

TLC Showcase

TOM O'ROURKE

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Introduction to *Across the Stone Bridge*

In 2009 I wrote *mosaic*, an experimental novella. The story concerned a man who leaves his job and goes on a quest to meet a woman he had known in the past. He is led from place to place by a series of mysterious letters which encourage him on. If this scenario reminds readers of the model used by Hermann Hesse in *Steppenwolf*, they would be right. I sent the manuscript (ms) to TLC and several things happened: I received back an excellent balanced assessment and felt for the first time in years I was engaging with like-minded people; most importantly I got to know Rebecca Swift. Becky was very kind to me; she sent off the ms to a deeply professional literary agent - Broo Doherty - and asked her to represent me. After very good and encouraging feedback from Broo, I made a decision which, looking back on it now, strikes me as more than a little perverse: I decided to abandon the novella and change tack completely. In two or three months I wrote a book exploring several ideas in the form of a Dark Ages novel which after some further refinement and revision became *West Briton Story* (my first published book). Meanwhile I maintained an occasional correspondence with Becky Swift, and throughout Becky was never anything less than very patient and kind, with a natural intuitive understanding of the trials of a would-be writer. I was shocked and saddened when Aki told me of her passing in 2017.

The original ms of *mosaic* included a coda called *Torquino's Question*. I have always liked the voice of this short vignette, even though as a piece of writing it seems to break many rules. A couple of years ago I was in a restaurant in Italy with my wife and mentioned this piece to her; in her inimitable way she simply said – why not write a few more? So I did, and this became *Across the Stone Bridge*. Suman Chakraborty at Roman Books, who had published my first book, agreed to publish it.

Across the Stone Bridge is a series of twelve vignettes or short stories which move through time and record the life of an artist at the precise moment of an event in history – each event being of some significance. The series culminates in a madcap transatlantic audio conference. I've been involved in many such conferences, though none quite like the one set out in the book. *Torquino's Question* is the second story in the series. I hope readers enjoy this story and the book.

Across the Stone Bridge by Tom O'Rourke

Torquino's Question

*Beatrice di Folco Portinari died on the ninth day of June 1290.
On the eighth day of May 1300, an ambassador from Florence
journeys to the hill-top town of San Gimignano.*

Before you and to your left sits the Podesta, the most important man in this magnificent and rich hill-top Castle; behind him are arranged the high-status civic dignitaries; the families already introduced to you as the Braccieri and Ricardini, the Aldi and Baccinelli, Carpi, Useppi and Marsili, all grown rich on agriculture, on saffron and Vernaccia wine, on money-lending, all arranged in rank as you stand before them at the lectern.

You are momentarily dazzled by the early morning May sunlight as it streams through the huge windows in front of you, above you, slightly to your left.

Behind you on your right-hand side, lesser dignitaries are seated on the benches. All in the room strain slightly forward, wait to hear the words of the poet, now ambassador, rumoured soon to be one of the six Priors of Florence, sent by Florence to address them.

The Hall is hushed.

You briefly note the freshly painted frescos of carousing and jousting scenes which tell you plainly that for now this place is of the White Guelph faction - your faction. This is the most important strategic stronghold in the region, it commands the heights of the Val D'Elsa. You are here because it is important for political reasons that the people here should think of themselves as *unem et idem* with Florence – one and the same. You are to tell them that it is expedient for each of the cities of

the Tuscan League to hold a Parliament to elect a new Captain and then for all of the appointed representatives of those cities to meet for the despatch of that business. The historical record will show that your mission this day will succeed.

You note the sensuous blue, red, green and gold of the robes of your audience; in passing, you note too a slight pulse under the right eye of the Podesta, de Tolomei of Siena, and wonder: what does this man think at this moment, this man who is rarely outranked in this place?

To the right of the Podesta, behind him, stands the guard previously introduced to you as Torquino. Tall, big-framed with square shoulders and a shaved bullet head, a raw, battle-scarred veteran at the age of twenty-four. You note how he shifts his weight restlessly from foot to foot, looks about him; it causes you to muse - *perhaps this soldier already prays this day of dry-as-dust procedural formality is over; perhaps he has a pre-arranged assignment for this evening with some feisty full-bodied woman who cares nothing for these politic formalities, perhaps a woman like Angelyka, black-eyed when naked and aroused, all tiny waist, flaring hips, soft yielding curves and lithe strong limbs, a woman whose senses and needs are fully alive, one who demands to take from this day whatever there is to be taken from it in the full glory of some life-affirming passion . . . only then, satiated and all passion spent, will she allow him to tell her how he, Torquino, guard to the Podesta, witnessed in the flesh the day the ambassador from Florence came to talk to the people.*

You blink three times. In the space of five heartbeats you have triple sinned; to imagine that a woman might entertain such brazen lusty thoughts; to recall your mistress Angelyka again; to cast aside, in thought, your wife Gemma, mother of your children. You shall go to hell and eternal damnation if you do not find the path to your salvation. Your trained will grasps at, grips your wild imagination. You bring your mind back to the lectern in front of you. Slowly you remove the blue cloth cover of the red and gold-lettered vellum sheet.

Behind you in time: the Battle of Campaldino and the defeat of the Ghibellines, where you fought vigorously on horseback in the front rank of one hundred and twenty men, exposed to great danger; you were there too at the capitulation of the castle at Caprona. *La Vita Nuova*, those strange seemingly coded verses, has already made you known as a poet. Ahead of you in time, could you but know it, is the *Commedia*.

There will be many trials too: the fiasco of your unbending two month rule as a Florentine Prior, your subsequent failed embassy to Rome and Pope Boniface VIII, your exile from Florence on the final victory of the Ghibellines under the auspices of the Angevin Charles. Then the fateful death sentence in absentia; your endless bitter wanderings, the hospitality offered to you in Verona and the Lunigiana and finally on to the city of mosaics and its symphony of colours. The last abortive journey to Venice and your fatally stricken flight back to Ravenna, like one who has voyaged out upon lost seas, never to return.

This future life is unknown to you. Now at this moment you look up at your unmoving, silent waiting audience. You half-raise your left arm and reach for the cup of water, half-noting the red and yellow glaze of the ceramic cup. You glance once more at the vellum sheet in front of you, idly record the date at the foot of the formal document. And another unbidden thought strikes you then, as if an unseen silver silent arrow has pierced deep into your heart. On this day next month, she who has devoured your stricken heart, she whom your mind beholds in glory, shall have been gone from the sorrows and sad joys of this unredeemable world for ten full years.

You physically shudder at this imagined blow; for an instant you close your eyes as a riot of despair rolls through you; for an instant terror is in your face, almost unseen.

One man alone in the Hall sees it: Torquino, the soldier, the fighting man, who for the rest of his long life will tell nobody of the stark terror he sees in your face at this moment, even though he will never forget it. Sometimes, now and then, in his last years after many battles, perhaps momentarily alone in the back room of a tavern at night, his belly full of Vernaccia wine and his booted feet up on the stove, his leather waistcoat, unbuttoned, hanging loosely around his thickened girth, the old mercenary will stare into the embers of the fire and remember again this moment and wonder: what was it that caused such fear to come into the face of the Florentine ambassador, that man who became the great poet? And then he will slowly stand up, lean over to rake up the embers in the stove, tenderly straighten his battle-weary spine even as he draws a hand down his scarred embattled face, will step heavily across the stone-flagged floor and go through, go through to the main room of the Tavern, the embers of the fire slowly fading as the muslin cloth curtain falls back into place behind him.

You steady yourself against the lectern and recover yourself instantly. The hawk-like profile turns towards the Podesta, towards history, towards-----?

"Good people of San Gimignano . . ."

Note: The poet Dante visited San Gimignano, Italy for the purpose stated in the story in 1300. A memorial stone in the Sala di Dante in San Gimignano gives the actual year of the visit as 1299, although all other references I have seen suggest 1300 as the correct date.

About the Writer

Tom was born in Liverpool; at a very early age his large family (he has two sisters and three brothers) moved to Manchester, following his father's work. At school most of his reading was outside the formal curriculum. By the age of 17 he knew he wanted to write. At 18 he went to Cardiff University to study English Literature and Law; in his final year he transferred to full time literature. He continued to read mostly away from the curriculum. He spent a large proportion of his final year in France with the woman who became and still is his wife.



His first full-time job was managing a theatre company, which he sent to Canada and Poland and which won a prize at the London Film Festival whilst he was there. Sadly drastic cuts in arts funding resulted in eventual closure of the theatre group. He turned back to the law, working for solicitors in Nottingham. After a spell in local government he went back to law school, as he and his wife were starting a family. He was then called to the Bar. He chose commercial law and as his children were growing up he had a successful career negotiating commercial agreements in the UK and elsewhere for large organisations.

Throughout this period he maintained a self-devised reading programme and wrote constantly. He decided none of the writing was worth keeping until, in 2009, he sent off an experimental novella to TLC.

His first book *West Briton Story* was published in 2014 by Quintus, an imprint of Roman Books.

Tom left legal work at the end of 2015.

Across the Stone Bridge is what lawyers might call a statement of intent: he will now write until he can write no more.