

Orthric Sonnets

ANDY VERBOOM



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THE FIRST SONNET



for KDW
Brodyaga to my Shavka

The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion
such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some county town.
Such monsters never live long, it is said; one has never seen a prodigy
of that sort cropping grass in a field. Two heads on one body
do not make for length of life.

~ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*



Envy

Seeing staying-put kids spit-swap
with moving-away kids and then grope
with cheap swiss knives to draw pimento
mouths across their life lines, I'd thought

we could exchange our sexes. Simple.
Vow a slapped-fat-tick's worth of not
never or always, a well-pocked
pact. But as the sun cuts a dimple

in her cheek, she dream-buys a single
ticket, flies from not having it
to the coast of not having it.
I keep it in a coop, a symbol.

Hoofing It

In the spring of guerrilla sculpture
the doe surfaced, blood gelled, hooves first
from the lot. I crouched at the works
of marvel's first colours—the sulfur

of pissed-on snow, venison ulcer,
cloudlessness—later brought back thirst
and a pipe saw. There are some perks
to thinking dragons' teeth might culture

in your gums' boonies, to reversing
sport utility fetish over
this landscape or another, older
kid's rabbit foot: your pretexts worsen

with age. Hermetic jam jar chauffeured
the hoof into the year, past closure

past comic stripping of its person
for scrap, never limping its odour
around the room, and through my pauvre
capacity to think perversely

made known it wouldn't rot. *No vultures
allowed!* it said and winked, the flirt.
Years I've prepped, I've known many skirts
lacquered at bars, lighters like pulsars

will crowd me as if to engulf her
too, lungs' gossip pushed at me, spurted
in the ear, as the mind's inert
deer wander on or scatter, pulped.

Erring

Blushed cheeks backdraft dangerously
like she tactically smashed the window
of her nose with a hooligan to
let the fire breath. Picture Clarice

with a bigger moth in her teeth,
red feelers' sweeping innuendo.
After the called cab comes, she limbos
into predawn. After half-sleep,

after the third person's untwinned shoe
punts him as he goes for the switch,
there's gluey grenadine, blood knit
through his fingers, a curt twinge shooed

away despite coagulate
coating the room. You must acquit

because no one really kills in fugue
provinces, right? Look, both their mitts
painted the wall in superscript.
Showering, he recalls a pink cue

walking fleshy stilts down a creek,
a child's field guide vowing *flamingo*,
instrument stillness thawing into
the unfinished mural of trees.

Maybe it's just propriety
that props up guilt. A trusty pinto
holds his pink lance while some knight sings to
the perfect broad, absorbent leaf.

Sonneteering

Here it is, word for word for word,
a poem that took the place of moxie.
A rose rose arose as its proxy,
a fragrant line up from a turd.

That line, in turn, was heat transferred
onto the stones of orthodoxy
dropped in a pitcher by a foxy
and fabulously dusty bird.

Not stones, exactly. More like rocks.
Not dust but inexactnesses.
The rose ain't shit, the cactus says.
Did you know that the cactus talks?

It's recent, but he practices
by chatting up the actresses

who play the raven off the clock.

Do you know where Arrakis is?

More muppeteers than actresses,
one works the beak, one does the squawks,

one yanks the rotting bungee cords
that thresh the wings and tilt the boxy
head, one's reapplying epoxy
to the googly eyes, one records

the water level float toward
the pitcher's lip. The cactus talks, he
expounds on poisoning goldilocksy:
not under felt, not overboard.

Creating a Two-Headed Dog through Extraordinary Surgical Skill

for Shavka and Brodyaga

Two-headed dog
bites a scrub nurse.

The universe:
a catalogue

hawking gulag-ish
species of birth.
What could be worse
than monologue?

Sharing your hearse
with its own pending.
Being condemned
to two obverses.

Means over ends
is how men justify forensics.

It doesn't require a perversion
to demand this exotic bend
in what dogs are and how they're spent.
Soon, our bodies will be blank verse.

Spring'll be warm, the team post-op.
They'll watch blades fly beneath the mowers.
They'll hold their rest as if it were
the wedges of a sandwich, cog

wheels of their spines jammed against god,
frost, or some other Russian curse,
the scrub nurse's two heads immersed
in clinching who's the underdog.

Sending in an Avatar to Do the Dirty Work

As he approached the terraces
I don't know if he saw the earth-bound
water or water-bound light-bursts. Mound
of huge shards that embarrasses

a giant potter? Seraph's fizzy
pyramid of champagne coupes? Asked round,
was told I should've asked him, found
it's easy for omnisciences

to forget each creature's closed circuit.
He'd watched the moon cross the valley,
roll into the bottom rice paddy
like a white marble, then uncorset.

Light cut paddy water, intent on
bathing, him intent on intention

it seemed. He'd squinted as her clothes slid
like snow from limbs. He'd looked up canny
as if to say, *You hear that, daddy?*
Clothes thunder into a soft verdict.

I was no sign. In fairness, is
there an answer? She climbed up, dove down,
from terrace to terrace, slowly crowning
the hill. He followed. There's a gist

I hoped he'd learn. The perilous
climb, the jagged clods she scrubbed with, brown
water turned red. At least a frown
like two clumsily conjoined faces.

Returning to a Poem Returned to

I miss your witchy, dog-breath mouth,
hooking a pinkie in for that
piece of the language of somewhat
before you express post it south.

Genetic hopeless: a cat's
sequence of unsolvable bodies
settled by a martyred copy
of *The Situation in Quantum*

Mechanics left flat as chapatti
on vision's doormat. Yet it moves
till you stomp on it. What resolves
in out-of-focus pics of cloudy

dictums? I shall not kick the humdrum.
I ramble over Himalayan

snows, commission resigned, feel dowdy
bone china glaciers carving grooves
in roastbeasts beneath. They're absolved.
Why not me? I turn, thank my hardy

Sherpa for tireless service, but
she's turned to me to thank her hardy
Sherpa. No eruption, no faulty
translation from a sans-skirt chant,

no bone shivs, no arrowhead myth
abandoned in the lower gut.
Just whiteness. Just the empty glut
one gets from snuffing scales off moths.

Sonneteering 2: Resurgence

The stars are chalk-white cruise ships anchored
in infographic parables.

We're flies tasting a pear-stacked bowl's
sweet other-continental lacquer.

The space between's all supertankers
constellating half-bear, half-bull.

Our boundaries are bearable
as long as Goldblum plays the actor

in Cronenberg's *The Fly*. We're bored
of remakes. We adore the remix.

Our dozen hairy legs are helixed
like flypapers tossed in a drawer.

When spiders abseil silky felix
culpae down into our folkloric

safehouse, what can we do but fictions?
Fight a pack of tyrannosaurs
who've linked their nubbly arms in chorus
line and roared out, *I'm not a Nixon?*

Oh, Jeff, our Jesus particle.
Redeem us from the coming zapper.
Reassure us the Earth's a danker
backwater than a port of call.

But lend us sexy spectacles,
help us keep our compound refractors
on light, gravity, human rancour
when the alien space bats call.

Woman Arrested for Frankencat Experiments

*She had become obsessed with hitching
a new breed of dog. But with no
pedigree, her dogs were let go.
Life is doggedness. Meanwhile, It's*

*estimated Warsaw's bewitched
by tens of thousands of inchoate
free-living cats—already so
stage! Such machina! Very bric!*

—so, frankly, who would notice three
or four hundred? A city chuckles,
a whole busful of homeless schmucks
disappears, no? Not to get twee

but an animal's love can buckle
a human, so humans unbuckle

their lovely pelts pre-emptively,
leave naive art to reconstruct
a taxidermy of dumb luck:
Franken means Frankish, Frank means free

for instance. By that politic
the photo of her freezer showing
two kittens' piggyback is snow
inch-thick on a bearberry stick

and nothing more. We know they're stitched
together somewhere. That we know
without due process is a slowly
emergent property of glitch.

Hating Not the Satyr but the Game

In one's absence, rivers aren't kept
from running. No banks collapse.
Fish issue in an unpeopled bath.
Currents still pause to genuflect

at each eddy. She'd be a wreck
on the dock, liberating cats
-gut from its pupal-stage fishjackets.
Or palaquinned by insects, schlepping

nets on the river's surface, peepshow
for those below. I'd sneak up, heave her
in, vicariously receive her
hot divinity/water creole

through the lips of that very wide creature.
Who do you hope returns? a teacher

feeds me bitter vegetables, treacle
liquor, fans away the procedure
-generated bugs, and asks. Either
midstream carp stare up through the peephole

of their blue door, or I drain the dreck,
glass after tributary glass.

After forty-odd years? he asks.

Where many brave glasses have met

in an ocean of emptiness,
I'm locked out of the only bathroom.
No lightning makes illuminati
out of the inmates of distress.

Considering the Oracle at Frigidaire

No cave, no remote war-gun voice,
no spirits queued to autograph
her abyss with their bodies' chaff.
Just a fridge like an omphalos.

Noon before the first of the boys
cracks an airlock, remembers caffeine,
haunts hall, halts in kitchen door, laughter
quickly fed to silence. The noise

of her fingers across the sheer
fridge face, mountain goats' brinksmanship
across magnetic poetry slips.
Piss under her foot, a gold mirror.

Village gathered at the flat rows
of a blighted field, the frat bros

mass at the table, open beers,
and send in one who took art crit
one term before he fucked that shit
and who reports, *I'm out of here.*

She's pissed again, her feet like buoys
in the pool of it, the pool a raft
like a tan army man chief-of-staff's
plastic base, but her hands aren't poised

on binoculars aimed at coitus
and pointing ruinously. They're half
blurred with re-sentencing the past
arrangements. I warn, she destroys.

Preserving the Jarheads

for Judith, on the occasions of her sawing through Holofernes's spine

Unscrunching those skeptical foreheads
requires popping lids off the vessels,
reaching in with the tongs and special
spatula. It's more or less morbid

than razoring the algae porridge
and other pestilential, sessile
interlopers off the once-vestal
glass of an aquarium. Storage

costs likely exceed rationale.
But who's auditing? I'm unhired lung.
In love again each time I watch, drunk,
her tutor his spinal canal

in a komodo idiom,
blood's sprouting then retreating tongue.

More heads tossed than in L'Oréal
ads, but every time his neck has sprung
a new one before the old one's numb.
I've run so many intervals

toward those still half-alive warheads
as they've rolled through mud under pestle
boots, worried they might conjure missiles
of escape. The fluid's distorted

their expressions, but it's like florid
pleasure stretches across the dismal
warehouse shelves. They are smug as gristle
bits still working their favourite organ.

Keeping a Disembodied Dog's Head Alive by Use of an Extraordinary Mechanism

after S. S. Brukhonenko

You have signed her neck with a scalpel,
carving such time, so many notches
she could have drowned, her glottal botching
on blood—*tock, tock*—before your careful

sutures made her a short-lived sybil.
Register success with your watch.
Toss her head—just 'her'—like a bocce
ball into the mountainous skull pile.

The gurney's small red afterthought
reads *Brukhonenko, Brukhonenko*.
She will never again flamenco.
The wife, I mean, not dog you caught.

Notes

Orthrus was the two-headed, four-pawed brother of Cerberus and the guard dog of Geryon's cattle. As the victim of a labouring Heracles, he is most often depicted in Classical art as dying or already dead. According to Hesiod, he fathered the Sphinx with his own mother, Echidna.

"Sonneteering" references both Aesop's fable "The Crow and the Pitcher" and the titular desert planet in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, also known as Arrakis (Arabic for 'the dancer').

"Creating a Two-Headed Dog through Extraordinary Surgical Skill" is for the two dogs—Shavka and Brodyaga (Russian for 'cur' and 'tramp,' respectively)—who were surgically conjoined by Dr. Vladimir Demikhov, in 1959, under the observation of reporters from *Life Magazine*. Shavka's body below the heart and lungs was removed and discarded, her remaining torso and forelegs being joined to Brodyaga's circulatory system through a large incision in the back of Brodyaga's neck. This was the final such surgery of two dozen that Demikhov performed over six years before being ordered to cease for ethical reasons by the Soviet Ministry of Health. Demikhov coined the term 'transplantology' in his 1960 dissertation "Experimental transplantation of vital organs," and he is widely considered the pioneer of that medical field.

"Returning to a Poem Returned to" references Erwin Schrödinger's 1935 essay "The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics," the famous cat paradox therein being as consistently misconstrued as Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

The two italicized passages in “Woman Arrested for Frankencat Experiments” are modified quotations, the first from a 2013 *Huffington Post* article (“‘Frankencat’: 100 Corpses Found In Freezer Of Polish Woman ‘Who Tried to Create New Breed Of Feline’”) and the second from the website of The KOTERIA Neutering Clinic for Feral Cats in Warsaw.

“Preserving the Jarheads” references the apocryphal Book of Judith (particularly chapters 10 through 13) and owes its conception to Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

“Keeping a Disembodied Dog’s Head Alive by Use of an Extraordinary Mechanism” responds to the 1940 film *Experiments in the Revival of Organisms: Research in the Revival of Animal Organisms by means of an Artificial Blood Circulation System carried out at the Institute of Experimental Physiology and Therapy, U.S.S.R.* The film, directed by D. I. Yashin, features experiments conducted under the supervision of Dr. S. S. Brukhonenko. The disembodied dog featured in the film is unnamed. The extraordinary mechanism is the autojektor, a very early cardiopulmonary bypass machine of Brukhonenko’s design.

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About the Author

Andy Verboom is from subrural Nova Scotia and currently lives in London, ON, where he organizes *Couplets*, a collaborative poetry reading series, and edits *Word Hoard*, a journal of creative and academic dialogues. His poetry has won *Descant's* Winston Collins Prize for Best Canadian Poem, been shortlisted for *Arc Poetry Magazine's* Poem of the Year, and appeared in *Arc*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *BafterC*, *The Puritan*, and *Vallum*. This is his third chapbook.

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