

Flammable Witness

Poems by Richard Ronan

"A story houses us," Richard Ronan wrote at the beginning of one of his books, "often more utterly than does our flesh. "The story of a life—especially a literary life—might be told in terms of a sequence of metaphoric residences, a succession of dwellings, places in the world we haunt for a while, and then are gone. Gone—places as well as people. A frightening thought. Perhaps we conjure ghosts, each in our various ways, because we find their appearance far less terrifying than their absence. We say that there are traces we leave behind, signatures of our passage: "Nothing in nature is lost." When I think of Richard Ronan, of his work, of his far-too-brief residence among us, a particular Zen story comes to mind.

A man was wandering through a forest. Suddenly, he met a ferocious tiger, so he ran. The tiger gave chase. Soon the man found himself at the brink of a cliff, the tiger hot on his heels. He grabbed hold of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. Above, he could see the tiger sniffing after him. Seized with panic, the man looked below to consider his prospects. No luck; there he could see another ferocious tiger, its gaze fixed upon him. The man's life hung on the vine. Then he noticed above him two mice, one white, the other black, nibbling away at the vine. Nearby, growing out from the cliff side, was a delectable strawberry. As he clung in desperation with one hand to the vine, the man reached out and plucked the strawberry. Nothing ever tasted so sweet!

Richard Ronan—poet, playwright, and high school teacher—was born and raised in Jersey City. He attended parochial schools before going to Jersey City State College; later he began to divide his time between his native state and California. He earned a master's degree from Berkeley and wrote a thesis comparing Basho and Wallace Stevens. In 1980, Princeton University presented him with a Distinguished Teaching Award for his work with emotionally disturbed high school students in the Montclair, New Jersey, school system. In the early eighties, he moved permanently to San Francisco. His lifelong interest in Zen and Japanese culture led to his becoming a master in the Sogetsu School of Ikebana. In the end, he was able to make his living by arranging flowers. On November 3, 1989, he died at age forty-three from complications arising from AIDS.

Ronan authored six collections of poetry, the last two of which—Narratives from America (1982) and A Radiance like Wind or Water (1984)—were published by Dragon Gate in Port Townsend, Washington. These books remain in print. The best of Ronan's poetry conveys an austere poignancy of sensibility, as if Basho were wandering around in William Carlos Williams's Paterson and giving report. In Narratives from America (a volume that I believe is among the finest by an American poet in the second half of the twentieth century—go out, find a copy, and read it!), Ronan writes:

And each would
almost believe *this is the reason for*
death: to give our old facts time enough
to waken from their callousness, to grow
luminous as gas; to fast fall apart
and reveal their small ghost of sense.

Perhaps it is a ludicrous gesture on my part to imagine Ronan as some sort of Basho astray among the horrible industries and chemical debris of northeastern New Jersey. But I grew up there too. In my memories and dreams, when I return to this mythological landscape I find the same tortured holiness that Ronan renders in his poetry. How ugly it is, how beautiful. The tears of sorrow and the tears of joy spring from the same well, a poisoned purity to it. I'll let Ronan explain this by turning to an elegy he wrote for his father, whose life ended in a painful, drawn-out suffering from cancer. Entitled "Poor Flesh," it appears in A Radiance like Wind or Water:

Poor flesh
to be the host, the flammable witness,
the crux where such fire dances up itself
to brilliance and ash,
to a winter and irrelevance of flesh,
an unplace about which
we've only the split bones of guesswork
given down by next of kin.

All burn, Papa; some know they burn.
Few know the wheel that steers the flame.

Ronan knew the wheel. His poetry is one way others may know it as well. A significant body of Ronan's work remains unpublished. From among this material, two poems—"Deus et Imago Dei" and "We sit in the garden"—now appear in print for the first time, here in Terra Nova. They certainly speak for themselves, but I must say a few words about "We sit in the garden." As far as we know, this is the last poem that Richard Ronan wrote. On the day before Thanksgiving 1987, Ronan lost his lover, his dearest friend, Bill Pittman, to AIDS. The poem originates in the next day's meal, which Ronan and his friends used to give thanks and to celebrate their friend's life and passing: "Oh, that we can so love one another / in this place." It wasn't until Easter 1989 that Ronan shared this poem with those friends. Six months later, he himself passed away.

To return to the Zen story, we might say that we all have our tigers. Those that Ronan faced were the ferocious tigers of AIDS. But unlike the man hanging from the vine, Ronan saw more than one strawberry. Remarkably, he found strawberries everywhere; each one he plucked became a poem. We are indeed fortunate for this man's courage, for his flammable witness. We taste of death's sweetness in each of his poems.

—John P. O'Grady