

The Red Tower

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Cloud Journal (2008)

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The Pilot House (2010)

The Red Tower

New & Selected Poems



DAVID RIGSBEE

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FOR JILL AND MAKAIYA

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I. NEW POEMS

Harp

A bad painting, at once aggressive and shy,
connects its glassy, Alpine blue
with a utilitarian sofa beneath—where no one sits—
and that in turn to footstools
like toadstools leading away, becoming flagstones
that would take the eye the distance
across the domestic space of the room.
Leaves wobble by the window opening
and across from that window
on the fifth story balcony above the sidewalk
(where immigrants drift in shoots and eddies)
a young, bespectacled mother puts out the wash:
blouses and leggings on metal dowels,
underwear in an aluminum rack tub.
She disappears and returns with an armload
of baby wash, though where this will go,
now that the racks are full, is not clear.
But distribute them she will,
paying no mind to the encroaching garden
from the balcony above, nor the slag
of toys piled on the balcony below.
Nor of me, sitting by a wooden harp, in a room
not mine, thinking of hot, loser towns
where I am no longer, of years imagined
when I never was. One child's dress, an ever-
serviceable blue cotton smock, says it all,

hanging four-square from the balcony rail,
as if in the absence of its little owner, billowing,
it took that absence on a journey.
Pointless speculation, says a contrapuntal voice,
and yet that is what I did with my life.

After Reading

I put down the book thinking
how purity is a curse, how it
puts us off the human
for whom it better fits
to turn away from the shore
in favor of the garbage and the grief.
I remember standing in the nave of St. Peter's
looking at the smooth, dead body of Christ
held in Mary's arms and secretly admiring
the madman whose hammer
chipped the same marble that made
Michaelangelo such a monster.

The Red Tower

For two years I drove by a mountain
and wondered how long it would take
to tunnel through using a teaspoon.
That's how dead my brother was.
No, more. And I thought the young
Yeats was wrong when he wrote
that God talked to those long dead.
I imagined a blinking tower
on a mountain: the red light pulsed
but raised no one. Because even if
God talked to the dead, what could
He possibly say to them?
What could He possibly say?

The Apartment

Through the window I saw, in a canted plane,
an apartment building rise—stonework, ironwork
and detailing where every other window
becomes a recessed balcony. The penultimate
floor bore an ironwork cincture, and I was reminded
of my vertigo stepping out from the top
of Trajan's Tower in Rome years ago.
The guardrail stopped at knee-level,
and the tower floor itself did not exceed
three-feet wide. At your back, granite;
out beyond the eyes: air's abyss. Now,
a convenience store occupied street level,
but the air was a void all the same.
A sculptor, on commission, carved the spiral
of the Emperor's conquests among the Etruscans,
the Dacians, and the Goths—like all killing
utterly repetitious in the ringing iron,
the screams of horses, the helmeted bodies.
At some point, the eyes following the spiral
could no longer take in the scope of victory,
but the vanishing point was no less bloody
than the start, the swords no less blunt.
By contrast, the top floor I saw—tilted
and tiled—had only a rail and no place
out from the window to stand upon. Already
the windows on either side were indistinguishable

from skylights. Who stood at that rail
saw boulevards stretching all the way
to the inhospitable suburbs. Just so,
saints were said to emerge from their cells
and pause, before going forth out of the spirit,
in their rope belts, into the stony forests.