

The Carnival of the Animals

Narrative text ~ á la Bill Richardson

Set to the music of Camille Saint-Saëns' "Carnival des Animaux"

Carnival, as I've heard tell,
Means, in essence, flesh farewell.
Carnival, if I'm astute,
When we trace its Latin root
Means abandonment of meats:
Hands off all that moos, and bleats.
Spirits that would be refreshed
Should eschew and not chew flesh,
Should remain removed, aloof
From what started on the hoof.
But this present fête, my friends,
Brings that notion to an end.
It's ironic that we've all
Come together in this hall
For a festive, bestial show:
Le Carnaval des animaux.
Here no beast is banned or shunned:
Welcome creatures, every one!
Play now, players, with panache!
(Apologies to Ogden Nash!) ...

THE LION

A tawny lion yawned, "L'état c'est moi, mais l'on est triste!
We're tired of eating zebra loin and blackened wildebeest,
We're bored with courting torpor here upon the hot savanna,
Sharpening our claws to find the flaws in errant bwanas"
He scratched a flea that chanced to be upon his regal raiment.
He shook his mane and then proclaimed, "We'll have an entertainment!
We'll give ourselves a carnival! Why not? It's only logical
Since we're the King of everything that's vaguely zoological.
We'll summon all our subjects for a grand command performance.
They'll come pell mell and thus dispell our existential torments."
He rang for his lord chamberlain and made a proclamation.
His runners svelt assailed the veldt with posterred declarations.
"His Highness, Good King Lionel, exacts his furred civilians
To come to court, to romp and sport in manner vaudevillian,
Hear his plea. The King's ennui requires dissipation.
Come and bring a song to sing or risk evisceration."
The finned and furred in schools and herds assembled on his lawns.
The King said. "Kneel! We'll hear each spiel, but first – Camille Saint-Saëns..."

HENS and COCKS

Sound the drum and beat the tabour,
Now's the time for merry labour!"
Cried the King through his chagrin.
"Pitch the pipe, and let's begin.
Strike the harp and sound the psaltery
Poultry's anything but paltry.
Red or white or black or mottled
Come ye forth what's plumed and wattled.
Plumed and wattled, beaked and crested
In these hens have we invested
All our hope for quelled depression.
Roosters, make a good impression,
Pretty pullets, preening plumpings,
You'd be tasty served with dumplings.
Sparkle now and be not ho-hum.
Don't we pray you, lay an ovum.
With this charge have we imbued you.
We should hate to have to stew you.
Pardon us our long kvetching,
But we count on what you're hatching.
Show us what you have in store!
Give us songs and terpsichore!"

THE WILD JACKASS

The braying jackass stood up next, with all his comic wiles.
He'd slain the crowds in Vegas, left them rolling in the aisles,
He came before the King of Beasts. He felt himself inspired.
"I just flew in from Winnipeg (*read Enderby, Sicamous, or Peachland*) and Boy, are my arms tired!"
The lion curled his lip. The ass went weak about the knees.
"Heh-heh-heh, your Highness, well then, take my wife now – please!"
The lion sighed. The jackass tried his "sure-win, no-fail" shot:
"Say, have you heard the one about the Frenchman and the Scot?"
The lion sent the palace guard a "come and seize him" look.
His punchline withered on the vine. The jackass got the hook.

TORTOISES

What is so wondrous and rare as a tortoise?
Whenever a storm comes he knows where his port is.
And if you should pine to define the rigor mortis
The tortoise is someone to know.
What's more he can dance, better far than a man can.
The monarch looked down from his leonine grandstand.
"Tortoise," he barked, "do the Offenbach Can-Can!"
He danced it, but slow. Very slow...

THE ELEPHANT

The elephant, whose pretty dentures,
Led to many misadventures,
Such as countless forced extractions
And to sundry malefactions
So that creatures such as we
Might have rings and ivory keys
Lumbered forward to the throne.
"What a wrinkly, long trombone,"
Said the King, still deep in funk,
Taking in her tusks and trunk.
"Play away, then. No one has
Tried to cheer us up with jazz."
The elephant, polite, but firm,
Told him that a pachyderm's
Far too grand to blow or pluck.
Elephants will just conduct.
Every creature gazed upon
Her enormous, gray baton.
Down it came. They played a waltz,
Short on rhythm, long on schmaltz.
And the solo's plodding pace
Begged the question, "Who's on bass?"

KANGAROOS

There's nothing less plebeian
Than a beast Antipodean.
And the best of all mammalia
Is native to Australia.
That wonderland "down-underland"
Has dedded us Joan Sutherland,
Who thrilled with the bravura
Of her sweet coloratura.
There are others of like leverage
Like, say, Dame Edna Everage,
And Aussies would do well to boast
About Dame Nellie Melba's toast.
But though to fame they rocketed
They none of them were pocketed
In areas abdominal
As is the most phenomenal
Of animals exportable
Whose babies are so portable
That when she hopped to Africa
To make the lion laugh – ha-ha
She wasn't feeling bitter

About paying for a sitter.
And when the King recoups he will
Give thanks to this marsupial,
And say, "What would we do without
A happy kangaroo about?"

AQUARIUM

Let's change the mood in the merry vivarium,
Let's try for calm with a placid aquarium.
Some fish are plain and some are exotic
Watching them swim is deeply hypnotic.
That's why some dentists keep tanks in the offices
So while they're peering down our esophaguses
We will have something serene to delight us,
Rather than thoughts of the dread gingivitis.
While they are wrestling recalcitrant plaque off,
We are prevented from telling them, "Back off!"
By the display of aquatic adventure,
Buttressing us from the prospect of dentures.
Strange are the fish and the motives that power them
Guppies have babies, and then they devour them.
Me, I would rather make do with a croissant,
But one fellow's meat is another man's "poisson".

THE LONG-EARED CREATURES

Those with long ears, like the donkeys and mules,
Often are taken for garrulous fools.
This is unfair, this is plain incorrect.
They're not there to scoff at, they're there to elect.
His parliament rose, gave the King their report.
The song that they sang him was mercifully short.

THE CUCKOO, DEEP IN THE WOODS

You won't find this in Audubon, so take me at my word:
The cuckoo is an entrepreneurial, chamber of commerce bird.
He scouts about to find the nest, a feather-lined envelopment,
And if the thing's unoccupied, he slates it for development.
He moves right in without regard or thought for proper title.
Permits only slow things up, and speed, he sees, is vital.
He makes cosmetic changes, keeps expenses to a minimum.
Then turns around and sells it as a pricey condominium.
Preoccupied with business, he declined to join the chorus
But rather sang his cuckoo song from deep within the forest.

AVIARY

A perennial question whose answer is moot is,
Do we say "Flautist", or do we "flutist?"
Flutist, some say, is appealing and modest
Which isn't the view of the few who say flautist.
This we all know: sure as bees live in apiaries
Flutists or flautists will always ape aviaries.
As sure as the instrument's silver and narrow
The lot of the flautist is skylarks and sparrows.
Yes, flute equals bird just like tramp equals hobo:
Except for the duck, who is stuck with the oboe.

PIANISTS

The lion roared out, "Is there no one so wise
To heal up my heart, lift the scales from my eyes?"
The grassy plains shook with his shuddering wails;
"Oh, surely," he cried, "someone knows about scales!
I've had it to here with your dances and songs!"
And then, all at once, there appeared through the throng
A couple who strode to the front of the mob.
"Your Highness," they shouted. He stifled his sobs.
"We've come to your aid, and there's nobody finer.
We know about scales, both the major and minor!
We're duo pianists! A dynamic dyad!
We play all the scales and the principal triads!"

And then they sat down, all rhapsodic, not blue:
They flexed twenty fingers and how the sparks flew!

FOSSILS

Although the fossil seems relaxed, his days are full of toil
Digging deeper into rock and turning into oil.
He looms up from the limestone or some prehistoric shoal
When he fell asleep he never dreamed he'd wake up coal.
These Paleozoic postcards come our way from year to year:
Each passing day they seem to say, "Ahoy! Wish you were here!"
And if you wonder if the fossil's life is smooth or rough:
Hang on friend. Wait for the end. You'll find out soon enough.

THE SWAN

The swan, Orlando Gibbons wrote,
Is silver but she has no note.
Her repertoire of plaintive cries
Is tuneless till the day she dies.
She dies to free the song within:
That concert must be rather grim.
To hear the raucous, wild applause
The loud melee of hooves and paws,
To break the long, melodic fast,
To curtsy and to breathe your last.
It seems a nasty trick of fate:
A gift revealed when it's too late
A gift that withers far too soon
A bud that's nipped before it blooms.
The bird drew near the moody King:
"Swan," he asked her, "will you sing?"
"Please you, sire, " the fowl demurred,
"It may be you haven't heard
What befalls a swan who croons,
What accompanies her tunes.
Singing swans, your Highness, must
Take a bow, then bite the dust.
Therefore, sire, may I decline?
I'm the last one of my line.
And I have an obligation
To ensure its preservation.
Gone are sisters, cousins, aunts.
Please you, sire, I'd rather dance."
She kept a measured, courtly pace,
Hale and merry, full of grace.

FINALE

Then, a silence settled on the worried, fawning throng.
The swan had danced her dance, the birds had sung their final song.
The minions, as requested, had bestowed, each one, a gift,
In order that their monarch's flagging spirits get a lift.
The carnival was over. Now that everything was played
The Lion looked about: the lord of all that he surveyed:
Of birds and fish and fossils who were subject to his rule,
As were the hens and cocks, and the pianists, and the mule.
He smiled, beguiled to gaze upon his furred and feathered nation,
The infinite variety that teems throughout creation.
In view of what they'd given him, he couldn't stay depressed.
The simple fact of living meant he'd been amply blessed.
He couldn't in good conscience, say, "I'm out of sorts and bored."
He threw his head back heartily, and laughed until he roared.
The animals were most relieved. By being good and dutiful
They'd ended his despondency without ONE pharmaceutical!
So, finally the end is nigh. It's time to shut the stall.
The doggerel's in the manger now. Goodnight to catterwaul.
My tent I'll fold. My tale is told. We've had the final tally.
But don't rush for the exits yet...You'll miss the Grand Finale!