

Selected Poems (a preliminary collection)
Ann Redpath

OTTO D.

"A big man to lose--"
Boots kept saying.
Like a vine--
not a willowy vine--
but the tenacious kind.
growing wide
forever reaching
sometimes fierce
always curious--
Otto D.
fiercesome vine.

The man sang to his children,
opened their eyes
to the world,
to its wideness,
made them interact
with that world,
made them react to him,
made them sing.

The man took hold
as a truck driver,
teamster, salesman;
reached out
from the picket line;
fought injustice;
kept on in those 1930s
despite those who sought
to cut him back with bigoted labels.
The man clung
to every bargain,
making sure no family member
escaped-without old bananas,
tired chickens, and
pounds of bruised butter.

Not an ordinary vine
he clung to his beliefs

in the Latin Mass.
He looked to each new brick
in life
as something to conquer,
or to argue about,
but never-- no never--
to just leave alone.

And as a vine encircles,
drawing back in on itself,
Otto drew on his family,
leaving them strongly entwined
in the wreath of the world.
"A big man to lose."

August at the Beach (1978)

Like the sea crab
that grabs hold,
hangs on
and finally
lets go--
the beach in August.
In the grasp
these refrerections:
sunset off the deck
tubing down a dark wave
vacuuming up flea crackers
dining on bouillabaisse
clams casino
and half-and half
the Garriety run
with the voice of Himself,
the constant comings and
goings of Philadelphia's
most colorful people--
Jeannie with the phantom family
(did anyone really see them?)
"the reverend" with news from Nicaragua,
Elaine playing "up, up and away,"
Judy, gourmet counselor who hates cooking,
Bob with hat on doing a running commentary
on Himself's Irish songs,
Allie, a most dignified clam shell sucker;

Mimi, stopping only long enough to do an
industrial-cleaning job,
Ed and Maria, rare "perennials" to take
four extra kids to dinner,
John B., Bill, Morey, Carol, who-did-I miss
and mostly Boom Boom Redpath
Sweat box Beal
Arny B-dot and Alan of the surf
gracious hosts,
family.

The beach shore
lined with people
in August
all hanging on
to the disappearing summer--
hanging on
for the moment
to the vacation hiatus:
that vulnerable meeting
between friends, family,
strangers, sun, wind, surf--
then the moment is over
never to be recaptured
also
never to be forgotten--
August at the beach.

*Wayne,
your neighbors
over here in El-Hi
think that flowers
are still a pretty good way
to say the complex thing--
that we wish you strength
and steadfastness each day,
continued humor and a good spirit,
abiding warmth from your family.*

*We appreciate your abilities and competence, Wayne,
and we keep you ever in our thoughts
and hearts, happy to be among your friends.*

REMEMBERING AL REDPATH

Strive to enter by the narrow door
the bible says this
I've read it many times

but how narrow
does a body need to get

As narrow as his hand
with no muscle to write
but a touch that carved valleys
clean through to the heart

As slim as his mind that might slice off today
but kept enough fat to reach back
and remember roots
and Door Redpath fruits
and all the words to
old presbyterian hymns.

Though his were the boniest legs,
he could never enter
strapped to the wide wheelchair.
One has to imagine
he smiled that great smile
when he finally kicked those steel wheels
this Saturday in March
and strode unencumbered
into heaven with Alice.

As the stroke cut deep into his words
making the path in his brain narrow
and rocky for him to scale and search
for sentences to fit his feelings--
he clung tight to the metaphors
that fit him like a glove--
business, meetings, 3M, sales, teamwork.
We often thought God has to be
Corporate to appreciate his prayers.

Without fat hands,
and only the boniest legs
and not enough speech
to thicken any stew
this man who liked to stride
with the lions
crept out softly as a lamb
wearing only
that giant smile
this March 13th.

Welcome,
Erin D.
If we had a wish to give you
this February eighteenth
we'd wish you
a long life
among people who care
dearly for you
as Susan and Jim,
their families
and friends,
care for you.

If we had a wish to give you
we'd wish you
just enough happiness
and just enough sadness
that your life feel
full but not weighted,
balanced but not boring.

If we had a wish to give you
we'd wish you intellectual
challenges all your life,
adventures that tap
wells of strength and creativity,
experiences with many people--
Both familiar and foreign.

If we had a wish to give you
this February eighteenth
we'd wish that one thing remains
with you all your days--
that you enjoy being yourself,
Erin D.

You are here,
you are loved.
Welcome,
Erin.

PERENNIALS

Could you call
this past year
sweet?

No.

Achievements, fame
TV, radio, news?
Yes, plenty.
Difficulties, ordeals,
some deals, some awards?
Oh yes, plenty.

Still,
underneath it all
those Perry Perennials
keep growing:
strength, courage--
no pansy here;
endurance, patience,
and the long, life-giving
stem of good will.

Some gardeners say
"it's tilling the soil;"
others call it "good breeding;"
still others name it skill,
knowing when and how to plant.
Perry Perennials
have all those attributes
(and bone meal, too).
But mostly
it's in the timing--
knowing when to work,
when to be quiet
and when to flower.

Now is the season
for flowers.
Odd isn't it
that it's also
Susan's birthday.
Happy Birthday.

Messengers 2018

There is some talk of journalists--today
in a role made nearly sacred
by today's threats, fake news, killings.

Different somewhat from biblical messengers Isaiah, Matthew, Paul-to name a few

Isaiah cautioned, "Pay attention and your soul will live."
Jeremiah prophesized, "plans for peace, reserving a future full of hope." Matthew questioned,
"when was I a stranger and you took me in?" Paul clarified,
"the spirit brings truth and truth sets you free."

Today the journalists' role is almost made sacred
as they step into the vacuum of banal tweets
and acts of normalized cruelty.
There, with clarity in conflict,
they do their jobs.

There have always been messengers -
Needed now as never before--
As the new year begins.
2019.

Sources: Is. 55, Jer. 29, Matt. 25, Rom 8

TO ERV C. (1982)

Scraps of paper,
notes from meetings,
telephone calls,
doorknocking,
asking, begging,
cajoling volunteers,
supporting, laughing,
staying until dawn--
humdrum
and crises.
It's all there
yesterday
and today.

It's all there
from the Newsletter
of 1972

to the East Calhoun News
of 1982.

It's part of your life,
Erv C.
It's part of ours.

We document here
your scraps of paper
and meeting notes
and watch them turn
into piles and bundles
of stories and cares
we've all shared
these ten years.

You were there at the beginning,
starting these stacks,
sometimes tying them with ribbons,
sometimes scattering,
discarding them
and starting over.

Can scraps of paper,
and photos of old events
hold our thanks
and hold our promise
of continual communication
that we know you care
so deeply about?
We hope so
and say so
with these pages
of yesterday
and today...

Tony

those blue eyes
so like the tip of an iceberg
hiding so much mystery beneath--
we have only bits of icicles to remember
 St. Peter picnics,
 catching baseball scores on the fly,
 eating those stale brownies
 you made in bakery therapy
 Christmas parties at 1812
 and all the visits to third floor

We never really knew
what those eyes saw
what oceans covered you
hiding you from all of us--
us out in our separate boats
Sometimes reaching out
 with a lifeline,
sometimes staying out at sea for a long time--

And in those last days
your eyes haunted us all
like beams from a lighthouse
we could never quite reach.

We could only hope
that the tip of the iceberg
would at last feel at peace,
complete and together
with the whole iceberg,
with Alice and Fred, Buster and Virginia,
with Minnie Lou and Earnest--

and with Mary and Bess
and all of us still on
our life rafts
reaching out to one another.

This family--
it's full of life boats
when you need them.

The heron
at Lake of Isles
hides
most of the year.
But once in a while
it rises
and we see its graceful
Flight.

"..those who trust in Yahweh
renew, their strength
and soar as on eagle's wings"

Sometimes
the heron just stands there
quietly
in tall grass.
We have only to notice it.

"Be still and know that I am God."

Still,
most of the time
it's hidden--
like most important things.

Each spiritual session with you
over these past 3 years
is a little like noticing the heron:
something beautiful
that lies hidden and real
beyond what our eyes usually see.

You draw it out
from behind the tall grass
and say--
"just notice what rises to the surface."

Over and over
you've lifted me up,
as on eagle's wings,
encouraged me to "be still . . . "
and constantly
"notice what's there."

How I would like,
on the occasion

of your birthday,
to tell you:
you make my heart soar,
God bless you
and I love you.

earth

Heights of contemplation,
stars,
galaxies,
angels heard on high,
horizons beyond sight
beyond reach
lift minds
in ecstasy.

But the pull
of earth,
of roots,
of stables and mules
brings-warm
realness,
cool facts--
funny balance
this earth.

simple

The simple,
Unadorned clay pot
stands ready to be cut
from the potter's wheel.
Shaped like the hands of the potter,
the pot points beyond itself
to the shape of the moon,
the shape of the earth.
Simple,
unmingled,
homogeneous--
the pot stands
a pure and clear thing

made of mud clay
speaking for the potter
yet standing firm
in the hands
of the receiver--
a simple exchange.

(1975)

TURNING THE PAGE

This year
turning into the last decade,
toward the new century,
we celebrate
the same season
still there as an old story
we keep re-telling.

Each season
repeats itself
but it's never the same story:
we're never the same.
We hope we're turning
toward a better world--
witnessing big turns:
like walls crumbling;
and small turns--
in our own lives
where we struggle
to make them more full,
less serious,
maybe even funny.

May you be where you are
this year
peacefully.
And may you turn
where you want and need to be
this new year
new decade
new story ...

A SMALL TURNING: A SHORT STORY

Consider a man
who was on his way
to join his wife
at a New York hospital.
Just as he got out of his car,
a big delivery truck
pulled up and hemmed him in.

"Do you know how long you'll be here?"
he asked the truck driver,
saying that he'd need to get his wife home quickly
after she finished her medical tests.

It was a New York truck driver.

Clearly not pleased with being
asked *anything*, the truck driver
hurled out a line of abuse.
The man, deciding to take his chances,
said nothing and went in to meet his wife.

When he returned, he found
The truck was gone and this note
on his windshield:
"I am sorry for the way
I responded to your question.
Pardon me please. And it is my wish
that the person in the hospital
will be better soon.
God bless you.
The truck driver."

--Reported in prose in *The New York Times*

It's just a brush
reaching
top to bottom
like the bamboo
stretching
tall
against the night moon.

Christmas,
Hanukkah,
a time to stretch
from roots
to all that is straight
and strong,
beyond
our expectations.
It's just a brush
like a toothbrush,
hair brush,
scrub brush
in my hand,
your hand,
hands across the world
this Christmas,
Hanukkah
cleaning,
sweeping,
painting
beauty
straight through
the everyday
moon
of our lives.

Whatever your brush--
may it sweep happiness
this holiday
through your house

(1978)

What else can you say
about a tree--
so simple,
trite almost.
Yet it's Christmas
and Hanukkah--
and we need the tree
for lights and celebrating.
Trees, like us,
so nameless
so numberless
in worlds of hostages
and refugees.
A tree is just there,
not reckoning and counting,
just ripening,
unique in its space--
sometimes squatting
at the sides of life,
sometimes rising tall
in the middle of life.
Trees and us,
each of us
important for a time,
sometimes reckoning,
often counting,
always ripening.
Each of us,
this year, this holiday,
is just here
in this space
and in this time
celebrating something unique--
some new work, a birth,
a death, an unexpected joy.
Yet each of us celebrates
something universal--
a hope for real peace,
real destinies,
in this space
and beyond it,
in this time
and beyond this decade.

Trees and us
this winter
just here
and somehow celebrating.
Happy Holidays.

Like a jetty--
extending out into the sea
to influence the current,
to protect, to harbor--
Yes, a little like a jetty
is this Christmas and Hanukkah.
It stands as one season,
a harbor in a raging year.
It makes us wade out
into the sea of family,
friends, colleagues,
even strangers--
and give gifts,
giving away part of ourselves.

This holiday,
we may not really
influence the tide
of today's problems
or protect anybody.
Still
this Christmas and Hanukkah
perhaps we stand as jettys,
offering gifts
that sustain us,
that celebrate
how life will always be
a bigger sea
than we can ever
comprehend alone.
But we can stand together
perhaps,
as on a jetty,
and admire how vast
and how simple
is the message
of Hanukkah's oil,
of the child's birth.

Pete's Hoops

In the alley
behind our backyard
Pete taught me
how to make a layup shot
right through the *hoop--swish*.
He loved that sound.

How many hoops does a man jump through to know
he's played the game well?

A two-handed dribbler--Peter:
on the one hand, a very funny guy
on the other, intensely serious

So--how many hoops does a man jump through?

Well, start with the career hoop:
At first he stood out in the field
with farmers and animal feed,
then wheat and milling.

If he could teach his sister to shoot layups,
in front of friends, taking no guff--
then no surprise
that he learned early in his career
he was good with people.
In human resources,
--no hoop was too high to reach for a victory for both
teams--worker and company.

How many hoops does a man jump through--

Family hoops: five kids
5 great players on this team--
mixing up positions as needed--
a point guard one day, a center another.
Some days they *all* were forwards.
He never felt any string in the net too loose
not to care for, tease out, or teach to
with humor and quiet wisdom.
A skill shared--anytime, not just with his own kids but
through to the whole extended family.

Saving the best for last--the hoop that made Pete's life--
the day he met Barb Donahue.
Luckily she liked his "funny"
and understood Pete's brand of intense serious.
Right from the beginning
they were a team.
All he learned about the collaboration from work
met its match and was surpassed in the day-to-day with
Barb.

Both Pete and Barb were both rule-holders and rule
benders.

That's what nets are for--bending.
These last few years,
Barbara bent that hoop,
brought it low for him to reach
whatever he could reach--
back in his mind
or out with a smile to his kids, grandkids,
friend or nurse--
still a people person.

Barbara kept him hovering on the rim

She bent that hoop
to hold him
challenge him
engage him
and prepare him

for hoops of angels,

heroes,
now welcoming our backyard,
legendary, big brother--Pete.
(2012)

Kind.

A pale word
and understated, too,
maybe even wishy-washy
for spirited
Hanukkah and Christmas
celebrations.

Yet
Kind
comes to mind
this 1990 holiday.

Kind, the noun--
means
a related grouping,
"a gentle kind and noble stock,"
Shakespeare said.

Kind, the adjective--
means
fond, forbearing.
Kindly--
used to mean related by birth;
today-a generous nature.
Kin--
the immediate family,
or just close ties.

This year,
my kin brings
a new granddaughter,
Alissa.
She lives with me,
reeking of joy
and reminding me
that simple kindnesses
might be enough to grow on.

May your holiday
reek with joy
as you celebrate
small kindnesses--
the kind all your kin
grows on.
(1990)

(Editor's note: This is a work in progress. Please check back for an updated version. She had a publisher's eye and shared her poems with careful design that this lacks. And there are a few more favorite poems that we'll add. Most of them are undated - though when written with a typewriter the courier font generally indicates 1970s to mid-'80s. So many poems were written for specific people and were named for them. She called out their full names with meaning; though in this context it seemed appropriate to omit last names.)