

# Tony Towle      Selected Poems      1980–1989

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

## Interior

*for Ted Greenwald*

I can't tell how high up I am  
in these windows  
through which boats and the lake  
are graphically still —  
nothing but water  
resting like a cat; and myself?  
Cutting up vegetables for dinner  
I face quiescent canisters and condiments,  
echoing the shapes and symbols  
that make up the symbolic edges  
a few feet away.

I always used to, Ted, or usually used to,  
disdain these quiet little interiors  
and now I am part of one  
while the water, oddly, gets deeper as I watch  
and the dazzling beach like a paper towel  
blots up the excess  
I have left among the innocent patterns  
of the true things I orchestrate  
but cannot move.

## Garlic-Purple/Pink/Cobalt

First the milk was added, then the vegetables, eggs,  
sugar — lots of sugar — beef, pork and lamb, ground  
beef, salt and other spices, fruit from the trees,  
and soon I was living, and have kept  
for what seems to be a long time: the cup I have been drinking from  
without knowing what's in it; and glancing at the stars  
one can see from over here. The universe  
looks so different tonight; what planet am I on? One  
where they charge 30 cents for The New York Post,  
and that used to charge for the Sun, the Mirror, and the World  
with its Telegram, by means of which I was a Republican in 1948  
through the cartoon dramas of donkeys and elephants; I guess  
I preferred elephants by the time my father brought home the paper —  
I still don't think very well in the afternoon, I let  
The New York Post do it for me, leaving night's approaching footfalls  
in a shoebox in a closet somewhere,  
until Apollo finishes his stroll across the sky, in his sensible  
shoes of gold, to the banana peel of the horizon  
and takes a slow pratfall into the west. But the door is opening  
so I pretend I'm working, finishing my essay: "Antwerp:  
a Psychosomatic Overview," though it is just an idea, crossing  
my mind, like all the others that left for greener pastures,  
hoping they might actually get to nibble on something, something  
real, the thought of which paralyzes me  
into reading The New York Post over again, while pools  
of future impressions form on my right, and on my left:  
smoking dung from the past, but fortunately far to my left,  
the distance to the horizon that always cuts me in two,  
bringing more pictures of impressions of pictures: Matisse, Turner,  
and the World Trade Center — from its foundation of financial bananas  
taking a slow pratfall into the Hudson,  
leaving just more blue, some pink, and garlic-purple  
as a plane flies overhead taking the half in the distance.

## Notes for Poems (1981)

Going straight to the point  
I tend to evoke the evocative,  
for, while you were standing on your head,  
someone shit in your hat,  
although I don't think you actually brought a hat,  
in fact I don't think you even own a hat  
in the history of my impressions  
that turn the wheels  
to mash the colors  
and correct them in their nests of spots,  
rustling the shrubbery  
of indefinite iambs  
scampering across the palette,  
which guides the pliant viewer  
through the afternoon.

The spots disperse in their nests  
like the little adventures on crutches  
seen on crutches, you vaguely think,  
trying to sit up straight  
through the interruptions  
and the constant weight of yourself  
which struggles on up the ravine like soldiers  
treading expertly on the wildflowers  
with other travellers so amazingly conceived

until there is an accident.  
"That is not a part of it,"  
the reader may object, glancing at the images  
that fill in the cracks and minutes  
in this part of the city.  
Again someone calls out,  
and it is probably true,  
having ventured out among the comparisons

and someone calls out once more,  
in a verbal glint like a spider's web  
through a tiny square in the screen,  
though why the glint will not move  
when I move my eye  
I leave to the voluptuousness of speculation, or,

more idiosyncratically, in the consequent  
wave of mutterings, leave buried  
in a thick layer of pumice, with a topping  
of olives and burnt pine cones, or  
more eccentrically still,  
as the mutterings grow louder,  
olive *leaves* and pieces of burnt pine *bark*;

and the speculations twinkle like volcanoes,  
part of the game  
the same size as the players themselves,  
and it is a curious thing  
to be playing it so close to the world,  
to sit so long in this odd shape.

## Recapitulation

Wild Assyrian armadillos  
couldn't drag me from this place. Just stop it! Just  
stop that kind of talk! The music builds,  
and raises the lid, until it is off.  
Jean's cousin is sleeping over tonight, which I mention  
because I seem to be in a different literary tradition tonight,  
sort of a "Write 'til you puke" school, though that would probably  
take longer than it should; anyway, I continue: Jean is painting,  
small canvases, and I am writing, small poems, and I have both a glass  
of wine and a glass of rum — why limit yourself  
if people think you're an alcoholic, in the important  
decisions? Part of an incredibly complicated dream I had last night  
was that Jean went out and bought cough drops, an incredibly ordinary  
fact, considering that she has a cough. "Camels," I say, and point out  
that when Frank, Frank O'Hara, gave up Camels for Marlboros back in '64  
or was it '65 he lost most of his cough pretty quick but of course little  
good that did him; I mean it wasn't what did him in. Part  
of *Jean's* dream last night, or so she told me and why  
should she lie about it, was that I had invited Joe and Eunice Fearer  
and Joe and Marjorie Singer to Jean's grandmother's  
house in Chicago, with whom I don't get along, the grandmother not  
the house and the city falling somewhere in between; I guess the reason  
the Singers and the Fearers were there is that they recently bought  
prints from us, though Jean knows them hardly at all but I've  
known them for years; and in addition to this, in the dream, Jean  
was introduced to someone who turned out to be someone else, who  
then sat down next to her on the sofa and had it out, jerking off,  
trying to *come* on her, and I was there too, apparently, and was being  
absurdly nonchalant about it, which is maybe in the right direction but that  
would be beyond even me; far beyond, like these iris vinyl place mats  
I'm nowhere near ordering, though if *you're* interested, they're four-fifty each  
and 18 by 12 — inches — metrics haven't really caught on yet, at least  
with *my* particular poetic self: "And kilometers and kilometers to go  
before I watch TV . . ." There are no doubt other reasons  
why that one doesn't work, but there's no point in criticizing  
my own materials, since someone else is almost sure to. At  
Ted Greenwald's wedding not too long ago I opined, or, rather,  
asked rhetorically (I thought), what would become of the New York  
School of Poetry (having noticed a number of the other guests) if  
somebody blew up the building (probably someone who hadn't been  
invited) and a colleague within earshot said, or opined, that it would  
be *improved*. Now, eliminating the building as a possibility for "it," "it"  
occurred to me that my own work was included in this appraisal,

but on the other hand he was also including his own, which was both self-effacing and, at the same time, again considering the guests, more eclectic than the implications of my original remark; but since the building *didn't* blow up I am here thanking you for your patience and cooperation. I would never let a mere *appraisal* stop me anyway (though a small-caliber revolver would probably do the trick). The wine is beginning to taste acidic, I'll stick to the rum, while Jean is still painting and while her cousin, Martha by name, is presumably asleep, and while the television carries on with its endless entertainment and the music indicates that Fredric March's wife is dying.

## **The Last of the Lake**

Night was scratching at my door;  
I opened and struck out  
and it gave a yelp.  
It was a large black poodle,  
for you see the night can be illustrated  
with black curly hair.  
I tried to pull my foot  
from the primordial slime  
and keep the precious stones  
still caught between my toes  
to finance my journey into finance,  
where money gives way to more money  
as the magic wand to the club; wait,  
I'm getting a message; no  
just a buzz.

## Vase

Then it is your balance,  
thrown off by primroses, asters,  
giant political interests  
as you tumble from this earth in a fuzzy idea,  
another key ingredient in the mix  
for anyone gazing at the glimmering software of the brain  
shining for the hopes  
demanded by the times.

What do I care? I am not of the earth,  
I don't know what all the little flashing  
lights and symbols mean, any more  
than they can translate the ironic hyperbole  
with which I am well supplied.

Then I pause, and pause again,  
for who can forget the excitement  
of first leaving the earth?  
passing through its girders and beams  
and flakes of rust, the orange and turquoise sheets  
billowing from its sides,  
from the cosmic winds  
the trip requires.

It was never the world that I knew,  
unravelling in signs that fled the screen,  
rendered without light from the other stars.

## July 6th

The water edges up  
on you and your thoughts  
which disquiet the mind as the tops of trees  
try to shake themselves free of birds.  
And there is the soft thump of insects  
on sandy skin, while I absorb the news,  
two days after Ted Berrigan dies

and the sky seems to sag  
and open up a space, the one in which  
we didn't really know each other  
though for twenty long years,  
which are suddenly shorter.  
At this point a painter  
could reach down  
for a little cerulean blue  
to cover the hole in the sky  
while I search out a caption for the scroll below.

## Variations for Jean on Gnothic Neophancy

That? That's just a leopard bite, taking its gnothic place  
on the oscillating structure of neophantic events  
amidst the luxuriant greenery of this corner of the world  
that adds to the Salad of the Nation, and gets tossed  
with the brown historical croutons of national earth.  
Who is this meal for, I wonder vaguely, floating away gradually,  
gnothically, in circles that have elsewhere been described as Baltic,  
all the convenient materiality having dripped down the walls,  
exposing silence and age.  
But let's leave all that for the moment  
and let it simmer in the serrated backwaters of self-perusal,  
because things have been simply humming with activity this week  
here at Watercress Gardens; and speaking of neophancy, this  
is my dog, Shabby, and my cat, Giblet. These are the flies  
hovering above the specimens, and this  
is the wind, dying down in the bluish-white atmosphere. The rest  
is indescribable, but humming with activity all the same.

Yet, even so, by this time I am probably looking around  
and humming to myself, a few aimless bars of something,  
and tapping a finger on my John Keats paperweight. Maybe  
I'll run into James Watt, I think; I've got a great joke for him —  
it takes place on shale: but, to make an endless  
story shorter, Jim is a little old to be believing in Santa Claus  
so the Polish guy shoots him. And now, though stunned  
by my pointlessness, the audience might as well stay in their seats,  
for it is that edifying time when Shabby, Giblet, and I like to enjoy  
a beverage or two (and I think Giblet is already waiting for some more)  
before sinking into our private evening humors  
in which we battle potent emotions and bizarre imaginings,  
as sulfur, nitrogen, and other fantastic substances assault our senses,  
depending on whether we are being figurative or abstract.

By this time I am looking around yet again,  
and discover that I am the only poet there,  
a restless quavering of strings in search of a composition. Apropos,  
while we're waiting and speaking of gnothic, have *you*  
ever struggled out of bed in the morning, ready for practically nothing,  
and found a greasy floor, littered with walnuts?  
That wasn't poetic but it certainly wasn't reality,  
the way pondering the cold rose-gray mist on the water is,  
or the earthquakes, war, and pestilence  
that bring about minute changes in earthly color and form.

But when things are all relatively back to normal  
it will still be the pressure of your lips  
that will be needed to stir in her breast the metaphorical milk,  
as she waits for your words in their colorless envelopes,  
though first you have to decide how big your people are going to be.  
I tend to leave them about a quarter of an inch high, myself,  
far below in the sand, swirling in objective solitudes.

## Typing Test (2 minutes)

By the time the thick brown box encloses the xenophobic fog the two halves of the brain should be working together: the left, with its nose to some rational grindstone, and the right, which was probably off gathering wool somewhere. That is, the *reasonable* letters of h, j, k, l, n, m, y, u, i, o, & p will be interacting with the illusory, or “off-the-wall” letters of a, s, d, f, g, b, v, c, x, z, q, w, e, r, & t. One’s own name, for example, might start out with letters that are logical enough and then get a bit screwy toward the end. But do you remember when the human race had to write “by hand”? Certainly a great deal of irrational nonsense was dashed off by right-brained left-handed authors (Blake and Dostoyevsky, for two), before the typewriter imposed the practice of having the two brains cooperate, thus insuring the intelligent balance of the modern movement.

To be sure, whether the writer was right- or left-handed, there was always the issue of the unused digits in those far-off days. They could help keep the parchment from moving for a while, until the inevitable boredom would cause them to wander off, most often to the writer’s lap, an unwholesome situation that released a centuries-long torrent of superfluous erotic imagery, infiltrating even the composition of religious disquisitions, as in St. Augustine. John Donne had the good fortune to lose an arm in mid-career — resulting in the abrupt elevation of his concerns; Milton, of course, classical as always, went literally blind from this phenomenon: “a sinister hand in the nether land,” as he tellingly mumbled on his deathbed, and took the precaution of having his daughters take his dictation with both hands at once. Thomas Aquinas strapped the left hands of his monkish scribes painfully behind their backs and so forth, the two minutes by now being up.

## Dropping Names

"Always make a sharp upward stroke  
after the downward twisting jab. If you don't,  
you'll never get anywhere in this business."

So spoke art critic Giorgio Vasari.

"You never revise, you just tinker."

That was Virgil Thomson.

For my part I herd my own silent thoughts  
into the shallower of the two allegorical pools for the night  
and toss in a few stones to hold them there,  
except for the one that returned my gaze  
from its black miniature depths and which I mention to you briefly now.

"Those who can, construct; those who can't,  
deconstruct." — La Rochefoucauld.

And finally: I wish we could go to Florence.

It was Mark Twain who said that, but later,

in unintentional quotation,

so did I,

and later still, I sit

before some of the countless bricks of New York,

where Chris and his camera decided I should be,

and I wonder if the smoke

will appear in the rectangle

and who and how famous the passersby

think this person really is.

## **Possibilities (Winter)**

### *Caffè delle Muse*

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, talk, talk, talk, talk, I  
know, a lot of it's mine. Sure, sure, sure, sure, easy  
for you to say, you don't have to be there, scraping the lichens  
off the cappuccino, getting ready to face the museless world outside,  
and then bring all the conversation, mannerisms, bustling and merriment  
back into scale with the size of the tip.

### *Walk the Other Way*

amid the inchoate spiral interiors of dusk,  
and separate its decoration from its parenthetical carcass,  
its non-contextualized wings carrying us over the footprints  
that lead into the porpoise-laden waters of verisimilitude . . . *what?*  
the porpoise-laden *what!?* Never mind,  
it's never bothered you before,  
at the end of a simulated outing, to turn around  
and walk the other way.

### *Dim the Lights*

because I can't keep looking at all this contemporary crap,  
these wildly postmodern elliptical woodgrain-and-aluminum gizmos  
trying to get at me from off the walls,  
agitating the monstrously inexpensive wine I keep drinking  
that is relentlessly dissolving my liver, which observes:  
It serves you right for showing up  
on this godforsaken uncontrollably rained-on evening  
and expecting anything else.

### *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*

I think I see the rest of the flies over there, hovering  
above the rest of the aging oranges and bananas over there,  
just three of the colors covering *Iberia*, which, in turn,  
covers what, exactly? I consider this while underprivileged  
urchins insult me as I pass, in disturbingly colorful words,  
into their language.

### *The Apotheosis of Canada*

Boundaries enormous prolong the frozen geographical phrase  
raised in a crystallized toast to some azure empyrean very like  
your own, America. *Quoi?* But before there is formulated a *réponse*,  
frosted coppery lines burst forth in all directions  
as if an ersatz sun were there illuminating the snow.

### *Greed and Charity*

Would it not be charitable, in this unbounded season of generosity,  
to give just one more small and coated piece of your smitten mind  
to help fill out posterity's faint and shimmering outline?  
No, not if it is filled up so relentlessly with this overly graphic  
1920's slum-against-skyscraper charcoal which flecks  
into my eyes from freezing windswept corners of the past;  
but seriously, welcome, come in, we're not going to stop here.

### *Two Concerts*

The first is the danged farcical effort it takes  
to confront one's jangling physiognomic deterioration in the mirror,  
shave, and get the heck out of the house and show up; the second,  
to keep sitting here with all these other losers, communal lack of air  
reducing us to translucency, to our concerted timeless pittance.

### *The History of the World*

Striped overalls, first of all; the playground in Rego Park:  
basements and roofs in labyrinthine invitations; the bus to Elmhurst,  
Maureen Roy and William Hahn, gum-chewing  
and complaints to the principal, replacing Lila  
Gardner, a ceramic elephant with lilac flowers, but  
there is more, much more

## Commentary

This is about a man who goes to his favorite spot,  
who says that things are changing constantly  
but there will always be things to see,  
such as beautiful mornings;  
the author seems to be describing  
what he sees while sitting under a tree —  
he makes it appear as though  
a tree were blowing in the wind next to the sea:  
Towle says that twelve years go by,  
which seems to relate to his life.

Twelve years of his life pass by,  
then another twelve, until he dies  
and ends the years of his lifetime.  
His poem brings about a feeling of emptiness,  
as if you've been missing something;  
Towle is trying to say that time goes by anyway,  
that every day is different  
but there are still the same number of things to see and do.  
He is maybe also remembering a quiet environment —  
possibly he paints scenery and this is his favorite,  
or he sits down *under* the tree and writes poems and stories.

The poet is letting us know that nature will always be there,  
it'll just always be a little different,  
and to see the difference takes a practiced eye — this guy Tony  
is telling us about a special place where he gets his work done.  
His world is about the changing yet constant world of nature;  
he is an optimist because he refers to the future;  
according to him the world cannot end.

## **Another Zone (Prelude)**

In the end you take off from your former world,  
the rambunctious wings folded in for the day,  
the smoky air settling down over the brushwork,  
the whole treated to my casual but gregarious inaccuracies,  
with imperfections for the entire family:  
the reviewers and the reviewed,  
the editors and the edited, all the wretched of the earth  
at its flattest, the wretched page,  
which has now ripened, ever so slightly,  
into the details of time and place, land and sea,  
brightly seductive, or somber, ill-lit, and grave  
and looking for a few more good words  
to fill out the diminishing weeks,  
the weekly reversals of the Christian tradition:  
coming alive on Friday and dying on Sunday  
against a background of lawns and coffeepots, steaks and spaniels,  
which was nothing like the original cartoon,  
once you clean off the dirt with some turp,  
which was of a moose chasing a kind of weasel with a two-by-four,  
or something,  
but anyway the merest sketch  
when a thickly crowded panorama  
pushing across the bridge of evolution  
would have done just as well;  
but I'm going back upstairs  
and look out the window of America,  
which I thought somebody was supposed to clean once in a while,  
not that it would change the view:  
pastel sunset landscapes sinking into the western foam,  
where I would fly like a common bird

and get away from the Cask-of-Amontillado number  
the buildings in architectural agglomerations  
pull on you here in Downtown New York;  
but no island is an island  
if you duck your head far enough beneath the waves  
and observe the microscopic connections  
and listen to the complaints of the sunken travelers,  
their obscured vocabulary standing out from the rest of the bullshit,  
and we obtusely concentrate on the former  
when the latter would do just as well.

I too saw this day a pretty street  
and I scrape the clarion layers of paint from the walls  
and find stationary shadows on the layers beneath;  
it's one more scenario I've got to think up feelings for  
at some point — but a snail with a limp could go faster than this,  
and since I no longer have so much time  
that's all for the prose. For poetry,  
the dawn comes up and I make some more coffee,  
and it awakens me to the whispering  
of yet ten *more* turbulent years,  
and I drink the coffee,  
and wait for someone to believe me,  
the rain not yet having reached the ground,  
and I jump toward the sun  
that still reaches to this moment,  
the sun the same messenger, Guillaume Apollinaire,  
it's all still the same, August 26, 1989.

## Rhapsodic Reviews

### I

At first one might have expected her current parameters to be based on the discrete equivocations of reorientation, that is, before we notice the equally arbitrary objectification of her geographical locus, and of course after the inevitable reassessments in light of her minimal directionality, vis-à-vis the iconoclasm of her palette, or — how shall we put it — before the wilting leaves of haptic justification are lacquered yet again with the yellowing paradigms of the more visualistic of our debasively modernist apperceptions —

or, more accurately still, let us say that she has heterologicized one of those disingenuously ontological peregrinations along the poststructural cliffs, which rise ominously from the choppy late-capitalist sea, and during which one is buffeted by serializations of destabilizing yet culturally specific air, since it has been her avowed programme to signify other stuff as well, morphologies not found in the high, self-reflexive strategies of overly individuated process, including those that can be literally stumbled upon, in variably undifferentiated but choreographable detritus, piled in privatized mounds, and swept to the microcosmal center of her rented studio floor. However it will be on the non-planar periphery where we must examine the elliptical chromatic juxtapositions, the pigments at first "curated" and then vivified in a conscience-stricken frenzy of post-Neo-Marxist mark-making, gesture-ridden obsessionality exploding in the solitude.

## II

It has never been more apparent that this other artist  
here under scrutiny — we'll just call him Jerry, to avoid  
any needless obeisances to formalism — has been encoding his ongoing  
conglobulations with brushstrokes employed neither as *paint*  
nor as artistic *behavior*; he treats his canvases  
neither as *surface*, nor as *material*; nor does he consider  
his expensive paintbrushes either as *personae*,  
or as overly elongated sticks with various lengths and textures  
of fuzz on the ends of them; nor does he epitomize  
his interactively commodified archetypes  
as privileged and discursively non-specific *conversationality*;  
nor does he regard his wife as feminist discourse made manifest;  
nor his children as chronological counters  
in yet one more economic ploy in the Western consumerist prospectus;  
nor his family snapshots as gratuitous photographic appropriationism;  
not does he consider his long years in art school  
to have been a succession of coloristic sensations  
now recontextualized in a futurity of societal confinement  
and held in abeyance with the patriarchy's bourgeois hierarchical  
differentiations, picturesque though they may be. No,  
our artist here under consideration relies on none of these tropes,  
synechdoches, tactical minutiae, and the occasional zeugma,  
merely in order to resubmit them to the methodological *re-*  
*deobjectification* prevalent in referencing the systemic ravings  
of the expressionistically besotted art-press media apparatus,  
only to have them spatially revalorized in the externalization  
of postmodernism's *hommage* to its entropically anachronistic self.

### III

So just where does the rest of this loosely assembled school hang today, that is, in relation to the targeted subtextual positionality of our "Jerry," or, rather, our "post-Jerry," or "Gerald," now that he seems to be back documentizing along a reconfigured formalist track? Perhaps it is time to ask whether, stranded as we seem to be on the tangential significations of our fin-de-siècle dogleg, it is not appropriate to request that the too-rarely-seen Lacanian six iron be pulled from the materialized bag of fetishistic ambiguities, to get us beyond the sandy fulvous cipherings of the non-utilitarian but site-specific traps and leave us resting and expectant on the edge, i.e., the "context" of the "green" of the common zeitgeist. But then who will putt us into the cup on this par-infinity hole, so that we may emblemize the biomorphisms of its signature style? Perhaps it is also time to untie Professor Löschlott's *formbundles* [sic] and privilege our newly authorized *oculization* [sic] with a range of modulated vacancies that will be, at least in the *peculiarization* of their phenomenological hegemony, less neo-conceptually overdetermined.

### IV

Thus, as this writer has argued elsewhere — well, no, not *argued*, exactly, merely offhandedly suggested, perhaps, though in a hermeneutically *agenda-cized* way, and admittedly irreal amidst this present writer's academically iconicized achievements, the artifactual simulacra one must assess to avoid the *vernacularized* path to the idiosyncratic monumentality that, by this time, might just as well be *disconstructed* and laid out, in a more or less semiotic agglutination, in what the neoclassicists of another day

might have archaically and simple-mindedly called "long lines,"  
but which here, in point of fact, have been particularized,  
one atop the other, as part of a "marginally faux-normative simulation,"  
if I may be permitted to coin a phrase.

But could these coterminally murmuring signifiers and referents  
be but echoings of the phallocratic dematerializations  
that have been shorn of the dysfunctional reifying the disenfranchised  
were made to hang on the subliminal washlines of Eurocentric society?  
Or rather have such pseudological garments been reinhabited  
and made more resistant to the ambient darts and architectonic  
brambles of monochrome solipsisms  
before being rehung in the museological closets of specificity?  
It would seem as if the mediational landscapes of catenary praxis  
have been shrouded in a language-based night, the ebonized fist that,  
nonetheless, in an approach to a distantly surrogate "morning,"  
may unclench a bit  
and show the schematicized portrayal of its inhabitants, who turn  
their male and female gazes to the glints of impending criteria,  
hints and clues that highlight the barest opacity of a preliminary sketch,  
beginning the spectation of the world in some newly translatable way.