INTRODUCTION

THE REALM OF THE ESSENCE OF TONKS

In the late summer of 1987 I lived deliriously alone behind the sun-smeared bay window of a first-floor room in an otherwise empty shared Victorian house. Its garden acridly fumigated my sleeping space with the heady musk of the territorial pissings of cats, and the baked urine of homeless men enjoying the privacy of our side alleyway, many being ex-professors gone doolally, it was alleged, by subsequent generations of students. I was deliciously content there, even with only a bag of brown rice and half a dozen records to see me through to a crisp and cold October and the arrival of my full grant; a stray waif floating on the thermals of the now faded belief that further education was an end in itself. By day, I earned beer money handing out leaflets for a fancy-dress shop down by the station in the ancient university town, heading out as a horror-movie gorilla in full fur and face mask, routinely attacked by emboldened young men whose barely suppressed inner-primitive still recognised their traditional enemy, a distant forest-dwelling relative nonetheless too close to the family tree for comfort. By night, my idyllic environment would swing to a compilation of early recordings by the New

Zealand post-punk band the Verlaines, specifically the jangling thrash of their 1983 single 'Death and the Maiden'.

It's a great record. Two self-absorbed aesthetes wander the streets of Dunedin, indulgently imagining they are the protagonists in a psychodrama of their own making, drenched in the perfumed insolence of the French symbolists.

Do you like Paul Verlaine?
Is it gonna rain today?
Shall we have our photo taken?
We'll look like Death and the Maiden.

Who were these characters, later long-term 7-inch residents of my vintage Wurlitzer, and why were they as they were, decadents determined to be bored, *flâneurs* fearful of feelings, when to the teenage me the waiting world was an overripe orange wanting to be sucked dry? Three decades later I was to meet them again, archetypes that drift through the centuries, privileged princes and princesses paralysed by prevarication. Because they and their ilk, or at least versions of them, waft in fine detail through the pages of *The Bloater*, a great lost sixties novel that captures the momentary guttering of flimsy moods in mid-flicker, Eadweard Muybridge chronophotographing the flapping of human emotions in flight. I hope you will now clasp it, as I have done, to your heart.

Head forward thirty-three years. Sometime during the birdsong-brilliant street-silent space of the first 2020 pandemic lockdown, I set about a grand imaginary project of

my own making, walking long routes across London via linked chains of undocumented locations, significant to me alone, it seemed; unblessed for the most part by blue plaques, their coordinates gouged out of literary biographies, the contact addresses on the sleeves of old punk singles, unreliable small-press books of unreliable occult histories, and the occasional long-lost letter. I hoped it might add up to a serviceable idea of some sort, perhaps a fond parody of Iain Sinclair-style psychogeography, in which the author (me) was pursuing his great work to stave off some middle-aged brain-fogged breakdown (mine). Perhaps, I now realise, that was what it actually was.

Nevertheless, one great find was a particular Hampstead house, an early nineteenth-century square-faced home, traced from the address on a private piece of correspondence that had come into my hands, tucked into the corner of a suburban junction, cross-triangulated in a few hundred yards by the former residences of more famous and formally commemorated names – the artist Paul Nash; the poets Louis MacNeice, John Keats, Edith Sitwell and Edwin Muir; the surrealists Ronald Penrose and Lee Miller; Dame Flora Robson, best known as Stygian Witch 1 from *Clash of the Titans*; and, oddly, the chief Muppeteer Jim Henson. I stood in front of the unspectacular property – distinguished only by the massive price its once bohemian but now prohibitively gentrified location means it commands – and took a celebratory blank-faced selfie. How very contemporary of me. A passer-by was quietly baffled and appraised me with suspicious Neighbourhood Watch eyes. Certain

that anyone who would have known the former inhabitant of the house would have been priced out of Hampstead years ago, and that my accuser was most likely a monied philistine financier, I declared, with a confrontational arrogance that my quarry herself would once have admired, 'Rosemary Tonks lived here.'

I am delighted that *The Bloater*, by this same long-lost literary genius Rosemary Tonks, is back in print for the first time in over half a century; and I am flattered to be asked to write an introduction to it. I am under no illusions. There would have been better people than me to pen this foreword, doubtless: Neil Astley, who rediscovered and republished Tonks's two forgotten folios of sixties poetry for Bloodaxe Books in 2014, his eruditely framed edition of the verses, *Bedouin of the London Evening*, being my first encounter with the writer, in the wake of his intriguing *Guardian* obituary; the literary critic Jennifer Hodgson, currently working on an experimental biography of Tonks's contemporary Ann Quin, who has expertly identified Tonks as part of an unnamed loose amalgam of dissident sixties prose stylists, emerging in the shadows of modernism and social realism with their own sassy, slick, scathing and satirical voices; and the editor and podcaster Andy Miller of *Backlisted*, for some time the only other person I knew who had even read a Tonks novel. He and his co-caster John Mitchinson, who coined the title of this essay, hosted a life-affirming discussion of *The Bloater* with Hodgson and me in the lonely lockdown darkness of early 2021, generating low-level literary junkie heat to help nudge the book back into print, briefly brightening our own book-lined bleakness, and giving us a chance to

gently rib our beloved Tonks, who we realised had quietly intimidated us all from beyond the grave. (Each of us knew, independently, that the acidly acerbic Tonks would think we were idiots, and would have wounded us mortally with a characteristically waspish barb had our paths ever crossed.)

An amateur Tonks fan, I stand on the shoulders of these giants. I am a comedian with a limited following, my customer base doubtless identified by the publishers as the sort of bookish folk likely to read this tome, and as such I command a commercially sensible crossroads position of Tonks fandom and public profile. Forgive me for taking the gig, oh minds immeasurably superior to mine. Tonks, showing a hilarious lack of self-awareness, hoped the stream-of-consciousness cynicism of *The Bloater* would bust her out of cult corner, describing it as an effort to 'make a lot of red-hot money'. So it is perhaps highly appropriate that a light entertainer like me should be your guide into the shimmering hallucinatory Hampstead pond murk of *The Bloater*. This was the perma-scowled Tonks's attempt at a hit single, her 'Shiny Happy People', her 'Purple People Eater', her 'Crazy Frog'. But, typically, it nonetheless remains diseased, fecund and heady with the sweet smell of decay. I love this book. And I want you to love it too. Roll up! Roll up!! But first, the biographical details.

Brian Patten called Rosemary Tonks, in his Radio 4 documentary of the same name, 'the poet who vanished'. She was born in 1928 in Gillingham to a nice middle-class

family (the surgeon-painter Henry Tonks was her great-uncle), spent some time in children's homes after her father died and her mother momentarily faded out, left boarding school at sixteen with a squint, astigmatism and a bad attitude, and finally discovered post-war London's bohemian underbelly, a cradle for her own literary ambitions, while living there with her now recovered mother from 1946 onwards. In photos from the time Tonks is bright, blonde and beautiful in black sunglasses, and my knowledge of her later work makes me retrofit a perhaps non-existent insouciance onto her tight-lipped smile. At the young age of twenty Tonks married Michael Lightband, a financier six years older than her, and she returned from one of his business trips to India with a polio-withered right hand, forcing her to learn to write with her left. I did the same at the age of six, after wrecking my favoured left arm in a caravan-site bubble-blowing accident, and I've been told since it's psychologically damaging to deliberately rewire your brain's preferred leading limb in this way. Tonks cloaked her useless claw with a Gene Vincent single black glove, rock-and-roll style, like Mark E. Smith of the Fall or Alvin Stardust. I wish I'd thought of that.

Neil Astley suggests that it was while recuperating in Paris in the fifties that Tonks, 'close to the spirits of Baudelaire and Rimbaud . . . was able to immerse herself in Parisian culture and French literature', and certainly the sixties London that she subsequently described seems filtered through a sensual French haze. Astley records that Tonks lay down next to the poet Baudelaire's grave in Montparnasse on the centenary of his death 'to confirm

they were the same height'. From the Hampstead home I stalked her ghost to, Tonks and her husband hobnobbed with late fifties and sixties literary London neighbours, and in the mid-sixties *Notes on Cafés and Bedrooms* and *Iliad of Broken Sentences* established her as a poet to watch. She collaborated with the nowadays fully feted Delia Derbyshire of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, the post-war state-subsidised avant-noise research outfit that famously gave us that iconic *Doctor Who* theme, on a sound-poem, 1966's 'Sono-Montage'. It's not officially available but you can source it illicitly if you poke around online, in all its received pronunciation/analogue electronica glory, and experience an all-too-brief corduroy-whiff of the golden age of the kind of transporting cutting-edge taxpayer-funded out-there art that would make the current Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries shit hot porridge into a hat.

Tonks also wrote six novels between 1963 and 1972. Andy Miller maintains you can divide them into the early, more self-consciously poetic works, *Opium Fogs* and her unacknowledged *Emir*, of 1963 and 1964, and the more conventionally constructed 1968–72 quartet, all predicated on a lead female character obviously and often unflatteringly based on Tonks herself (she's even called Mimi, presumably a play on 'me me', in 1970's *Businessmen As Lovers*). But it's hard to meet anyone who has managed to find copies of all of them, who can give you any clear overview of Tonks's trajectory. Until now, all the novels were out of print, either totally unavailable, or with the few surviving copies sometimes prohibitively priced at four-figure sums. (Amazon is currently asking £3,653.99

for a second-hand copy of *The Way Out of Berkeley Square*, the seller wisely realising that going the extra one pence and asking for the full £3,654 would be taking the piss.)

After her mother died in 1968, a gradually destabilised Tonks spiralled slowly through Sufism, separation and divorce, further sight problems, and finally, in 1978, retreated to a reclusive life in Bournemouth where she changed her name and became a born-again Christian and occasional Speakers' Corner tub-thumping evangelist. Dying in 2014, apparently having found some kind of peace, Tonks had smashed 'to dog-biscuit size' all the precious pagan artefacts she had inherited from a loving aunt and, according to Miller, systematically visited public libraries nationwide to take out, and then destroy, any copies of her works she could find, which she now regarded, like some kind of Bournemouth Nazi, as *Entartete Kunst*. And this is why, when as a fan of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, and a recent convert to Tonks, intrigued by rumours that her 1968 novel *The Bloater* was based on her collaboration with Delia Derbyshire, the only copy of it I could find in 2015 was prohibitively priced, to me, at £200. Nightly, I would linger undecided over the keyboard, tempted, but I never quite pressed purchase. How good could it be, this 'novel'?

It was my live promoter, the late David Johnson, Gutter Lord of the Soho streets and culverts, who finally united me with *The Bloater*. The great and generous epicure that he was, David had a habit of making, on my behalf, the

correct decisions that I was too timorous to commit to. In 2016, after I had sold out some bigger rooms than usual, he asked me to name my luxurious Christmas present. Under duress, I directed him to that sole online copy of *The Bloater*, and soon it was mine. And let me tell you, there's a sick thrill to wandering around with a £200 book in your backpack, and in taking it out to read on the Tube. Knowing that every word was literally precious, and that online searches proved it essentially irreplaceable, made the week I spent devouring *The Bloater* in stolen moments an especially vivid memory. It was the most erotically charged real-time relationship I have ever had with a book, and one that was entirely appropriate to its sweaty febrile subject matter. People looked at me on the Underground train. To them I was just a normal middle-aged man reading a normal-looking book, albeit one with an almost uniquely poorly designed cover. Ha ha! Fools! With their J. K. Rowlings and their rotating fruit phone games. They could not know my dirty and expensive secret. They could not enter the Realm of the Essence of Tonks.

Although it was the Radiophonics connection that led me to *The Bloater* first among Tonks's novels, the book is much more than a fascinating literary footnote in the all-too-brief history of Publicly Funded Research Into Abstract Sound, though it does provide some fascinating insights into the Civil Service-style mundanity of the Radiophonic Workshop ('There is no air in the workshop, we're sealed in like tinned shepherd's pie.'). I had loved Tonks's poetry, its hashish-cloud of suppressed emotion and luxuriant imagery delighting me even as the exact

meaning of much of it eluded me, like fleeting faces glimpsed through a London fog, and some of the verse prefigured the themes of *The Bloater* perfectly. In 'Story of a Hotel Room', Tonks's protagonist (Tonks herself, it seems reasonable to assume) and her lover attempt a no-strings assignation in an anonymous room, but despite their attempts to liberate themselves, the spectre of the possibility of genuine affection rises from their bed, like those corporeal sheets in M. R. James's 'Whistle and I'll Come to You'.

Thinking we were safe – insanity!
We went in to make love. All the same
Idiots to trust the little hotel bedroom.

In *The Bloater*, Min (the Tonks cipher described by Tonks as an 'unbroken capricious schoolgirl') ignores her unfairly derided husband, torn between the perhaps unwanted affections of the titular and hefty opera singer, and her soulmate Billy. Meanwhile she is advised on romance by her elderly confidante ('dangerously gay at sixty') Claudi and Jenny, the Delia-derived character with whom she is working at the 'Electronic Sound Workshop', and who is 'informed on current sex customs'. But, as in 'Story of a Hotel Room', Min is attempting to deny emotion in favour of mere sensation. She seems to feel that if her heart gathers steam it will beat too fast, like a hummingbird's, and explode, and tries instead to shut out the personal risk of genuine experience, to choke off the terror of true love with witty banter and waspish put-downs. These anxieties run deeply under the apparently