Joe Doerr

Tocayo

New & Selected Poems & Songs

Shearsman Books
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**Love Favors the Prodigal: New Poems for the Sage & Savage**

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Triptych
for my mother,
who always insisted that I draw my own tree
i.m. (1927-2015)
Love Favors the Prodigal:

New Poems

FOR THE SAGE & SAVAGE
Tocayo

_Come, all ye tribes of serpents and foul fish!_ 
_Beetle and worm, I have a feast for you!_  
—Aleister Crowley

The first strains of _Tannhäuser_ made by a Sawzall —  
Specifically B/E/B/G# — before  
Ascending into approximations of whale song,  
Ground their way through a stubborn length of rebar  
On that _Miércoles de Ceniza_ —  

_Consequently I_  
_Rejoice[d], having to construct something upon_  
_Which to rejoice_ when the Roach Coach’s wheels  
Came crunching through the damp _caliche_  
Abaft of its breakfast-announcing cuminous stench.

Toting a plate of beans and chorizo, my coffee  
Lightened by unsweetened milk, and a centipede  
Curious about the gray flecks on my boot heel,  
I commandeered a stack of 2x4s and sat  
Anxious not for company, but for morning solitude.

But he sat too, having first asked permission,  
His coastal Texas accent flat and green and smooth,  
Though his features gave the lie to all of this and more.

The Rastafarian tam of Garvey colors—  
Red, black, green, and yellow bands of wool—  
Worn Pericles high and pushed off the brow line,  
Made him seem less politic than refined.

He called me _tocayo_, shook hands as _Joseph_ ,  
Talked of carpentry, women, Melville, and time.

The last he claimed to be done with killing;  
Having done it had smothered his yen to hang fire.  
And murder, to which he no longer cottoned,  
Was anathematic to his new moral code.
I’d heard the rumors; he was no angel,
An anti-santo and apoca-prophet, yes,
But one whose company was the picture of peace.

Prior to the prolix yarn of his conviction and sentence,
He had made it his business to furnish the dead:
Great slabs of purple heartwood,
Spalted tamarind, wengé, and mun
Became in his hands the bedsteads of the breathless,
Terminal fixtures for those whinnying with us not.

He’d made a simple living, so he claimed,
And called it Queequeg’s Coffin,
Selling to those who wanted something
Uniquely final, or finally unique.

He’d made his own as well; or rather,
Made one for himself—it was carefully worked
Of Yaje and Cocobolo in the classic coffin shape:
An elongated hexagram with a simple sliding lid

On which he’d carved a personal charm:
A white rose blooming from a thorn-encrusted cane.

When finished, he’d placed it in the attic hollow,
A space above his living place of rest—
The bed he shared with a woman who’d betray him—
Ready to receive him,
    ready there and waiting for his time.

Impassioned men are prone to crimes of passion,
And by some trick of nature find it difficult to bear
The same propensity for passion found in others—
Or such was Joseph’s theory;
and as theories go, it’s fair.
He’d killed the man who for a time at least
Had lain beneath his coffin; had lain beneath,
Above perhaps, the woman he desired;
Had come, at any rate, between
Two objects of his passion—his words, not mine.

Fifteen years of punish and appeal,
Fifteen years of contemplating time,
Fifteen years of books and conversations
Had placed something like redemption in his grasp.

The woman who’d betrayed him never gave up
In her efforts to secure him an appeal,
To secure him his release.

She’d worked three jobs
and went through all her savings;
Lawyer after lawyer threw his hands up in defeat,
Till one agreed to take the case
For a most unusual fee,

And managed to make a fine appeal
Before a sympathetic judge.

The sentence was reduced to time served—Joseph
Had no idea who had been responsible for this.

The day he was released he saw her standing
Near the entrance, near the exit, nearly frantic in her joy.
She embraced him, he forgave her,
they remembered who they were.

After the marathon making up,
and over a bottle of wine,

He’d asked her how she’d paid for such
A brilliant, young attorney who had argued
His appeal with success.

*Your coffin*
she had answered
*it brought you back to me.*
My coffin
he kept saying
it took me back to her.

The coffin
I repeated
it raised you from the dead.

—para mi tocayo
The Catch

A heron’s rasping call from somewhere higher than dusk
settling in the canopy of cottonwood
sounding desperate
as it echoes through the creek bed.

The men appear from downstream,
two of them,
in cotton shirts and cut-offs,
cautiously wading
from the deep pools to the sandbar.

Along this stretch of arroyo
the high banks surrender
to suburban lawns of Bermuda,

St. Augustine and Buffalo
sprawling from the edges of patios
their exotic flora trim
by contrast to the tangle

of beggarstick and broomedge,
bristlejoint and chess

where I stand drinking,
a guest in a backyard
not my own,
one eye open
for arrowheads in the chirt
as the last minutes of daylight turn blue.

Hola,
and all at once
three hands are raised in greeting;
all eyes present
narrow with suspicion
of the other,
posture is contagious, 
growing mannish and compressed.

Then distance 
between us narrows 
and soon we are speaking.

*punta de flecha*  
vino  
canto del garza  
mi hogar

It is revealed 
the men have traveled to this city 
to find work 
quite unlike the work 
they knew as other men 
in a distant village by the sea.

It is revealed 
the men long for homes 
that are no longer, 
for connections with a past 
that has all but passed away.

It is revealed 
the men are fishing 
with homemade nets and anchors,

and if one were so inclined 
to use the language of the courts, 
the men are poachers

who worry that I 
or someone who is not me 
will choose to use such language 
to reveal them tonight.

* * *
A heron’s rasping cry from somewhere
higher than the darkness
now settled in the canopy of sky
sounding desperate

as I walk up from the creek bed
to the lawn.

Then something more:

¡Señor!, they whisper, ¡Señor!
¡A ver nuestra pesca!
The Driven

I. Hill

Not quite the hushed Vosges it led to,
that road from South Bend Regional.

Not quite the enemy’s country, either,
though Old Blue Eyes’ own ‘September Song’
would penetrate the static of an FM station,
declare war on the gravity of expectation,
and mock conspiratorially with the catch
beneath the shotgun seat
   where Offa’s shadow rode.

Not a proper taxi—preposterous that hatchback,
ridiculous in dimension—my circus miniscule,
all the more outrageous
   for its inconvenient flaw:

I hit the brakes and the prof slides forward;
I press the gas and the good knight shuttles fro.

II. Peck

The last train departed Union Station,
South Bend in 1971.
None of us knew that in the year of M
and Other Poems; all of us strangers in town,
we circled W. South in our golden ratio,
not quite unaware or unawares—
   “What is the sign in you of your maker?
/ We are to say, It is movement and repose.”

The man who speaks of primordial imagery speaks
with a thousand tongues—and if by pondering signs
he misses, yes, his train perhaps he catches something other: Did you see that homeless guy? I think he was a Mexican; the spiral on his poncho was hypnotic. Hypnotic.

III. Smith

“My gentle mother’s furious resolve.”
The Fox held the line with his tongue running circles round its contours before he broke it and the silence in the car the way Leopold Bloom might break an egg against his palate.

I, pleased he’d found my poem worthy of recitation, steered him to another bit of manuscript I felt he might enjoy.

He’d an empty styrofoam cup he held aloft — Where—?

The floor is fine, I offered, and he chuckled:

I rode once with Robert Bly who’d brought along a fast-food meal;

the wrappings he kicked beneath the seat. Christ, I told him, some Iron John you are.