

Tony Towle

Selected Poems

1990–2000

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

Storytelling

Incident

It was yet once more a full-blown tale of the empty tawdriness of evil. The protagonist was one of those slippery, neurotic, yet agreeable women who could only face life as a clown. And as if that weren't tawdry enough she began to look for her fading personality in the local pool halls, with only her clown suit to shield her from the cacophonous feeling that nibbled at the place her thoughts should have been . . .

Complication

It's time to change the locale, said Beverly, Ohio, from her makeup of scrap, coal dust, industrial lubricants, and the pollinated seeds that connect her to the rest of the chorus describing their respective components: Kathryn, North Dakota, Rachel, West Virginia, and Laura, Illinois — using newly invented photographic techniques, as well as those of analogic archaeology, to highlight the more arcane aspects of geographical anthropomorphism.

Further Complication

Another aspect of our story encompasses a recombinant farm boy, Spencer, Nebraska, and a nude Greek slave girl, Eudora, Arkansas, and the enigmatic wounds they would come to inflict on a faltering economy. How, stratified as they were, they could have ended up sitting next to me in Sawyer, Michigan, at Club Meg, waiting to see Patty Melt, I will leave to the transfigured hyperdiffusionism of those who have been less numbed by the thick sunlight and slow air of New York, New York, vacation capital of the Northeast.

Gratuitous Soliloquy

What an impersonal first name the place I live in has,
I mused, as I set my goblet down heavily on the priceless glass
table, sending a perplexing neoclassical miniature,
Spencer and Eudora Fleeing the Boundaries of North America,
crashing to the floor. Maybe I should just let
the computer ramble on by itself for awhile,
although it has a virus, too;
and my caption,
Embark on a reign of blood and splendor; send no money now,
is even less pellucid than the dialogue,
while our topographical heroines
have been downsized to imperceptibility,
like Clarissa,
Minnesota, her ample figure
dispersed in the languishing software,
her earthy repartee
set inaudibly in a 2-point Subsidized Phrygian,
and upstaged by a multitude of texts and charts,
half-density options, double-density spreadsheets,
with only a menu of raisins, berries
and other simplistic outlines and shadings
thrown in for iconic refreshment . . .

Explanatory Soliloquy

Ah, that was the kind of absurdity I used to type out
when I first woke up next to Sharon,
Connecticut, before I quite knew what I was doing,
before I realized that she was merely a pseudonym
and not related to the parallel community
existing unexcavated below the conscious level,
where the captions have been simplified:

EMBEZZLEMENT MURDER SEX BLACKMAIL

But the morbid and juicy details seem to have been rendered
in a 3-point Canaanite Old Style
and my glasses have remained back on the conscious level,
where I quietly stare at the screen.

Nonconsistent Realities

It's time to change direction, said Joe,
Montana.

*And so we did. It was cold that chilly Thursday, several
dozen meters below the conscious level.
The artifacts included photographs, stuffed animals,
pink spaldings, primitive swords, gravel from the roof,
and shards of undecipherable polychromatic emblems
surrounded by childhood scenarios I don't think
I could have imagined
or could not have imagined forgetting.
By morning I had cleared some of the lower cranial vaults
but the morass stretched out for miles.
I tossed the findings back into the bog
and dug into the less personal archaeology of the Near East,
and was soon engaged in a monologue with the remains
of the royal dwarf, the one that made the priesthood
laugh so hard it kept off the flies —
and clutched in his hand was a can of Ninkasi,
the Sumerian beer of choice;
I open it and take a sip, suddenly immersed
in the beer-versus-bread dispute,
why hunter-gatherers would have started sitting around for half the year
waiting for grains they could have found in the wild —
all that harvesting, threshing, grinding, baking,
sweating and praying for rain,
just to get the wrappings for a mammal sandwich —
or maybe they were waiting for a brew*

*to savor at one of the festivities you have to invent
to honor the gods those rotten quirky bastards
who bring on a drought
whenever they feel like it,
and leave the kingdom dry*

*but that year the gods must have come through
because the results still taste pretty good in this one —
sprouted barley and date honey, a gooey mash
mixed with shovels,
a pleasant, swatting sound,
and the landscape is mildly transformed
as we begin to notice the sacred signs and symbolic murmurings,
and other devices of extracurricular fermentation . . .*

*and besides,
my mother is Queen of the Sacred Lake, so
I get the last sacred mugful.*

Digression

A boy's best friend should be his mother,
unless perhaps her name is Agrippina
and yours is Caligula; or,
more mundanely, Theresa,
New York, calling you to come home for dinner
when in reality you have run off to see Alberta
one more time,
before she is covered with snow.

Subtext

There was now enough material
for the inevitable subtextual struggle.
A random sampling of a viral prototype
is spread like jam over the American heartland
in patterns to match the ensilaged corn.
Our antagonist distracts the pig, Perky by name,
from his motley banquet,
and inveigles him into a luncheon of duck droppings,
indicated by the purple-and-yellow triangles.
Perky picks up another strain
from the hired hand's red-and-blue-dotted persisting cough,
and sifts these with infinitesimal voices
to begin the resulting epidemic late
the following autumn at breakfast,
by means of thick slices of stylized bacon. The farmer
will die in the arms of Pauline,
South Dakota, who then will remain stoic in eponymous reality
on the windswept November plain.

Virtual Reality

“Well, it beats sitting in the hog pen with two broken legs
and smellin’ like a sow,” drawled Melissa,
Texas, her outline landscaped in seductive charm beneath
the cosmic events roiling overhead. To recapitulate [though
by this time few are paying attention] Mercury
continues bouncing around the horizon.
Mars approaches Saturn. His offer is simple
though not simple enough
to penetrate the accumulated pulsations of saturnine gravity;

and the details have been sealed in a misaddressed
astronomical envelope,
and deposited in a cloudless timeless chamber, of sorts,
that could restore a kind of proto-literary simplicity,
if opened, or so the encrypted notes
would seem to suggest.

“And it sure beats being a poet in New York,
with *one* broken leg and a mixed bag
of hyperdiffusionistic* impressions,”
said a post-literate and prophetic voice
from no particular point in space,
but from the general direction of the pastoral hills,
where the formerly peaceful barbarians
will soon emerge in a furious unison of historic proportions,
a veritable human blizzard
of massive inconvenience to the neighbors,
the area bathed in the flush of historical tumult,
the sacrifice of quadrupeds in the morning,
the slaughter of rudely awakened bipeds later on,
while a potpourri of evening pigments,
such as overwrought rose and avenging carmine,
comes pouring down from celestial ramparts
on the heads of the assaulting soldiery,
their picturesque howls collapsing with the masonry
and overprinting an already edited landscape
with lettering whose obscurity
will be the message.

* *The repetition of this unusual and suspect word should have put me on my guard.*

Misdirection

But when I had figured out who was actually speaking,
and we got the culprit sealed up in a timeless chamber, of sorts,
problems remained, as old as the pastoral hills
and audible even through the panoramic clamor of the god-kings,
between 3000 and 1500 B.C.,
where I still like to show up occasionally,
as a scribe, an embalmer, a priest,
soldier or grand vizier, or a sailor on the crested sea —
or to stroll down one of those columned galleries
lined with colossal statues of myself,
stalking the deities in their timeless clouded chambers,
but ending up back in the present, where I live on
with uncanny accuracy
in the yawns of the tourists,
the leers of the guides
and, through relentless technological achievement,
in this replica pewter paperweight.

But the postman on muleback has in the meantime
grown larger, fills the visible space, and delivers
our means of escape; then,
with a hissing of keystrokes,
goes on his abated way, the mule's dwindling posterior
the vestigial suffix of our morphological fate.

Historical Reality

Here, as in the relationship of scholar to collector,
I am enjoined to tell the truth. It is 1943 and pennies
are made of zinc. My grandparents are taciturn and unyielding.
Events unfold in dank vignettes
and one in fact can actually imbibe the dank breeze rolling
in from the river. Everyone's family album can produce
such scenes: genealogically unemployable oafs, mythic
giants looming from the past,
captains of industriousness urging you on
with genetic pokes . . .
my suit of bark rustles in the torchlight
as I turn the pages of the twisting saga.
In this part I am under the impression
that I am eating spaghetti made from cardboard and blood.
Another time I thought I knew what Genghis Khan
was thinking as he plundered the world;
and once I stood on the ice in the Beaufort Sea,
though not for very long.

Turning Point

The times progress and we inhale the winds of change.
Bacterial tides sweep through the burgeoning necropolis
but we survive. Jupiter slips back behind the sun.
Uranus and Neptune conjunct mysteriously
in their respective blue-green worlds,
while Pluto arises at midnight, to find himself alone.
And ultimately historical reality has done me no good,
so I push the *I'm Not Sure* option again,
but just get handed over to the Christians again,
along with the relevant heretical documents
and my extra pair of shoes,
which they said I would not need.

And by now the commentary has been upsized
to a 24-point Tumultuous Hittite Bold
to keep up the reader's attention,
which was creeping off, like spectral New Jerseyisms,
to the horizon,
an abstraction as alarming
as the company of spirits with flaring wings
that wait outside the virtual room.

Crisis & Resolution

Thus it is time to throw open the front door
of my imagination, and then the screen door to my heart,
and a little child runs out, with a hideous lump
of something pursuing him.

But after that the plot
takes turns less and less bizarre,
the blatant surrealism turned back like a coverlet
until naturalism reigns once more
and we finally get some sleep.

That should wrap things up,
like a mammal sandwich,
with the dust allowed to settle
on the esthetic furniture,
for there is no longer any risk
as we fade from the screen, wrapped in endothermic bliss.

Linkage

. . . yet on the most basic level we continue
to stand naked on the highway of life,
and, as you remember, this is a tale about —well,
the brutal but sensitive story draws to a close. The lovely
neurotic woman finds her identity in a pool hall
but remains standing naked on the highway of life anyway,
her clown suit in shreds, the trucks whizzing by, the rain
pouring down from celestial battlements
in obliquely glinting pigments. She came to terms
with herself at about the same time I did. We shed our personas
as the story began.

Downtown Song

I know it's of undetectable interest at best,
but the post-Platonic bees of encyclopedic irrelevance
that periodically fill my head with their gratuitous teeming
have escaped.

I live on Warren Street, for example;
who here can tell me Warren's first name?

Who cares? Who gives a damn?

Not even me, most of the time, but it was Pete,
Captain Sir Peter Warren,
who took up entrepreneurship in the Caribbean,
relieved the French and Spanish of some extraneous treasure,
and bought 300 acres uptown, in the hamlet of Greenwich.

Ah, those were the days when the road to the Village
could be awash in the Hudson, a bygone detail
of New York's North Ward,
of which Warren Street was the furthest settled boundary by 1755;
and today, nestled among gentrified groves and copses,
it occupies the southern edge
of Lower Tribeca.

And I am staring out the window at it,
because I should really be doing something else,
as if I were back in school, and avoiding
information that might actually be useful someday —
until finally there is recess and I go outdoors
but minutes too late to see Johnny Chambers, Joey Reade,
Jimmy Duane, Tommy and Lenny Lispenard,
Billy Worth, and Benny Moore
disappear around their eponymous corners,
luminescent in historical rectitude.

Apropos of further inconsequence, Warren's mansion
was eventually bounded by Charles, Perry,
Herring (Bleecker) and Asylum (West Fourth) Streets,
until it was torn down in 1865,
and the estate could easily have been seen in 1743
by the Reverend Peter Nicholas Somers, my ancestor
auf Hamburg, on his way up the North River
to assist the Palatines of Schoharie in selecting,

from the pre-Fenimore-Cooperized trails,
the path of Lutheran righteousness.
Back in the city, Warren was compounding his successes
by marrying Susannah De Lancey,
although *that* street's first name is Jim, not Susan,
if I could permit myself such familiarity
with a thoroughfare so far off to the east.

And at this point I might mention
that June is Mental Health Month in today's New York,
and apparently I don't have a clue how to celebrate
and July is already about to make an appearance.
Superman's first appearance,
in Mental Health Month of 1938, a mere
12 months before my own,
is now worth a hundred thousand dollars, I read somewhere.
So I conceive a stroll up Staple Street,
the bustling artery linking Lower with Middle Tribeca
below the Bridge of Inscrutability north of Jay,
to the Mercantile Exchange,
to see if my own emergence those many years ago
might have accrued any retrospective worth.

Knowing the answer, I wander instead
over to the Food Euphorium on the Road to Greenwich,
now safe from the raging Hudson,
and amble down its fabled Aisle of Crumbs,
perhaps the last of the Shredded Wheat
I was looking for. Nothing
remains undissipated today, including the atmosphere,
in which a whole box of meteorological crayons
would seem to have exploded
but left everything a pale mental-health gray,
while the crucial insights go bouncing off, football-like,
down the Aisle of Forbidding Fruit,
past the ATM machine and out the door.

I am probably lucky, really,
that my existence has no value in the marketplace.
Batman and I are about the same age, too,
and *his* editor found it profitable to finish him off,
just like that, wash and iron his uniform
and give it away, just like that.
And although for no gain at all
I, too, periodically edit myself out of existence,
and will do so again in a minute,

I hope in the meantime to stumble upon the truth,
gleaming like nuggets somewhere in the Tribecan night
until outshone by the sun
on its daily morning roll down Warren Street from City Hall
to Sir Peter's newly erected cenotaph in Hudson Park,
strewing bits of undifferentiated light along the way.
Though it sounds like it could be a rhino
reverberating on the street
like a paradigm of traffic
that with a twist of its horn
keeps me awake in the morning blur
and punctures the space between historical reality
and no information at all.

Thoughts at Frank O'Hara's *City Poet* Party, 6/9/93

Hal Fondren was there, and Bobby Fizdale,
John Gruen and Jane — Wilson, that is,
Morris Golde, and a number of others
who were already highly visible on the scene
when I appeared in the background, as a young poet, thirty
years ago this spring. “How are you?”
is the question I kept hearing
from the members of this senior contingent
as I milled about in the clinical orchards of sociability.
How am I? Feeling old, I wanted to say,
as a birthday approached from the end of the week,
but these people had ten to fifteen years on me *then*,
and of course, as is the mathematical way, still did;
and on the other hand there were these clumps
of stylish young men
who weren't even born when Frank died. Which
was more depressing? “It's a push,”
as a bookie would say,
from his bit part in *Guys and Dolls*.
And Frank's sister Maureen was there, of course;
I don't remember if I ever told her
that my first “serious” girlfriend, in the third grade,
was an Irish girl named Maureen, but I guess
I'm telling her now, after a fashion, and this way
everybody else gets to listen in and be bored, too.
And I guess I could have told Brad Gooch
that in World War II all destroyers were called “tin cans,”
not just the type Frank served on,
and the battleship *Missouri* was called “The Mighty Mo,”
not “The Old Mo,” but I suppose I'm
telling him now, et cetera.
It's the first fatiguingly humid day in June,
that's partly why I feel neglected and out of it,
no longer involved with the art and poetry world
that still buzzes with participants in Philip Taaffe's
huge and strangely refined space. On the terrace,
I notice the motif of pairs of human-headed winged bulls
that face each other in banded strips
on the office building next door.
The Assyrian Building, I think, an opportunity
for Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer,
although he's as fictional as I feel uncomfortably real.
I wonder what kind of business

is transacted in there, I continue on to myself, since I don't feel like talking to anyone else. "*Listen*, Frank cuts in, "what's all this *Assyrian* baloney? Winged bulls? Winged bull-you-know-*what*! And how can anybody possibly feel *too* real? Why don't you trim the fat off your no-moss mind and try to be at least as entertaining as you used to *think* you were? God knows, *I* certainly wouldn't miss that kind of opportunity."

That's not fair, I answer, your just showing up right now would be entertainment enough for this assemblage, you wouldn't have to say a word.

"Well, I could take their minds off *that* pretty quick by showing an interest in *their* existence. The best way to keep from feeling sorry for yourself is to be interested in someone else; *you* know that. *I* certainly still know that, in fact it's exactly what I'm doing at this very moment."

Yes, of course you're right; I'm just not in the mood.

"Don't be truculent, you're not young enough anymore — in fact you're thirteen years *older* than I am now, so act it. There's John Ashbery, go over and say Hello. It's thirty years later and I'm *still* getting you invited to parties, but this is the *last time*. You're on your own for the rest of this saga, baby, as Siegfried said to Brünnhilde on the way up to Valhalla, *I'm* going to get a *drink*!"

Introduction & Exposition

Initially, he gave his name and, *honestly*, he tried to explain himself.

Annoyingly, he began each attempt with an adverb.

Inaccurately, he thought this would be edifying.

Coincidentally, it sometimes was.

Sadly, she considered his undertakings pointless.

Ironically, he agreed with her, while *theatrically* he had felt upstaged for years.

Biblically, the book was closed.

Decidedly, she left him.

Astronomically all continued as before: the sun rose realistically each day and glisteningly the stars appeared at night. *Riotously*, the populace would continue to take to the streets; *impossibly*, he would watch from the azure sofa of space and sleep.

(April)

My ex-girlfriend and I were on the plane on the way to a city, flying past the frozen clouds slowly enough in fact so that I could examine their very motionlessness, which included, I slowly discerned, a colossal stretched-out male figure, the same color as the clouds, his arm wearily held out, fully extended, the hand taking a fistful of cloud and squeezing it in a futile gesture as we passed, she not noticing, and it then occurred to me: angels *must* exist for the creature was alive with a melancholy sigh, and I heard the sound of a cloud as it was crushed in the giant hand like powdery snow — but now the plane accelerated and left the figure behind, and we sped between a narrow row of skyscrapers heading straight toward a line of others directly ahead. We can't make this turn, I thought, recognizing the events as a dream and turning to tell my present girlfriend about the realness of it, as I saw that she too was fabricated, and when I turned toward the final, physical version from across the imaginary loft we were trying to rent to people who didn't exist, I knew that this was yet another layer between sleep and April.

Postmodern Maturity

When Parliament passed the Union Act of 1707
I thought it was the dumbest thing
I had ever heard of grown men doing,

until I gave in and sent off the five dollars
to join the American Association of Retired People —
or is it Persons? I don't want to be accused of Collectivism
at this point
on the stage of world history.

Of course Juvenal said that to appear on the stage at all
was a fate worse than death,
though he couldn't have known when he said it,
but he might have found out later,
and he nonetheless spoke from the clamorous stage
of the Roman Empire,
which is now a faded backdrop for ours.

And other asterisks twinkle like stars overhead,
referring to so many of the dramatic remarks
uttered within civilized parentheses
that I will never get to them all —

but here the professor interposes:
Your utterance is neither credible nor concise.
I don't have to be credible or concise,
I'm a retired person. *A layabout,*
I think the English say,
adjusting their collective monocle;
and since I did not show up early enough
on the stage of world history
to actually now *retire,*
they send me *Post-modern Maturity* with my membership,
the AARP, that is, not the English,
so I can preview the relentless facts and articles,
and puzzling letters to the editor,
that are not yet quite relevant, but too soon will be.

Dear Postmodern Maturity:

I have just got back from the Depths (no modernist metaphor intended) but yet I enjoyed your unspoken comparison of today's health-care costs to those medieval crypts that increase in mysterious pungency as the centuries pass. But I would like to see more discourse on the Great Platonic Brick. You know the one I mean, the invisible support for all the self-referential, daily-reality bricks that hold up the scene even when you forget your lines, and at the same time is a disembodied token of the real reality as it hurtles from offstage like a cartoon dénouement . . .

But here the layout person has intervened,
with an ad for pills
that are supposed to make 75-year-olds
feel like I do.
Save your money,
I want to tell them.
You don't know how well off you still are,
they answer.

And then the letter concludes:

. . . so when Parliament passed the Onion Act of 1707, I thought it was the dumbest thing I had ever heard of grown men spending their time on. But when it was followed by the Carrot Act, the Parsley Act, and then, in 1798, the Great Potato Act, I realized that England was the center of an immense vegetarian conspiracy that continues to simmer in the soup the attendants bring me for lunch even today. But wait, there's the sound of the tambourine cutting through the noodles again (no post-metaphoric symbolism intended) so I better sign off. By the way, how about an article on where we came from, what we're doing here, and where we go afterwards. And soon, as I'm out of ideas and time is running out.

—Mrs. Esther Brown, Hamilton, Ohio

THANKS FOR THE LETTER, ESTHER, BUT WE FEEL THE HUMAN EPIC IS LIKE A GOOD DETECTIVE STORY, SO WE WON'T BE THE ONES TO GIVE AWAY THE PLOT — AND ESPECIALLY THE ENDING! BUT IF ANYONE CAN FIGURE IT OUT, WE'RE POST-IRONICALLY SURE IT'S YOU.

— THE EDITORS

And when I next glanced up from the magazine, in the dressing room reserved for the Chronologically Advantaged, life seemed to have lowered the lighting one more touch, casting a less elusive shadow on the curtains that part only for the Chronologically Besieged.

To the Editors:

I spent a good deal of time, during my most recent transformation, trying to conceptualize the above, "England" being the only reality-based allusion. But I think the writer refers to the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland rather than any mythical vegetarian conspiracy, although the "doctor," as he was rearranging my interior, suggested I join one.

—*Illegible, New York City*

NOT SO FAST, FRIEND. YOUR LETTER COULD NOT POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN PROCESSED QUICKLY ENOUGH TO BE INCLUDED IN THE SAME ISSUE AS WHAT YOU'RE REFERRING TO. IF YOU CAN'T SUPPRESS THE URGE TO COMMUNICATE WITH US, TRY TO GET IT TOGETHER WITH THE SPACE/TIME CONVENTIONS IN USE SINCE AT LEAST THE COOLIDGE ADMINISTRATION.

—THE EDS.

But here the professor intervenes once more.

"I told you," she admonishes, "that as soon as you took your eye off life for just one more frivolity, it would spin irrevocably away, and leave you standing there holding a ton of Platonic bricks; and that what you thought you would have at last figured out some day, such as how to live with someone, or how to live, period, will have by then slipped unattainably away into the abyss."

Postscript

To the Editors:

*Like many of your readers who endure the fatigue
of waiting to go backstage, I swore I would not waste
precious irritability on cynical young editors
who twist your words like tourniquets
to cut off your intent. But I have just read the foregoing —
I guess it's what you people call a text, isn't it —
and my eyes are moist with tears. Thanks
for momentarily impinging on my self-involvement.*

Coda

And, continuing on themselves, the asterisks
have fallen to earth, their referents disbanded.
All these divagations have held off
for a few scant moments
my ongoing reckonings.
I wish you had seen fit to skip it all
and just publish the poem I submitted.
It was called “Edifying Tales of the Deep”
and I'll read it now:

*It is thus a perfect time to watch the clouds go by,
and you tilt your chin to watch their diverse meandering,
sensations abated to the sound of a lighted candle
but to illuminate — what, exactly? Memories, no doubt,
those most antic of God's phenomena,
frozen much of the time,
but now blaring their microscopic trumpets
in a procession
you are no longer at the head of,
as if the poem had suddenly changed planes at Frankfurt
and let you off in a deserted field, near Syracuse, New York,
which dwindles to a tiny beanbag with tinier writing on it; no,
nothing could be like that, really, and maybe
you'll edit that part out. As you do,
I will continue my stalking of eternity,
stepping amidst the grains of time
on the graveled floor of space. Wrinkles
have been found in the fabric of space, and campfires
lit and abandoned by voluminous beings —
and these we call stars. They still throw light
on past events, though not enough to see what they were.*

The Art of War

I'm sorry I was asleep when you called.
I was up till dawn
attacking the Prussians at *Ligny*,
and I didn't do a good job, I'm afraid, there
were still plenty left
when I pushed "save"
and shut down the computer. I'm glad
I didn't know any of them personally
as I ordered the 12-pounders
to concentrate on the tiny clusters of veteran brigades,
and clicked on all the available cavalry
to erase the inexperienced *Landwehr* from the screen.

Red Pens

The little Hispanic girl at the stationer's
on Park Avenue South just now
asked me my name, and repeated *Tonio*
when I replied Tony. *Estranjero?* Is
he a foreigner? she asked her
embarrassed mother,
the proprietor, as I was leaving with
the red pens I had bought
for editing English but now
used to delete the *No*,
fué nacido aquí
I had been about to say,
to show that I too was a native.

Morning (Murray Hill)

Stepping alertly like a deer
I move along the edge of a vanished structural perspective,
the ghostly debris of a more elevated
elevated transit than my own,
which used to keep Third Avenue both self-effacing and loud,
before the manhole-cover smoke
turned to cappuccino steam.
The traffic, as it whips up the middle of the thoroughfare
where the shadows used to be,
seems even more foreign than I feel —
Previas, Camrys, Altimas, Tercels,
Acuras, Celicas, Supras, and Maximas
appropriating nomenclatural space —
and then an anachronistic Cressida —
with a Troilus sputtering along behind . . . autosuggestively.

Yes, well, you see, it would seem as if my rum-soaked brain
were not fermenting on all four vats this morning,
as it transports me back to my 29th Street exile
on figurative fumes;
but at the corner first a Probe
and then a Prelude wait for the light
to transport the story away and out of town,
while, unaffected by the narrative in this alien zip code,
I remain stranded like a bookmark
as when the Aztecs, in their unending cycles of 20 days,
placed “in between” any two of them
the name of an animal
with whom they shared the continuing saga of Mexico.

Scenario

Memo: wander the streets of Rome endlessly,
until, tired of your foreign misimpressions,
a troop of *Bersaglieri*
take your imagination off on a brisk trot
to the Castel Sant' Angelo,
where they have not had an execution for a long time
but seem willing, now, to restart the tradition.
“I have captured your imagination,” asserts the *Intendente*
of subconscious rambling, and the sun and the moon unite
to dribble gold and silver down the bib of the executioner;
and the ax does fall
but is just one more unrecorded incident
taking place in my head in a bar near Canal Street,
Angelo's, where bar-stool inertia has set in,
a scene within a faded reproduction within foliate carving
of Violi's great canvas, *Canal Street*,
hanging dim and baroque above the customers.
Indeed, morsels of roast swan
are all that's left on the steam table,
and so in the picture I remain hungry,
making do with gratuitous details,
such as the pair of snow leopards
who wait to escort me to my blind date,
a 2500-year-old Scythian princess,
who I hope will be thawed and animate
by the time I call at her tomb of logs
high in the Altai Mountains;
and the bouquet I bring swirls
with the kitsch of autumn colors,
and silvery moonbeams dance about,
and I was sure I could stay there, quiet,
and partake of that vista forever,
time stopping allegorically in its tracks —
but then comes the call to action, to get up;
with a few artful taps from the hammer of creativity
I'm on my way, a dancing moonbeam.

Notions

I emerge from the Grey Art Gallery
into the shadows of Washington Square
too late to catch the exhibition at the Quick
Center for the Arts, up in Fairfield,
and *The Rise of Modernism*,
at the High Museum, down in Atlanta,
is completely out of reach;

so I take the concept back home,
by way of the #6 local,
where on 28th Street it took less than a minute, much
less, really, in front of the Epiphany School,
to decide to go on a bit further, up Lexington,
an enigmatic thoroughfare
in any event
at these latitudes,
to the Stern School for Women,
and ask if I could just hang around
and maybe sit in on a class or two.

*That is precisely the sort of indecent facetiousness
which does not go unpunished here for long,*
said the astringent, 1930's-style receptionist,
as she reached under the desk
to sound the alarm.

Seasonal Ramble

Genoa salami on a bagel? Why not
offend two cultures at once? Three
if you count a few of my relatives.

Ah, time seems to fly when you get up at 4.
Stocks uncharacteristically took their cue from bonds
and tumbled throughout the afternoon.
Not that I could have done much to stop them
as they fluttered down through the recessionary air
to the economic floor;

for there are two kinds of people in the world
and I assumed I was one of them —
another notch to loosen in the belt of impressions
while slowly, not too slowly for me, of course,
but not quickly enough, perhaps, for the impatient Future,
I master the art of losing my hair —

in conjunction with which I pause,
for yet another birthday — renewal? or just one more step
up the ladder whose last rung will not be there.
No one actually called me
but my fax gave me a series of beeps,
and Groggy and Feral, two of the household gnomes
I employ for such purposes,
brought in the two videotapes I ordered.
But five minutes into *Your Personal Destiny Revealed*
and the screen just went blank. I hope
the tape was defective,
if you know what I mean.
However, once I started watching *Ferocious Biblical Scenarios*
I was hooked. Instead of a tangle of prophecies, admonitions,
and theological posturing,
exciting events jumped out,
while into the room wandered my know-nothing
teenage stepson, Splat
went David's stone against his forehead;
my stepson, the Philistine, was dead,
an anachronistic victim of the media.

But let me introduce some of the rest of the "family":
my theoretical older brother, Andrew,
who personified himself as a hurricane
and tore through the family fortune;

my great-aunt Beulah, who, though not an actual
force of nature,
could win numerous awards
for inducing perspiration in others
and who would be happy to trumpet your failures
like bugles in the public domain,
where bystanders would be cut dead within seconds
of saying anything funny. And Uncle Henry,
who received the Teflon Star with Bulbous Clusters Removed
for distinguished but baffling conduct
in a lifetime of domestic skirmishing.

*But don't stretch out on a basaltic scarp of genealogical fantasy
and imagine that you're really alone,
or think that "being alone" is a synonym for enlightenment.*

Confused as to who is actually speaking,
and using such terms as "basaltic scarp,"
I sneak up to the attic and raid my Uncle Bob's
ever-diminishing matchbook collection for illumination.
He himself was an invention of my grandfather's cousin,
last seen by humans in the late Chalcolithic,
somewhere between Indiana and Utah,
indulging in ground-breaking obscurity,
a fictitious characteristic he nonetheless
seems to have been passed on.

I take another media break, The Disaster Channel,
in time to see terrified golfers fleeing bolts of lightning,
mashies and niblicks flung away
like weapons cast down by the Edomites —
it's almost a ferocious biblical scenario —
before switching over to the Esoteric Network
to watch the Revelations of the Week in Obscure Tableaux
dissolve into patternless gestures.

Speaking of coming apart, it's time to see what fate
will unveil for me in the tableaux of the coming year:

YOU WILL HAVE A *VERY* PLEASANT EXPERIENCE.
YOU CAN BREEZE THROUGH *MOST* OF THE DAY.
YOU *SHOULD* BY ABLE TO MAKE MONEY AND HOLD ON TO IT.
YOUR LOVE LIFE *WILL* BE HAPPY AND HARMONIOUS.
IF YOU'RE THE ONE THAT'S MUMBLING INCOHERENTLY,
QUIT IT.

And no doubt there will be more such predictions
to illuminate the scenes with misdirection,
though that will remain private,
though perhaps not only to me.

THERE IS A TRUE AND SINCERE FRIENDSHIP
BETWEEN YOU BOTH,
my fortune concludes,
SO TAKE A MINT AND KISS YOURSELF GOODNIGHT.

Fugitive Visions

While the devil and an angel struggle overhead
for the soul of the wholesale bread distributor,
two drifting, metaphorically unstable critters
emerge from the maze they'd been wandering in,
sit down on the allegorical plains, and light up:

*Delirious from her sun picture, the whisper goddess has stopped,
ventured the first.*

*But I waxed mad recall and drove the vanilla moon from the sky,
returned the other.*

Although the rain petals soften our view in elaborated sympathy . . .

Or crush the arboreal light above the blameless road . . .

*Or blame the road for its vertical paucity,
as time boils down . . . its stanzas, or something, something
as it passes, closer to the ticks or . . . ticking
on the sullied mattress of reverie —*

And so on in this vein, while elsewhere the rest of us
might be reaching for the same immortal blossom
that, when picked, releases another chorus of inexactitudes:

The sky may essentialize but the nurse drives on.

Wintry bliss may leave us but murmuring in a ditch above the stars.

Finance data raises doubts of city board.

Wait! observes the nebulous shepherdess,
taking her eye off the flocks of tears and captive reminiscence
that graze in grandiose subtlety wherever we look,
that last one makes no sense.

In a parallel hypothesis
a dreamer is assigned a gender
and set strolling across the unsteading heath
to her doom.

In yet another, questions are heard:
Has romance become *inconvenient* for you?
Have you become too *busy* to revise your idiosyncratic state?
When you see the shepherdess in the supermarket,
do you permit the tiny voices in your head
to compose the dialogue
or do you maintain editorial control?
For example, if you say, *But think*
why such tiny lakes rob men so,
does she come back with: *The truest rain petals*
would fall from your vision in unelaborated sympathy,
or words to that effect?
Or does she simply retort: *Go, in bitter mist?*

In any event, I inscribe her response
on the hollow shell of my existence. For some
can sing the loves of Romeo and Juliet, and so forth,
while I merely amplify the stammering of adolescents.
I look at you and feel the fever of Thebes is what I meant to say,
but now, elsewhere, having passed
yet once more through bitter mist,
and rusted void as well, I ponder, like the frog,
the implications of the most recent enchantment;

I mull the inconvenience of my latest transformation
and turn to the TV: *Here Come the Lombards! Part 2:*
Can a late-arriving and contentious Indo-European family
find happiness in the Po Valley?

I suspect they will,
but there is the woman of my dreams.
She strolls quietly across the heath
and that's all I'm going to say.

Municipal Cartography

I live in nameless taupe

I realize to my horror
from the map staring at me from the back
of the front seat of the taxi:
below the verdant rectangle labeled Murray Hill,
above the respectable olive of Gramercy Park
and to the right of the solid ochre of Chelsea —
as if 23rd to 34th, Fifth Ave. to the River
were only a conglomeration of arteries
on their way to actual *neighborhoods* —

but it is even worse than I thought,
for as we emerge from the Midtown Tunnel
I see the colors more clearly:
I live in a *gray* area,
not taupe, in fact the identical hue
that covers Brooklyn and Queens,
which seem to have established
a sinister game-board bridgehead
right where I am, Outer Borough invaders
perhaps bivouacking at this very moment
down the block from my building,
in Vincent Albano Park, where a troop
of Clinton and Cornwallis's redcoats
could have also paused for a moment
in September of '76,
in the effort to cut Washington off
from the rest of the Revolution.
To do this they disembarked at Kip's Bay,
supported by a murderous naval cannonade
that scattered the rebel forces, just over there
and back a couple of blocks. So that's where I live:
Kip's Bay. I'll ink it in here on the map
at the next red light.

Mini-Jeremiad for the Year 2000

Forgive my non-Y2K compliance, so to speak, but what's all this worldwide *Millennium* nonsense: *tontería*, *folie*, *Dummheit*, *stoltezza*, *mishegas* — a sequence of a hundred starts with *one* not *zero*. Why are we so eager to rush things along, a year before it's necessary, to the possibility of Apocalypse — to see if it's actually going to happen? to find out if God is going to split open the sky and yell at us, extra *loud*? to see if Jesus is going to come down from the clouds and make us feel really, *really* bad about ourselves? The Greek monk who was given the job of figuring out Christ's birthday, so an Anno Domini date would have a semblance of accuracy, worked back from the hundreds of years of his own existence, and was, it is now determined, to have been short by a few, so the *real* Millennium probably came and went sometime in the '90s and nobody even noticed! And math is what this whole deal is about anyway: the magic of numbers. After awhile, 1 becomes 2. That's the way it goes. And the *real* bottom line is that it's a *good deal* — a bargain: we get a whole century for a mere 99 years, an entire millennium for nine ninety-nine; we get two *fins de siècle* and two *fins de millénaire* instead of one, a two-fer, something for nothing, something thrown in, an extra party — since we know we will get to do it all over again next year, the *real* first year of the 21st Century — except that, a year from today, we can remark: How adolescent and impatient we all were a year ago, how so very *20th century* we acted back then. “Look,” someone shouts, “the sky's splitting open! Now *this* is a *Millennium*!”

Vista

for John Ashbery

*Unifying our inconceivable wonders — the Bridge
of Superfluous Destiny, the Gardens of Resonant Dust
and the gilding that continuously drips
from the prodigious Steeples of Historic Lunacy
that even now with a sudden downdraft
can impale a wafting dynastic feud —
is the Yoke of Beauty
with which the ancient despots
adamantly encumbered the shoulders of the citizenry.*

“The brochure was getting out of hand and fluttered
by degrees away until my textual orders calmed
themselves, since no one could follow them anyway
except to their respective diminutions and deaths,
the indistinct potential that managed always
to be dropped from the day’s itinerary.” Look,
I wasn’t even supposed to be here this morning,
but perspective must begin somewhere, even
if yet another fade-in on a foreshortened North Atlantic,
the vibrant aviatrix herself a function
only of the conversational ephemera
that turns out to be the ultimate destination:

But when she said her husband was on a board
and pushed buttons, I fled
through the traditional baroque aerial mélange
to avoid hitting bottom too soon,
to thus become recognizable in details
that would have provided no foothold at all, really,
other than what is on the paper over there,
a furtive monument to travel in the form of memoranda.

“But in fact the luncheon was proceeding as if nothing
more were happening, a panoply of colorful fluids
mercifully punctuating the monochromatic fare, until
our calcified plates were at last taken away and one
crossed the provisional bridge
to roam beneath a deceptive *roofliness* of sky,”

*And it is true that your vision will be hampered
by the limitations of the same colors your ancestors saw,
and there will be no new ones in your lifetime*
except that one over there, I added, from the precipice,
hoping a word or two would extend the thread,
but there were now so many interlocutors inhabiting
the erratic daylight whirl that it was no longer funny,
and included many who should be simply shot
and fall cinematically into the sea;

however no one will emerge clearly in the photographs,
just as no one could ever read the brochure carefully enough
to remain unretouched in the memory.

*Nevertheless, as if by autocratic decree
you will devour every vista in sight,
and even cultivate a taste for Anonymous Death,
the architectural confection
that mingles picturesque shards of skyline
with pastel aroma and chipped illusion,
pointless cavalcades and unrewarded beggars . . .*

*Traditionally, so the preface determined, if the arbalest misfires
you will be allowed to leave peacefully.* So we would probably
suspend the action, a great loss for the relevant conflicts
that are pedestrian enough to justify the cobblestones
if not the stroll itself. Interestingly, I had gone there
to escape all that, encrypted, as it were, in gratuitous anticipation,
but now I felt nominated as a poet of the cliffs
and thus would never look down, but shoulder
the vista the way the ancient despots, et cetera.”