

THE OYSTERS
I BRING TO
BANQUETS



Essential Poets Series 296



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I BRING TO
BANQUETS



Gary Geddes



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*The power of sound has always been greater
than the power of sense.*

—JOSEPH CONRAD

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Termites



*Art is our chief means of
breaking bread with the dead.*

—W.H. AUDEN

Elegy

for John Asfour

Lebanon, a curious
boy, a shiny object in the sand
outside his village. With

all the lights switched
off and small metal particles
removed from his eyes,

his ruined optic nerves,
he explodes into poetry. Words
that have limped along,

taking no responsibility for themselves,
shape up and begin, slowly, to bear
weight, acquire beauty,

raise smiles,
like the one that spreads
across faces in East Jerusalem

as children in the orphanage
cling to his arms and legs,
John bent over the *oud*,

singing old familiar tunes in Arabic.
As for the loss, he makes
light of it, laughter

his tonic of choice unless,
of course, it is 'love,' a concept
dismissed as sentimental

but worn like a diminutive heart
or cryptic hieroglyph on the sleeve.
A joke or satirical comment

on Israeli-Palestinian relations, beaming
faces dappled by sunlight filtered
through grape-vines overhead.

Obligated to talk politics: Bedouins
displaced again in the Negev, Saeb Erekat,
a walk near Abraham's well.

Propped up in palliative care and flirting
with the duty nurse, he winces as the needle
releases a surge of morphine

into his vein. The new drug promised
relieve, shrunk the tumour in his lung
to half its size, then stopped,

outflanked by fully-armed sleeper
cells. The dark archive of his poems
never raises the question why,

the flight of birds, a line of golden
wheat against the blue
of sky.

Captive Audience

Five months in jail and still no answer,
faithful Muusa not returned, desert
sands rife with renegades. Fighter jets

bomb Hargeisa, the Sheik's harem
defect one by one. Unclaimed bodies
rot in the streets. How do sophisticated

cultures end like this? It starts with
small gifts, the impossibility of
not favouring your own. Next,

the struggle over sequestered aid,
donor labels still intact, followed by
the pecking order: Ruler of Toilet Rolls,

Vizier of Canned Veggies, Excellency
of Powdered Eggs, fat cats always greediest.
The prison grapevine serves us well

as a conduit for news and gossip,
revives then kills the spirit, hope its
latest casualty. We had a Buddhist Brit

in the same cell-block, picked up
for selling drugs. His problem?
Dealing with the wrong people.

He went on about Noble Truths:
suffering caused by desire, reprieve
found in right speech and right living.

When word got out he was trying
to convert us good Muslims, they fed
his tongue to dogs. News from Ogaden

as might be expected: Siad Barre's tanks
explode like over-stimulated Coke
bottles. We're better off with camels

and rifles than the crazy potpourri
of imported ordnance. Poetry
is more persuasive than combat,

Hadraawi argued, as infectious
as bagpipes and less painful
on the ears. Nonetheless, it too

landed him in jail. Rally the tropes,
supercharge the metaphors, let them
gather force, strike home, seduce

and overwhelm the opposition,
unorthodox as termite mounds,
so easily mistaken for the enemy.

All That Rain

Once I had a voice, K says, watching foam settle in his glass of beer, but I never learned to play an instrument. Too much death,

bad luck and a peripatetic father. I recall sitting at a concert in the community centre where this woman with fractious

brown hair was introduced and began to play the violin. I focussed on Natasha, imbibed her repertoire of songs, from movies

thought forgotten. A reservoir of memories, feelings long buried. And all that rain.

Umbrellas of Cherbourg. Moon River. And

that day in Grade 12 French when Charles Trenet's rendition of "La Mer" made me weep. Natasha had strewn leaves on the floor,

autumn leaves among vegetables, a bottle of red wine, harvest bounty to simulate a time and place where the making of music

seemed natural, necessary. My foot tapping the beat, I hummed, fighting back the impulse to sing along. If only I could make words

dance, I thought, drawn across an auditory
nerve of vibrating catgut, verbal fingering
so deft they'd leap an octave or two, achieve

the change of register that makes a listener
gasp, seductive minor chords that fly beneath
the radar, nest in the ear, a passionate

repertoire of pure sound. I recalled a young
Catherine Deneuve as Genevieve, with Guy,
Madelaine and Fate, their simple narrative

of love and loss, actors struggling to hint
at what the heartstrings yearn to convey. Guy,
returned too late from the war in Algeria,

found his beloved already married. He operates
a small gas station in Cherbourg now. From
the expensive car idling at the pumps,

Genevieve walks in, shakes her umbrella,
flashes a smile of recognition and asks
how he is. Guy, tiny son perched on a stool

behind the till, sums up a life of wounds,
disappointments, with *je vais bien*, I'm fine.
By the time Natasha finished her medley

of tunes, I'd melted and did not know what
to say, but I could feel that warm rain, its
insistent patter, drumming inside my skull.

K's right index finger traces a path through
the condensation on his untouched glass.
He looks up at me, smiling, and shrugs.

Do animals cry? she asks.
I don't know, I say, but I think

they grieve. I'd read about a camel
that sniffed her dead offspring

for days and wouldn't move
until they placed its pelt on her

back. Why do you ask? Her hand
on the breakfast counter looks tiny

beside mine. A milk-ring graces
her mouth, a toasted bread-crumble

clings to her cheek. A sympathetic
smile is all I have to offer.

J-35, she says, scarcely audible.
The orca in the news has carried

her dead calf for fourteen days,
trying to keep it above water,

travelling hundreds of miles
as J-pod forages for the scarce

spring salmon. When it isn't
resting on her head she grips

its tail with her teeth. J-35 knows
her baby's dead, she whispers;

I think she's trying to tell us
something. I leave the science

out for now: the most polluted
mammals on earth, the slurry

of toxins female orcas slough off
on their newborns. Extinction

looming, salmon stocks
depleted. Tanker traffic, the

old whale-road the Vikings
celebrated now a web of dirty

shipping lanes, booming
grounds, plastic archipelagos.

I think you're right, I say,
let's see what we can do.

Hiatus

Delicate snowflakes settle on the tidal
flat, whose reflective surface turns

from forest-green to gunmetal grey.
Outside my window a hummingbird,

wings a blur, dips its long, elegant beak
into the fluted glass tube of the feeder.

Nearby, jays and towhees vie for access
to the hanging cylinder of black-oil

sunflower seeds, a chestnut-backed
chickadee and a purple finch assess

their chance to chow. Beyond snow-laden
moorage rafts, sheets of frozen water

form in the shallows. Only burning wood
and humming fridge disturb the silence.

Disaster Management

One question dogs her still, despite
credentials: why this particular
child? A job, a foreign assignment,

the chance to use skills acquired
in the Emergency and Disaster Relief
program, patrolling beaches, binoculars

in hand, feet raw and sweating in cheap
gumboots, emails from family, concerned
friends. Phone at the ready, she'll adjust

the lens for distance and focus, hoping
to spot derelict vessels, inflatable dinghies
in time to save lives, but wishing too

for empty horizons swept only by
foraging gulls. Nothing in the web-based
learning materials and occasional lectures

has prepared her for this, not even
the chapter called Dealing With Disaster.
Both instructors warned of panic,

hunger, hypothermia, but not death,
perhaps because the dead, lying there,
passage paid, journey ended, require

neither haste nor care. But what
of this graduate, her degree or diploma
in the mail, expected to roll with perils,

unforeseen punches, including that small
boy facedown on the beach, his family
denied admission as refugees,

lying palms up, as if asleep, water
lapping his forehead. It's the red t-shirt,
and orange rubber soles that stay

with her back home, jogging the waterfront
path around Stanley Park, passengers
waving at her from a passing cruise ship.

Grooming

Me? I've no passion for horse racing,
although I love the soft velvety flesh
around their muzzles. It seems those parts
had been designed not just for grazing

but for nuzzling. I cringe at the way bits
cut into mouths and riding crops leave welts
that take days to heal. So there's no chance
you'll catch me weighing the odds and placing

bets. I'm more likely be found hanging out
in stables comforting the losers, horse
and jockey. One of my favourites dropped
dead just past the clubhouse turn, injuring

the thrown rider who died in hospital
later, both having overtaxed their hearts,
driven themselves quite literally into
the ground, not the expected finish-line.

A well-shod animal has the best chance
of completing a race without damage.
Once, inspecting the hooves, I detected
a nail missing in the light aluminum

shoe, a sure sign of negligence, perhaps
a wilful dereliction, the left front
hoof where the concussive force is strongest
and shoddy workmanship most likely to

take its toll. What was a mere groom to do,
report the omission to the owner,
confront the farrier, when one or both
could be complicit, clued in, on the make?

My duty like that of a bridegroom
was to the central figure in the drama,
whose elegance and spirit we extol,
even though it cost me my job, my joy.

April 2020

One day this will all be history,
she says. A dubious consolation,
he thought, so will we. Statistics

or brief footnotes about the one
who survived with a ventilator
made of garden hose? Marginalia

added later by a monkish scribe
struggling with the last remaining
computer, just long enough

to embellish the capital letters
of your name, unless that name
is e.e. cummings. Shops shut, ferry

service shortened or cancelled,
the few exceptions charged with
strict rules and passenger limits,

exorbitant fines for exhaling
in public, washrooms verboten,
toilet paper pilfered. How

rapidly we've morphed
from celebrating the global
village and its alleged solidarity

to giving neighbours and friends
a dirty look or closed fist if they get
too chummy in the check-out queue.

The birds, at least, are striking up
a tune, putting the finishing touches
on their nests and courtship rituals.

Light Housekeeping

for Marilyn Robinson

Downward dip as the train slips from bridge trestle
into the slick, black waters of the lake,
where hearts wrestle

with loss, brains reel, mortar and pestle, images
of grandfather, ticket punch in hand,
flailing about, pages

adrift as windows burst
inward and the deep engulfs late-night
gamblers, thirsts

quenched at last, ages
irrelevant now and the dealt hand, doomed
sleepers awake to the instant

of their release, the reverse
umbilicus, metal aslant delivering them
womb-ward, offering little refuge

in the flight from air,
time, perhaps, to observe a stuffed
woolly bear

hurtle past, making a beeline
for the surface, a reminder
bobbing in black ink, message

duly noted, tucked into a binder
and mother, shortly after, her trajectory
lakeward, the car turning

twice in mid-air, and the rectory
kitchen abuzz, the link
obvious, heads nodding, tea

served, white bread (no crust),
jam, a trace of polite repartee
from those who know survival

a game of chance, every face
pale, thinking fish, blue lips,
the limits of grace.

About the Author



Gary Geddes has written and edited more than fifty books of poetry, fiction, drama, criticism, non-fiction, translation and anthologies, including *20th-Century Poetry and Poetics* (Oxford), and been the recipient of a dozen national and international literary awards, including the National Magazine Gold Award, the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Americas Region), the Lt-Governor's Award for Literary Excellence, and the Gabriela Mistral Prize from the government of Chile, awarded simultaneously to Octavio Paz, Vaclav Havel, Ernesto Cardenal, Rafael Alberti and Mario Benedetti. His work has been translated into six languages and he has lectured and performed his work in twenty-one countries.

Before retiring, he taught English and Creative Writing at Concordia University and was the founder of Quadrant Editions and Cormorant Books. He has subsequently served as writer-in-residence at UBC, University of Ottawa, McMaster and the Vancouver Public Library, as well as visiting writer at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Distinguished Professor of Canadian Culture at Western Washington University in Bellingham. He lives on Thetis Island with his wife, the novelist Ann Eriksson.

ALSO BY
Gary Geddes



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