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Pierre de Ronsard

Wendell Berry

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The Salad

by Pierre de Ronsard
(Translated from the
French by Wendell Berry)

Wash your hands, get them good and clean,
Hurry and find a basket, friend Jamyn;
Let us gather a salad, and so unite
To our passing lives this season's fruit.
With a straying foot, a roving eye,
Here, there, in a hundred out-of-the-way
Places, at the top of a bank, across a narrow
Ditch, or in a field left fallow
That of itself, never disturbed
By the plow, bears every kind of herb—
I'll go this inviting way alone.

And you, Jamyn, take that direction.
For the tufted shepherd's purse look carefully,
And for the narrow-leafed daisy;
Watch for burnet, good for the circulation
And for the spleen and for indigestion.
I will gather wife-of-the-moss, the sweet
Rampion with its tuberous root,
The buds of currants, fresh opening,
Whose green is first to announce the Spring.

And then, reading the ingenious Ovid,
The splendid verses where he serves as Love's guide,
Step by step, still rambling, let us go
Back home. Rolling our sleeves up to the elbow,
We'll wash our greens by the handful
In the sacred waters of my beautiful
Fountain, blanch them in salt water, stir
And sprinkle them with red wine vinegar,
Richen them with the good oil of Provence.
Oil that comes from the olive trees of France
Ruins the stomach, it is so inferior.

And so! Jamyn, here is my sovereign cure
Until my veins are rid forever
Of this abominable quartan fever
That has so used me up, body and mind,
So weakened me that I may never mend.
You'll say this fever has left my senses loose,
That I've gone mad— with my salad and my Muse.
And you'll be right. I want it to be so.
This is the madness that rectifies my woe.

And then you'll tell me that it's better to live
Like the parasites that interminably thrive
On Kings, on credit and good luck,
Bloated on the pomp and honor that they suck.
I know it all, too well; want none of it,
For such a life makes life a counterfeit.
It requires one to lie, deceive, and flatter,
To mask one's face, laugh without laughter.
No more for me. I want no part of it.
To live that life makes life a counterfeit.
To follow in your steps at court, I grow
Too sick, too deaf, too sluggish, too slow,
Too much afraid; besides, I now require
A restful quietude, no public care
Hung over my poor forehead like a sword.

In a little while all courtiers will be bored,
Failed, gray—or dead, lying in a coffin.
In this one present that God has given
They will have spoiled their natural gentility
To hoard too much of this world's prosperity—
Uncertain good that usually is gone
Before it reaches the third generation.
For fortune with her unsettled disposition
Cannot for long abide men's ambition,
Demonstrating by their sudden fall
That it's a thing of wind, this free-for-all
Of the world; and the man's unhappy indeed
Who lives exiled at court, nor dies in bed
At home. Far be from me the pomp and privilege
That betray us with appearance, the sacrilege
Of disguise—that abrade and fret us inside
With gnawing envy, care, and pride.

The man who climbs to honor in frivolous matters
Seems a Colossus held in fetters,
Confined by hasps and hinges, bars and nails;
His face is puffed with rage; he rails
Like Neptune—or if he could he would.
His magnificent swelling astounds the neighborhood,
Outwardly enriched with azure and with gold,
But when one looks inside this blazoned, bold
Corpse, there's only plaster and kneaded clay.
Then the imposture's out—all false display!
And after that this Colossal trash
Can, from his high eminence, abash
Only the simplest fool; those with good sense
Grimace in contempt at such a performance.

Ignorant man, so short of wits and days,
Forgets it's only a game that Death plays,
A game of chess, this brief, miserable life;
And that when Death has pacified its strife
He mixes all together in his sack
Knight, Pawn, King, Queen, and Rook.
Thus the earth under the same verdure
Holds commoners and Kings, by law of Nature,
Who, having no prejudice, impartial mother,
Cares no more for one than for the other.
And thus she demonstrates that worldly glory
And greatness make a sounding, hollow story.

Ah, how Virgil pleases me when he sings,
How the old father of Corycia every spring,
Busy with his hoe through daylight's length,
Worked his difficult fields with all his strength,
And at evening, buying no expensive wine
At the tavern, nor any meat, choice or prime,
At the butcher's, loaded his table with things to eat
That, because he was hungry, seemed to him more sweet,
Better and tastier than any Lord's
Who, stuffed with meat and honor, bored,
Picks and finicks over earth's largess
That, eaten without savour, is savourless.
Which do you think was happiest of these two:
The great Crassus, to his "position" true,
Who, envious of Pompey's Triumph, of that *word*,

Went out to die by the Parthian sword,
Or this old husbandman who stayed at home,
Lived in his garden, and never set foot in Rome?

If we only knew, said Hesiod, how well
We are served by the asphodel,
And how to care for it, the human soul
Would prosper, and the half surpass the whole.
By the half he meant the plain coherent life
Of country people, free of ambition's grief,
Who have the health of unpretentious things;
By the whole he meant the happiness of Kings.
Nature, said the good Horace,
Is content with little, and our human race
Does not need much; and yet we are so beguiled
By greed that for the whole we let the half be spoiled.

Give me my salad before I preach all day!
It's too cold for a sick man, you say?
What of it! You be the doctor, Jamyn, my friend,
But let me live at ease until the end
At least, and don't waste your breath
By prophesying either life or death;
For you no more than I can think of ways
To shorten, much less to lengthen out, my days.
It is necessary to board old Charon's bark
At last, that tomb vaulted like an ark.
Birth is the fatal passage, and here is why:
If he weren't born, no man would ever die.
And he's a fool who hopes for a better sum;
Birth and death are the same; the two are one.

NOTES

The poet Amadis Jamyn was first Ronsard's page and then his secretary.

M. Licinius Crassus, after the war against the pirates, received an "ovation"; his colleague and rival, Pompey was granted a "triumph," a higher honor. In order to increase his military standing, Crassus undertook a campaign against the Parthians, during which he was killed.