

News From Home 24

Text Copyright © 2006 Richard Thompson

<http://www.richardthompson-music.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any forms or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any other information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

08/29/06

The Governor was in a tip-top mood when he arrived for his elocution lesson, and I noticed a change of wardrobe. Gone was the paramilitary look, and instead he was sporting a blazer, slacks, and a cravat.

“I’ve been hanging out with your man, Tony”, he said. “You know, the Prime Minister! We hit it off right away”.

I said I’d read in the papers how he’d been doing deals with Blair on behalf of the State of California, bypassing the Federal Government. He nodded.

“But that wasn’t the best part”, he said. “I tried my English accent on Tony – and he nearly fell over! I completely fooled him. I said, ‘Do you fancy Arsenal for the Cup, old boy’ and ‘Looks a bit cloudy, but it’s supposed to brighten up later’, and all those other phrases you taught me, and he was stunned! He said I could pass for an Englishman any day. You” – here he poked me firmly and rather painfully in the ribs – “are a GENIUS language coach! I give you present.” He handed me a box of Romeo y Juliettas – I still haven’t summoned the nerve to tell him I don’t smoke the darned things. Or that he still sounds as Austrian as ever. Georgio, an old friend of Arnold’s from bodybuilding days, came by to say hello, and stopped dead in his tracks at the door. When he recovered the power of speech, he said that he hardly recognized his old friend in his new, smart English clothes, and assumed that Errol Flynn had risen from the grave, and was standing in our living room. Georgio drew on one of his fine old Slovakian agricultural expressions to explain the phenomenon...these always leave something to be desired in the translation: he said that a goose will peck off its own feet to prove to the farmer that it isn’t a tractor.

Akbar and his boys have been hired to spruce up the house next door, and it is good to see them back in the neighbourhood. Besides painting the house, which they are doing in their efficient if surly fashion, they are also handling the yard work, re-installing the sprinklers, and relaying the turf.

“There won’t be any turf”, said Hashimoto. “They make Zen dirt garden. Add few rocks, rake dirt – dirt garden! Nobody got turf now, big turf shortage, maybe three month...so good for meditation, ho ho, very Zen!”

Hashimoto said all this while working on the front hedge. His topiary is growing in nicely, and I'm sure I can now identify it as a chicken being followed by six baby chicks. I congratulated Hashimoto on his rural theme, but he said I wasn't even close. "You in for big surprise!" he said.

McSweeney was also a little dismissive of Akbar's painting skills. I put this down to professional jealousy.

"He is a fine fellow, right enough", he said, "but does he commune with the paint? Does he shove his hand in the tin up to the very elbow to get the feel of it in his fingers? Can he smell out red from green in a blindfold test? And of course you don't truly know paint until you've made it yourself – like the time I was in India." Here he paused. "Did I tell you of the time I was in the British Army, of all things?" I nodded my head, to no effect. "I was stationed in the hill country, Nan-I-Tal, up by the lake. We had no paint and no pigment to make any, so we used what was to hand, which was, conveniently, the dung and urine of the sacred cow." He broke off to attend to his pipe, and resumed with a chuckle. "When mixed together, this makes perfect army khaki, and adheres like the devil – indeed, the origin of all military painting, and how every damned thing ends up the same infuriatingly uniform colour, is the economic necessity of having to use animal excreta for pigment whilst in the field." I ventured the opinion that surely camouflage was the intent in using the khaki? He tut-tutted. "As any military brain can tell you, from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz, the best camouflage colour is bright red."

"Bright red?" said I, "How so?"

"Why, is it not obvious? When the enemy sees a bright red object in the distance, it immediately assumes it to be a letterbox, or basket of strawberries. If the object is moving, the enemy lookout might say to himself, 'Look, someone is relocating a letterbox, probably to a more suitable spot. No point in firing on unarmed post office employees.' Or he might think 'There is a handsome basket of strawberries coming towards me at great speed. Someone must be in a hurry to get to the market.' That the red object is a tank is the farthest thing from his mind – why, what raving eejit, thinks he, would paint a tank red?"

I was, as usual after one of McSweeney's discourses, at a loss for words. He continued:

"Did I tell you of the time, back in my farming days, when I painted the goats? Ha! This will amuse you." He tapped out his pipe on his heel, but seemed unable to find a fresh supply of shag in any of his countless pockets. "I understand that you are fully of the teetotal persuasion, but would there happen to be a secret supply of porter, or any such, about the house, left over and long forgotten since you took the pledge, of which I might relieve you? I myself have a rather good 12

year old whiskey concealed in a table lamp, which Mrs. McSweeney has never suspected.”

I could think of none. “No matter”, he replied, “I’ll toddle round to a dispensary shortly. Anyway, back in my farming days in Connemara, I did miraculously well with my oats – as you know, it is a windswept and rocky place, far more suited to livestock, and I was considered a bit of a freak for even attempting a cereal crop...but I was blessed with perfect weather that year, and made a handsome profit. Figuring that things might never be as good again, I decided to get out of cereals and into the goat business pronto. Every week I walked the two miles to market, bought the three best looking animals at the auction, and walked home again – after a stop for refreshment at Mrs. O’Rourke’s Bar, of course. And herein lay the problem...I was so drunk going home, and the night was so dark, that for three weeks running I lost the goats. I was rapidly losing all my hard-earned capital. Avoiding Mrs. O’Rourke’s did not seem a practical solution – this would have meant painful self-sacrifice, and I did not even consider it as an option. I did, however, have some white paint left over from sprucing up the cottage, and so the next week, I took two tins with me to market. I painted the new goats, and after a dram or two, made my way home.”

He paused. I was unsure if that was the end of the story.

“You made it home successfully, with full compliment of goats?” I asked.

“Alas, no”, he replied, “If that wasn’t the one day of the whole year that it snowed.”

Witherstock is someone who would never be seen dressed in red. Grey, grey and grey are her personal rainbow, to match her hair, and that tinge of sadness in her cheek, and that steely grey in her eye, and the threadbare but perfectly pressed grey of her uniform. It is a proper, housekeeperly colour, she would say, unfrivolous, unpretentious, and blending into the shadows of the room with a servile deference... from where she can dream of lost love, and read the auguries in bird-flock and tealeaf. Her utterances are increasingly eccentric, and she is scaring the children.

“Mummy”, said our youngest the other day, “Witherstock says the world will end next Tuesday during Geography.”

“Well, I’m sure she didn’t really say that, Dear.”

“She jolly well did, and I asked her if the end could come a bit later, ‘cos I really love Geography with Mr. Soutar. I asked if she could change it to end just before double Physics, and she said she had the power to see what was written, but not to change what was written - something about the moving finger writes, and dum-ti-dum-ti-dum...”

“And having writ, moves on, Dear. I’m quite sure she meant something entirely different.”

“She also said our house was built on the site of an old Indian burial ground, and all the lost Indian souls were coming to repossess the land next week, and they’d probably suck our brains out...but if the world ends Tuesday, that doesn’t really matter, does it?”

And so it goes on. Witherstock has also taken to muttering to herself, and chuckling in a Macbeth-witch sort of way. But she does iron my shirts superbly, so I think we can live with these small inconveniences.