Hard to imagine  
how despair can befoul a life  
to such macabre punishment.  
What sin so loathsome Caravaggio  
needs his art to purge it? Still,  
something in the boy's grimace  
spooks me: his clenched look  
of guilt, of terrified complicity.  
Dear Berryman, dear Lowell,  
will I ever be asked to dispense  
such justice? Is it my own head  
I will one day grip by the hair?

## NEW WORLD ORDER

They are everywhere, gaping beneath hedges,  
tucked inside moss. Their scrutiny keyed  
to the merest chirp of wren-song. Nothing  
is left to serendipity. The perch and swoop  
of each swallow's dip from birch to birch  
has been accounted for. The copper each leaf  
is freckled with. We have sent warning  
to the forsythia, tiny room the bee hides in.  
The end is coming: not wind and rain, but the sky  
decanted of cloud and light. They will grind  
away at these woods; all sycamore and acacia,  
All blackberry, beech and gorse. A million  
wet, ineffable buffetings to give it the shape  
of shapelessness. Yes, even the willow-herbs.

**TO THE WOMAN WHO COMPLAINED  
MY METAPHORS WERE MASCULINIST**

Ok, I think I'm on the right track. I'm on a beach in Scauri as I write this, trying to get it all in, hold the moment, the now and the not-now, the page a patch of sunstruck sand giving back the day's heat, a warmth that passes from this sentence to you. But no hidden meanings. I want to see without comparing, without analogy; to stare at the sea until the roiling fact of it is enough, stare at the reef until its existence is doubled only by its shadow on the waves. If a metaphor comes -- nouns, say, clumped like mussels knuckled into the hollow of a rock -- throw it away. I'm trying, believe me. I'm trying. But it's hard to abandon old habits. Each word a solid thing, but bouyant, like a flat stone, leaf-light, skipping across the water. Oops.

## **WRITER'S BLOCK**

Two gnarled turds, each leaking a cloudy smear  
of rust; an ocher that stains the water the way  
moods darken the clarity of one's concentration.

## DIRTY WORDS

Faccia de catzo is a good one. Mingia and va fa'n culo are also good. Words with a goat-stench to them, or the reek of wet hay steaming in the sun. Not exactly what's meant by "dirty", I know, but for me they are dirty; fecal-brown in color, sometimes with a sodden, fetid smell, like rain seeping into the dirt floor of a chicken coop. Porca madonna, for example, sounds moldered and sour; effluvia of ripe figs, split by their fall, rendered vulgar by the summer heat, shitting seed into the ground.

FOUR

## CORNAGE

I

I was always litten-faced as a child. My features  
gaunt and mournful, as if whittled by the emaciating  
rigours of a forty day fast. No doubt I'd have been  
a bemoil during the seventeenth century, the name

given to the young boy employed as a scarecrow  
due to his unnerving scrawniness: an ascetic rebuke  
to crows carousing in the crops. Maybe some sort  
of safeguarding should also be what I should be

doing here. Cornage was the duty of every tenant  
to alert his distant master of approaching invaders.  
I have thereby stationed this poem on a tout-hill, where,  
in time of danger, it will blow a horn as warning.



## II

In the way that a hare scampering across one's path was thought to disorder one's senses by its odd running style, there are words which, by their touch and hop, afflict our enunciation

with a sort of madness. Horshwoil, steeped in the tidal shhh of its own pronunciation, is, for some, inescapably brinked on the drop-off and plunge of the unsayable. But getting it right brings

a peculiar giddiness, the sheer exhilaration of a threat circumvented. Like an eleventh century convict pardoned by a neck-verse. The test? The first part of the Fifty-first Psalm. The catch? Reading it in Latin.

### III

Okay, maybe not exactly "like". Since afterwards, unlike us, the unlucky (meaning nearly every neck faced with the neck-verse's noose, Latin being a language few outside the Church could speak)

were hanged. Beheadings, it seems, were reserved for the privileged. That is until Dr. Joseph Guillotin dreamed a "philanthropic decapitation machine" to carry out executions "in a twinkling", regardless

of position or wealth. The condemned, he insisted, felt only a "refreshing coolness". Your last worry whether you had sufficient bell-penny to afford the passing-bell they would ring at your funeral.

## IV

Ale and a loaf of bread placed on the corpse's chest were for the sinne-eater to consume; hired to "absorb" the sins of the deceased, and spare him a needless stay in purgatory. But purgatory wasn't the problem --

premature burials were. In the thirteenth century the French set aside two dismale daies each month. Here's one daie that was almost dismale: a farmer comes to life during the procession to the cemetery

and shouts and bangs on the coffin lid to be let out. The cautious sometimes set up a Bateson's belfry: a bell tethered by string to the dead person's thumb, to be rung from six feet under if they unexpectedly awoke.

V

Words I'd like to get into a poem: eagle-stone, ezel,  
cornage, buckram, scrynne, waes hail, sillyebubbe.  
Think medieval, think Old English, think so archaic,  
so orphaned, so disregarded, so unused they seem

each to disappear into the slow, self-searing glimmer  
of their vanishing, like the faint phosphorescence  
emitted by decaying matter. I want to smuggle in  
this fox-fire, angle the small dole of pilfered light

to a line's wick, then set the conjured illumination  
on my desk like an oil lamp. Doeges-eage, horshwoil,  
necke-verse. Some nights I feel like St. Fillian who,  
it's said, read by the glow given off by his left hand.

## VI

A hollow stone or fossil toting a trapped bit of debris that rattles when jiggled. It was believed that eagles, in whose nests eagle-stones were sometimes found, were unable to bear healthy offspring without them.

At least that's the story, which, I guess, is also what these poems are about. Their etymological mission to stall their own miscarriage using the accrued power of old words, objects seemingly empty I can shake

for noise. How a fifteenth century noun for "cotton-linen stiffened with glue" is also an eighteenth century verb "to give the false appearance of strength." As in, I hope I haven't buckramed my stanzas with such long lines.

## VII

Let's play it the other way. What dry, calcified  
logo-speck has been left to rattle forever inside  
our words? Well, there's bytesheip in bishop (a joke  
on his official title -- as if he were a shepherd

who bit the animals he was given to protect).  
And in blacksmith, bren-waterys (or water-burners,  
since their iron products were plunged in water  
while still hot). Ezel began as a beast of burden,

a donkey loaded with firewood. The word itself  
a hoofed quadruped that easily carries the rest  
of this poem's charm. I return it to its new spelling  
like a canvas mounted on a three-legged frame.

## VIII

Waes hail, dear reader! They call this sillyebubbe. Its frothiness discovered by surprising some cider with a spray of milk. An act of improvised effervesence during the 1500s became the preferred beverage

for almost three hundred years. There are accidents so serendipitous it's nearly impossible to stand out of their way. Even the word itself, in a moment of happenstance (a pub argument maybe, over

Shakespeare's sonnets) changed properties.

So by the 1700s "sillyebubbe" was used for writing that lacked substance, a spiced spindrift of phrases that pleased the mouth but ignored the stomach.

## IX

When one's bibacity confronts one's sense of tact  
bybbe is the clever trick of taking frequent sips  
so that a great amount of alcohol can be ingested  
without the appearance of excess. I got that from

the seventeenth century, where etiquette required  
a stirrup-cup be handed out to those on horseback  
before their departure from an inn, and that gave us  
St. Bibiana, the patron saint of hangover sufferers.

I try not to think about the nineteenth century,  
where it was said "spontaneous human combustion"  
struck those bodies turned so flammable with liquor  
they ignited: punishment for drinking too much.



X

Foodful meant a bouffage of swan, seagull, and peacock. Each roasted whole, feathers replaced before serving. In medieval times, feasting (or lurching, mouching, yaffling,

and glosing) was sanctioned by the belief that bouts of excess helped achieve self-control. If you expect gluttonous nourishment here be reminded of the Greek King Tantalus who

for an eternity was made to stand in water that receded the minute he bent over to take a sip, with branches of fruit above his head that pulled away as he reached out for them.

## XI

Trust me, deception is part of the game. It's best  
to be corkscrew-eyed in your dealings, sharp-sighted,  
chary and inquisitive. What with the bird-swindlers  
and their ambiloquence, betwattling double-talk,

sweet-smelling unscrupulousness, who hustle expensive,  
extravagantly colored birds, puffed and outrageous,  
and, on closer inspection, entirely bogus: greenfinches  
re-plumaged and dyed. But the worst, the absolute

worst are the glimmerers. Shy, soft-spoken young men,  
so nervous they grip and wring their caps, and who,  
at each doorstep, stammer a request for a single live coal  
to start a fire. Invited in, they filch small valuables.

## XII

If you alleged a poem "smelled of the lamp," you meant it was verbose, its word-whiff caused by too much "burning of the midnight oil." Or, using a culinary term for nestling strips of fat between cuts of lean meat,

you might have complained that incke-pot phrases were interlarded. Verbiage, like the "ear-sores" given off by a fishwife's vulgar-voiced huckstering, belonged in the market. In poetry, as in polite conversation,

unmentionables, unutterables and unwhisperables were to be treated with the same euphemistic efficiency that allowed Victorian women to retreat to the loo to "pluck a rose"; men, to "exonerate their paunches."

### XIII

If I say that daisy comes from doeges-eye,  
or "day's eye," obtained from the flower's  
sun-seized, bloom-splayed, feather-edged  
morning yawn of "opening its eyelash-like

petals to the new day," I've given you a place,  
in our arboreal language, at which a branch  
separates from the trunk. And if I say blash,  
concocted from the mix of "blow" and "dash,"

was once used to describe a heavy downpour,  
muscular with wind, the leaves hanging on  
for dear life, I've given you the charm of two cherries,  
umbrellaed by foliage, sharing a single stem.

#### XIV

A scrynne was a medieval marvel-coffer. A box,  
ivory-hasped and bossed with jewels, that held  
great ecclesiastical toys: a set of shoemaker's tools  
manufactured from St. Hugh's bones; a bottle

of St. Morand's blood (patron saint of wine makers);  
a morsel of a ship's mast still electric and bluish  
from St. Elmo's fire; St. Francis Xavier's big toe bitten off  
by a female pilgrim as a keepsake while his body

was displayed (its "odor of sanctity," released  
upon death, sweetly clouding the wooden chest.)  
If I could, what would I save in my miracle-crate?  
A lap-top, a coffee mug, the Goldberg Variations.

## XV

For the prophets who wrote in boustrophedon,  
the first line turned from left to right, the second  
from right to left: much as oxen (bous) were,  
during ploughing, steered (strepho). I wonder,

given the barminess of the 1800s (an age when yowlers  
were hired to run screaming through orchards  
begging the trees to bear fruit), if boustrophedon  
helped to seed boanthropy, a rare delirium

in which a man imagines himself to be an ox.  
As in the book of Daniel where King Nebuchadnezzar  
“was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen,  
and his body was wet with the dew of heaven.”

## XVI

To discover that a certain grub-like insect,  
when ground, gave the medieval world  
a pigment called vermiel is to find poetry  
somewhere I would never have thought

to look. Nothing is beneath consideration.  
Vermiel especially. How it gave sealing-wax  
its blood-splash, and lipstick its bright  
publication on a cheek (some say a daub or two

helped an artist trick the Shroud of Turin  
into life). Even this poem is one more example  
of the usefulness in scavenging through  
the day's refuse, saving anything of value.