

**Tony Towle      Selected Poems      1970–1973**

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\* Included in *The History of the Invitation: New and Selected Poems 1963-2000* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2001).

## The Morgan Library

Up, gracing the void with intellect, I noticed a ring,  
encircled by rows of shimmering diamonds,  
walking, feeling prosperous and losing weight,  
to the Morgan Library. For young people there was a pin,  
expressing love in simple cascades of diamonds,  
on 34<sup>th</sup> Street  
which we give no relief walking and walking,  
looking for something to stick it into,  
women and children first, apples, walnuts, melons,  
the calm transparency of plastic, the grudging  
response of lead, or the rolling fog or even a jar of worms!

I try to be normal, but one is magically altered  
in the serene tempest of infinity

Keats Milton Pope  
their fragile efforts preserved

at the incomparable Morgan,  
and examined with the curator's indulgence. Shelley

his last poem sitting here over the years

lungs having filled in desperation,  
the supreme tempest of personality finishing,  
while today America is happy,  
from its own romantic exhaustion,  
and I am happy  
to see the books and the furniture  
and to feel the circulation of local air  
through the structure of my romance.  
At times I would like to go to a foreign country  
and forget myself and America;  
American women are complicated and beautiful,  
and their soft arms cling in loving silence,  
but at times I feel there are other women  
who wait for me in vain.

## The Works of Li Po

The mountain flowers are growing and in bloom,  
the different insects carry on their business.

At the sound of my rambling you awake  
O drunkard  
and arise from the dew of the wine shop.

The thick wine is called the wise,  
the clear, the sage,  
poured blissfully in a ditch above the stars  
where my city like yours stands by a serene waterfall  
and after a jugful we are clouds on the eyelid of heaven.

I cannot be less precise because my words have fewer meanings;  
“vessel” is a wonderful word in our language,  
for as the liquor travels it is also a ship,  
bearing the liquid course of the seasons.  
Syntactically I am on the vessel,  
as on the wine curtain of the shore.

## The New York Clouds

*for Larry Rivers*

In 1963 I wrote that New York was a cloud.  
Telephones rang. I was swept up  
in the most impressive poetry renaissance  
since Pound, Eliot, et al.  
Larry refined the painted clouds of Africa.

Years before, things had already been happening,  
actions and paint occurring simultaneously,  
canvas and space filled with sensible equivocations,  
the walls of art lost to view  
in a summer history of clouds.

You can't lose with clouds,  
a painter or poet, that is — if you're a pilot  
then clouds are “out to lunch”  
in a quiet sandwich of sky —  
looked up at and ordered in times of emergency  
with a casualness to make the public stare

since they are devoted to persistence as I am  
and Larry is  
and awaiting the nerve to be “hopelessly corny”  
one divulges a life more painfully to the modern  
and reflects it with minutes of clouds.

## A Unique Tour

- March 22<sup>nd</sup>: Flight #100; chrysanthemum of sky;  
arrival on the continent of Europe;  
transfer to hotel with remorse.
- March 23<sup>rd</sup>: Meetings with government officials.
- March 24<sup>th</sup>: Meetings with Trade Unionists.
- March 25<sup>th</sup>: In a state of intense personal remorse.
- March 26<sup>th</sup>: Meetings with Leftists and Social Democrats.
- March 27<sup>th</sup>: An *optional* excursion.
- March 28<sup>th</sup>: Meetings with Anarchists and Christian  
Socialists; summary.
- March 31<sup>st</sup>: The return to America, in a state of  
restlessness and despair.

## Moral Courage

Pink birds are again in the yellow sky,  
a silver spoon of milky clouds  
and again I am nourished by escape.  
a seagull appears at 4 o'clock,  
and again at 11, to be revised  
and ready to attack the page  
through a cement feeling of infinity.

In September I gave up smoking: that  
was moral courage. I go out into the sleet  
to fetch a dying stranger a cigarette.

Coughing and wheezing he reveals the secret of life:  
yes, it is having moral courage.

The world shrinks to the size of an oyster,  
the museum of sleep opens,  
then grows to the size of a turtle  
for a splash in the clear broth of awakening.

*Tart* is a variation of the Middle English *tarte*,  
from the Old French, *tourte*, a round, low, Latin cake  
devoured on the way to a woman. If her taste is sharp,  
or tart, then she has come to you from the Anglo-Saxon, *teart*.

I explore the language compulsively, like Tennyson,  
and exist in it as a story, like the dictionary,  
told accumulating beneath the sun  
which I notice with medieval regularity;  
but again I escape,  
in digression on this lovely hill  
above the rape of the country.

It takes a long time to write,  
and to read, as well. Time is short, in a way;  
the animal air is a bath, in a way;  
an animal darts behind a wall  
and loose stones trouble the continuing footsteps  
that follow what from the window

I can only think of as moral courage.

Typing is a variation of drama, a soft pursuit,  
and I type the words Modern Theater, too — patterns  
I do not disturb, or go into, but into a variation.

# Autobiography

## Prologue

*With an eye for the ladies,  
you lift up a skirt,  
in New York,  
in a brief reference to infinity,  
and find a New York woman,  
aghast at your manners  
and amused by your lament.*

I get up from the floor  
my dear ladies (*donne mie care*),  
a continuous line from the porch to the hammock,  
and will tell you everything.  
I close the door  
and the doorknob hangs in space  
on the other side.

10

For ten years I have courted the muse  
through memories and despair, poverty,  
the specters of urban development,  
and the blood of an unbelievable impatience.

At a certain point my imagination began to stir, like boats,  
sitting on a still horizon, moved by a gathering breeze,  
torn apart in a tempest,  
and by the nerves in the following calm.

20

At first I boiled the language, like an egg,  
the spirit broken at the insufferable hands of sociology,  
until at last the ground trembled and broke, like an egg,  
and I could imagine filling some small need of literature's  
as well as finally, and in a modest way, my own —  
a stew of undergrowth and towering oaks.

From Europe my ancestors headed west, to a certain point,  
then returned to the east in the logical irony of opposites,  
to get lost on nature's accordion walls,  
resolved in nature's immortal subterfuge —

30

Yet I hesitate to give myself dramatic location,  
time without place is my usual location,  
someone from the last century thinking to be in the preceding one,

but without really mentioning anything specific  
that happened in those centuries.

I return to my century and open up Spenser, and the sun,  
an elevated plum and a demon from the dim past,  
closes an eye on the ocean at sunset,  
dropping from a plate to the carpet of green forest,  
crushing the fragrant spices soaked by torrential rains,  
echoes to my clinical romanticism  
expressed with wit and a carrot boundary;  
unhappiness, a curve in the river, a bight,  
lemon sharks in the rainbow sunset,  
a cataract of billiard residents  
rolling from their intellectual core.

40

An eagle lands, for example, on vacation in the approaching dusk,  
in a simple dénouement, a right to the solar plexus,  
delivered like death in the Middle Ages,  
free of rancor and sentimentality;  
and a final dénouement,  
a left to the jaw in the soft haze of dusk  
where people even older than I  
can still do marvelous things.

50

Of course our bodies are no longer pretty,  
but we can be in fantastic shape  
and can shoot a quick jab to the ribs,  
against a background of orange and yellow streamers,  
to put your thinking in perspective.

60

You see, most of us do not use our backs properly,  
they float unused in the body's sea,  
retreat like flights of steps into the earth,  
or mount birds and hurtle through space  
in a universe of misuse —

a setting of deserted and elaborate terrain.  
Other things happen during my lifetime;  
cotton, for example, becomes a less important product,  
although it remains an inviting mass of clouds.

70

The wallpaper of NYU surrounds my present responsibilities,  
wheeling Rachel through Washington Square Park,  
but I can see through them  
to some azure cows mooing in a yellow country sky.

Or a label covers part of its bottle, simple enough,  
and by itself  
can hold the language back one single minute  
from the metaphoric abyss.

Or a girl comes to the door and means to widen her eyes.  
Hand her a crust of bread and return to your work,

80

a note to Charles North,

a note to Sylvia Plath,

and a yellow phial filled with cloudy fluid;

I spent a lot of time on it, thinking about it,  
changing it again in a quiet rage, spilling it,

soaking it back up with a sponge,

and by this time everyone is in stitches.

On a smaller scale, a puddle is covered over with boards  
and an awning shields several successful men from the sun.

I know none of this is really true,

90

until the damned car ran over the embankment,

which was also not true;

hundreds of wheels,

and the embankment the diamond border of another state,

and the road a river stretching far to the west,

and along the way slopes leading down beneath the trees,

and from there the clearing I had seen before

from a silent pool of sunlit air,

looking from this spot and from others

to the same imaginary points among the stars.

100

The landscape is still very pretty but there are too many people.

There have always been too many people

and they obviously have something in common,

but that's as far as it goes,

a friendly chat or violent debate among civilizations,

comparing pyramids, admiring one another's feathers,

while muskrats keep nibbling the grass

and I prop up my feet on a temporary framework,

and I again open Spenser

and would gallop onto the plains,

110

a distinguished figure on the back of poetry,

non-ferrous castings holding me securely

to the machinery of composition.

But do not jump to conclusions,

I can be entertaining as well as literate,

as well as thought-provoking and lucid,

reflective and supremely melancholy

after relating the fashionable drolleries of the day;

in short like a newspaper, sealed off from the floor

by the knees of my beloved

120

and open to her incisive and affectionate perusal.

By the editorial of course she is dozing;  
the soup bubbles merrily on the stove,  
personalities of tiny fragments, sharply transitional,  
parades of figures that die like a mosquito,  
slapped against the forehead in a surfeit of imagery,  
one minor event and then another,  
exaggerated even further during the night,  
building up the daily framework until forced to seek revenge  
and dying like a dog in the gutter,  
installed in the tradition determined by sanitary bliss.

130

In another picture, if I understand my vision correctly,  
Nebraska shines with a burning aura,  
and elsewhere in that same picture  
it appears again, consumed and glowing quietly,  
with shapes nearby not too dissimilar, Colorado, the Dakotas,  
with a definite luminosity always from around their borders.  
The people back east are dogs, asses, or cats,  
sheep, rats, parrots, or pigs.

Out west they are rabbits, bulls, or coyotes,  
mice, or low, like snakes. The rest of us are without interest,  
trapped like insects within the merely human personality,  
huddled together in our rented leaking rooms,  
with only the wallpaper to suggest the wrought-iron entranceway,  
a passage down the marble hall, the balconies, the stairwell,  
and the bow-window of the dining room,  
the visit miles away at the bottom of a glass  
in a tradition determined by liquid tropical bliss.

140

I was born in those United States too,  
and for a long while it seemed useless,  
time pattering by on its iambic feet,  
followed sometimes too closely by anapestic ones,  
and ultimately stamped by the thousands of feet  
having no proper accent at all, the endless pyrrhic journey  
discussed in an English aspiring to the grains of sand,  
trampling the literature until it screams with hyperbole,  
and generating a confusion unequalled since 1950,  
when I stood in the same place in the playground next to my school  
and had the same thought I had there the year before  
and knew that this was going to occur yet again the following year,  
and that then as now the intervening months  
will have seemed to have passed in an instant,  
and that no matter when I looked back from the future  
all the previous years would have flown in a second,  
the cartoon with the one perennial frame.

150

160

But newspapers do not think and act by themselves,  
someone has to get up, bored,  
so that I fall to the floor in a heap,  
a lowly detail of my own description,  
while she walks away like success and failure  
and the pages pile up from room to room  
until the apartment is an informed but littered mess.

170

I periodically avoid that reality for a few minutes  
by delving into the contrived and picturesque,  
the façade of a palace, a cathedral, a lengthening shadow,  
a cloud drifting along above  
while shaded figures disappear beside the canal,  
or rest beneath an unseen melon canopy;  
and pieces of rock break off beyond their reach  
from a distant cliff;  
and their pounding hearts,  
as they scatter whispering to their costumes,  
passing through a vestibule into a low room.

180

I pause, and think about the human condition.  
I look out at the sky,  
which is rich, and brown, like a leaf  
floating all the way down to our narrow jungle floor  
and becoming like a tiny person during the night  
talking in the clichés of our computerized age;  
though people were always reduced to numbers  
whenever one wanted to count them,  
in our case to over 200 million Americans,  
and we are counted again for our ethnic identities,  
each of us secretly knowing it is the wrong one;  
and we do not enjoy our empire,  
a claim to historical uniqueness  
along with the Bomb,  
the scientific equivalent of the Deep Image,  
and the morning's sun arises in splendor  
to intensify the insane bullshit of time and place.

190

200

So *this* is the famous Meadowbrook Parkway at dawn  
for example, a dwarf transept in the cathedral of Nassau,  
running at once toward the valuable properties on the Sound,  
and south to the famous crowds on the beach,  
who believe they are wading out toward their ancestral homes  
in Europe and Africa,  
but who in reality face the remainder of the New World  
which soon began to yawn like a professional,

trapped in the craters of the periods and apostrophes,  
having been inserted as the second sheet  
for the writings of the past.

210

Another possibility is that the universe is a spoon  
of enormous depth,  
stirring an infinite cauldron of soup, or a fork  
to prod the roasted planets of gas  
until they break up in hopeless laughter  
and slop over the sides  
onto the indivisible floor of night; or it is a ladle,  
scattering pinpoints of sensation before your eyes  
in an astounding flood of information  
greeting you suddenly on your return from a walk.  
Indeed, one staggers in, silhouetted against the February sky,  
back from a tour of no less than fifty centuries,  
to collapse on the bed like all the others.  
Indeed, your position can be revealed to the howling mob  
of rugged individualists  
who become enraged en masse  
like a blind spot in the electricity  
that shows you at a glance the night as it has always been.

220

Long before 1950 I knew that one of the numerous years  
would bring death, as 1939 brought life,  
in the way that two poems on universal themes  
open and close an important collection;  
or with a novel, its epigraph and after 600 pages —  
coming to one's senses and closing it before the last, the 601<sup>st</sup>,  
because there are a host of other good books  
to be read, written, and published by far-seeing publishers,  
who like the authors themselves are high on the evolutionary scale,  
where death is the occasion for great verbosity,  
which like vegetables from the Massapequa Market  
imparts a healthy glow.

230

With Rembrandt, I understand that there is no history,  
there is only pride, fury, and frustration  
and the glow  
these fevered emotions can impart to my work,  
applied in phrases built up like brushstrokes,  
but apprehended in a sequential structure, like music;  
there is very little left for poetry itself,  
it is only the core  
on which to hang the mountainous array of information,  
and which is not gathered from the *anguish* of life, exactly,  
although it is that very word that has sometimes shaken my heart,  
verging on the French, as have the English always,

240

250

two percent (2%) less oriental refinement  
due to an arriviste position analogous to Spain's  
and two percent (3%) more Teutonic brooding,  
due to the raging sea, the barren crags, and deserted fens,  
which was why I was resting my head in the first place,  
distorting human affairs in the polemics of survival,  
in the enigmas posed by the use of the words themselves,  
sustaining almost anything that floats.

260

The lights come back on, in the company of others,  
in mediaeval values brought to their modern equivalents.  
I pick up a newspaper, and put it back down.  
I pick up a tape-measure and start rolling it out,  
making a mark at 31 and continuing,  
until at 60 it stops altogether  
and I look out at the unrecorded distance.  
Then I just sit quietly for a while  
in a blaze of liquid sensation. Skiing is not allowed,  
nor is hunting or fishing,  
just gliding along a low cliff for a while, then out above the deep.  
I am basically a moderate person and often tire of myself,  
my drunken attempts to sum up existence in an evening,  
like poetry in that one makes impossible demands of it,  
or one can be found differently,  
smashed on the sidewalk in a trance, face down,  
having imagined some great piece of nonsense from the heights  
to permeate the ridiculous ease of existence.

270

I refill my glass and light a match,  
but after that things are at a standstill,  
or they skitter away like a muskrat  
until expanded into something more exciting  
for the entertainment of the great, and politically well-placed,  
as well as for those who feel that they sink through a sieve  
and who seek an explanation for this.

280

In our American English is the expression "left field."  
It is the largest of the three fields,  
and the one Americans most often come from,  
walking with limps toward the setting sun.

290

Really only about one-third of the news they hear  
can be considered "bad"; and of that  
an even smaller percentage which could be called truly disastrous,  
or "catastrophic," in the classic sense;  
but when one brings up the subject of poetry,  
discharging it among minor globules of conversation,  
they shiver up the length of their spines.

They know that millions have died horribly from excessive reading,  
useless quotations trickling from parched and swollen throats,  
closing glassy eyes directed in vain  
to a final mirage of feeble verse  
overwhelmed by relief columns of practical industriousness,  
an assault even on the poetic dreams of my great predecessors,  
Generals Grant and Washington,  
who fell and died with a splash in the poetic lake of their country,  
which is no worse than having noodles for brains, or ice cream.

300

Like religion, I cannot agree,  
I simply admonish.  
I operate in a prescribed area,  
from one end of a spectrum to another.

310

I fall in a heap sometimes,  
on your doorstep in a bundle,  
spilling out in any number of ways;  
and missing many opportunities,  
some of which do not yet really exist;  
as visitors over two miles away, on Maple Avenue,  
a street over two miles away,  
and during the journey the moods are sharply transitional,  
almost a parody of Shakespeare as one scene relieves another,  
and in almost all of them are moments of crisis.

320

Hmm. Change and growth, stagnation and decay.  
With other devices I circle the rooftops.  
I burst onto the scene, mature by 1848,  
and settle down to the gourmandise of Victorian inelasticity.  
Below stairs, in the kitchen, there is related a classic metaphor,  
in which an iron ladle of universal night  
scatters a trail of visibly glowing stars  
across the artistically morbid nineteen-fifties,  
determined by people molded in the Twenties,  
enduring the artistic spasms of their maturity.

330

I finish reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,  
and wish that Charles would end up with Sarah.  
That's what the Fifties were all about,  
ending up with the right person,  
as opposed to with God or the Apocalypse,  
which would be very difficult for me to comprehend,  
but very interesting.

I start off the Seventies, publish a book, and fall back exhausted,  
to languish in my personal version of the ex-neo-Protestant ethic,  
although I am not really competent to speak of it,

340

nor would it be in good taste.  
For my part I just take it or leave it,  
like November on the leg of the needle's quadrennial plunge,  
when political famine rages  
and Wit is burned in the presence of Theory,  
with a bowl of warm and bloody water as a side dish;  
when the electorate acts *automatically*,  
in that is has "no effect" on the rest of the year;  
while I shun the crowds like a person from the Fifties  
and autumn turns peacefully to winter  
and your hair descends in sudden glory,  
as on the soft shoulders of the daily epic,  
which gets pushed roughly down at the close of day  
for the crude pleasure of its simple narrative;  
a train grinds to a halt, for example, a man emerges  
holding a sealed and grimy box; the box is resealed,  
I awaken, and the man returns by car.

350

But the lyric as well ends up more or less prone  
on the rumpled bed of narration,  
summer turning peacefully to autumn, for example,  
as a few flakes of rust float allegorically onto the highway,  
while I look out at the afternoon sun,  
having arisen again from the cold June water.  
On a pure whim I get up and pour out a drink, three fingers,  
and then another,  
with puzzling but gratifying effects;  
I visit Rome for the first time, and Greece, old women  
carrying candlesticks and not without prejudice,  
who soon have you munching garlic and stale bread,  
hauling their barrels up from the Mediterranean,  
getting stains on your picturesque clothing;  
and suffering the insolence of the northern peoples  
in their idiot perpetual renaissance,  
onions falling out of a bag.

360

I crawl back through the sawdust to my table,  
searching for a perfect phrase. I sit down  
and begin the American epic;  
in which gods and goddesses in the late 18th century  
sprinkle the dust of adventurous enlightenment  
on a passing eagle,  
who lands as if on vacation and beats the dust into rebellion,  
flecked with the vestigial droplets of Puritanism,  
the vestigial mediaeval reaction  
to the sensual abandon of Renaissance curiosity.

370

380

The God of War enters with a sword;  
I run forward with a pen and tell him to leave.  
Greatly incensed, he leaves with his attendants,  
his brazen shield indelibly spotted with the ink of truth.  
So you see it is possible, from my experience,  
to rout the forces of war and disruption,  
who become like straying sheep,  
and borrow a woman's skirt and bonnet  
(which they sometimes forget to return)  
and play some domestic comedy involving food:  
bread, corn, beans, and steak,  
the odds and ends of a homely American cooking  
eaten by men who grumble and women who lament,  
as curtains lower to the familiar smells of frying potatoes,  
onions, and rice;  
a performance ending up not so much as a *nocturne*  
but a NOCturn, the first syllable getting most of it over with,  
so that with the brief appearance of the final syllable  
one can merely retire to a convenient flat rock  
and watch the sun move on in its fate,  
through one transparent door after another,  
leaving them open for us to follow after  
in the subordinate madness of a satellite.

390

400

It is in that vein, then, the rich streaming blood of comedy,  
that I shoot the rapids,  
the humorlessness of the turbulent times in which I live,  
and plunge over the falls  
and pierce the ripe giant tomato of death,  
and continue in its vast red pulp at last truly alone.  
I fall to dozing about it,  
and occasionally try to write about it,  
and then stop, as if for a nap.

410

I tried last winter in "Sleep and Poetry,"  
at the end awakening, as if from a nap.  
Then as now my life is very simple and of course tragic,  
but my thoughts are very complicated.  
I had always found my thinking inexplicable  
and then, on July 15, 1960, I began writing poems,  
which oddly enough has made me feel gradually more comfortable,  
at least an improvement over when I was nine, in Rego Park,  
slowly ripening beside the great asphalt ladle of Queens Boulevard  
which led a broad trail of starry lights  
to the distant elegance of a visible Manhattan,  
which proved still to be there after many years, August 1960,  
when I returned in anonymous triumph to the island of my birth.

420

Next door, back in Rego Park at the end of the Forties,  
"Walden Terrace" arose, its eight stories of cement  
making obsolete our previously majestic six of brick,  
and was the home of Sid Caesar for a while  
who was good for a dollar tip on a drugstore delivery.  
People came from nowhere after the war,  
like going nowhere during it.

430

We played in the postwar expansion as the buildings went up,  
then faced with a vanished frontier our families pushed on,  
out to the Island, to Jersey, or Connecticut;  
mine trekked to the silver Alaska of Westchester,  
to picturesque Dobbs Ferry on the imposing Hudson,  
where you got beaten up if you were Jewish,  
far from the recently victorious Israeli army,  
and where the devout Irish mayor taught public high school as well,  
and was the scourge of the Protestant students.

440

The lethargic Hudson gleamed in the sun,  
symbolizing our forthcoming journey into the world,  
as the nearby ruins of the Jay Gould estate were the window  
on man's glory and predictable fall.

By 1953, "Ferry" was one of those inescapable puns.  
Popular music was terrible.

450

Many of the people who I saw on those streets  
have died in the meantime, complaining bitterly, et cetera,  
part and parcel of the last hundred years,  
which like the last five have been a period of transition,  
demonstrably different at the extremes,  
but with many of the same people alive for a good deal of it,  
until each dies, finally, closing the transparent door in front of us,  
and like the dawn is a symbol for progress and a new beginning,  
an elderly man, who enters for a moment to give some sound advice.

460

Like Walden Terrace it is usually cement,  
leading like a path from the back door to the garage,  
and then a long drive down a deserted highway  
past a setting for something very real,  
like Elvis Presley in 1957,  
closing the door behind you in much the same way,  
taking the dog out for a walk and coming back in for dinner.

More often, though, one's life and times speak for themselves,  
poured out before you from a sparkling ladle of expectations,  
the physical abstractions I wash in and walk through,  
working hard to relax in them,  
closing my eyes on the roof of the world,

470

rain turning to snow, removed from the company of others,  
and by the time it melts everything has changed.

More truthfully, though, on feeling the first few drops  
I just go inside,  
make a few phone calls and then hang up,  
after having told exactly the way I see things,  
which is in a glare,  
but more the glare of the south and its blue treacherous coast,  
not the staggering lonely white glare of the far north,  
where eventually you stumble into the arms of a bear  
and give up, in a dazzling flurry of blood and fur.

480

But there is another option, the middle way,  
the temperate zone on the eastern coast,  
a smoldering environment of temptation and betrayal,  
immersed in the cauldron of boiling anticipations,  
sitting on what appears to be an empty stage  
bathed by an emblematic moon.

Furtive silhouettes enter from stage right and stage left,  
monstrous allies of dubious organization,  
gliding up the aisles where you shiver with fright,  
until you knock the plugs out and they stiffen with cold.  
After the harmful liquid has drained,  
you stroll at random among the limp and soggy items,  
to find something useful for poetry; much as a dermatologist  
ironically would search for healthy skin, grimace, and move on.

490

There are other specialists in the fields of literature,  
almost too numerous to mention,  
except through a few cryptic references  
set within lush imagery and sparkling observations,  
and in between the great saga of America,  
lying like a lost nickel in New York's platonic gutter,  
or found in one of the real ones  
existing platonically for years in my vision of New York,  
which has proved still to be here after all this time,  
bathed in the artifice of the nightly moon.

500

When it becomes too completely real  
I may jump far out into the night,  
to be lifted up by a great starry ladle,  
and spooned into the cauldron of infinity.

510

Perhaps you are being prodded by these culinary figures  
into the beginnings of an appetite,  
and the rest of the poem  
begins to rise up like the Andes, before which

you have been forced inconveniently to camp this evening,  
and in the chill dawn you find that nothing has changed,  
staring at the ashen embers and the cold cup of oily coffee  
and the peaks loom upwards still,  
and you begin to hallucinate a warm hearth and steaming gravy  
spooned over succulent morsels of roasted meat.

520

The image will have to keep for a while  
in the luxurious bubble of your imagination,  
for there is the inexorable winter of these final hundred lines,  
hard, uneven ground, impossible for trucks or horses,  
on which, in their version of the Middle Ages,  
Europeans searched for firewood,  
using the leftovers to build some ships  
for sailing out and finding empires;  
studying feverishly, arranging for transportation,  
hiring mercenaries; the banter is very loud;  
people's lives in general are far from private,  
and in two senses — the part that is determined to rise,  
and the part that is discovered as a vehicle  
for moving along the ground, nettles along for the ride  
on the corpulent coachman's tattered coat.  
I sit back to enjoy the ride,  
my head a veritable brimming cask, a flickering distant campfire  
in the relentless flow of night.

530

Its blackness can limit our activities  
but not our restless thoughts,  
rendering the dark in dialect  
and wending their way through space.

540

I turn out the lights and get into bed,  
the forces of gravity holding me in place  
on the wrinkled skin of the earth.  
In general our underlying materials must improvise constantly  
to refresh their jaded covering fabrics.  
The interior of the universe itself  
consistently pokes and arouses its translucent wrapping  
which on every side must face the unknown.  
I get out of bed and go to the store,  
observed and alone like the educated suburbs.  
I open a book but fail to read it,  
turn out the lights and toss in my bed.  
I talk a great deal but it is not the truth,  
it is an intellectual shorthand, like painting and music  
and it goes on into the night.  
I stumble out in the night, turn around

550

and come back in the morning,  
my nebulous dialect keeping its distance,  
awaiting the dreaded delivery up to the typewriter,  
distorted beyond recognition in floods of internal description,  
jumbled with pieces from books and from music,  
the surface of painting, sculpture, and prints  
which momentarily sweep from the mind its trivia  
and which all together fill an immense goblet  
from which I drink by definition in failing health  
as much as can be held;

560

and for that informative time  
spreading out as far as possible into the infinite,  
no more than a few miles really,  
until I feel more peculiar than usual.

570

I break the ice and plunge into bottomless sleep.  
I lie in bed and think about life  
or get up and go to the store;  
taking a tentative step on the soft pear of convention  
which can lead to sinking into the worst of two worlds,  
the world of fashion and the world of bitter hallucination,  
where crisis, pain, and emptiness color the imagination,  
miles of crystalline glacier,  
shafts of sunlight and the haunted fields.

580

I gallop onto the plains,  
a distinguished figure on the back of poetry.  
I relax my vigilance, raise the blind  
and observe the sky.  
I verge on the maudlin, jump the gun, drag my ass,  
have a quick Pernod with other poets,  
reach for the sky, turn the screw, and fall out —  
take a powder and hang it up.

590

I venture into the unknown.  
I play by the rules, branch out,  
and stay in my place.  
I walk into the wind, continually,  
have lunch on velvet burgundy tablecloths with friends,  
dress for dinner in elegant striped jackets,  
or fabulous gray suits,  
a pestilent green hat or short furry slippers,  
fashion with charm like the perennial sea  
in that it is always pulling at your leg,

600

or concocting a simple soup.  
I enter another year, 1973. I read Verlaine,  
feel my pulse and drink some rum,

take some shit, bust some balls and run like hell,  
until sleep-inducing herbs permeate the room  
from an odiferous panel, or cylinder.  
The sugar softens in my coffee;  
I outwear my welcome, always,  
harnessed like a horse to a tale,  
casting about in an endless mire,  
along with the other poets, my worthy opponents,  
flying for hours and then some relaxation,  
between the sky and the ground,  
in our purely hypothetical space.

610

### Epilogue

*Nothing will happen here, now, to you,  
something will happen later;  
a story has a beginning and an end,  
ambitions and limitations,  
and some scientific proof.  
It bears you finally downward,  
through mysterious questions  
to unpleasing answers,  
over the warm ground and in driving rain,  
the mind shedding pages like the trees,  
the stars of imagination in eclipse,  
growing in richness and ingenuity,  
the sparkling glimmer of communities.*

620

## Addenda

The Wright Brothers invented the airplane,  
and I almost never use it.

I use up electricity, which imitates the sun,  
the phonograph and television,  
which reproduce our activities;  
the Wright Brothers' contraption  
imitates the flights of poetry and divinity  
and that is immoral.

Get into the pudding.

No, that is a pudding for dinner.

If you want to empathize with menstruation  
subscribe to *Poetry Magazine*,  
if you don't, don't, or if you're a woman  
then you know;  
and you know,  
colliding with the small but equally brilliant moon.

(Don't worry about it, he's drunk,  
the ice just spilled on the floor.)

I know from Frank O'Hara that the poem and its setting  
are completely at your disposal,  
from Kenneth Koch that the resources of language  
are greater than oneself and thereby liberating,  
from John Ashbery that the mysterious and beautiful  
are still supremely possible  
and supremely inspiring –

and James Schuyler's blinding exactitude of observation,  
its serene and tremendous burden.

I am fortunate to know even the alphabet,  
my mind sticking to nothing for very long,  
leafing through some great books, getting up in agitation,  
sitting back down with some paper and life;  
my life is barely started, from January 1963,  
when I knew it would have to be poetry or nothing.

Since then I have looked mostly like a lawyer, a broker,  
but in a struggle with the eternal verities,  
and with always the one day to be disposed of,  
at times in nostalgia for someone's past – not my own –  
I told Frank that his poems made me have it for his,  
and I had it for John's, Kenneth's, and Jimmy's,  
and Joe's, Norman's, Larry's, Joan's, Mike's, and Jane's as well.  
I came to know these people, but I don't really, of course,  
as I go on with my work to some distant point,  
with most of the feelings I had before  
and the sorrow of literature I learned and I keep.

## The Sea and the Wind

There is no light, and no quiet;  
some areas are smaller than others; a shout  
is not heard at once,  
but makes a way in leisure to your ear,  
and in a moment of leisure you hear it,  
with the sound of your voice.

I do not know clearly what it is,  
but now in the lime dusk I write about it,  
enveloped like time in a larger facsimile.  
And soon it will be louder,  
until there will be no further need for notes,  
or even for an end to it, having multiplied as children  
within their boundaries of sensitive particles,  
in generations to languish in the respective arms of civilizations,  
coming of age in China, ancient Greece, or the fabled Levant —  
French for getting up, going to the bathroom  
and back to bed, beset with Parisian dreams,  
adrift like islands amidst our American ones conceived in English,  
all of them together irrigating the wide basin of simple life.

Children learn to deal with the local merchants,  
and become used to it;  
they go outside and give themselves up to it,  
in series of events that rival an eclipse of the sun;  
they go alone or with a guide far off in the night,  
passing our monuments and tombs  
which reflect their obviously transitory state.

Children eat too much, too many cakes and too much candy;  
they have vacations, drive to the mountains and beaches  
and come back; travel through forests and over boulevards,  
until finally there are the continents, the oceans,  
and the vastnesses of outer space  
to make up the eyes' foreign vision.

In the meantime they find flowers together, fences, stems,  
marble, exalted feelings, and ornate cornices;  
there are excursions to museums, pursuing  
one another down corridors, grapes, underbrush, memories,  
and Mozart concerti among the dominant points of interest,  
and a gabled roof, a swooping hawk, the silver flash of a trout,  
dramatic but nonetheless minor points,  
rejoining always one's generation at the elevator,  
or elevation, to the combined hallucination and dream.

## Piece

I have a book in my pocket  
that contains a list of all the countries of the world.  
But those islands now, as I walk near the Hudson,  
quite frankly heartbroken,  
have taken on the aspect of a deserted forest,  
and within it I am walking,  
open to great abstraction,  
which is not seen abstractly,

and which carefully, from his point in the world,  
Barnett Newman distilled from the heroic sublime.  
He used to ask me with a confidential twinkle  
if I were sure I wasn't just a little bit Jewish.  
I said that anything was possible and we laughed.  
On July 4th he became silent,  
and closed an access to the sublime blue.  
It is difficult to breathe  
in his triple air of sublimity  
and difficult not to embellish my life.

## Nearing Christmas

A frog croaks continually in the pond below,  
and jumps out onto the ground.  
I climb through a window and cross the floor  
past a forest of utensils.  
A heard of bison roams the great plains;  
they bite my hands so I feed them;  
a girl paints a yellow sun streaked with orange,  
the last of some lines before the Christmas rush,  
before the wingless exasperations of Bloomingdale's  
which already entwine my heels  
in intellectual pursuit.  
I knew it would happen eventually,  
Frank's poems would come out,  
and I would feel the impulse to close up shop,  
so I have sat down to write,  
evading the personality, like Rimbaud,  
jumping into one, like Marianne Moore,  
or sitting simply like a sack of raisins in space —  
as you threaten to become my personal Rachmaninoff.

I have never been able to drink in the morning,  
as opposed to Frank, to whom the day was of a piece,  
the sun poised firmly in the middle of the sky,  
though many a fortress has been lost in the meantime  
and a snowy range of mountains rises behind them,  
with some of the people forgotten,  
cancelled out by pretty events.

I didn't meet Frank O'Hara in 1959, as in the book's notes,  
we met in 1962, August, by chance in the Cedar Bar. In 1959  
I hadn't even begun to write, and by 1962  
the problem was neatly reversed,  
having wept with love and irritation  
beneath the honorable sky,  
which leads everywhere at once.

December 15th, noon, 1971,  
one quick drink and I'm off to Bloomingdale's,  
crawling with ants on a Popsicle of moving clouds,  
against the color of the junior sky, by extension  
to Irma's coat, the far promontory, and the uniform of the person  
who turns the handle  
in Rachel's Musical Mystery House, the end of Part I  
the road and the morning.

I'm still here, 12:22, perhaps three minutes fast,  
forgetting what I was going to say.  
Two more drinks Towle and you'll say anything.  
I haven't been called Towle since high school.  
I had something else to say but I don't remember what it was.  
Two Spanish painters are painting my front door a tasteless orange,  
one more anonymous tribute to "Why I Am Not a Painter."  
*Dr. Zhivago* is a great novel, I don't care what anyone says.  
I could have written *Safe Conduct* myself; in 1964  
it occurred to me I might write one for Frank some day  
if he ever died before I did, which wasn't likely.

Well he did and I haven't.

Irma needs skirts  
so I'm going to Bloomingdale's to look for some,  
empty ones that is. I remember when it could be said  
that someone had a dirty mind,  
no more hopeless and antiquated than having, say,  
the mind of Henry James.

"The woman's place is in the novel." — Henry James,  
who would be sipping something more exotic;  
but I have really got to go,  
out through the door  
to the facts of life.

My life at any rate is more oblique than Frank's.  
What have I ever said to the sun, for example.  
What did I ever say to Frank, for that matter,  
brooding on the promontory of my early poetic development,  
silent and self-preoccupied, garrulous and self-preoccupied,  
not that anything's changed too much,  
an aging Frank O'Hara Award winner  
jumping from ice floe to ice floe,  
a step ahead of a horde of younger practitioners,  
to whom I nevertheless occasionally turn and shout some advice:  
which is not to have a mistaken notion of your biography;  
no event in your life is of the slightest importance,  
but there is nothing you cannot use;  
the unceasing events of your boring life  
occur only for the success of a particular poem  
awaiting your efforts on a horizon.

For instance, it is supposed that I am drunk at a party;  
I walk unsteadily into the foyer  
where Joe, Jane, and John are putting on their coats.  
I stand there for a moment, breaking the alliteration,  
then find my way back, staggering with the implications,

to the hors d'oeuvre of the infinite room  
which I have chosen from the swirling elements,

from the actual events, stories, and people.  
I don't see clearly the swirling elements,  
I am made up of those elements;  
it would be better to live *over* a dyke bar than *under* one;  
like poetry they perhaps at worst only confuse two specialties,  
itself with life in poetry's case.

Finally I have gone to Bloomingdale's  
and I am back.  
You call that lyric you big bag of shit?  
I am not talking to myself,  
or in that manner to a great poet of the past,  
that must be Frank, talking to me;  
I am at last fully awake in this mortal life,  
for the few years in the middle,  
and I keep myself opaque and I don't regret it,  
on the promontory.

Frank you've got to help me  
and there is an answer but not at this moment.

sky

cloud

cloud cloud

monarchs and wealthy patrons

hill

## biographies of the people

hill

## the underworld

new york 7/29/72

## On the Moon

1.

It would seem that long ago demons punctured this sphere,  
that the moisture rushed out  
and rained down upon my planet Earth  
in a flood still dimly remembered.  
There is nothing left here for the imagination  
but the many more millions of lights in the distance  
than I have been used to  
in my more familiar but capricious air.

2.

Certainly there is life on other worlds,  
and in common with it we must certainly have death,  
crossing our much publicized bridges to it,  
freshly gilded wood, for some odd reason,  
with richly embossed aquatic motifs running parallel  
and excessive decoration at the other end,  
due to the great decorative possibilities.

3.

Everyone, including myself at the age of 13,  
realizes that we can see far past the moon.  
Even the smaller mammals quite early in their lives  
can imagine making leaps past the moons of Mars;  
we should have come here further back in our history,  
when it would have made a difference,  
or we should have gone somewhere else.

4.

Duck! as another heavy rock passes close overhead,  
hurled randomly into space from another world,  
the penultimate gesture of intelligent despair  
from its disintegrating ruling species:  
a stretch of benevolent but dying moss —  
the reluctant breakdown at the end of his cycle  
into fuel for the myths, politics, nostalgia,  
and a food considered a delicacy  
by the gourmets of the emerging dominant form,  
a race of wistful, persevering caterpillars  
who look forward to a long and happy dynastic life.

5.

There, too, the vegetable life seems to get the worst of it,  
sighing in the wind,  
submitting to the sharp teeth of ravenous tiny creatures,  
a handful of temptingly edible seeds  
thrown to the torments of chance,  
the resulting pathetic sprouts stepped on by the lumbering entities  
who are condemned to flounder in the baffling maze of choices  
presented by the phenomenon of locomotion.

There, too, everything exaggerates its internal life,  
psychologically distressed by the pull of several moons,  
and is prompted to exaggerated attempts at stability.

Limitations in regard to the environment  
are seen most accurately by a potential mate,  
in this instance seven discerning but fated partners.

During the mating itself the unfortunate stench  
is apparent only to other species  
who scuttle off into the hapless vegetation.

And, as everywhere, mutants wander off "in tears"  
to parts unknown. I have followed along for a mile or so  
just to see what it's like;  
casually roaming the ochre plains,  
past miniature giraffes and the moons shining down,  
the caterpillars learning to work with bronze.

6.

On Earth we have already had our age of bronze,  
and in this future day I am healthier for it,  
as well as completely free of it,  
an early detail of what has become a very long walk,  
reflecting on the aphorisms embedded and visible  
in our well-traveled ancestral road of anecdotal glaze,  
until effortlessly, as if having many pairs of legs,  
and keeping the scale of an insect beneath a network of leaves,  
you arrive at the edge of your planet,  
the point at which its evolution has left one's perception,  
which to reach the precise emotional center of  
you need merely to raise absentmindedly your voice  
or one of your fingers,  
space shooting out on all sides as usual,  
the bowl of moss decomposed in front of you,  
a lilac edible mass  
among the crystals of the planet's variable affairs.

7.

Presumably we are all trapped by our planetary situations,  
until by necessity one glances up at the moon,  
raging with famine,  
and departs, burning, on a voyage.

Presently there is a single line, directed from the moon  
across the water to where I am standing.

Conventionally enough, the line is gold  
as if a bridge could cross the deceiving water.

Something has kept the water from draining away  
leaving me forever on the land,  
or from where I have watched, clear of the planet's surface.

## **On His Name**

Wandering, shipwrecked on a shoal and running into Robert Lowell  
I introduced myself: "Tony Towle,"  
I said, "we met briefly some years ago at a party in your home;  
we have differences in style and sensibility but a general goal,  
to distill from the distraction and trouble of life as a whole  
what we think of literary interest, before interment in the loam."  
He replied that that was not *his* role,  
that he preferred not to speak, since it was not his poem,  
and the conversation broke off near the knoll's island foam.