This Is Just To Say

One Hundred Variations on a Theme
by
William Carlos Williams

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I was sitting in my study listening to Mozart’s variations on "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and reading a volume of William Carlos Williams' poetry. When I turned the page, my eyes lighted on this poem:

**This Is Just To Say**

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

At once I thought, if Mozart could write variations on music, why not write variations on poetry as well? I whipped out my ballpoint and scratchpad and feverishly penned the following 100 variations.
This Is Just To Say

I have taken
your car
that stood in
the driveway

and which
you were probably
planning
to leave in

Forgive me
it was convenient
so near
and so fast
This Is Just To Say

I have borrowed
the cash
you left on
your dresser

and which
you were probably
needing
for lunchtime

Forgive me
it was enticing
so green
and so crisp
This Is Just To Say

I have opened
your mail
that lay on
the table

and which
you were probably
thinking
was private

Forgive me
it was inviting
so white
and so sealed
This Is Just To Say

I have gone to
the store
to get what
you told me

and what
you had probably
thought I'd
remember

Forgive me
but I just bought beer
so cold
and so gold

*(cerevisia = beer)*
This Is Just To Say

I had offered
to help
the kids with
their homework

so that
you could probably
find peace
and quiet

Forgive me
I’m watching TV
so set
and so snug

*(otians = at leisure)*
This Is Just To Say

I've forgotten again
(like last year)
your birthday

on which
you had probably
hoped for
a present

Forgive me
I'm just forgetful
so hazed
and so dazed
This Is Just To Say

I have turned off
the clock
that was to
awake you

and now
you will probably
miss your
big meeting

Forgive me
you’ll get the axe now
so rushed
but so late

*(matutinus = pertaining to the morning)*
This Is Just To Say

I’ve erased all the disks beside your computer

on which you were probably saving your life’s work

Forgive me now they are empty so bare and so blank
This Is Just To Say

I have opened
the cage
that housed both
your finches

the ones
you had probably
relished
the songs of

Forgive me
now they are catfood
so sweet
and so plump

*(avis = bird; cultura = cultivation)*
This Is Just To Say

I have dumped out
the books
you placed in
your bookcase

and which
you had probably
lined up
precisely

Forgive me
I am just sloppy
so loose
and so lax

*(bibliotheca = a library; bibliothecarius = pertaining to a library)*
Variation No. 11
Agonistic*

This Is Just To Say

I have cancelled
our plans
to leave for
the weekend

a time
you had probably
thought so
romantic

Forgive me
there's a big game on
such plays
and such moves

*(agôn = a contest; agônistikos = relating to a contest)*
This Is Just To Say

I have chopped down
the tree
that grew by
your window

and which
you had probably
gazed on
each morning

Forgive me
it was for toothpicks
so slim
and so short

*(arbor = a tree; arboreus = relating to a tree)*
This Is Just To Say

I have burned all
the bras
you fold in
your dresser

with which
you have probably
bolstered
slack bosoms

Forgive me
they're liberated
so loose
and so free
This Is Just To Say

I have hidden
the mike
that stood on
the rostrum

with which
you’d have probably
given
your lecture

Forgive me
your voice is cracking
so stressed
and so strained
This Is Just To Say

I have caught you
on film
in all of
your glory

just when
you had probably
stepped from
the shower

Forgive me
you are in *Playboy*
so nude
and so nice
This Is Just To Say

I have let out
the air
from all four
of your tires

on which
you'd have probably
ridden
quite smoothly

Forgive me
now you just sit there
so still
and so stalled
This Is Just To Say

I have drawn out
the funds
you’d logged in
your bankbook

and which
you’d have probably
paid off
your bills with

Forgive me
I found your balance
so high
and so full

*(pecunia = money; pecuniarius = relating to money)*
This Is Just To Say

I have ripped the last page
from what you are reading

so now
you are probably missing
the climax

Forgive me
it was exciting
so strange
yet so true
This Is Just To Say

I have drunk all
the wine
we have in
the cellar

and which
you were probably
saving
for New Year’s

Forgive me
I’m alcoholic
so drunk
and so glad

*(oinos = wine)*
This Is Just To Say

I said I would
clean out
the attic
this weekend

in which
you’d have probably
put things
in storage

Forgive me
I have gone hunting
so rough
and so wild

*(venereus = relating to hunting)*
This Is Just To Say

I bought you some
sweets for
Saint Valen-
tine’s feastday

and as
you could probably
guess they
were chocolate

Forgive me
they are all gone now
so dark
and so rich
This Is Just To Say

I have blacked out
the days
and times of
your datebook

with which
you’d have probably
kept your
appointments

Forgive me
you can stay home now
so bleak
and so blue
This Is Just To Say

I have broken
the vase
in front of
the mirror

the one
you had probably
valued
as priceless

Forgive me
now there are fragments
so small
and so sharp
This Is Just To Say

I have emptied
the tank
that held all
your goldfish

the ones
you had probably
joyed in
the sight of

Forgive me
they are decaying
so rank
and so foul

*(piscis = fish; cultura = cultivation)*
Variation No. 25
Tapetal*

This Is Just To Say

I have spilled all
my port
upon your
white carpet

on which
you had probably
not put
the Scotchguard

Forgive me
it's like a crime scene
so stained
and so red

*(tapeta = rug)*
This Is Just To Say

I have broken
the date
for which we
had tickets

for which
you had probably
bought a
new outfit

Forgive me
I was out drinking
so hard
and so late
This Is Just To Say

I have driven
my car
right over
the rosebeds

the ones
you had probably
laid out
so nicely

Forgive me
now there are ruts there
so deep
and so wide

*(flos = flower; cultura = cultivation)*
Variation No. 28
Nacreous*

This Is Just To Say

I have broken
the strand
of pearls on
your necklace

those which
you had probably
worn at
our wedding

Forgive me
many got stepped on
so smooth
and so frail

*(arabic naqqâra, medieval Latin nacrum = mother of pearl)
Variation No. 29

Iago-like

This Is Just To Say

I have told your
best friend
you slept with
her husband

a man
you would probably
not find
attractive

Forgive me
she will take vengeance
so swift
and so sure
This Is Just To Say

I have scuffed up the floors you spent all day waxing

and which you had probably guessed would stay shiny

Forgive me boots are just clunky so heeled and so blacked

*(caligae = military boots)*
This Is Just To Say

I have switched all your phones to “nine hundred” numbers on which you will probably get your new clients

Forgive me they will be dirty so lewd and so low
This Is Just To Say

I have totaled
the car
that you have
just paid for

and which
you’d have probably
driven
a decade

Forgive me
now it is scrap iron
so crushed
and so crunched
This Is Just To Say

I have sold off
the stocks
in which you
invested

and which
you had probably
meant for
retirement

Forgive me
it's a bull’s market
so rich
and so fat
This Is Just To Say

I have steamed off
the stamps
on all of
your letters

the ones
you had probably
thought I
was mailing

Forgive me
they will not get there
no way
and no how

*(philos = a liking for; ateleia = exemption from [postal] charges; relating to stamp collecting)*
This Is Just To Say

I have unplugged
the cord
that goes to
the freezer

in which
you had probably
frozen
some dinners

Forgive me
now they are mushy
so sopped
and so sogged

*(frigorificus = producing cold)*
Variation No. 36
Halieutic*

This Is Just To Say

I promised to help with my share of the housework of which you are probably getting so weary

Forgive me I have gone fishing so blithe and so free

*(halieutikos = relating to fishing)*
This Is Just To Say

I had bought you
a gift
but since have
returned it

it’s just
what you’re probably
wanting
for Christmas

Forgive me
your box will be empty
so big
and so void
This Is Just To Say

I have shaved off
your hair
while still you
lay sleeping

the hair
you were probably
rightly
so proud of

Forgive me
you have a chrome dome
so slick
and so sleek

*(capillus = hair; capillaris = relating to the hair)*
This Is Just To Say

I have smashed up your set of antique French china on which you were probably serving this Friday.

Forgive me it was outdated so quaint and so old.
This Is Just To Say

I have hidden
a snake
beneath your
bed covers

between
which you probably
slipped un-
suspecting

Forgive me
it has just bitten
so coiled
and so fanged

*(ophis = snake)*
This Is Just To Say

I have messed up the house
you spent the week cleaning

and which
you had probably thought would stay tidy

Forgive me
men are just like that so crude and so crass

*(sordidus = dirty)*
Variation No. 42
Servitudinous*

This Is Just To Say

I've decided
we won't
go out to
have dinner

although
you would probably
rather
not fix it

Forgive me,
slave of the hot stove,
so balled
and so chained

*(servitudo = slavery)*
This Is Just To Say

I have pulled up
the blooms
you tend in
your garden

with which
you’d have probably
made an
arrangement

Forgive me
they have all shriveled
so dry
and so stale

*(hortus = garden; cultura = cultivation)*
This Is Just To Say

I have dumped out
your purse
right into
the trashcan

the one
you had probably
kept all
your stuff in

Forgive me
now you are needy
so poor
and so lost

*(marsupion = pouch or small purse)*
This Is Just To Say

I have framed you
for crimes
that I have
committed

and which
you would probably
never
have stooped to

Forgive me
you are in prison
so cooped
and so caged

*(medieval Latin *felo* = something galling)*
This Is Just To Say

I have slept with your friend who worked in my office and whom you had probably trusted as faithful

Forgive me she was seductive so full and so firm
This Is Just To Say

I have thrown in
the trash
your light bill
for April

one which
you'd have probably
paid off
by May first

Forgive me
you're in the dark now
so pitch
and so black
This Is Just To Say

I have pommeled
your dad
who dropped by
to visit

and whom
you were probably
waiting
to chat with

Forgive me
he was nitpicking
so proud
and so snide
This Is Just To Say

I have taken
the eggs
you had in
the icebox

with which
you’d have probably
cooked up
an omelette

Forgive me
your car is splattered
so shelled
and so yolked
This Is Just To Say

I have pawned off
the ring
you left on
the nightstand

and which
you most probably
often
had flaunted

Forgive me
it was expensive
so gemmed
and so gold

*(anulus = a ring; anularis = relating to a ring)*
This Is Just To Say

I have changed your address
at every post office

and so you will probably get no more letters

Forgive me they seemed like junk mail so dry and so dull
This Is Just To Say

I have turned up
the heat
control of
your oven

in which
you were probably
fixing
gourmet food

Forgive me
now it is cinders
so crisp
and so charred

*(fornax = an oven; fornacalis = relating to an oven)*
Variation No. 53
Aleatory*

This Is Just To Say

I had promised
to save
my bonus
from Christmas

which thus
you had probably
deemed would
draw interest

Forgive me
I’m in Las Vegas
so down
and so out

*(alea = a game of chance; aleatorius = relating to a gambler)*
This Is Just To Say

I’ve been feeding
the kids
while you were
away, dear

with meals
you had probably
thought were
nutritious

Forgive me
they like their Cheetos
so cheesed
and so greased

*(caseus = cheese)
This Is Just To Say

I have had you declared
unfit as 
a mother

for which
you will probably
lose all
your children

Forgive me
they will forget you
so quick
and so well
This Is Just To Say

I have shattered your clock that sat on the mantle

and which you’d have probably cherished forever

Forgive me it was annoying it ticked and it tocked
This Is Just To Say

I have gutted
the cat
you raised from
a kitten

and which
you had probably
thought was
so cuddly

Forgive me
I strung my banjo
so tight
and so taut
This Is Just To Say

I’ve severed the clothesline
you hung out the wash on

the load
you had probably dreamed would smell springlike

Forgive me
dogs have attacked it
what shreds
and what scraps

*(lavare = to wash)*
Variation No. 59
Millinery*

This Is Just To Say

I have trampled
the hat
you purchased
for Easter

with which
you’d have probably
topped off
your outfit

Forgive me
it is a pancake
so thin
and so flat

*(milliner = originally a vendor of goods from Milan; relating to women’s hats)*
This Is Just To Say

I have slandered
your name
through all of
the papers

in which
you’d have probably
never
been mentioned

Forgive me
you have been muddied
so mucked
and so mired
This Is Just To Say

I’m spending the night with a couple of bimbos and so you should probably wait up no longer

Forgive me double is better so mixed and so matched

*(geminus = twin, double)*
This Is Just To Say

I have cut off
the main
that brings you
your water

of which
you’d have probably
drunk from
the faucet

Forgive me
you are so thirsty
so parched
and so pale
This Is Just To Say

I have auctioned
our child
among the
slave traders

the one
you’d have probably
sent off
to college

Forgive me
she’s worth a fortune
so young
and so fresh
This Is Just To Say

I have drained from
your car
each drop of
brake fluid

and so
you are probably
racing
downhill now

Forgive me
you will be crashing
so hard
and so fast

*(de = down from; celerare = to accelerate)*
This Is Just To Say

I have torn up
the notes
you took in
your classes

and which
you would probably
study
for finals

Forgive me
you will be failing
so sure
and so bad
This Is Just To Say

I have thrown out
the pills
the doctor
prescribed you

and which
would have probably
healed your
condition

Forgive me
they seemed a trifle
so small
and so round
This Is Just To Say

I've taken an interest in things geographic in sights you have probably never imagined

Forgive me I've gone exploring so far and so wide

*(mappa mundi = map of the world)*
This Is Just To Say

I've used the last diaper
to wipe up
an oil spill

one which
you were probably
storing
for Junior

Forgive me
it was absorbent
so soft
and so white

*(pannus = a piece of cloth)*
This Is Just To Say

I have had you pronounced, dear, *non compos mentis*

for which you will probably forfeit your heirship

Forgive me all will be mine now so much and so soon
This Is Just To Say

I have bent up
the flute
you kept in
your flutecase

on which
you were probably
meaning
to practice

Forgive me
it was atonal
so sharp
and so flat
Variation No. 71
Telephonic

This Is Just To Say

I have ripped out
the phone
you had in
the kitchen

and which
you'd have probably
talked to
your friends on

Forgive
it had been ringing
so high
and so shrill
This Is Just To Say

I have butchered your dog
who frisked in the hallway

and whom you were probably wanting to play with

Forgive me he had been barking so loud and so long
This Is Just To Say

I have slashed up your chair in front of the fireplace in which you'd have probably browsed through the paper.

Forgive me here is the stuffing so soft and so plush.
Variation No. 74
Eleemosynary*

This Is Just To Say

I have given
your clothes
to Salva-
tion Army

the ones
you’d have probably
put on
this morning

Forgive me
now you are naked
so buff
and so bare

*(eleemosyna = a charitable gift, an alms)*
Variation No. 75
Calumniou*
This Is Just To Say

I have cut off
the heat
that flows to
your quarters

with which
you’d have probably
kept warm
this winter

Forgive me
now you are freezing
so stiff
and so numb

*(calorificus = producing heat)*
This Is Just To Say

I have murdered
your mom
who stayed in
our guestroom

and whom
you had probably
hoped to
spend time with

Forgive me
she was complaining
of this
and of that
This Is Just To Say

I have sent you
a file
to open
by e-mail

and which
you will probably
download
this morning

Forgive me
it has a virus
so strong
and so vile

*(epistola = a letter; epistolaris = relating to a letter)*
This Is Just To Say

I have gone on our dream vacation without you

one which you had probably long been awaiting

Forgive me I'm in St. Thomas so oiled and so tanned
This Is Just To Say

I have cancelled
your cards
with all of
your credit

with which
you would probably
run through
the sale days

Forgive me
They were just plastic
so cheap
and so fake
This Is Just To Say

I was watching
the kids
I took to
the playground

a place
you’d have probably
not picked
for napping

Forgive me
they have been kidnapped
so weak
and so young
This Is Just To Say

I have ripped up
the book
with all of
your photos

the shots
that were probably
keepsakes
from childhood

Forgive me
now they are tatters
so black
and so white
Variation No. 83
Cultellary*

This Is Just To Say

I have brought you
some fruit
in which I
hid razors

and which
you have probably
bitten
right into

Forgive me
your tongue is bleeding
so slit
and so sliced

*(cultellus = a little knife)
This Is Just To Say

I have thrown out
your brooch,
your heirloom
from grandma,

though it
was quite probably
your sole
memento

Forgive me
she was an ogress
so mean
and so mad
This Is Just To Say

I have bolted
the door
and turned up
the sauna

in which
you were probably
calmly
relaxing

Forgive me
now you are fainting
so limp
and so light

*(balneae = a bathing place; balnearius = relating to a bath)*
Variation No. 86
Funereal*

This Is Just To Say

I have dug up
the grave
you buried
your mom in

and where
you'd have probably
gone to
lay flowers

Forgive me
her bones have no flesh now
so blanched
and so clean

*(funus = a burial; funereus = relating to a burial)
This Is Just To Say

I have shredded the files that held all your papers and which you had probably indexed for tax time.

Forgive me now they are slivers so thin and so light.
This Is Just To Say

I have left for
a year
to seek out
my fortune

and so
you will probably
fend for
the children

Forgive me
it's an adventure
so new
and so near
This Is Just To Say

I have stomped on
the case
containing
your glasses

and now
you have probably
clashed with
a doorpost

Forgive me
your nose is broken
so bent
and so bruised
This Is Just To Say

I have coated
with soap
the floor of
your bathroom

in which
you were probably
going
to shower

Forgive me
you slipped and fell there
so black
and so blue

*(detergere = to clean by wiping)*
This Is Just To Say

I've polluted
the air
you breathe in
your study

although
you will probably
not smell
the toxins

Forgive me
now you are choking
so gagged
and so scragged
This Is Just To Say

I have torn out
each page
you wrote in
your diary

and which
you were probably
keeping
a secret

Forgive me
it’s on my website
so trite
and so tired
This Is Just To Say

I’m quitting the job that put food on the table

your children will probably have to go hungry

Forgive me
I am just lazy so slow and so slack

*(pigritudo = laziness)*
This Is Just To Say

I have switched out
the locks
at all of
the doorways

the ones
you are probably
seeking
a key to

Forgive me
night is approaching
so cold
and so dark

*(janua = a door)*
This Is Just To Say

I have drained out
the pool
in which you
are diving

in which
you will probably
fracture
your skull bone

Forgive me
I hate the water
so clear
and so wet

(piscina = a pool)
This Is Just To Say

I’ve called in a bomb threat
and grounded the airplane

in which you were probably ready
for takeoff

Forgive me you’ve been left stranded so high
and so dry

*(minari = to threaten; late Latin minatorius = threatening)*
This Is Just To Say

I have shot out
the lamp
up over
the entrance

on which
you were probably
counting
for safety

Forgive me
here come the muggers
so fierce
and so mean
This Is Just To Say

I have burned down our house
which stood on the corner

and which you had probably counted your castle

Forgive me now it is ashes so fine and so black
This Is Just To Say

I have poisoned the food that you have just eaten with which you have probably sated your hunger.

Forgive me now you are lifeless so cold and so dead.
This Is Just To Say

I have written
this book
composed in
your honor

although
you will probably
not be
immortal

Forgive me
fame is not lasting
so here
then so gone
After all, this poem is not a lyric song, or an ode, or a meditation, or a valediction, or a whatever else poetry might be, but "just to say," something more direct, simple in tone, like a simple piece of information shared. But like all our apparently simple speech, the real meaning and tone are elusive, and one can imagine a wide variety of possible meanings of this little note. It is important to consider the title of this poem, in part because the poem is so short. In the YouTube reading by Williams himself, he reads the title and begins the poem seamlessly, almost as if the title is the actual first line. The phrase "this is just to say" reinforces the tone of non-apology found throughout the poem, as if the speaker felt obligated to apologize to the ambiguous "You" but never really wanted to. This inspired others to create interpretations of the poem set to various popular songs. One of the most popular tweets, posted by @thwphips[12] set the poem to Lou Bega's "Mambo No. 5", gaining over 3,500 retweets and 13,000 likes (shown below, left). [8] Tumblr â€“ Search results for 'This Is Just To Say'. [9] Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams. [10] Kenneth Koch â€“ Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.