

Tom Henderson's
Poetry

In loving memory





Evangel



Toiling upward, quite alone that day
Under the mountain's new green shadow,
I paused to assess a confusion
Of redbud and dogwood - then started
At voices from a clearing just below.
Approaching curious, but in some trepidation
Of meeting mountain folk, I found
What seemed a rite of celebration -
But what the language or what ground
Did not at first perceive.

Drawn, and yet reluctant to obey
Spirit, sensing the long climb ahead,
Not moving, lest the moving be intrusion,
I stood apart - until one parted
From the others, seeing both my dread
And hunger, and, abhorring any
Brokenness, He came for me. First one
Then several came, then many -
Offering bread and wine
I could at last receive.

TRH, July 1984

Wind



O Wind

Teach me to sing

The wild wave

The purchased height

That I may sing

Rough songs of men.

Teach me, Spirit,

Sing my soul's song

Deep still water

Forest light.

Sing my soul

My soul's song.

TRH

1989

Vows



This is my friend who gets angry
Sometimes at me and shows me
Her anger, or sad, cries in my arms,
Deep blubbering sobs, her tears
Confronting as I do not know
What I feel, enfolding as I do.
Who walks with me on night beaches,
Orders my house, disarranges my hair,
Disturbs her universe, and mine
And listens to my verse.

We two have other loves to keep.
May our love be deepened in the deep
Remembering of cherished things -
Joy in faces, places, bright wings,
Clay pots, a saltant pirouette,
And in the letting go regret
Of wings wanting wind to rise to heaven,
Earth wanting fire to be a poem.

You and I are a poem.
Water bearer and the ram.
Am I meter? You are zest.
Am I eighth notes? You are rest.
Dear, grace note in my heart's unruly measure,
Come, I bid you, chance with me
What new music God may play,
And if you will, then you and I shall dance
While songs go on
And make new poems
Joyfully.

TRH June, 1990

Love Gong



Wind, blow in me
Blow over me and though
And in me. Fill me
With your power. I
Am water liquid waiting
To be driven till the white
Caps on my breasts swell
Becoming more and more
Unsettled, stormy. You
Are power beyond power
Rousing me higher and higher
Till my waves pour over me
And over you mixing with your
Breath to make me frothy
Green and dark O violent,
Pushing this way and that
Until I cannot tell where water
Begins or wind spirit wave-
Goddess has its ending O no ending
All horizons gone
I am wind
You are ocean
Churning
One
Flowing in and over
All our being
All of me full of all of you
Know no limits no equality
Limitless
Knowing
We are one rising
Falling, rising falling
Rising and now O
Subsiding, wind now letting go
Of water. I see you wind again,
I falling back to water
Water knowing wind-fullness
Wind power and water response
Liquid flowing and subsiding
Liquid
Flowing and subsiding green
Dark calming sea
Deep sea.
Amen.

Skin



It needn't be a perfect world,
Just a little better than the one we're in.
In that world, skin
Won't be described in black and white.
Should we ignore it then? Deny?
Looks like where we're headed today.
But, shouldn't we, as artists, at least try
To think of skin in a more colorful way?
How's this:
Clive smooth as oil that oozes from the hillside
Presses, ochre as varieties of clay
In Piedmont Carolina, red-gold wrinkled as the sun
Is wrinkled on the mesas west of Santa Fe,
Dark as lava entering the sea,
Pale as water under ships turned
Homeward at the end of day?
Well, it doesn't do it quite.
It may take a while to get this right.

Some years ago I had a life in most respects
Normal for a person of my time and education,
Place of birth, and yes, my skin. I had a wife,
My high school sweetheart, a job that made
My mother proud and kept me
Comfortable, two kids, and standing
In my church community. I knew no gay
Men or lesbians and was not then
Living on the edge of a run down
Part of town near Central Prison and the State
Mental hospital. A year before that world caved in
I had a dream in which I was in Hell.
And Hell was not much like the hard-sell version

Think State Fair midway – everything I wanted
Immediately at hand. I was about to turn away
Or die of boredom when I chanced to spy
A hooded figure in my way whose face
I couldn't see, shielded as it was,
Who pointed me the way. I went
That way and was abruptly in another place.
That same one greeted me

With an embrace though I was still
Unable to see his face, and life since then
Has been anything but like my dream.
No one was happy when I walked away
To find my new heaven.
I tell you this because . . .
Because wisdom is not knowledge.
Because wisdom comes from story,
Comes from dancing on this earth a while.
And wisdom unlike knowledge needs an edge,
A wedge of bitterness to temper joy.
If there is any part of me today
In which you think you see a trace,
An echo of that hooded face, and some of you,
Surprise, have said as much, I mean to say
That someone else has paid the price
For any fresh compassion bred
In me, and wouldn't it be nice,
If it didn't have to be that way.

When we don't need black or white,
We won't need "gay" or "straight" either.
We won't need "pro-life" or "pro-choice"
Or any of the other words we use today
To tell us who we are. We'll know.
But until we know, at least more soundly
Than we do today, we'll have to seek that place,
That heaven, with the only tools we have -
Besides that shielded face - each other.
And - our art.

So we must tell our stories, sing our songs
The only way we know, knowing all along
That words are not enough, could never
Be enough, may cause us pain.
These words, my voice,
May do the same, and still our choice
Must be to use the words we know,
To learn whatever we have to learn.
The way of art is not to heal,
But to transform.

TRH
August, 2001



in a time like this



in a time like this
when the world falls in
when we have to ask
what we who are powerful
might have to learn
from any hungry
foreign man or nation
i try to be Buddha
i try to find
just the right words
the right attitude
something to hold onto
perhaps Buddha wouldn't like it
much this holding on
and it's too late
anyway the age
of gurus being past
in a time like this
maybe i should pay
attention simply pay
attention the world may
not depend on me
after all even God
may not depend on me
but we
had better
depend on each other
everyeach other
and not some buddha

TRH

September 12, 2001