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Christopher Bernard

### Dance of the Autocrats

Choose your partner! Take your stance!  
Smile for the camera! Start your dance!  
Keep your knees high! Stomp your feet!  
Love success and hate defeat!

Watch your neighbor! Keep your ear  
Close to the ground! Be debonair!  
Spy on your kids, and tell on your wife!  
Listen to your parents all your life  
(And tell Patel at the FBI  
The truth behind their every lie)!

Take a hammer, find a nail!  
Put the judges safe in jail!  
Send your foes to El Salvador!  
Pocket the key then slam the door!

Fire all gubment employees!  
A federal budget's just to freeze!

Circle right and do-si-do!  
Grand but watcher partner's toe!  
Roll away and half sashay!  
Weave the ring and promenay!

Swing your partner! Let 'em hang  
Who can't take the bitter tang  
Tyranny puts in their tea!  
Let 'em lose their liberty!  
Who needs independence? You?  
Let me tell you what to do.  
Freedom's for the rich, you see:  
That is why you follow me!  
Never need to vote again!  
From now on it's only pain.

Change your partner! It's the same?  
Well, I'll be! Who knew what came  
Only is what's always been,  
Again, and again, and again, and again?

There's no changing now for good!  
Despots run our neighborhood!  
Keep your head down. Mind your own  
Business. Thank the Lord the groan,  
The scream in the street from the ICE patrol  
Ain't your own. They're in control,  
And never again will liberals  
Shame you with self-righteous calls  
For social justice, equity,  
Or other impossibility.

Take your partner in your arms.  
Look deep in her eyes, her charms.  
This might your final chance  
That you see her, or the dance.

## City of Downed Trees

After a city hammered by storm and night,  
a morning's walk through still streets.

A tree thrust against a wall, its roots,  
finger-like, grasping a mud of nothing.

Magnolia and cedar in fatal embrace.

A van crushed beneath a cloven oak.

Trunks piled at an intersection like a drunken accident.

A column lying, almost gently, in a cat's cradle of wire.

A stump pulled from concrete by some passing god.

A park with the strangest sight of all:  
a mass grave dug in the air.

Then every block, and every street:  
a regiment of giants beaten to the ground  
in perfect perspective diminishing in the distance  
like broken toys in an immense children's room.

A tree fallen is an unsettling thing,  
what had seemed so fine in its strength against the sky—

but to see so many of them . . .

### Almost Free, of a Kind

No morality confined him,  
no law but that he made.  
Guilt and shame could not rule him.  
His command was sun to day.

The wind passed through him like a god.  
It blended light with mineral,  
shining it with polish made  
of energy and vanishing.

The world was the temple of his god,  
an endless arabesque of shape  
wrought in iron and honeysuckle,  
beauty and power hand in hand,  
his palace and his toy.

Mercy was his byword,  
for everything that cracked from seed  
or egg, or whelped from flesh and lived,  
all that lived must sink to stone,  
suffer, lose, be fooled, and die.

So let them play their shipwrecked games  
the long winter in the twilight world,  
while they breathed here, the living.  
Their foolishness was inevitable, almost forgivable.

Fear was lost to him  
the day he grew to love death's face,  
the loveliest he had ever known,  
for even death demands pity:  
no one loves her, yet she is  
our last comforter,  
our deepest rest and last remove  
from the sirens of promise and hope,  
and the irrepressible folly of mankind.

Yet he too was a man, locked  
inside the cage of illusion; thus  
the indignant qualifier "almost"  
pertained, above all, to him,  
who aimed, from the cradle of memory,  
one day, to escape,  
the crowning humiliation  
of being human.

### Politics of the Rose Tree

I conquer above the salt grass,  
I halt the tide of the bees.  
I am captious as a spider  
in the democracy of weeds.

Take my root. It worms  
through the mud of Golgotha.  
The garden is my anarchy.  
A rock presses through fog.

The dragonfly ponders  
a cobweb of zephyrs.

To flourish, I aim thorns  
at dew, my only crowns.

I lean, a tree, crooked,  
my hands grow wild.  
Once a month a new rose  
defies the murderous earth.

## A Casual Death

Toward home at the end of an ordinary day,  
bland, forgettable, and yet you hum  
as you walk through summer afternoon  
down a vacant street.

A happy life is a quiet life,  
you think in pace as you go;  
a life in which nothing happens.

On the street's other side, abrupt,  
a car appears out of nowhere;  
swings out, then, curving, makes a sharp  
U-turn toward the side you walk,

and swerves past. You hear  
a crunch and crackling like the sound  
of a bag of chips being stepped on by an inattentive child.

You look down as the tire of the car  
rolls away, obedient to the laws of physics,  
down the street, which is now vacant again,  
except for a crushed  
form, mauled feathers and blood, and a startled eye,  
and a foul smell . . .

The car moves on,  
the driver oblivious,  
the street fouled,  
the sky indifferent,  
the pedestrian shocked  
by the casualness with which  
a little piece of life had been wiped  
out beneath his eyes.

And so it's true after all, you think.

If a hungry bird pecking for a crumb  
on a span of asphalt  
it had just landed on  
a moment ago,  
can be destroyed  
because a driver forgot his  
shopping list, missed a turnoff,  
remembered an appointment –  
if that life can be  
snuffed out without a shrug  
on an empty city street,  
then is it possible that all of life,  
from a taunting microbe to the arrogance of man,  
has not the slightest value,  
is no more than one accident among an infinite,  
a cruel and pointless joke?  
Without even the reverence of laughter.

Without the stars rising in outrage.

Without every faith  
whose aim it is to assure us,  
like abandoned children in the dark,  
crying, no, never: this cannot be true,  
the world is ruled by goodness and love.

### After Hearing Shostakovich's Quartet No. 3 in Concert

“Greatness”? – Perhaps only in art:  
when it grips, holds, then shatters your heart.

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Christopher Bernard is an award-winning poet, novelist and essayist and a co-editor, as well as the original founder, of *Caveat Lector*. His third collection of poems, *The Socialist's Garden of Verses*, won a PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was named one of the “Top 100 Indie Books of 2021” by *Kirkus Reviews*. He is also recipient of an Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award (2019). His novels include *Voyage to a Phantom City* (“an enormous achievement,” award-winning translator Peter Bush) and *Meditations on Love and Catastrophe at The Liars' Cafe* (“puts one in mind of *Ulysses* as much as *Naked Lunch*,” award-winning poet Ernest Hilbert). Two of his most recent books are the middle-grade stories, the first in the “Otherwise” series, *If You Ride A Crooked Trolley . . .* and *The Judgment Of Biestia*, which won an Independent Press Award in Preteen Fiction in 2025 and was a finalist for the K. M. Anthru International Prize 2024. His debut novel, *A Spy in the Ruins* (“one of the best American novels

since Thomas Pynchon and William Gass,” Miguel de Cervantes–award winning novelist Juan Goytisolo), was relaunched in October 2025 to celebrate its twentieth anniversary. His latest book, *The Beauty of Matter: A Pagan’s Verses for a Mystic Idler*, appeared at the end of 2025.