

Tony Towle

Selected Poems

2000-2007

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* Included in *Winter Journey* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2008).

In the Coffee House

the Mona Lisa, in the Village
at Bleecker and Seventh, a blip
from the middle ages
on the radar screen
of that young woman over there,
while she thinks of someone else.

I should have brought
something to read
because I have nothing to do now
but write, the way I used to
forty years ago, in the Figaro
in the Village
at Bleecker and MacDougal, exhilarated
by loneliness, poverty, and paralyzing
indecision, resolutely ignoring the fact
that everyone cool in there
knew that I wasn't —
lost to what was *happening*
behind the overpriced coffee, 35 cents
for the fuel
to infiltrate oblivion;

and I waited for a girlfriend
and composed jejune little ironies
that I hoped would pass for poems,
and I had all the time in the world.

*

The San Remo bar was there across the street
where I learned years later
real New York poets went
and drank real drinks,
but the San Remo is gone
with everything else from 1960 —
discarded, lost, or broken, or certainly
wouldn't fit anymore,
except for the sound advice
still gathering dust:

Think before you speak.

(Yes, I probably should have done that.)

A penny saved is a penny earned.

(That could have been made a bit clearer, perhaps.)

Don't be a complete idiot.

(Hey, I gave it a shot.)

You should really think about a career.

I'm thinking about it now

and there it is: involuntary barbs,

unasked-for opinions

and missed opportunities strewn

and rusting about the incorporeal field.

I told Diane I'd be here 'til six. Waiting

for a girlfriend *literally* is a great improvement

over the afternoons at the Figaro;

and in fact it's cool to *have* a girlfriend at my age

I think amusedly to myself

behind the overpriced coffee,

2.95 to contemplate the traffic

fleeing down the avenue and into the past

which has brought me up to the present,

where I put down my pen, figuratively.

from Nine Immaterial Nocturnes

En el Viejo México

First, you gut the burrito, for then events will proceed.
You were to uncover the señorita's repressed desires
and then get the *infierno* out of there
before she uncovered yours; but
it was too late and, if not exactly history
at least the perpetuation of unreality
in another language:
the *perro* chasing you for effect, a *cabeza*
mouthing imprecations from the window
that will reconstruct for you,
your worship, the streets that come to their end
in the comedy of finding and losing,
in the schemes of diamonds, ovals, circles
sparkling beneath the blue parlor of miles
and the fictive arrows that arrive from her female glance
still pointed.

Prospects

I would like to live long enough
to see the State Quarters Program
clink to a successful conclusion,
twelve dollars and fifty cents of wealth and history
fulfilled in elegant cardboard circles;
but now the premise takes off in a different direction,
for as Kentucky was about to pay its two bits
for a second admission to the Union
the imps of haphazard historicity
subjected the skyline to the whims of religious psychopaths;
and before that I had never purchased an American flag —
since I always knew where I *was* and, when abroad
(at least in England), the natives always knew where I was *from* —
but in October I bought two: from immigrants
making a tenuous living, appropriately,
from Africa and Asia, respectively
and on Wall Street, no less.

Archive

Social realists throw themselves into networking
while impressionists drift into scenarios,
where at the moment Catherine the Great draws nearer,
her Russo-Teutonic bosom heaving
with antique but passionate monumentality.
Fabricated trepidation has never before been this vibrant
I surmise, though the empress is coming to resemble
Margaret Dumont, and thus my anxiety
increases dramatically. But let me just move on
and say that in my next impression
the aliens have affirmed their evil intentions
and the death dust is entering the chamber,
yet there is an absence of detail
except for the picturesque Alpine village
and, because it sounds as if the containers
are coming loose again, we put on our capes and fly there.

Ethos

*Vous êtes un de ces types Protestants qui
se trouve seulement à Genève
(You are one of those Protestant types
one finds only in Geneva)*

I overheard an older man saying lasciviously to a young one
at the Cedar Bar a very long time ago
in clear, textbook French and I was startled,
apprehensive for a second that it had been directed at me,
though I have never been to Geneva —
and I don't think that's what Calvin had in mind
when *he* went to Geneva; he went to create an ethos,
through which as a distant subtextual consequence
I find myself engaged in marginally necessary yardwork
somewhere between Olivebridge and Krumville
to justify midnight sensuality later on,
in the waters of the enchanted spring
with *Dian*, the woodland nymph
who conveyed me here from the metropolis
by means of a spirited white Toyota.
But work for reward is not what Calvin meant either,
really, yet it is out of his control, isn't it,
for that's what happens to an ethos: it dapples the landscape
like invisible confetti from a distant century,
falling unobserved as one rakes the leaves,
gathers the kindling.

Phenomena

“With holidays around the corner
you can sweep easily through the words
of a talented writer,” the critic said
but not of me, alas. “With hardly a festival in sight
you can briskly ignore irrelevant idiosyncrasy
and pointless rhapsodizing”
would be more like it;
but nobody’s poetry is any good
until someone in prose says it is,
and writes out a check and bestows a certificate;
others, milling ambiguous in the shadows
say nothing. The trick
is not to care. The trick is,
from my precarious pseudo-aeropagite
perch on the sofa, with the traditional
insulating glove of blubber worn down to nothing,
to reach yet again into the icy water
at the bottom of the room
and find additional specimens
that no one will see.

The Show Went On

Some 1200 children rioted in a Manhattan theater after realizing they'd been swindled. Each had paid the sum of seven cents for a performance billed as a charity benefit for "The Children's Home," which did not exist. The performance consisted of the hunchbacked organizer of the event attempting to imitate a porpoise by making strange sounds. The irate children hurled the potatoes they had brought to donate to the Home at the performer, seriously injuring him. One boy swung from the chandelier, which came crashing down to the floor. Others smashed the windows of the theater, at which point the police arrived and arrested the organizer/porpoise imitator, a hundred years ago this week. Now, answer the following:

What charges were filed?

How long was the sentence?

How many of the children testified at the trial?

What was the name of the theater?

What would have been the capacity of "The Children's Home," had it existed? why?

How could the porpoise imitation have been more convincing?

What happened to the uneaten potatoes?

Which vegetable would the youth of today most likely have brought to such an event?

Hypotheses

Imagine turning the clock back
to when there were no clocks,
and then back another hour and a half
just to make sure. Imagine the unique insights
your wristwatch will give you, even though it is running slow.
Imagine how you will feel if it stops.

This brochure invites us to imagine
reliving the terrors of World War II,
but the explosions are deafening and it seems hazardous,
so we come back. Instead, let's imagine a bright blue Mesopotamian sky
and the peaceful Baghdad of January 1258
with the Mongols somewhere in the distance.
Imagine trying to explain to the Caliph what's going to happen
when they get there, that his grand vizier is double-crossing him,
that the city's inhabitants will be slaughtered,
that he will be mocked at a banquet and then he and his sons
will be sewn into carpets and trampled by the Mongol horsemen.
The description will become unimaginably gruesome
so imagine that you are a peacefully falling leaf that is, like,
kind of, actually, you know, floating in a present-day
colloquial breeze, or whatever, while there I remain,
real or imagined, inside behind the autumnal window,
unraveling the sizeless sweater of the unknown
into countless piles of yarn. You wander off to seek advice
from the symbolically obscure but kindly old welder,
whose torch like an indulged nephew or sputtering oracle
perched on his remaining knee
spits out an indefatigable stream of chromatic enlightenment
and within the vanishing sparks
you are imagined as just a normal person
facing an enormous stack of bills
that require payment for everything you've ever imagined.
Imagine you have the money to take care of them all.
Imagine what will happen when they find out you don't,
and they resort to the unimaginable: sending grim reality
to infiltrate your imagination.

Anthropomorphic Etiquette

1

When a monkey courts a dragon
he must never arrive at her lair
with a gift less bizarre
than the impending relationship.

2

At the fête, the female goat
should caper with the snake before the rat
and thereafter the ox, but leave with the dog
for he will relish her credentials.

3

If you are a male goat
stay right where you are
but eventually gravitate toward the arts
for then you will be the goat of her dreams.

4

The female horse should resist rearing up
with passionate hooves before a favored guest,
thus upsetting the delicate equilibrium
and the trough.

5

When a male rabbit calls on a female tiger
it is improper that he be startled by the doorbell
and scamper back down the hall to the elevator
after having requested the rendezvous.

6

The female rooster should always follow her instincts
and then perhaps apologize for the misunderstanding.

Extraterrestrial Observations

Across the street, Marcia has changed herself into Cindy
and she is wearing a dress
that could only have come from Mars
and a hat perhaps suitable for an evening on Neptune.

Up the block, the Moonmen are assembling the ray gun
but don't be alarmed! — our dwelling
is sided with Lunarium
under the tar paper,
their puny cosmic devastation beams
cannot get through, cannot cause harm.

Across the street, things have returned to normal;
Cindy has become Marcia again, though her shoes
are apparently from Jupiter, her belt from Pluto.

Let me repeat: the alien weapons will be powerless
and will, in fact, have “no effect” — on the three-legged chair,
the mildewed curtains, or blemish the one-page calendar
that displays the intrepid, pigtailed Miss October
offering a shiny apple out of season most of the year —
absolutely none, not the slightest effect at all.

Clash of Artistic Temperaments

You see, Plutarch
used to call poetry
“noisy dancing” whereas
I think of dancing
as sweaty poetry,
indoors under the hot
prosodic lights, feet
all over the place, but
remembering to hold
the capricious words just
far enough away
to keep them respectably unaware
of my arousal.

The Dinner Party

Ah, life is a reassuring dream that is vivid but comfortably mundane, said the shmuck aloud to himself as he sat down next to the shlemiel and indulged in an expansive gesture of certitude that sent the latter's soup into the lap of the adjacent shlimazel. The shmendrick apologized, to no one in particular, and the shmegeggy accepted; while the shlep scuffled off to the kitchen to get another bowl, and at the front door the shnorrer pushed past the shlumps to talk his way in. It was the putz, of course, that had arranged the seating, which included a decorous mélange of shmoes crowded in next to the radiator, sweating and uncomfortable but grateful to have been invited. I have no idea where I'm supposed to sit, so I leave and go sit in the park — where I hear an avian voice: "Hey, you don't recognize me? I'm the pigeon that craps on your windowsill. Why are you down here in the cold when you could be upstairs eating a free meal? What *are* you, some kind of *shnook*?"

Digression, 5/10/03

“for” Joe LeSueur

Listening to Samuel Barber’s
orchestrated Souvenirs of whatever it was
he was remembering with the Mets on the tube
with the sound off would be an oxymoronic
afternoon to some, even a gender-preference tussle,
or manly brawl, but to others — me —
a way of building up the entertainment quotient
before adding actual *activity* to the mix,
perhaps working for those who give me money
or laboring over my poems
when *I’m* the one who pays; and the Mets
are like an orchestra in need of rehearsal not
like the ensemble playing “Sam’s”
exquisite miniature song for oboe
the most beautiful instrument I think
even though I have never heard
a 20th-century piano concerto I didn’t like,
a coincidence of sensibility I shared with Frank
although mercifully neither one of us
had to hear them all. And you left out
a great story that you told me back in ’64
which you said Frank didn’t like to talk about
of how at the Living Theatre reading five years before,
which *wasn’t* the Leroi Jones benefit by the way —
that was in ’63 and I was there — because Leroi
was one of the readers in this one, with Allen
and Ray Bremser; there is a famous *Voice* photo
of the three of them watching Frank read that Larry used
in a lithograph, incorporating Frank’s “To a Young Poet”
about John Weiners — so Frank was reading that poem
and others and Kerouac was in the audience,
drunk, and yelling: “Get off the stage, O’Hara, you faggot,
I want to read some haiku!” and after a few minutes of this
Frank actually started to leave but the audience
said: “No, don’t go, don’t listen to him”
and so forth but Kerouac wouldn’t stop and finally
Frank, walking off, said, “No, that’s all right, let him read,
my silence is more interesting than his bullshit”
though delivered, as you told me, with tears in his eyes.

Well, like the Mets I'm coming up to bat in the bottom
of the 9th, or the 8th, if I'm lucky,
but far behind in the game —
and the music seems to have stopped to listen.

from **Truth in Advertising**

On the Road

The segmented demigod “Michelin Man”
who cushions our daily journeys, distributes
diminutive likenesses of himself, the votive figurines
we utilize on the road, to keep in touch
with his wisdom and pliability —
as in such manner were fashioned statuettes of *Gudea*
ruler of Bronze Age Sumerian *Lagash*
to call attention to his reality when not in personal view.
One day, Michelin Man, resting in his automotive
conveyance notices an acolyte who has paused
in his own vehicle to mistreat one of these benevolent effigies,
shaking it with violence and leering with menace,
as if to do it harm. The scoundrel looks up and sees
with chagrin who it is that has discovered
his execrable behavior. And how does Michelin Man
punish this impiety? Does he seize the blasphemer
and lock him in the trunk? No, he gazes down
sorrowfully, in quiet pity, so *resilient* is his compassion.

A Sunny Day

A man washing his car on a sunny day is approached by two gangsters, who wordlessly “suggest” that he use their cleaning product. Intimidated, he switches.

Interestingly, the thugs’ merchandise seems to be quite effective although it is not clear how much it will cost. Probably

quite a bit, because it seems that “protection” is included:

When a bulldog trots up to the car’s rear wheel and lifts a leg to pee on a tire the man has just washed, the mobsters reach into their jackets as if to draw pistols and “blow away” the offending animal. Sensing the danger, the dog ambles off to relieve himself in safety somewhere else, leaving the men in one of those overly complex scenarios he has noticed humans so often become involved in.

Vehicular Presentiment

The Pathfinder has again come to that section
in the narrow cliffside road
where it has to drive over the colossal letters of its own name
deeply incised in the stone, bumping down and up,
straining the suspension while moving carefully along
over the autobiographical roadway: from the I to the F,
and then across the H and the T, inching onto the edge of the A,
toward the perilous gap on the other side,
the hollowed-out space below the bulge of the P
into which the left front wheel will drop once more
and send the car plummeting into the bottomless canyon below —
and at this point the vehicle awakens, its cold engine shuddering
in the silent showroom, beads of moisture covering the hood,
the sales staff gone home for the night,
the stars twinkling over the beckoning mountains.

A Chance Encounter

A living snowman is waiting for his scarf to dry in a laundromat. He opens the door of the dryer to retrieve it but someone walks by and carelessly hits the door, knocking the snowman into the drum. Then an archetypal “hot young woman,” in tank top and shorts, oblivious that the machine is “occupied,” opens the door, proceeds to throw in her own clothes, starts the dryer, and sits down to wait. One can see through the machine’s window that the intense heat has melted the snow from the snowman’s bones and that his skeleton and the lumps of coal that compose his face are all that’s left as he spins entangled with the woman’s clothes. He manages to get out of the dryer, however, just as she is raising a bottled potion to her lips. He snatches the bottle away and drinks the contents down himself. The miraculous coldness of the liquid causes the snowy “flesh” to reappear on his bones. But something is causing him discomfort. He reaches into the packed snow of his thoracic sphere and pulls out a purple brassiere, belonging to the young woman. He hands it to her. The fact that an article of her lingerie has spent time inside this creature seems to make the woman kittenish and sexually receptive and she gazes at the snowman with unmistakable passion. The latter, now that he is back to normal, gives her a wicked and seductive smile. But he knows perfectly well that a relationship would be doomed while the woman is in a “warm” state of being. He turns and waddles out the door, ruing the fact that he needlessly drank the entire bottle of snow-making fluid, when, if he had just let the woman drink *some* of it, they could have had a wild and frosty affair.

Misprision

*someone said Sappho could be understood
only through her original tongue
and I said I didn't think so
as educational as that would probably be*

*someone wrote that Charles VIII
entered France in the 1490's
and I said to myself: I don't think so
he was born many years before that
but he did penetrate Italy in 1494
as far as Naples, and didn't withdraw
for an entire year, which seems extraordinary
by today's standards
but he finally lost virility and everything else
by hitting his head on a doorway in 1498*

*someone wrote that gardening was a literature
in which scholars nibbled at the edges
of what appeared to be an insurmountable edifice
and I thought: that makes perfect sense
nibbling is an authentic scholarly pursuit
and eventually the edifice will get lower
and can be surmounted*

*somebody said that cretins painted murals
and got out of labyrinths but that seems unlikely
and someone wrote to say it's time for a poetry museum
but I don't understand how anyone could possibly know that
and isn't that what our books are already
glassless vitrines
where you're allowed to run your fingers over the art
or nibble on the implications
or loiter in the white passageways between the lines
hoping to meet the lenders to the exhibition*

Scenes for Alexandra MacPherson Kelley

Now that the hurricane has passed through our transparent island
and smashed furiously into the resolute molecules of inland air
where at present it is weeping a copious rain in frustration,
let us turn the page, where a gentle *Parkay yellow*
spreads across the enchanted vale
tinged with *burnished kipper* at the edges
and where shadows in *sudden decanted burgundy*
have discreetly spattered the succeeding layout
as if intent on enhancing the already moistened village
ingeniously highlighted in *transient blue deep*
and dabbed with *impecunious thatch*, in addition to
quasi-melodious laments from the vernacular, as the villagers
present each other with little pieces of their respective minds.
But of course we don't really want to know these people
and since socializing is networking to no purpose
we abandon the tableau and look up
against a background of *expectant taupe* and *reticent gray*
to see that an eighty-ton locomotive can float on air,
and watch Japan go through wrenching lunar aspirations,
and observe an insecure lobster expiring from self-doubt
on the way to the zoo of scrutiny;
and you can find mystic sights and sounds in your very home
or pass the time in conversation with an atomic clock
and then we see the butterflies
in *transcendent orange* and *immortal black*
floating from the mouths of Amish suicides
and can be certain that reality reigns supreme.

Dramatis Personae

SLOAN, arachnid-like, lures GARY into her web, all the while visualizing someone else. She has sex with various cast members, smokes, uses profanity, and manipulates everyone in sight, including the director, DONALD, who also plays the producer who defenselessly falls prey to her manipulative arms or legs, whichever they might be. He has sex with her and perhaps JANE, all the while using strong profanity, all the while trying to figure out the truth of the situation, both theatrically and in “reality” while, in addition, he, DONALD, in a desperate attempt at an exculpatory tour de force, plays the role of the wandering “philosopher” who is certain no one is up to any good, and proves it, for the most part, but using overly strong profanity, in our opinion. Simultaneously, CHARLOTTE discusses DONALD out of context with CATHERINE, the director’s so-called mentor. She smokes several times and is instructed to cough “engagingly” in the direction of HUGH, a reporter who has sex with GAVIN’s unnamed ex-wife (LIBBY) and wrestles with EXPOSITION. Similarly, FLORA plays the associate with whom MICHAEL has sex. ETHEL plays the one with whom he does not, with equal conviction. LYNN, weeping totally, plays the shadowy figure who sees DONALD one last time, as the CREW, CONSULTANTS, and TECHNICAL SUPPORT STAFF put down their sandwiches to watch in staged incredulity, bursting the sticky threads that had heretofore bound them in a morass of camaraderie and professionalism.

Out and Around

The streets have never been more inflated
with automotive self-assertion. The sun
has its instructions: keep up the heat. Nouns
drift about like paper. One of them, a politician, orates,
creating haphazard currents of serial realities
and on the corner stands the archetypal critic, musing
as in a blog — scanning the heavens
for discourse, paradigms, process, and praxis
while poetry pauses, unnoticed, to signify
on his or her leg. And we are not on the same page
so I turn it and move on to the Librairie de France
where *La Monarchie austro-hongroise pour les gourdes*
is finally on display, justifying the years of toil
in making *The Austro-Hungarian Empire for Dummies*
fit for Gallic consumption,
and somewhere in a more strenuous context
the grizzlies are creeping closer
and are doing well from the outside
but can they prosper in the paint
is the question put to the otherwise empty landscape,
and a gentle ripple of opinion
passes through the waving field of experts.
But you are skeptical of all this darting about, you say.
Very well, I shall pick my way through the fundamentals
in these explosive times and relate a sad but cohesive tale:
Krakatoa grew up with two magmas,
which created feelings of stress, conflict, and volatility
and it resulted in a predictable eruptive displacement
that preempted the attention of all in the neighborhood —
and thus they were treated to monumental trauma
as acted out with rock and gas,
supported admirably by lava and all the ash you could ask for.
Now, let us return to the unfinished landscape:
You are correct that the lesson is not clear,
the translation inadequate, the rainbow suspended.

Elsewhere

*Do you remember when we dodged showers of poisoned arrows
or when they set those pigs on fire and sent them squealing like crazy
into the midst of our war elephants, who were trumpeting like crazy
and our guys were falling off the elephants and not getting up*

*And do you remember when they threw clay pots full of snakes
that broke on the decks of our ships, and everyone just went nuts
and the sailors thought they were hangovers from the gods made manifest
and we just took off our armor jumped overboard and swam to shore*

*And remember when we catapulted bags of scorpions into the middle
of their cavalry and then threw javelins dipped in venom
and our slingers hurled stones inscribed with derogatory phrases
that bounced sardonically off the helmets of their infantry?*

*Those were good times — for our cause was as just as theirs was
and the self-roasted pork delicious after everything
had calmed down and those who were dying
finally stopped complaining about it . . .*

A burst of empathic marmalade spatters the English traveler
as he peruses these ancient adventures,
and a leopard of sorts springs across his brow
and frightens off the spirit that had nurtured his boredom.

Adjacently, the two vibrant young ladies paint the carriage window
to reflect the inclusion of their faithful celestial dog
to whom the clutter of earthly landscape is irrelevant
as he trots off to investigate a notional empyrean

and the other items have been subtracted
to allow our spectator to concentrate
on the drawing room door, where we will leave her
for to go further would be cause for comment

and we are both left on the wrong side of our respective portals,
kept from warmth and civilized appurtenance in my case
in another distracting quatrain created
from exile in the hallway of misadventure

and I never noticed the offbeat zodiac on the distressed ceiling,
how the dog seems ready to pounce on the trilobite
though they are millions of paint specks apart
well, maybe not millions, and I am privileged to have a book

in my wearisome circumstance on the metal cushions of stairs
and I can read about the Parthians
who didn't pay enough attention and became Sassanians,
a process I now understand as well as they did

as they too had left their keys hanging in the past
and were caught in the future without them
so that fate was free to manipulate their mortal details
so that they came to ask: what was the present after all

but regret for the past or anxiety about the future,
there was no time "now" to actually accomplish anything
and thus they sidestepped their continuance like a bag of scorpions
and were swept into the advancing moment

but I will disturb you no further while you are dreaming
on one of the other shelves beneath our common roof,
floating on the contrived undulations,
as the echoes tumble into inaudible perspective

as if our travellers had any chance at all
of reaching a satisfactory destination,
in which the leopard would not himself fall asleep
and the dog not return with news of a further eternity.