

## *Reginald Gibbons*

### Homage to Longshot O'Leary

For Thomas McGrath, 1916-1990

*"The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."* — Muriel Rukeyser

#### 1.

October 1, 1989. The recent history was told to me before I arrived — back and forth between hospital and nursing home Tom has been carried. He rises and falls like a tide of stubborn unwillingness to leave this life. In his true mind — which, I am told, still flashes out of him once in a while with the old fiery impatience and wit — he is certainly angry that he has no strength left to end his own suffering. Before this decline, he told me on the telephone that he didn't want something to happen that would put him at the mercy of pain and helplessness, he had decided to kill himself, but at the pleading of his son, he did not.

Now he is forced to live what he had hoped to avoid.

Early for my ride to the hospital, I step into the little grocery store where Tom used to shop. I see all the everyday foods and humble ordinaries out of Tom's reach now. But I think I dwell on it more than he would: even when he has had a lot to complain of, and has complained, there has been something resolute and forward-looking about him. Even when things have looked bleak, he has pressed on. He has persevered without being necessarily optimistic or cheerful. Yet even when not very cheerful, he has had a ready laugh and ready hope. I heard that Tom said to K, "I think you're a sad man who has had a happy life, and I'm a happy man who has had a sad life."

I leave the grocery, and here outside the door is a precious artifact: a wooden produce crate stamped *California Kiwi*, into which the store people have dumped some dubious fruit and vegetables — for free? for the homeless? The crate speaks of agriculture, labor and the

pleasures of exotic sensation. And it's attractive in itself — the clean wood, the colorful label. Taught by Tom to appreciate this but not to idealize, I then think: What of those working conditions and wages? Perhaps this unsold food won't be wasted.

In Minneapolis the civic tone is charitable, the atmosphere tolerant and encouraging of good efforts. Over the door of another store I saw a sign reading "Please Leave All Bags, Briefcases and Large Stringed Instruments at the Counter." There should always be such relics as stringed instruments and steam-engine threshers, and celebrations like Tom's work to remind us of human hands at work and play.

Back I wander along the bland wide avenue to Milwaukee St., where Tom led me on a slow short walk when I last came to Minneapolis — that was before he fell, injured his head, grew weak and unsteady from the damage, could not eat properly and never has, since. Everything is bare and exposed a little too nakedly, a little too openly, in a Midwestern way under the unforgiving breadth of the Midwestern sky. The small houses face each other across a walkway and esplanade; no cars; flower beds planted with humble marigolds. Poems are one of the ways we speak ourselves to life — our own poems and those of others, like Tom's that are full of his love of the colorations of words, the rhythms of American English, his engagement with his causes. Tom's view: idiom is the mother of poetry; history the father; marigolds the banners. "Pipsissewa and sassafras," as his poem has it: little plants offering a blossom or a root, bearing the names given to them by the music of speech.

## 2.

Men and women and girls and boys labor in  
granaries, glass factories, hospitals,  
in plenary assembly lines and at no-vote sewing machines,  
in republican ditches and judiciary fields,  
in pain under transmissions and over fires,  
deafened around airplanes and between flagmen,  
weary on streets and in subway stops,  
through bad weather and foul spillage,  
behind desks and at the beck of telephones,  
among chemicals and gangsters —

not made more worthy by this labor  
nor less, but if they could would simply own  
their used and unacknowledged worthiness,  
would own if only they could  
their own time of living the unreturning hours

even if elsetimes they may be entertained by  
the transmutations of TV and gladiatorial shopping  
and are thus educated  
to what they are given to know and  
something more — a knowledge in the labor like  
the salt taste in sweat or tears

## 3.

T and I were in Minneapolis in January of 1987, three days asking Tom questions, taping everything. T was probing Longshot's politics and personal history, mostly; he was working on the essay which would not be published till after his own sudden death, that so shook Tom and grieved me, only a few months after this moment. And I was asking about the poems. I wanting secrets; T wanting answers — T who had brought nightmares with him from childhood, then found their echo and new visitations in his years of reading and thinking about the German death camps, his mind strained by the scale of defeat even as he found in it the germs of survival and dignity; seeds planted in winter . . . Thinking of the myths of annihilation that exhilarated the murderers, I also think of a counter-image — our Mayflower, our myths of privileged origins. More than four million persons are said to be present-day descendants of those Pilgrim emigrants! In the death camps that T wrote about, genealogical time ran backwards, the camps consumed not only the six million persons in them but also their potential progeny, the offspring that were not to be born to the millions who were killed — of whom how many would there now have been, parents, children, grandchildren, greatgrandchildren? The camps were for destroying the origins of the unborn.

Tom went to the *Book of the Hopi* for adequate symbols in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* — symbols from that region of indigenous cultures and (by 1610, well before the Mayflower arrived with its self-mythologizing passengers) alien governors from Spain. Poems like Tom's — rich in lingo and lived history — seem to me like lessons in a spiritual genealogy that we have to construct for ourselves, that will tell us, if we want to know, from whom we are descended in spirit, whom we are free to claim as our protecting fathers and mothers to help us against the owners and inquisitors, sadists and thugs, beastly and heroic conquerors, and against the merely indifferent, through whose gauntlet we must so often be running as we try to reach the sowing and the harvest, the building and the making, the feast, the carnival, the romance, and peace.

And I came to choose the Tom in the poems as one of these fathers — to be taught by the movement of breath in his lines, the

peculiar surprising and sometime visionary metaphors, the forms that he said he liked "to rotate a little," the permissions granted by his boisterous vocabulary, the world hefted in the working hand, and the working hand surrounded by wildflowers and shipyards, the long shots, the lost locomotives, the last clattering of the horses' shod hooves, the call to respond . . .

## 4.

Complications and responsibilities of the appropriate  
 response in these days when cold gazes measure  
 the range of projectiles, the grievance,  
 the building site of another fenced camp,  
 when no single store or catalog offers better value,  
 when spectacles of thrilling outrage  
 swing back and forth before all eyes  
 and injury comes in solids, stripes and checks

\*

A car is always on fire to one side of the highway,  
 a woman walks up her steep unpaved hill, the weight of the morning  
 marketing in her string bag, and passes a man  
 coming down talking on his cellular phone  
 as he carries an empty plastic bucket to the one well

\*

At the steps of a closed church  
 on a street I think might be Avenida Salsipuede  
 a blear-eyed starving dog stands motionless  
 very slowly turning its head to watch us  
 in the hot sunlight as we walk past,  
 offering us its own thought  
 in its own language  
 which for this once  
 we can easily comprehend

\*

I would like to be as simple as a starling in the rain  
 Sometimes I would like to eat only seeds, like a sparrow

\*

But the work one might do

5.

A wave rises  
                    coming in at  
                        an angle to the beach  
Another wave falling back is cutting  
                                    under  
The coming wave  
                    The coming wave  
rises bulging upward  
balances on its own moving thickness  
begins to curl forward at the top  
                                    starts to topple  
roars along churning  
                    sand and foam as it slides  
reaches up  
            the wide wet shallow smooth slope of sand  
faster and farther as it  
                    thins to a sheet  
and then gives out  
                    touches the last grains  
(but not quite the line  
            of dry wrack left  
                                    by high storm-tides)  
And it slides back  
                    accelerating and gathering itself  
slices  
            under the next wave

Speed without haste  
Contest but no malice

We hurry to live  
while the waves come in and come in  
while up and down the hospital hall  
the nurses amble to answer the patient

## 6.

Our New World ruins

Empty factories, scorched  
shops and businesses in the districts  
of the leveraged takeovers and the riots  
Our blazing-up balloon-frame fires  
Our kinds of monuments of our kind of tragedy and romance  
(of working hours, bus-seats, poll taxes . . . )

Even Sears closes, on this street and that  
Some of a forest disappears, birds dislodged  
(a literal forest here

a figurative one there  
with first-growth health benefits  
and a company meadow)

These could be old stones — of an abbey, a fortress —  
but it's just an American retailer's wall  
Sometimes the pressure of feeling,  
like a firehose, like a steam cooker, who knows how long  
a man, a woman, a father or mother, can contain it . . .  
It's going to explode, it may come  
from elsewhere, *that* argument, *that* unhappiness,  
that impossible desire, that heartbreak  
for the baby of the family, but wherever  
it came from, now it is flowing out at  
a stone in a wall, this wall along the gritty street

*We wanted to get the little guy something*

Chicago — no illusions here of fortresses or abbeys or ancient walls  
Only our old brick of industry

our teetering pinewood 3-flats  
No romance of any glitter  
of the money that was churned to make more money

This wall was just the money that didn't make more money

This was just a raising of edifice and ornament and sales floor  
out of labor and grain, mills and railroads,  
sewing machines, metal stamping, plastic molding, retailing

Meanwhile an argument, a human dissonance,  
pain and harm, accusations and denials as this  
little family come some miles to the big store  
turns back from the locked doors toward the el stop

Nor do the empty floors pay anyone's wages now

## 7.

Tom was perhaps not so preoccupied with instances of suffering as with systems of exploitation. It's I who am stricken by the plights and episodes; Tom was more concerned to oppose political and social structures. I am touched by scenes and stories, and Tom too was angered and bitterly amused by anecdotes and tales and cautionary inspiring examples, but I think the moments that spoke to him had to be representative rather than dramatic. He was more political and I am more emotional. He could be saddened but I am sad. He was always looking past the instance for the pattern. He believed in his cause and I weigh beliefs. But aren't my categories too crude? Did he not suffer at the news of suffering? I haven't got this right, exactly. The wall came down in eighty-nine, and Tom came down soon after, leaving this only physical world, down from the ruined ideals murderous and stony in that wall, and already he was past being able to think such things through any more, so we didn't get to talk about it. "Of course," he said one time, "those are deformed societies."

8.

As was taught, we are  
only sparrows but  
sparrows that take  
a little longer to mate  
sparrows that read  
little sparrow books  
sparrows that tell  
sparrow stories  
sparrows that invent weapons  
sparrows that take power  
other sparrows that resist  
watch  
remember  
and others . . .

## 9.

Walking through Our metonymous Town I think I hear Longshot  
 giving an unguided tour,  
 pointing with that black-gloved hand of his to  
 Rightfully-Ours Inflated Realty  
 Sentimental Mass-Speak Greeting Cards Co.  
 Gov't Protected and Bailed-Out High-Dollar-Welfare Mobile-Capital  
 Bank & Brokerage

Most Dangerous Working Conditions Mfg.  
 Dispiriting Wage Service Co.  
 State-Sponsored Xenophobia Consultants, Ltd.  
 Nasty, Brutish & Short, Attorneys at Law  
 Students Working Against Poetry (SWAP)  
 Global Murdering, Inc.  
 Fear & Reassurance Local Evening News  
 Happy Kitchen World Advertising  
 Muscled-Man/Pouty-Woman Plumbing  
 Chicago Society for Professional Secrecy  
 AAA Orphanage Supply Co.

## 10.

But in addition to venting his potent dispraises, Tom could also celebrate and commend. Simple things pleased him into writing his praises, as they did Neruda, sometimes. I knew Tom only for the last few years of his life, when he lived in that apartment on 22nd Ave. South with only a few furnishings, a hundred books, and this that and the other, when Jesus Christ those long cigarettes he smoked lighting one off the other, the macabre black glove that couldn't keep his left hand warm (the botched operation at the VA hospital), a kind of ski glove so puffy that it seemed not to contain a hand at all when he wore it, it was an inflated thing at the end of his arm, his dictionaries his gravelly laughter his smoker's cough, his story of the box of papers including manuscripts of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* taken by mistake by the garbage men from the curb in front of his house on moving day, the phone beside him now on the vinyl couch (he says into it, laughing ruefully, "I'm in deep shit here, trying to explain what is going on in *Letter*!") and when Martin comes in one day bringing Tom groceries Tom introducing him by saying, "*This* is the McGrath that should have been the poet, *he's* the great one for stories and songs," and Martin, looking like a younger and stronger Tom, grinning and ducking his head. And the several worlds seen by Tom (several worlds even unto the Fifth World of the Hopi) existed mostly without knowing Tom was in them; and poetry, in which Tom built new windows and then threw them open, exists mostly without other poets even knowing Tom was writing. Oh poets like me of egoistical hesitations — world and poetry were rising and brewing with his secret yeast. His unabashed pleasure in saying — whether the thing said was compacted of metaphoric intensities or as common as the rain.

11.

"It's gonna be cold  
"colder than a witch's tit  
"colder than a barrel of penguin shit  
"colder than the hair on a polar bear's ass  
"colder than the heart of the ruling class"

and he laughs, shaking his head



advancing, fleeing  
wandering . . .

Our chosen mothers and fathers, if we can find them, helping us  
along . . .

Or not . . .

Some people knocked down by life  
Others knocked open

## 13.

Oh Longshot! Surely some revelation is at hand  
(your black-gloved hand)  
somewhere in  
this first or third or only world of ours, a shape  
    that should have been a flying tiger  
    a universal free election of the Buddha-nature  
    a crowd of generals and CEOs levitating in a mountain  
                    temple, renouncing their desires  
    a media magnate weeping over the Sermon on the Mount  
    the satori of Karl Marx and/or Adam Smith  
is scanned as selling power, and even now  
is morphing towards L.A. and Hong Kong

## 14.

(Interviewing him:)

                    Straw and apples  
                                    the farmyard  
the bindle stiffs

                    Anger and hope and love  
Comrades  
                    Labor and weariness and delight

His cantrip circle

                    His elaborate joke of the hornacle mine  
The cold military boredom in the Aleutians  
while elsewhere his brother was killed in the war

                                    Reznikoff's  
lanterns around a manhole and Dr. Williams's luminous empty  
room in Nantucket . . .

                    "Objects exist in a fluid world"

The League of Happy Teamsters  
                                    The shape-up  
The organizing

Proud of his expulsions from the Party for not writing  
in a way the workers could readily understand  
but proud too of his own loyalty . . .  
On the one hand Cock-eye Dunn and on the other Stephen Duck  
("the thresher poet")

                    Small triumphs and holding his ground  
but mistakes, too . . . ("Oh, I snaffled it," he said, hanging his head)

                    And: "Logic  
is the money of the mind" — not to disparage reason,  
as it's our only tool against the irrational, but wrong reason:

when it's not the partner of festival,  
of carnival, feeling, love . . .

Hart Crane

Lorca

Cisco Houston

Brecht

Rukeyser   Fearing   Roethke   MacDiarmid   Krishnamurti

"My experience," said Longshot, "has been an eccentric spiral . . ."  
and with the index finger of his good hand he traced it in the air

Coughing, shifting in pain, sitting hunched  
under a blanket that covered his shoulders . . .

"I hate paper" —

holding up that black-gloved hand:

— "especially after *this*."

The Murmansk run

The Lolo Trail

Enlightenment

The lifelong weavings of his engagement  
Poems both tactical (aimed at rousing people to act,  
aimed at *moving* them —

Longshot, his face  
tilting, a wreck, offering the example  
of a buffalo dance before the hunt)

and strategic  
(aiming to "expand consciousness")

and the great desideratum:  
the "flying tiger" of a poem that is both

## 15.

His anger wasn't pessimistic or defeated — his nature was to celebrate: "There are so many things I want to praise that I don't know where to start."

One place he started was in  
the lips and eyes, thighs and hips, of women whom he loved  
in the heaven of a hayloft  
or an open field,  
in L.A. or on an island in Greece . . .

Whether calling them by name or not,  
in the remembered time of his *Letter* he placed them,  
set them — although in the poem and it seems in his life  
their apotheosis was of the body only, not the mind . . .

Except for the firebreathers? — Emma Goldman or la Pasionaria  
or Flynn: "radical girl" her stone marker says, near  
the graves of the Haymarket martyrs in Chicago . . .

And having entered a bodily heaven with women,  
Longshot went ahead alone, leaving them behind,  
making his own representative way toward  
the charmed and humbly holy circle he revered  
of those who (men  
and women) with their hands and backs  
persisting even when work  
means seven days a week  
build and dig, sow and harvest,  
herd and assemble, cook and sew and clean and assemble . . .

So he set the women  
(mother;  
and the women he desired)  
in the great poem like jewels  
(Not what they wanted or deserved . . .)

(He said he was talking with his first publisher, Alan Swallow —  
decades ago — and Swallow said,

“Do you know where your books see the best?” And Tom said he  
said, “No, I don’t. They don’t

seem to be selling *at all*.” And Swallow said, “There’s a whorehouse  
in Wyoming where they sell

more of your books than anywhere else. The madam is crazy about  
your books, and she makes

all the girls read them, and they turn the johns onto them.”)

## 16.

A man's gonna sweet talk and give you big eye, my momma done told  
me (Ella singing it)

In a coffee house I have a little extra time  
The register ratchets and stutters, a confluence of ancient and  
modern,

tokens of wealth toted up by electrons  
The random even speckling of the wallpaper does not represent the  
clumping of matter

or of meaning  
It must be we seek meaning because it has some survival-value  
Our appetite for a meaning fullness

The young woman who serves me coffee is cheerful  
I steal time — but only from myself can I steal it, it can't be stolen  
from anyone else  
Could I steal some of the tiger's time? Could I give it away? Could  
I give it to Tom?

Last night I dreamt a hummingbird alighted on my hand, tiny,  
exquisite, blue  
But it turned out to be a kind of intensely vibrating slug that could  
leap to my hand  
from the same vine-flowers at which hummingbirds were  
sipping

A slug the same extraordinary color as the birds, even shaped like  
them, with a little pointed  
appendage that was a false beak

And a dollar-sign mark on its back  
(I shuddered and shook it from my hand)  
What is the value of the meanings I perceive?  
One of High-Plains Schoolmaster Tom's Elementary History Lessons:  
Values are always changing . . .

Symbols shifts their allegiance . . .  
(The women in his mind symbols)  
(Tigers are often symbols)

(Burning bright, or flying)  
(But what are the hummingbirds and the slugs?)

Now I must go outside, down the street,  
up into the antiseptic room,  
and see him as — he said and said  
when he was still filled with saying —  
he never wanted to be seen

As he wanted never to be

After I finish drinking this coffee and pay for it

May I have more, please?

She is so cheerful

## 17.

October 2, 1989. Saw Tom again in the hospital. He wasn't as alert as yesterday, tho' he did recognize me, and also recognized B, who had brought me to the hospital this time. Tom is too weak ever to stand again. He can smile but he cannot convey what he is smiling about; he cannot laugh any more. He can move his right arm to rub his left; yesterday he could wiggle his foot, today he doesn't. He would yawn like a small monkey. Horrible reduction of the great attentiveness, mildness of the strong spirit, silence of the golden tongue.

Yeats wrote in his journal, "The soul is an exile and without will," but the soul of Tom, not exiled in his lines but alive there in its proper home, and with will aplenty, was, even then, at that moment of Tom's leaving, and is now, shaking its striped head, glaring with fiery eyes, lashing its tail, and beats its wings once, twice, testing its strength, ready.

## 18.

Beside the broken sidewalk  
    in the representative and democratic sunlight  
a heteroglossia of silken hues  
    in the crocus and narcissus tolling  
a wild mixture of tiny silent peals and pleas

Or it might have been  
    in this beginning of spring  
this end of winter  
    pipsissisewa and sassafras . . .