

The Poet Who Vanished

I see you've tracked me down at last. It's a long time on your own, thirty-five years, especially in Bournemouth. But you've not come all this way to hear about some mad old bat called Rosemary Lightband. So now you're here I'll tell you about the other me, the one that poetry man Brian Patten called 'The Poet Who Vanished', who, as he put it, 'evaporated into thin air like the Cheshire Cat'. Not true, but people do love a mystery.

I was born in Kent, 1928. My mother Gwen christened me Rosemary Desmond Boswell Tonks. Bit of a mouthful, but my father was an engineer who went to Nigeria to help run the Empire and promptly died of blackwater fever. So I became his memorial. And Rosemary Tonks sounds suitably schizophrenic, don't you think? Poetic and prosaic side by side?

By then mother's mothering instinct was exhausted. I spent most of my childhood at a posh-ish boarding school where I was judged to be, I quote, 'brilliant but disruptive'. Also 'intolerant of authority'. Well, they got that right. But instead I read - all the time - and, more importantly, wrote, stories mostly. I was in *Uncle Mac's Children's Hour Story Book*.

After they chucked me out of school I lived in London. No money but I was eighteen and at least the War was over and there were public libraries - and Soho. I discovered the joys of Baudelaire (if that's not a misnomer), and more accessible pleasures at the Mandrake Club. Within a year I was married. Only twenty but it was what girls did in those days. Micky was twenty-six and, would you believe it, another engineer with a taste for the tropics, so I caught typhoid in Calcutta and polio in Karachi. But my marriage certificate recorded my occupation as 'writer', and as we creatives know, it's all grist to the mill.

So, polio gave me my chance, invalided back to England. See this withered hand? That dates back to then. With a rakish black glove it was a fashion accessory. People wondered what it would look like if I took it off. And with Micky out of the way in

Pakistan possibilities opened up. 1952 was the happiest year of my life - in Paris, alone (well, not *always* alone), the Île St Louis. The same streets as Baudelaire.

By the time Micky came back to London he was calling himself a financier and we set ourselves up in Hampstead round the corner from Edith Sitwell. Yes, we hobnobbed with Edith. It was a lively time. I was rather good at giving parties. And not just Micky's friends; I had my own by then. We saw the Huxleys and serious people like Cyril Connolly.

And suddenly my poems were being published. *Notes on Cafés and Bedrooms* came out in '63. The title says it all really. And I don't want to boast, but it was different and a lot more fun than the well-behaved stuff other people wrote. What lost souls they were too, frightened to write about passion. Poems should excite you. They should send you reeling.

So for a year or two I was hot property, the English Baudelaire. That poem of mine, *Bedouin of the London Evening?* That was me. The critics that really mattered loved my stuff, and when *Iliad of Broken Sentences* came out they loved that too. And the ones who didn't? Well, two fingers to them. Or so I thought ...

But then it was '68, that year the whole world went mad, and, for me, everything started to go wrong. They say if you stare at a flame, you may find God. That was what I hoped. And then I found that what it does is turn you blind. But that's my other story.

Rosemary Tonks

David Underdown