

## Joe Rosenblatt: Remembrance

*(The words below were written at the invitation of Joe Rosenblatt's friends, Sharon Drache, Marci Katz, Peter Millroy, and Allan Safarik, for a celebration of Joe, held on 6 April, at Qualicum Beach, BC, where he lived. Joe died on 11 March 2019.)*

Hearing of Joe Rosenblatt's death, and having the chance to write a few words of remembrance, made me think of a favourite passage of poetry, by Allan Safarik, one of Joe's friends, and mine: "How lucky I was to have you / for even one hour", Allan writes in "One-Eyed Song of Love". The hour of my life that Joe enlightened was in fact several years, particularly precious ones, and now seemingly gone in a blink.

I ought to refer to Joe's "untimely death" at 85, because the concept "forever young" applied to him consummately. He was a never-ending fund of fantasy, imagination, wit, humour, good humour, and delight. His poetry was joyful, a constant exploration, in language and in image and in thought, and he himself was a would-be gruff presence, a cloud, but a sun of good nature could not help bursting out from it immediately and always: just have a look at the photo of him on the cover of *Top Soil*. That's Joe: then, now, always. The contrast is not just a theme of his poetry but its very form: the eternal darkness, the wet denseness of earth, that he can't help entering, enlightening, celebrating, while leaving it what it is, in its troubling richness.

There are many things for me to remember about Joe but the one that looms largest is the series of weekly afternoons he and Faye held for us young poets at his home at 15 Greensides Avenue, in the Bathurst / St. Clair Ave. West area of Toronto. He loved to host these get-togethers, and the small house on its shady street would fill up with young women and men talking, trading poems, being friends.

Joe would move in the midst of it, and once in a while take centre stage with some of his schtick. For instance, he had two large fluffy cats, which anyone could see he loved dearly. But he would pick one up, tell stories of its cantankerousness and misbehaviour, and talk vehemently about throwing it against a wall in retribution. "*THROW* it against the wall," he'd growl. You couldn't quite tell if he meant he had done it or was going to do it. But what was entirely certain was that it was the very opposite of anything that ever happened or could happen, because the large animal was purring contentedly on Joe's lap as he scratched it with gentle affection on its plush chin.

If I strain my memory, I can recall that some of those meetings, so precious that I never wanted to miss one, were in the midst of bitter winters or muddy springs, but it's hard, because in my retrospect they are always on a beautiful summer afternoon. That's what it felt like. The afternoons were thrown by Joe and Faye for us younger poets, but because he was Joe, you'd often arrive to find Gwen MacEwen sitting on a straight chair in the corner, looking around benevolently, very quiet. Once in a while, Milton Acorn would drop in. John Newlove was there a few times, during and just after the year in which he was the Jack B. McClelland Writer-in-Residence at the University of Toronto.

But the day our "project" was conceived and launched, it was only Joe and a bunch of young poets. Somebody brought out the subject and phrase, "loosely tied hands", and this seemed uproariously funny over a period of maybe a half hour of quip-exchange and rising hysteria. It concluded with a commitment to each write a poem entitled "Loosely Tied Hands": what we did at these afternoons, sometimes, was read out poems to the group, though not in any organized, working-on-them, workshoppy way. The following week, maybe two or three of the

perhaps ten poets came back with a "Loosely Tied Hands" to read. I was one, though where my poem has got to now, I don't know.

But Joe loved the idea. His poem on the theme that afternoon was brilliant, and within about a year, out came his book (!) *Loosely Tied Hands* (Windsor, ON: Black Moss Press, 1978). Not one of his widely known volumes. Tiny, exquisite, with four superb examples of Joe's fine-line pen-and-ink drawings, including appropriately a mildly scandalous one on the title page. The object of desire, though her arms are indeed raised above her head, does not seem to be the victim of any restraints; though menaced by an enormous piranha near her left side, she appears to be holding aloft a roasted boar. The drawing is called "an experiment in punk", the title of a poem in the collection--which is filled with Joe: "dragging a seed into the fertile Gloom", as he says in "the celebration", another of the book's poems.

As souvenirs from those days I have this book, signed "to Al, a fellow artist", which makes me think, "Non sum dignus", and also a "dummy" copy of *Blind Photographer* (1972) that he gave me, with his and the publisher's marks and notes to correct the book for its final version. And of course, my much-thumbed copy of *Top Soil*, the Governor General's Award-winning 1976 republication in one volume of his brilliant first four books. Rest in Mirth, Warm Irony, Visionary Imagination, and Joy, dear Joe.

—Al Moritz