

# John Thomas Selected Poems



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of thonn  
Chprar o. w ?



# John Thomas (Idlet)

December 31, 1930 [Baltimore, Maryland] –

March 29, 2002 [Los Angeles, California]

Those was primarily associated with Venice, where he lived for most of his adult life after hitchhiking across the country to California after reading Lipton's *Holy Barbarians*. He is the curious case of an incredibly talented poet who wrote very infrequently, at least early in his career, and indeed often resorted to just republishing the same set of poems in succeeding editions of work. Parts of a long prose poem, *Patagonia*, appeared in the 1983 volume *Abandoned Latitudes* (along with writing by Paul Vangelisti and Robert Crosson), though that work itself—which is a mix between fantastic travelogue with more than a few hints of *Bataille*—appears to be unfinished. He died shortly after entering prison on a charge of having molested his daughter in the 1970s.

*Apologia*. 1972

*Epopoeia and the Decay of Satire*. Los Angeles: Red Hill Press, 1976.

*Abandoned Latitudes: New Writing by Three Los Angeles Poets*. Los Angeles:

Invisible City/Red Hill Press, 1983.

*Feeding The Animal*. Poetry by John Thomas. Lummo Press, 2001.

*The Selected Poems and Prose of John Thomas*. Venice, CA. Raven Productions, 2011.

# Tarquin

“it is snail today about  
4 whorls in the ice on the  
Arctic floe southerly”  
—*Eileen Ireland*

“The first thing. to do violence to yo ur myths/  
to be your own  
Tarquin...” said almost without thought, his attention  
on the barbed wire, as I held it up for him  
and he climbed through.  
There were patches of snow on the yellow grass, still  
but they would be gone by evening

(Lucretia! were the breasts  
marble? and the throat  
did it pulse then? Let the snow melt. enough  
that I had loved it

It was a pig farm, and no way around it/  
garbage and tin cans in the mud, the pigs  
glancing at us from under their eyelashes/  
Bill with his eyes watching where his feet stepped  
among the stinking trees I think  
he never stopped talking

(the surgeons would carry canes, and in the heads of the canes  
cloves, rosemary, other scents to breathe  
as they walked through the wards

Through the fence on the other side  
then a stream we took off our shoes and waded across  
the water so cold my feet ached/  
and what he had said to the American girl at the Louvre  
the girl who had come over to write novels about Boston  
and that she lived with a psychopathic Russian  
who beat her and who pretended not to understand English

and what the Russian and he (Bill) had done to the girl  
in a doorway by Notre Dame  
and afterwards all three in the bed  
which was probably a lie, although you could never be sure, with Bill

Jill easy going now, low hills and dirt roads/  
on the barn door two stretched coonskins  
also an owl with the wings nailed out      a rusty  
harrow behind the barn

(lists. and maps of back country where no one  
walks any more. is there anything else to make?)

a windrow of Lombardy poplars  
which we followed up the millrace  
to the dam and the graves

I tied a string to the wine bottle  
then lowered it into the green water of the dam  
all the way down to the bottom    there were  
huge tree trunks and old tires down there  
the mud was very still/  
while the wine was chilling we examined the graves

three families only  
mostly children's stones  
but the ones who had gotten through childhood had lived  
——ninety-four years old, ninety-eight, a hundred and four/  
Bill silent now    just our feet  
on the brittle weeds, and a woodpecker somewhere in the trees behind us/  
one fine stone, six-by-three, set flat in the dirt

Wm J Perkins  
1791-1888  
Last Survivor  
Of The  
Maryland Defenders

(that would be Fort McHenry or the Battle of North Point)  
upon which we ate the lunch we had brought  
a provolone cheese, bread, a fine red onion, oranges  
and the bardolino, which was cold now

(lists. and rubbings from tombstones  
and how cold the wine was. is there  
anything else, now? anything more  
now, three years later, letters from  
that country telling me that Bill thinks  
of little but suicide? only the lists come back  
and maps of tombstones and of dry hills  
—anything more is merely  
possible

(Lucrece! the throat, did it pulse?  
and was the grief real, or poetical only?  
there, see the snow melts  
and the grass is yellow underneath

the book had been in his pocket. Goethe. and he  
read “Whoever works with symbols only is a pedant,  
a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such,  
and they like to be together. Their babbling  
detains. . . ”

for coming back we chose a different way, did not  
wade the stream/  
he was quiet, breathing heavily because of the hills/  
certainly the graves are still there  
and we had thrown the wine bottle into the dam, watched it  
sink, so it  
remains

the weather here is different  
the children are brown, have  
never seen snow  
so everything is different/

I, Tarquin, sit in the afternoon sun  
making lists  
drawing maps of that realm  
all else now is  
merely possible

# The Squirrels

we brought him peppermint ice cream &  
napoleons which we  
really couldnt afford  
& the squirrels came up close to  
catch the crumbs that didnt get  
tangled up in his beard  
squirrels like peppy little shortstops

missus pound knitted a sock while  
it went on & on  
the laast time i sawr humminway &  
yes theyll let anyone visit me but westbrook pegler &  
yes well lawrence yes but lawrence was such a bawr  
& my friend birddogged him  
about sartre and berdyaev  
and didju read bean & nuthinness??  
until the old boy finally  
when a man reaches my ayge sez old ez  
rearing up in his aluminum deck chair  
triton out of a wave with  
crumbs & barnacles in  
his beard  
whin a man reaches my ayge he becomes  
thurrally ingrossed in his own wurrk  
& cannot afford t'become an encyclopedyaa  
of current lit ra chaw!!

which put things back in perspective  
missus pound knitting that sock &  
squirrels dodging among all the big shoes  
one zooming exactly like willie miranda  
stopping a sizzler over towards third base

and the one thing he  
said  
if you want to know whats really going on in

the world  
note carefully what is never mentioned  
in the newspapers  
meaning of course  
that is he meant  
international money swindles &  
deals between jewish gold merchants  
& cabinet ministers

but when i chewed on it i  
thought mainly of  
old ez sittin up at nite writing  
the confucian odes  
& me who wanted to be a poet & my friend  
hitchhiking forty miles to sit here  
& these squirrels shortstopping flakes of  
napoleons

# Assemblage Five (To The Spawning Grounds)

on the appointed night, incantations—  
her lips, or strips her glistening body

silent,  
transported / the lustrous crystal  
docile in July

Down there  
life and death, yes / to her he was only a

good-by,” he said  
soon see. She’d soon  
its clasp, and in gold. . .her single  
time she would.

all unbraided, lay / There, and motionless  
turning over and over  
irresistibly advancing

(swift currents, past the shore, a wharf,  
a rock, a mud flat / deep water  
of the original winter—  
wisdom, on and on along the river,  
piling itself, breaking and pulverising,  
it will grind and grind, it has  
prodigious momentum

(floats slowly down the stream, queer freight  
of drift-wood, a pile of ashes or an old hat,  
remains of bridges, or a broken stove...

(saw three large wagons  
crimson tapes, packed beneath

could not get up. She

and were gently  
to a stop. He  
. . . Ah, how he  
nobody had ever

in her warm, open

and flake

violet, dim

eyes

# The Pure Land

the light:  
you can look at it  
all ways)

sat on the curb at night  
under the lamp-post, squinting  
through a splinter of broken bottle—child's

play. as if it could be grasped in my

(twisting, breaking

burst into forty thousand

(they enter, dancing

suns, blazing systems of.

(shivering, diffrangent. see

too quickly, gone. and again

(no, changed-they

change. pause, tremble on my pulse

(shatter. shimmer, as my hand turns  
the archeus? as a child might, in caprice

(who seeks Nirvana?

streams through, bends

into. spins.

will not be caught or

held ever.

escapes, dancing.

# The Passionate Shepherd To His Love

O if I had bunions & grey hairs sprouting from my ears  
& your breasts were down limp near your waist  
if you had liver spots & carried odds & ends in a knitting bag  
all over town, muttering to yourself with bare gums

O if we lived on Social Security in a furnished room  
cooking Cream-of-Wheat on a gas burner  
if there were a Sacred Heart calendar on the nasty yellow wall  
& the buffet full of rusty tools & rent receipts

if we got a letter once a month from a daughter  
named Sister Mary Francis in a Kansas City convent  
& one night a week you went to bingo at St. Ambrose Social Hall  
& I played pinochle with the Golden Age Club

O my light o' love, then I would have secrets from you  
I would receive sex magazines in plain envelopes  
& hide them in the back of the radio  
I would take the bus downtown, secretly  
to the Gayety Burlesk where I would  
play with my limp old self under my hat

yes, I may as well be honest now  
that's just what I would do  
I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, love  
tonight I feel the need to write an honest one  
about what will surely never happen to us

I'll never have a great hernia bulging my pantsleg  
but if I did let's tell the truth—I would  
curse feebly with my teeth clicking  
& load my Postum with saccharine

you'll never walk twenty blocks in your rubber orthopedic stockings  
to see the homeopath for cancer pills, but if you did  
then truly you would spend your evenings

sipping sassafras tea & reading the death notices

I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, Sweetheart-elf  
tonight I must rattle my bonebag & speak oracles  
in an unreasonable spirit of fair play

# The Poem Is A True & Rooted Cactus

after all the  
mirages incident to  
desert, these apparent  
    lakes with such  
    apparent water birds &  
    whispering reeds  
    after all these  
    images  
        that seduce in the  
        far air  
        & dry the tongue to black &  
        kill

after these / but in the  
geographic foreground  
this true & rooted cactus  
most real & tough  
with thorns  
rooted in the genuine dry  
    having sucked deep  
    & with its toughness held  
    held  
its thorns make blood  
hands & lips  
but cut into that  
leather fruit  
& the water is truly there  
tasting green

# Epopoeia

1

in the Ur-chasm, the Organza Deep  
among anemones big as elm trees  
move whole herds of kraken, grazing  
on eel larvae 6 ft. long

& at the very bottom, nothing, the mere  
navel of the world, bed of primordial slime  
boulders of solid manganese  
scrawled tracks of great blind worms

2

the volcano they passed in the night, at sea  
& the whale alongside that paced the ship all week  
scratching its hide against the barnacled hull

prowls along strange interminable coasts  
hideous reconnaissance  
the march to the interior: valley of dry bones  
his friends dying of yet-unclassified fevers  
fruitless expeditions

tokens

& mementos: grisly fetish

brown & faded snapshot of himself  
beardless, flanked by grinning aborigines

placque or gorget of sea-ivory  
inscribed with curious characters  
he can no longer read

gold watch, dented, the works  
frozen with salt & rust

bottle of powdery dirt (the handful of  
bottomslime brought back as proof he had  
been there

3

wallowing galleons  
dragons dolphins camelopards

serpents unicorns  
great volcanos spouting whales & mermaids  
& the four fat faces

spewing wind

Nullus nostrum ad illos neque illorum ad nos  
pervenire potest

he destroys the chart

lest others waste their youth upon it

4

(a nomic exode)

the act, the  
axis mundi

the smoke hole

(Hassan & the Assassins. Assassins slew Raymond of Tripoli  
& Conrad of Montferrat

(the Ismailite society at Cairo: 9 degrees  
of instruction, the last being  
“that naught was to be believed, everything  
might be done”

in Paradise (traditionally): conversation  
with animals  
& immortality

e.g. the shaman as heteroclit, as tribal jester  
goofy gesture: tripping out  
climbing right out  
through the smoke hole  
to talk to Buzzard, who sez: when acorns ripen  
they will have no shells. snow  
will be salmon flour

cf. zen master's peculiar behavior  
the immediate crazy gesture (Q: "Does Goofy  
have the Buddha-nature?"  
    & he climbs right out  
    through the smoke hole

# Underwater Interlude

fast in the grip  
of the starfish  
fifty fathoms down  
I feel the pulse  
deep inside her my lips  
on the arch of her foot I  
see the day flow away  
like a slow fuse and up  
up faraway up there  
quiver the great blue screens!

# They're Wrong to Call It the Little Death and To Hell with the Here and Now

"I do not believe in the witchcraft  
she practices on me...."  
—Caravaggio

we take our pleasure, it is dark and regal  
and strange, she could be Guinivere  
risking Hell and her crown an damn their eyes  
it's worth it ten times over and I  
I hope to die at the last thrust lost  
in her smell of sweat and vanilla we pause  
I want her again but we pause and  
casually she tears off a toenail  
drawing blood then slyly tucks it  
under my mattress: scary but  
so moving: Guinivere  
to the life

then she shifts a lazy shoulder and  
Tara Tintagel Lyonesee the  
whole damned Bronze Age  
rolls up against me  
her fingers lace into mine  
on the wet tuft of her sex I  
want her again our two hands become  
one great paw I'm into her again  
don't know where any longer but  
into her Christ! is this Africa?  
I smell blood and grass I search  
her face as I come the lioness  
glows in the antelope's eye

# The Secret Instructions

This colossal marble head, fragment  
of an earlier time thrown down  
on its side so long ago:  
it rests beside the dark pool,  
embedded to the cheek.

Weeds, all youth and wasteful vigor,  
mask its prognathous face,  
crafty lip, proud life of brown,  
the one milky eye unaware  
of its blindness. Clearly,

something happened in this place  
where I squat, a circus ape in rags.  
twigs and tinsel in my hair. Something terrible,  
once, in this place. The air is thick with whispered  
message, and even apes must breathe.

There are no symbols here (my wishes  
count for nothing), simply earth,  
real weeds, the pool—real,  
one can lap its icy water—  
and this blind and monstrous teste

which now I, obedient,  
strong with the strength of sleep,  
heave and tumble over the grassy verge.  
The great stone head sinks slowly  
into the green depths of the dream.

The last ripples smoothe away and silence,  
the last unearned instruction, closes over.

# Dead Letter

The journey was pleasant enough, but  
I traveled too far, crossed  
some invisible, unposted frontier  
and here I am, here I have been—  
for years? Sorry. I cannot read  
their enigmatic calendars.

To be a foreigner here, always.  
The language is quite opaque.  
Pleasant-sounding at first, but soon  
one notices the mocking interrogatories.

Sleep does not refresh me here.  
To dream long, portentous conversations  
in a language one does not understand—  
unsettling. I always wake up sand and anxious.  
What did he say? What  
did I answer? Too late.

I sit in a café at an oddly-carpentered table,  
drinking... something. What they always serve me.  
I watch the people come and go, crossing  
the square on urgent but mysterious errands.  
If I knew how to ask, “Where  
are you going, and why?” they would stop and  
look at me with their harlequin eyes,  
and what their looks would tell me  
I do not care to know.

The games the children play  
are “wrong” somehow, and menacing.  
Are they really games, really  
children?

Forgive this poetical touch, but  
even the trees sing

different songs here. I can  
only guess what they might mean.  
They worry me the most, I think,  
these trees. I always felt  
at least I understood trees.

Soon I shall fold these pages and seal them  
in an envelope on which I shall inscribe  
some old familiar address. I do this  
every day. There is a mailbox across the square,  
and it eats my envelopes. I do not know  
where they go. Goodbye. The trees  
are singing again.



























































































































































