

## The Opposite of Cabbage

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Also by Rob A. Mackenzie

POETRY CHAPBOOK

*The Clown of Natural Sorrow* (HappenStance, 2005)

# The Opposite of Cabbage

ROB A. MACKENZIE



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*to Anne and Alyssa*



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## Light Storms from a Dark Country

You bend sleetward down grey alleyways,  
in search of finesse to straighten out  
the tangle of the last spat. The sky's  
watery glaze reminds you of that night  
you split. A shock of white chrysanthemums  
droops from an abandoned briefcase  
on the kerb. They shatter in the slipstream  
of a truck. You count the Christmas trees  
that line the tinselled storefront. They flicker  
pink, blue and saffron like a funeral  
in Hollywood. You search for living flowers,  
as a peace offering, but when you steal  
the twisted stems dumped at the cenotaph  
days before, you know it must be over.  
Freak lightning tears its jack-knife  
through the sky. You swerve under cover  
with other hunched men, all asking what  
flares in love, why it turns to smoke,  
why by any other slant of light  
you never move forward, never back.

## Voices

We staggered down the via della Guerra, the wind  
snatching at the bedlam of each overflowing bin,  
and you told me of voices crowding your head  
like sharp stones, as if the entire street had moved in  
with simultaneous post-theatre analysis, girls on boys  
and boys on girls, drunk sermons on the brink  
of violence, and how often the confusion  
made more sense than a single, real voice,  
including mine—a gloss which left me speechless  
as we entered the bar and your beer order  
was understood despite the anarchy  
of discourse drifting to the ceiling fan,  
which is where most conversations drift  
and spin at a height and resonance  
just beyond reach, along the wiry ventricles  
of the city's brain, before settling  
for that rented room where my reply, finally  
and dutifully performed, is already dulling  
to a murmur beneath the bed's bright quilt.

## The Listeners

The thrill of the fair is not in the glamorous machinery and its spin, or in the clamour of infants longing to be heard, but in the hour when music stops and lights blink out, when a man threads a dark path among greyer darkneses of once-bright carousels, and becomes, with them, a bearer of absence, night's counterpart, impossible to bring to focus.

The stars have plucked their eyes from the world, which has become a mirror of blindness, blind also to itself. Only the man's uncertain steps alert his listeners to its presence. So when they screw open a cheap Cabernet and lose track halfway through his walk from Waltzer to Big Wheel and dawn spills out like an over-familiar friend, they feel grief that the night is unrepeatable as its secrets, as footsteps that leave no echo.

## White Noise

From a third floor window, low trumpet notes  
have cradled the world in blue for weeks  
but today they cry like anarchic goats

pale as the sky bleached in haze overhead.  
Babies keep whining in the long line of prams  
from plaza to supermarket, impatient to consume.

Frank pays attention for the first time although  
the queue has stood, undiminished, for years  
just as the FTSE trampolining the pound

is, for some, a reason to live and, for others,  
hidden as the rage of commuters on the bypass  
or a life-support machine's final squeak.

In the hospital, Frank's baby's breath blew out  
like the cherry blossom crash-landing around  
the kerbs and drains, raised briefly with every

loitering hope and passing bus. The pram babies  
linger like cappuccino froth or white candles waiting  
to be lit on windowsills in favour of an unclear cause

while televisions drone on regardless. The trumpet  
bleats. The reason for a note remains mysterious  
until the next and then the next, just as commuters

beat out progress by traffic lights. The system  
functions. The operation was successful for a time.  
Her eyes opened, blue, for a moment blinked

and shut. The eighth day. He hears it is good  
that tills keep clinking, that each day bears  
its fair share of crashes, that disappointment

and music are made possible only by love.  
The trumpet croaks a flat minim and Frank says,  
'I tried I tried everything but nothing worked.'

## Scottish Sonnet Ending in American

*'We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like  
Spenser/and it is not fourteen lines.'*

— BILLY COLLINS from *American Sonnet*

I enter to the iambic whimpering  
of cheerleaders at the Presbyterian Guild—  
half-Calvinist, half-Muppet—and when expelled,  
I ride a yellow cab to the *Shattered Wing*  
where super-size-me drams are conjuring  
nonce forms and shapeless beasts, which stagger wild  
down yellow brick wynds from Wick to Cumbernauld,  
one foot short of a rhythmic swing.

I beg them to conform, to recreate  
the tartan utopia of Brigadoon  
in my devolved, not quite united, state.

But then I speak like Bush or wear a hat  
like Wayne. Or quit a sonnet on line thirteen

## Fallen Villages of the North

Given the unreliable climate on the moors,  
Longhorsley's priest supplies intercession  
for pineapple experiments at Pauperhaugh  
and genetically modified okra in Cockle Park.

Although he is diminutive in height  
his giant thumbs drum up post-lapsarian boredom  
long before the drone of cauliflower florets  
ripens to a ceremonial trumpeting

at fairground season: time for merry-go-rounds  
to recycle appearances, for technology to calculate  
the caterpillar train's freight capacity  
during its climactic, right-angled nosedive.

The rain runs amok with a chemical stink.  
Cabbage allotments between rival chair-o-planes  
raise leaves to heaven, green umbrellas  
punctured in the heart of hail-bitten earth.

The old-timers still believe in growth  
by steady grace, though most are stunted,  
which keeps in mind their need for God, in love,  
to sling thunderclouds above evil

Shilbottle's battered crêpe stall awnings,  
to give hurricanes the run of its skyscraping  
big wheel. Bananas, force-fed ethylene, sweat  
carbon dioxide, the priest's *basso profundo* shakes

coconuts from the shy, 'And did those feet . . .'  
through sunburn, sandblast and snowstorm,  
while all-weather saviours drop like shells  
in triumph to the leaky inflatable slide.

## Moving On

*The tall haystacks are great sugar mounds  
These are the fairies' camping grounds*

— JOHN ASHBERRY, AGED 8

When I first encountered imagination in Bronco's barn,  
cornstalk in my mouth and liquorice melting in my pocket,  
I could tell my career as a poet was over.  
How can one follow such a couplet, except with  
another couplet? I see it now in my friends' marriages  
dividing every day into further failures, which continue  
to multiply. When Liz Taylor had married seven times—  
a sonnet!—you'd think that would have been the perfect  
time to stop, but the usual imagined future egged her on.  
Take the pea-pod half I launched into the pond last year,  
which washed up on a deserted shore and soon became  
part of the island scenery, a boat-shaped hold-all  
cramming sunlight and breadfruit among my sweaty  
T-shirts and trainers. Every day, I press  
a coconut shell to my lips and reflect on whether rescue  
is desirable. Rescue by fairies perhaps! Now where did  
that come from, and where did they go?

## Scotlands

Just when we think we have arrived, the coach jolts forward  
from the Sorley Maclean Appreciation Society Picnic,

which once had been the terminus on this excursion  
through healthy weeds, peat bogs, and everlasting rain.

Although we still hear mouth music in the distance,  
the accent is American, the language a kind of English,

and the entire population is queuing round the clock  
for pizza, chicken vindaloo, and deep-fried Mars Bar.

At six degrees, it's the warmest day in Falkirk this year,  
but the coach shoots past for the Museum of Scotland

and a quick dose of reality—our miserable record of defeats  
in battle against ourselves. When we emerge,

Edinburgh has disappeared, and a choir of Tartan Tories  
improvises *God Save The Queen* on Culloden Field

while we photograph the grass. 'Much too green,'  
someone says, which induces a predictable backlash

from the ecumenical contingent. Everyone now feels  
discriminated against and half the passengers board

a ferry to Nova Scotia. We hear many have drowned  
by the time we reach Glasgow's suburban sprawl

and there is bitterness, bitterness against those who left,  
bitterness at the speedbumps, bitterness that the Scots

Dictionary compiler has bonded with the monoglot  
tour guide, bitterness at being left behind, perhaps to die

in these plush leather seats, bitterness at the angle  
we approach the Sacred Cows statuette, but nevertheless

enchantment at the world beyond the windows—on one side  
a row of builders' bums and flash women, and on the other

a child crouched by the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond,  
blowing dandelion clocks, which fan out on a tail wind's

whistle-stop tour of common ground, each fibre waiting for  
the sudden drop, for a patch of earth in which to root itself.

## Nuclear Submarines

One day they will surely betray me.  
For now, they seem content to drowse

resolutely without wit or purpose  
like autistic sharks ballooning

through seaweed, rock and sand  
of fish cities deep in blackout.

While I'm trying to trust, one breaks  
the Gareloch's surface and fixes

its stunned gaze on the mirrored sky.  
Things are as they should be—

the clouds, the flotsam, the stranger  
peering from the shore with my face.

The second it drops, I no longer exist.  
It has no memory, no plans.

The water rises, the sky falls,  
and I am as blue is to the fish.

## Everyone Will Go Crazy

The number ten to Morningside tailgates a cyclist.  
'Me next, me next!' Obese kids bicker over possession  
of the console and, outside, drunks in kilts pelt

Poles with cabbage from a restaurant wheelie bin.  
The best wee country, where arms flap and buses  
whistle by. If the driver picks up the Poles

fifty yards past the stop, everyone will go crazy.  
*We provide uncertain guidelines in every language.*  
Brian craves the simplicity of Space Invaders,

the bleep of a Casio VL-Tone, even switching off  
is so complex these days. The psychiatric hospital,  
invisible from the road, prioritises social inclusion.

'It's my turn, you bastard!' *We treasure customers  
with overwhelming indifference.* The cyclist wobbles,  
the opposite of cabbage—such a solid vegetable,

fat as a bus honk—and, on the radio, a Wal-Mart  
lackey raves, 'Our mission is to save people  
from money.' *In think tanks we fabricate personal*

*airspace.* With a day pass from the low-risk ward  
Brian plots to annex Buckingham Palace and dictate  
legislation on body shape conformity. He craves lack

of choice on the shelves. *The small print reflects  
an ethos of multinational lip-service.* Independence  
within Europe. A massive cabbage blasts the cyclist

into orbit, while Poles dive for cover, kids click  
the console frantically, 'You noob!' and Brian says,  
'They really ought to speak English if they live here.'

## The Loser

He lost with a symbolic victory secured.  
Deep in the forest, acolytes resurrected him  
from dying leaves, crisp, and with a throat of fire,  
but no heat, no light, only autumn lit the eyes,  
his arms olive, backside birch, ponytail willow,  
connected by shade, congealed in smirr, eschewing  
the crutch of twig or bone. He mounted his plinth  
and raised a fist of triumphant pine.

The winds could have blown. Instead they beat out  
terms of supremacy behind closed doors, hailed deadlock  
as democracy and flung a nailed-down table  
through the triple glazing as evidence of purpose,  
catalyst for a national year of rain, and so on  
towards a mulch kingdom, mosquito hatchery.  
His opponents wasted time waving matches at the weather.  
He dripped, became unrecognisable and in control.

## While the Moonies are Taking Over Uruguay

While the Moonies are taking over Uruguay,  
I find time to skin these *peperoni*,  
grilled but resistant to peeling.

Is God to blame when his chosen people  
scribble battle-plans and draft rackets  
in his name? Does he need

Uruguay? The hotels fall into Moonie hands,  
then the corporate bodies. Bids begin  
for Catholic mass.

Pepper juice squirts on my wrists, sticky  
like blueberry grappa. I regret  
trying this recipe.

The Montevideo football stadiums host  
communal weddings. Thousands  
of strangers queue in twos

like Fiats boxed in the rush-hour crawl,  
and my guests will be late. *Che peccato!*  
I chop fennel into strips.

By Torino's *Porta Nuova* train station,  
the Jehovah's Witnesses stalk me  
with magazines, and talk

peace. The Mormons attack *Via Garibaldi*,  
suits and ties in the summer heat  
and still they don't sweat.

Is it a miracle? Next to them, Africans  
hawk cheap sunglasses with fake  
UVA protection,

but what Italian doesn't yet own a pair?  
Only the Mormons do without,  
wide-eyed and blinkered.

The garlic sizzles. I add onion. The Moonies  
plant a flag in an empty field, somewhere  
near Fray Bentos.

I am left with my small concerns; the time  
to add the rosemary, the freshly  
snapped corkscrew.

Tonight, if the *peperoni* will, we may  
taste God among us. And later,  
there shall be *tiramisù*.