

Starlight

150 Poems

John Tranter

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Starlight: 150 Poems by John Tranter

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publisher of weird little books

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Is impossible to hide my feelings, I guess. Look ahead,
That effervescent persona and its emotional lurches and rocketings
Affected so much, and its magnum opus that was called
By another name is now the old school-teacher's chief creed and belief,
Or something very like it, gleaming in the rain. Hold up that light.
Has it shone on the tenebrous backyards yet? Or yet admitted that
It is unable to illuminate the wasteland of wet barbecues, so much
Of its fuel has flared and lit up the landscape... this project, I admit that
It is like gutting then refurbishing a friend's apartment. Now, are
The reply and the echo done with? I asked a redundant question, and
That answer suffocated it, as a firmly pressed pillow
Has choked a banker, but no one knows whodunnit. That whole thing
Of returning to my sources, raking through my prototypes until
The last blueprint is found and seems just right: perhaps this is
Peace – a crowded peace – under the hot sun.
That we are afraid of it – inhabiting a reputation, the whole thing
About establishing who you genuinely were – are – I'll admit. There
You hope your opus will be taken for legerdemain, but your effort sinks
Deeper into the mulch of history, while I adjust the mask that
Just fits more loosely every decade, and then I add up the little
That memory leaves me, a kind of pittance, the totality
Mustered and gathered... a look of boredom in a young person's eyes,
And all those hopes and struggles are quite lost.
Accents and dialects distort them, once again.
To have escaped from a tangle of difficulties, from
Nothing but obstructions, into a glowing absence
And then to take a deep breath and plunge into
Those crowded riverine cities, greedy for contact with ghosts that are
Precisely what we want them to be, our plans furthered,
Seeing alphabet soup spell out the aleatory message and the time,
Casting caution to the winds and the weather – sorry, welter
Of neighbours, barking dogs, traffic cops in a dreadful confusion.
And permit me... no, commit me, please, while the cops are standing
Around chewing the fat, and pray that these
Moments miss you like a whistling arrow. Thunk! The old tapir tapered
Into the bar: a Scotsman, an Italian, and a capybara – I've heard it. But
Wasn't the story of an Eskimo inside an eviscerated bear like this?
The fact that he 'inhabited' the smelly bear-skin... I feel that
Neither brave feats nor stories about them can cut it.

Did not a Dandy Dinmont yap? I deliberately stayed
This way, spiritually a hunchback, drooling and gaping at the stars
That promised ashes and diamonds and nourishing food all the way,
As though clambering inside an animal was simply the reverse
Of some method of becoming notorious. My cheating heart is known
Once its *modus operandi* is – among the *cognoscenti* – firmly established.
The look of a man is the man, Buffon said, and style a condition
Of those whose reputation is a handbag and whose blindness
Was being talked about even in Paris: a troubling myopia, so
That their left and right perceptual fields, red and green, slowly separated,
Only to hitch up again, like inspiration and perspiration. Go on, shout
And be heard. Is this anaglyph what I really want? My declamatory
Nature was made to seem just a yokel act. I must admit it is
Not without a certain *eau-de-cologne* charm, insinuated the farmer. And yet
An invisible dread prevents me making love to you among the provisions,
Then the post-visions that afflict me arrive, fits of
The assurance Baron Corvo had an excess of, a crowing assurance
Which tainted his career, under the blasts of air conditioning,
Whatever. There on the bank statement
At the beginning of the Age of Façadism was a catalogue of waste.
A dumb waiter brought me the tablets and a note about the projected
After-effects: they may amplify the symptoms instead of curing them,
Though Frederick Rolfe was never cured. This
Emptiness will do fine. Just pop it in a doggy bag, thanks. Did you
say ‘provisions’?
Was that a mispronunciation? ‘Provisions’, maybe, held
Too close to the chest, a fake poker hand of fate. The fireworks, they
Ended with a fizzing Roman candle sound that frightened the guest who was
Intended to rescue Gertie McDowell from that dirty old man. It’s
Gesture that fills out the role, as water makes the weather.
It was stupid of me to harp on the sadness
Of that animal’s demise: I should forget about the feeling
Which resembles taxidermy at midnight on an empty highway.
A telescope brings us a soothing view of distant mountains
And all the mountain people. Who knows where they’re going?
Moving from crag to cave to avoid the night
There, which is really ghastly when it comes on.
Beside the darkness, each farmer carries his own personal
Landscape around inside his head, a ‘landscape’ being

What surrounds your idea of yourself, it's so
Honourably framed, but presented in a Potemkin-village spirit.
There was a vast electrical disturbance just outside the walls.
Each time it's different, down through the centuries
For the sake of cultural improvements they repeat a dream that
Continually gives out a soft fluorescent glow, it was
Like standing on the prow of a moving ferry in the morning
With the spray bursting all around
And a feeling of nausea mixed with ecstasy washing over me. In a way
The whole experience was fake, except for the scale.
Really, what do Eskimos think of giants?
Not too much, I reckon. They say they like them.
A moment later they're saying how needlessly big they are. But
Also they are likely to flatter them. A cloud of dust
Or whirling fragments resembling a mistral rises up ahead,
But no one understands it: the old verbal torrent
In new guise, transformed into a sheaf of falling leaves, which
Are gathered up, bound, and stuffed into a briefcase,
And it's time for coffee and a Strega at *Il Miglior Fabbro*. When
Acts of killing fill nightmares and movies, only the calm
Of this bibulous routine can bring surcease. Then the shreds
Of another adventure assemble: a tour of the old college premises
Undertaken to the tune of the jig 'From Rochester he came hence,
A writ of Cease and Desist clenched in his teeth'. Here, see this,
Like a pistol on a silver platter, it's all yours
And it was mine once. Take it, go on. I kept it because
It had been handed down, and I had hoped it might be my insurance
Against the waves of devoted fans inefficiently
Seeking to take over the social scene and then the whole world.
The round platter, alas, has always been covered with dust,
So small it can hardly hold the pearl-handled revolver reclining on it.
Thereafter it should be passed on to other worthies, noted by
The comfort of strangers they fail to offer you, or me, even.
Like the wily coyote, I'm no sleep-abled; I tried all
The most difficult forms, even threnodies ending with the words
'After all' or 'Never mind!' And in my fine eye-rolling frenzy I almost
Exaggerated my *métier* into an obligation. This,
It seemed, was the way to build the future. But it was
Not likely to allow me to escape the whirligig of voracious time.

After all, *tempus fugit*, however we might chase it. Indeed,
All kinds of regret sprinkled my breakfast as the slant angle of
The day lit up the diner and the light began to increase
So that I was dazzled, then I heard a loud thump, dull, heavy,
Like a polar bear falling over, and the hunter saying something
Not quite obscene, but close enough. *Criminy!* The way
Things fade away, *le temps perdu* seems to be the point
Of this rodomontade. Does a traditional verse form simply provide
A protected place for the poet to plead the case for his vital
Concern for *la vie littéraire*, or is it a carapace, a palace?
And you can meditate there all summer long.
It was a little insight I had, one of the world's smallest.
Distant requests annoy me. The Poetry Club may be ultra-sensitive
But its supine and self-serving acquiescence
To the demands of those creeps... okay, that's in the past
And it belongs there and I promised not to whine. But oh, how
The past haunts me, its vapid fashions, the rigmaroles... they wish
But also harangue, that's why I resent them, the ones I talk with.
And in this way my paeon to non-discovery
In brittle yet oracular verse persuades us, but nevertheless
The map you provided was helpful in leading us beyond
Madness to something better: squatting in Circe's mansion. Only
You desire us to fail – just there, perhaps, where your verbal acts
Are sentinels warning us of the slow-moving, quiet
Invasion of middle America by pod people over many years.
Be quiet – hush! – they are nearby, whispering the poem itself
In a parody of oratory. I'll explain more plainly: the map
Of the literary world is a pantomime, and its longueurs have become
Prolongations of our prevarications on bad weather days, and also
Fine days where things seem okay but are not, those dull events
We shall banish from the Ideal Republic. Who called? No, I am
Not speaking to that shit: he just wants to be
Opposite me at the literary lunch. He got some fame recently, only
To be thrust into obscurity soon, I hope. It seems broader,
The sum total, a canal reflecting its own anagram, but will it ever
Become legible? Hidden behind a screen of rocks
And foliage, the creep quickly inhales the distant
Ether and faints, thank goodness, and what I own
I see before me shining like a dagger. Meanwhile

Of Death is dallying on Ninth Avenue, as yet uncertain of
Its intentions. I'll just leaf through the paper until
You wake up. I'm not planning to go anywhere. You know, it
Wasn't a small thing, to turn your back on Europe. The walls
Are turning into their own murals. Please don't speak
Of time within the hearing of that tiny hydraulic clock you
Invented, it can be self-centred and jealous, and has now
Grown furious. Deep within its complex innards a purple jewel
Exists as a blazon, rotating slowly, saying that this
Existence is temporary, that you may lodge and idle here
Only so long as you don't irritate the gods. Someone's
Purpose niggles at you. Then the sunbeams flood in at acute
Angles and frighten the other diners. I thought, then,
Of having whatever I wanted, but it seemed that a distant
Image of you chided me. My admiration is a test
Of how you might accept it: gracefully, or boorishly, or not.
You hesitate, don't you? I hate that. Please accept this
Wooden gesture, and you're right, the over-decorated representation
Returns whence it came, though it was easily said, and simply meant,
With nothing ulterior about it: a *simple entendre*. I'd like to alight
With you from the caboose on a hot dry day in a wonderful town. You
Must help the Judge measure the exact length of the shadow of
Your well-wrought urn in the centre of the square – it is still intact;
Appreciation gives it the shine and the shadow – but just now somebody
Is phoning to arrange for drinks – will you join me? – later this evening.

Desmond's Coupé

Desmond's coupé is full of jam. He's in a quandary:
a bean lance, or a dance of circumstances.
He's eternally fond of his own naivety.
A swanky beam spells out a white
cranky tale.

Susan's inclination was
plainly desperate.

An ailment common in Sienna
makes him think he's dead and buried
or makes him realise he's a bad dresser
on a plane, or in jail, but you don't dress for jail
and people don't wear a jacket on a plane any more.
Raise the bonds.

His three résumés – swallowed – he's just
a shadow of his former self – phooey! – a deep violet colour,
or an alternative he'll just have to adapt to
by the verge of the road.

Deep beans: his aunt has a rooster.
She's getting battier every year,
a fish in one hand, a peach in the other.

The Master of Surges,
or so we infer.

In the flames we see the communist menace –
uniquely, they've got the numbers, no?
But they hesitate when the corpse waves its arms.
Pluto (not Mickey) wants to play,
oh, what a nut! Chained
at the party, a name for the horse floats,
an old horse works it out,
tapping his hoof on the floor, good trick,
but then forgetting how old he is
behind the jade barrier.

#

These pedals take you to an agreeable horizon,
well prepared.

You old git, free meals,
a bad smell on the dratted train –
now he's heading for the air vents
in another carriage –
that's the spirit – actually, a jet plane
would be quite a temptation.
You could re-employ a division of passing firemen.

The secret item on the menu,
the chef's envy, even now
is cooling on the barbecue, or so you surmise.

Look straight at the homosexual:
nerveless, not very important, yet vain,
an old Hoover in his hand.

Potato crisps
are found in the deli, useless for a tête-à-tête.

He takes a disprin and feels legless, then he
has another one, then he feels
ambiguous. His ulterior plans
are unforgettably demonic.
He feels nothing
for the empty countries, Alaska, let's say,
home of the Inuit. This old idiot
had a chance to meet The Supremes, probably –
say, Louie, your son is some puerile *hombre*,
caressing a policeman and renting out a lavatory,
eating soup and getting vaguer –
a soup full of hard bones,
now he enters the aisle, bending his knee
like a bat flapping into the sea.
The old tenant reads Lowell ['s poem] against the sea,
a chance to ooze poetry –
financially speaking, that is – no, don't –
a voile handkerchief is an illusion
as antsy as having a phantom for a guest

in the chancellery
but that won't abolish folly
like this insinuating silence
or Dan's squelchy high-voltage approach –
he's simply rolling around and laughing ironically.
Ooo! – A mystery!
A precipice!
Frank Hurley!
A billion turbots! Laughter and horror
with the author Jimmy Giuffre (tenor sax),
but no junkies, please,
no fur,
and that old berk verging on the index
like so, a lonely puff of smoke at Purdue –
so far, so good,

where recounting the effluent is the talk of the minute,
and it immobilises you.

A chiffon and velour coffee-coloured sombrero
for this stiff old white man
is derisory, an opposition horse seal,
rather tropical, the sombrero, quite unmarked,
exhumed, quite conkers,
the American prince who loves the cool,
he gives a little heroic cough.

Irresistible maize container!

Par for the course, but a pretty feeble reason to be acting virile
and like a foodie, maybe the ulcers explain his puberty
or mute his loose and bossy vinaigrette
(invisible from the front)
sparkling with umbrage,
with the stature of a shadowy filet mignon
and with the torsion of a siren
impatient at squeamish ultimatums.
A rare, yes, and vertiginous debut.

Time to snaffle
a bifurcated soufflé,

thinks the old bird.

His manner is rather false.

All up, with a toilet next to the bedroom,
evaporated brooms

impose an unborn infinite state

issuing from the stars – *que sera, sera* –

a pyre doesn't disadvantage the minors,

they're indifferent to the mutants,

that is, to the number of mutants that exist

apart from those agonising, sparse

hallucinations of mutants which start when they stop

and never seem to close, apparently, with an infant.

The park elk and his profusion of expandable rarities –

see, then the chief rat is ill –

evidence that the Battle of the Somme, for one of us at least

was a poor thing, though somehow illuminating

and written up in Hansard.

Choose a pen.

A left-hand drive car with a rhythmic suspension

that levels itself, an ox and some original scum,

no more wars, a delirious sound and just one crime

fleeing without identifying Jimmy Giuffre's true neutrality.

Rein in a memorable crisis

as you see fit.

Your venomous accomplice can view the results: nothing!

Nothing human, that is.

In lieu of an aura of elevation,

the absence of ordinary verse.

In the loo, an inferior kind of clap

is likely to disperse and conquer

those who act in a poor video.

Abruptly key the synonym.

Parson, men's songs are fond of perdition.

#

A dance, in the garage full of vague parables,
and which reality is dissolved?
Except where the altitude peters out
and an Aussie's loins are right on.

A few swans, a vector dealer and
a horse of interest –
and a quantity of signals in general sell on,
tell obliquities, part Elle's declivities –
the furs, poems, see what theatre
a septuagenarian from the far north of Australia
sees in the stars – freezing, oblique and full of suet –
pass the aunt –
a killer from Noumea –
and this vacant surface is superior
to any successive hurt.

Side-rail was meant –
done, counted, totalled information
and a veiled ant, doubts, the rolls...

brilliantly meditating before the ratter
whose pointed bum is sacred –
and all the pensioners met Des and his coupé.

Five Quartets

1

All might have been speculation.
What might have been opened?
I do not inhabit the garden.
There they were dignified, invisible,
over the dead bird, in response to

the flowers that are our guests,
in the drained pool.
Dry water, bird children,
garlic and mud in the blood
dance along the sodden floor.
Below, the practical *Erhebung* without
elimination, its partial ecstasy,
its horror. Yet the body cannot
allow a little dim light: strained fancies
with no men. Bits of wind in unwholesome
eructation, the torpid gloomy hills of Putney,
twittering into inoperancy and the other.
Abstention from its metallised bell
carries the cling wing.

2

Words move the Chinese violin, while
words between the foliage
waste a factory, or a by-pass.

There is a time for the wind to break
and to shake the field-mouse with a silent motto.

#

You lean against a van
and the deep village, the sultry dahlias,
wait for the early pipe.

3

And the little man and woman
round and round the fire
leaping through the laughter
lifting the milking and the coupling
of man and woman of dung and wrinkles.
I am here in heat, and writhing high
into grey roses filled with thunder.
The rolling cars weep and hunt the ice.
That was not very worn-out.
Poetical fashion, wrestle with poetry.
Calm and wisdom deceived us, the dead secrets
into which they turned their every moment,
and shocking monsters, fancy old men,
can hope to acquire houses under the Stock Exchange.

4

The Directory of cold lost the funeral.
I said to the dark, the lights are hollow,
with a bold rolled train in the Tube
and the conversation fades into the mental ether,
the mind is in the garden, pointing and repeating
'there is no ecstasy!' The wounded steel,
the fever chart, is the disease,
the dying nurse our hospital.
The millionaire ascends from feet to mental wires.
I must quake in our only drink, blood.

#

Trying to use a failure, because one has
shabby equipment in the mess of emotion,
and to conquer men, is no competition.
Home is older, stranger, intense.
But the old lamplight is nearly here,
with the explorers.

5

I think that the patient is forgotten.
Men choose the machine, but the nursery bedroom
in the winter gaslight is within us,
also the algae and the dead men.
The sea has the water,
the groaner and the women.

Where is there an end of it?

Where is the end of the wastage?
We have to think of them,
while the money is ineffable:

we appreciate the agony of others,
covered by dead negroes.

Speaking French

Hôtel de Ville

The kids should visit a history museum
in their senior year, to understand disgrace as
one form of Clinton's victory. On the other hand
the European Community foreign debt gives
everybody bad dreams. So we do need to solve
the problem of students reading difficult things
that will lead them astray: why did Rimbaud
turn from socialism to capitalism? As if
it matters. He is his own consolation prize.
We'd be delighted to have his uniform.
We want to see all the modern art stuff, too.
Thank you. Press the button marked 'monument'
and see what happens: a recorded voice says
'I have wasted my life', and we pay to listen.

Deluge

Upgrading the late edition for all US units.
So why didn't you clear the town square?
In the thievery of my own dreams I can see
the square like a crystal showing a blurry
and refracted image of twenty people protesting.
Sure, you visited downtown Los Angeles:
it was always November there. You do not get that
on the Internet. The patrol has no qualms about
going on, and later we delivered the women
to encourage the men to start moving and get
that problem solved – it became the key
that unlocked the pain of the Soviet Union, and
today there's a new location for the war movie,
a green meadow filled with buttercups.

Ornery

We did want to buy the Kennedy memento.
The sun is rising and you'll get the crop,
but you are the harvest and not the reaper.
The light shone on the barn, full of wheat.
Who are those guys, in suits, with guns?
The CIA. One is a dish of blood. The other:
stains on the carpet, red tadpoles lispng.
They put the guns away, and listen.
It is off the hook, the phone. Their clothing
failed to blend with the rural scenery. Now
the agents call – 17 men – that is safe to assume –
and claim that the assassination never happened.
There was no song the Nashville people liked
in that field of political and human damage.

Democracy

Well, there goes compulsory voting: the Americans
want to keep the freedom to be governed by
corrupt politicians elected by somebody else.
So much for the tools of democracy.
Talk to the PC makers. We need cheaper
entertainment, not cheaper political displays.
They use our money to promote themselves
so they can take our money again.
To see it all, but to miss that one second
when the gun is fired... there's an old saying:
How much water is needed to run a horse?
I'd be interested in hearing your reply.
Today your wanderings have come full circle,
and you will tell us everything you know.

Royalties

We'll make common cause with the Right,
and take that message to the Ford Foundation
who helped the CIA guy in Paris win a medal
that let him sit in on the cultural deliberations
of all those old freaks, whose virtue is really
stubbornness. The quote of the week missed me –
that is, I missed it – I just stopped by
to look in on the literary debate, cast a vote...
Democracy is what we define it to be.
Sure the Iranians voted in a government,
but those socialist shits were going to nationalise –
their oil, British oil, our oil, what the hell –
so we put in that poet guy to agitate, Bunting.
Sure, people were killed: so what?

Pronto

No joy in this one, Bob. Would you like to be
summoned for a little blot on the record,
by a marshal, you who were always in the way?
And list the indictment today, that will be
implemented tomorrow? If you do that, old friend,
the problem seems to be saying, the data
will go on the skids – it could be a fun contest
held in a field in the Boston area.
Now I don't want you to get the idea that
finding a guitar has anything to do with it.
Just dish it up like the boss wants: though
if you deal with the CIA – Hi – I'm Bob.
Can't talk now. Down in the park,
listening to the guitars, lots of single mothers...

Departure

In this view
of *La Comédie Humaine*
we see only postures
of the dream, and this one
becomes a nightmare
when you turn on the light
and listen to the news
on the pound and the dollar
or the euro
on a fix –
so much for
the public
who know it
in the wallet.

The Fixer

Call me. The distant box is open. It has
the fix-it, though in three days of using it
he just couldn't get through to the end
of 'log enable'. You have to pay for that stuff.
He had a stiff drink or two in a cool bar
then the investigating court claimed
that the CIA under any other name
would be the same people: incompetents.
The defendants are free to come and go
as they please, through the vanilla-flavoured
venetian blinds. Incompetent killers, I mean,
but someone has to do it, I guess. This idea
is not the only derivative thing to happen
in the tasteful colonial novel of manners.

Parade

The beautiful city is his only speaking song,
a song that took place in the open air,
and we also collected data based on a dream,
the presumed landscape and the dream of home.
It's a CD of Fall songs, maybe, only
the data is in a format that might give away
the occupation of the person, and as we clambered
into the shuttle, a flashlight shone on the ticket.
So the district judge knows that I am still at large,
thanks to the informers the courts imprisoned.
They added a goal to motivate the contestants
and that's one of the ideas they need to speed up:
the one who collects forgotten languages will be sad:
the words of all the songs have been forgotten.

Scenes From a Voyage

The passengers are delirious, staring at the sea.
The slide presentation featured the Deutsche Bahn AG
then the attendees took off their clothes... the news
spread like wildfire through the luxury liner –
Ronald, stop them! Don't shout! Or give orders!
We told the passenger what the passenger wants.
We've only potted palms, and one wolf a year.
Then all the comedians disembark in San Diego.
That's a tour plan with a real future, though
the Torture Room is daunting, I agree,
and I should say that the ticket sale failed
because of that. They even want to set up
cameras in the bedrooms. We'll all need visas,
for this is the land where hope turns to fear.