

## Poems and Such by Richard Trachtman

### AN OLD CABIN (Columbia County, NY -1978)

A faded white cabin stands by a stream  
looking out at where the water rushes over black rocks  
and tumbles down into a shady pool.

The unfinished porch exposes its bare wood  
covered only with curling, cracked remnants of tar paper.  
Inside, the hardwood floors are still sound  
except where the open door let unknown seasons of snow and rain  
rot a small area in front of the sill.

Beyond the porch, water stained walls tell of a roof in need of repair.  
Grimy kitchen windows can not hide the brilliance  
Of October's woods reflected in the stream.  
Another room looks backward toward a quiet country road.

In the attic hundreds of wasps' nests stick to the rafters,  
Their tenants flying slowly in and out of louvered vents  
as the autumn sun warms the cool morning air.  
Strewn hickory nut shells tell of a squirrel's winter  
and forgotten mementos of a previous owner  
confirm the air of abandoned disuse.

This house needs unknown hours of repair;  
work so different from my desk bound labors  
where thinking is the only tool and words the only product.  
I accept the challenge  
and the work becomes my own restoration.

## Chasing Pigeons

I went out into the city  
and saw a boy of two or three  
chasing pigeons in the street,  
his face aglow with anticipation and delight.

And in that moment I was there again,  
a boy of two or three  
chasing pigeons in the park,  
mother standing by  
with tolerant appreciation  
of what must have seemed a game.

They were always just  
a few steps or wing beats away.  
Always holding out the promise  
of possession and fulfillment.

Sixty years and more have passed, but always  
I've been chasing pigeons in various disguises:  
women, love, success or wisdom - almost always  
just a few steps or wing beats away. Or if possessed,  
never what I imagined them to be in my anticipation.

Still I'm chasing pigeons with my brush and pen,  
but if these birds I chase are caught they will not be  
for me, but for me to give away to boys or girls  
of two or three, or seventeen or thirty five.  
And through this chase I keep myself alive

## A Stain One Can't Get Out

When I was a child I was disabled.  
Not in an obvious way that could not be denied.  
I was frail and thin, asthmatic, allergic  
And poorly coordinated  
So that in the schoolyard and the streets  
I wasn't like the other boys.  
Always chosen last for the softball team.

And I had trouble learning and needed  
All sorts of extra help, at which I chafed.  
During the day I was taken  
Out of the regular class.  
Singled out for special help  
With reading, spelling and arithmetic  
Which made me feel ashamed

And I was made to stay for extra tutoring,  
After the other children had left the school  
And were at play, and also in the summertimes,  
Which were supposed to be for respite and for fun.  
So in the classroom, too, and in my life  
I was not like the other children,  
But felt less; somehow inferior and stupid.  
And I resented it, including all the help.

No, my disability was not the obvious kind  
Which could not be denied.  
But still I felt the pity or concern  
Of parents, teachers and some children  
Who were kind and the disdain of others who were not.

And I did not like it, wanted to deny it,  
And daydreamed in the classroom,  
Doodled in my homework book  
Or watched butterflies during ball games  
As grounders sped on past me  
Where I was relegated to the outfield.

I resented all the help, but help it did.  
I learned to read if not quickly voraciously  
(at least mystery and detective stories,  
Where heroes triumph, overcome  
And punish the assaults of others.)  
I earned a Ph.D. and authored several books  
So no one could ever say that I was stupid.

And I became a social worker and psychotherapist  
Helping and defending others who are disabled,  
Though not in obvious ways that can not be denied,  
And a friendly man and loving husband, or at least I try,  
And do succeed much of the time in feeling grateful  
For my blessings, and try to forget about the past.

But I can not escape the stain of my humiliation.  
I can not get it out, and in the day-time  
I am plagued with recurring fantasies of  
Unfairness and abuse  
Against which I rail, but also am afraid  
Of possible retaliation for my anger,  
And my defense of the position I feel I must defend

And in my dreams I often am in danger  
Of being attacked and having to defend myself.  
I know these dreams and fantasies are projections  
(I am a psychotherapist after all)  
Of my anger at the stored memories  
Of real or imagined humiliations and unfairness.

Tonight I had another kind of dream.  
In it I was being driven by my father  
From our home in Brooklyn to a new school  
In Manhattan, where I had recently enrolled.  
And I pointed out to him how much further  
It was I had to go than his daily trips  
To see his patients at the hospital.

Then there was a handsome black man,  
A boy really; a student about my age.

He had been put in jail the previous night,  
But had been treated well because they thought  
He was a minister, and came to him for help.  
(As they come to me when I am awake.)  
I commented that it was a good thing  
They had not realized that he was just a boy.

He looked at me and seemed surprised, saying  
That I seemed to be really angry, and I replied  
That it really did upset me to think that boys,  
Or others vulnerable to the pity or disdain of those  
who really did not know them, could be discounted.  
Then I realized it was not that I was just upset,  
But also angry as he had suggested.

We went into an auditorium and I wanted to sit  
Right next to him, but found his book bag on that seat.  
I wished for him to lift it up to make a place for me.  
But then I understood that it would be more comfortable for him  
If I put my bag with his and sat one seat away,  
Where we could still be close, but not so crowded.

And I felt as if he were like a brother.

POEM in Covid-19 time  
No Laughing Matter

Mia Culpa  
On this day I did  
Not cover up my cough  
I let my sneeze get away

I'm finding that it's not so easy  
To wear a mask while I'm eating  
Or when taking breaths  
If I am wheezy

I also find that it's not easy  
Wearing masks while I'm imbibing  
At the dentist for a cleaning  
or showing you that I am smiling

But yes I hear you loud and clear  
This virus is no laughing matter  
Not for treatment cavalier  
I know it's not, I'm no mad hatter

I'm coughing yes but I've no fever  
Chest is tight but lungs are clear,  
So what I've got's the common cold  
Not to worry yet my dear

But you don't know that  
And so you say  
Cover up your coughs and sneezes  
Or else, just stay the hell away

This really is no laughing matter  
So let's not joke for if I do  
Belly laughs will lead to coughing  
Up germs I might pass on to you.

## Swallows Above My Garden

A quarter century, more or less, of swallows  
Stormed my morning garden, soaring, chasing  
Each other in swirling, swerving graceful flight,  
Sometimes forming pairs and kissing  
In mid-air creating a tableau of playful fun, but  
Serious in intent to find and capture prey enough  
For this year's crop of new or fledgling chicks.

Three quarters of a century and then a bit  
Slowed somewhat by age and stiffened joints  
But able still to plant and tend this garden  
Which these birds unknowingly defend  
From slugs and bugs and marauding beetles  
My beans and chard, zucchini and tomatoes  
Which sustain my body and my intention  
To plant a garden once again next year.

The Scrawny Cat (to the tune of Froggie went a courtin)

There was a big old scrawny cat, um hum, um hum  
There was a big old scrawny cat, um hum  
There was a big old scrawny cat  
he wasn't fat 'cause he didn't eat rats, um hum, um hum, um hum

Little birds are nice to see, um hum, um hum  
Little birds are nice to see, um hum  
Little birds are nice to see  
but I'd rather have them inside of me, um hum, um hum, um hum

A big black dog came to have some fun, um hum, um hum  
A big black dog came to have some fun, um hum  
A big black dog came to have some fun  
but the cat hissed at him and made him run, um hum, um hum, um hum

Then the scrawny cat felt all alone, um hum, um hum  
The scrawny cat felt all alone, um hum  
The scrawny cat felt all alone,  
he was sorry for everything he'd done, um hum, um hum, um hum

He called them up on his cell phone, um hum, um hum  
He called them up on his cell phone, um hum,  
He called them up on his cell phone  
told the dog to come and bring his bone, um hum, um hum, um hum

You birds come back another day, um hum, um hum  
You birds come back another day, um hum  
You birds come back another day,  
then you and the dog an I can play, um hum, um hum, um hum.

## I AM

I am  
the confluence of streams  
I see  
and call an eddy.

I know it's there,  
real,  
because I see leaves  
and other detritus  
caught in its sphere,  
circling round and round  
until they escape,  
replaced by others  
that still mark the confluence of streams  
I know is real,  
call an eddy

Water escapes  
replaced by more,  
tumbling down  
to river sea evaporation clouds rain  
becoming  
(has been)  
earth grass forest animals peep runoff  
finding its way  
(again)  
back to the confluence of streams  
I see,  
call an eddy,  
which I am.

## THE OLD OMEGA WATCH

I inherited the old self winding Omega watch when my father died.  
It was given to him, by my mother, on his fiftieth birthday  
On its back were the words "To dad from mom and the boys"  
and the date; 2-13-53.

By the time I received it the self winding function  
Supposed to be powered by a moving wrist  
No longer worked and the time had to be set  
Each day and the watch to be wound by hand.

I treasured this reminder of my father  
And tried to have it fixed, at some expense  
But, still, its self winding function never returned.  
So I wore it only on special occasions as a talisman.

Now I am age 80 and have decided it is time  
To wind it up and set the time each day  
To let me know each days time  
While my own time is passing.

The old Omega watch runs slow some days  
But so do I and I must wind up and reset  
Myself each morning to keep on moving  
Until my mechanisms fail and time runs out.

## SEPARATE AND A PART

One hundred thousand bits of colored shell,  
broken crabs and strands of twisted grass,  
torn from shallow ocean beds by storm  
or by the ceaseless pull of lunar tides,  
lie among the shifting grains of sand  
'till wind and waves and hungry terns and gulls  
return them to the earth from which they came.

Each of these – each shell or crab or twisted strand of grass,  
each hungry tern or gull or little creature of the sand,  
and I, who see the pattern which they form  
between the sky that silhouettes the dunes  
and waves beneath whose depths may pass leviathan  
or some great shark that stirs the fear of men

Each of these a separate life does sign,  
a self unique as any grain of sand,  
separate from all others, but a part  
of that great pattern formed by tides  
and creatures living off each other; off the shells  
that like themselves did sign a separate life,  
a self which in the end, like every other,  
must recede into that pattern which they form,  
no longer to be separate but a part.

## IMMARTALITY

Why do I paint? Not for immortality but  
to be as alive as possible and, while I am able,  
to see more clearly and to express myself  
as fully as I can while I am still alive.

I tell myself that I am not afraid to die  
but hope to live into a good old age,  
free of suffering, and then go peacefully,  
merging into the great unity of everything.

Why then does it seem important to me  
To be remembered fondly and  
perhaps with admiration for who I was,  
or for what I did and what I left behind?

If I were truly dead, would it matter?  
What difference would it, could it make  
if I were to be forgotten, since I know  
that the end really is the end.

That I, me, ego will no longer exist  
no Self to care about fond memories  
or admiration for who I was  
or what I did or did not do?

Here's the catch. I really am not  
sure that the end really is the end  
that I would not, somehow recall  
a world of beauty that I left behind.

I desire some connection not just with  
those who will come after me but those  
who went before. But I would not wish  
to disturb them in their peaceful oblivion.

I am less sanguine about the fate of art,  
my own and that of others, especially  
those works of quality which evoke feeling

or a sense of place to be remembered.

The best of what I do I want to survive, be kept  
and passed on by family, friends or strangers  
who can appreciate what I have done and,  
if only for a time, to see what I have seen.

And I hope, someday, to pass on the art I own,  
works by family, friends and other artists,  
for others to enjoy. It would be a shame  
if they were to end up on a rubbish heap.

So, yes, even more than a wish to survive myself  
I am concerned with immortality; the wish for  
the best and most creative of my paintings  
to survive for other people to see

Not who I was, but what I created, and maybe  
they will remember me, but even if they don't,  
at least be glad that I was here to paint  
and appreciate the work I left behind.