

Nathan Curnow

Four poems, June 2018

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The Messenger

May I sense the cue,
hear the loading of the gun,
see the blade that will cut my throat.
Let me judge your delivery of instant rage.
I have lived with the threat long enough.
My body is an order and instrument,
I am a nameless, chartered vessel,
crossing mountains, seas and battle lines,
with nothing but a letter or whisper.
My death will be swift and mean *War*,
Pay now or *How dare you profess your love*.
Nobody cares what it means to me,
my head sealed in a jar and sent back.
Or the claim I died in a storm en route
though I am buried face down in a trench,
victim of a temper after too much wine—
the cover up of the royal adolescent.
May I stagger and fall as if to suggest
there are no enemies just audiences,
that my only crime is returning again
to be slain in the shape of my replacement.
Once I played a bear in a travelling show.
The crowd cheered when I walked on stage.
They begged me to growl until I lost my voice.
I watched through the holes of the mask.

Good, Honest Food

It can be cooked by
bankers, lawyers and criminals,
as long as it's prepared with love.
It might be all about fresh ingredients,
or a recipe your gran came up with.
You want to believe truth is edible
because life is full of betrayals,
and they slip into dishes so easily,
sometimes after the meal's been plated.
There are lies that take a lifetime to chew.
There are secrets that rot the guts.
But who's to say when food's full of it,
when it's 'snack' or it's 'junk' or it's 'fast'?
Goodness explodes with mature depth,
balancing flavours familiar and innocent,
with notes that hint of a simpler life
and the long, lost youth of your palette.
You crave those tastes beyond suspicion,
ones that come with a customary grace,
flawless and found in every mouthful,
as if home is a place you can trust.

Versing

Kids invented it.
They're 'versing' each other.
They 'versed' some team last week.
It sounds like they're involved in poetry.
I've been versing, myself, for years.
The little bastards have bastardised
another word in the English language.
We have no way of undoing it now.
I blame parents and the entire school system.
Sometimes I'm invited to teach a class
and I start with 'every kid is a poet.'
But they throw bananas at the ceiling fan
or count down until the lunch bell goes.
They take advantage of our tolerance
and freedom of speech in the schoolyard—
the ultimate playground for vernacular,
where words go viral without the internet.
Perhaps I expect them to pay their dues
or come to me for help with their project.
Once I helped a kid who said 'all music is music'
and 'magicians are magic', which is rubbish.
I say I invented the word 'shimmerfinny'.
It was published in a book no one read.
So I'm submitting this to the school newsletter,
calling them bastards to prove I'm a bastard.

The Collapsible Man

He still can't control it. He folds up like a board game. It happens when he shrugs too fast. He panics in high winds, at the sound of loud bass, and is often reduced to tears. Some days he forgets to take his umbrella. He pops up in the strangest places. He has a hole in his heart—it's *not* a heart attack. He's ignored by the ambulance service. Activists have used him as a protest sign. He defends the rights of cardboard boxes. Sometimes he imagines getting swept off his feet. He was debris in the hurricane clean up. Cooking soufflés is bad for his nerves. Black holes are his favourite topic. Looking deep inside is not an act of meditation. He's embarrassed by his inverted nipples. One time he hid in a teapot, got locked in a time capsule, discovered himself in the post to Alaska. He loves telescopes, periscopes, hinges and joints, and has to pull himself up by the bootstraps. He was born in a tent. He thinks *inside* the square. He can be stowed safely in your overhead locker. It's simpler to tell people he's a contortionist. He can't assemble flat packs either. Entering the bean eating contest was a big mistake. There are days that he gets bone sad. Even his name 'Otto' folds in on itself. His only pet is a red paper crane. He doesn't take the support of his underwear for granted. He likes women in pleated skirts. He falls out with everyone and takes break ups hard. He's enraged by inflatable toys. He wants you to have his Swiss Army Knife. He's the fall guy for a job that went bust. The arguments in his defense were inherently flawed. Before the firing squad he's a house of cards.