

Richard Selig (1929-1957)

Richard Selig

POEMS



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INTRODUCTION

Richard Selig was a young American poet of the greatest promise, who died in New York in 1957 at the age of 27. These poems are a small proportion of those he wrote between perhaps 1951 and his death. Most of the comparatively early ones survived haphazardly in a file, and some only by being printed in magazines. Not long before his death he made a rigorous selection of his own poems, some of which he then revised, but at the same time he destroyed the bulk of what he rejected, so that although the present collection has been made from everything that could be found, it represents his own wishes at some points more closely than others. He had listed fifteen poems, entirely excluding the early ones (not all of which he worked through) and with no prediction of the last handful he was to write. The list made in pencil in a single evening with a calculation about pages, and never afterwards revised; it decided him at the time that he had too few poems for a book.

This book was conceived in the belief that not only his boundless promise and the individual temper of his talent, but the actual size of his achievement were of such importance in his generation that they justified some collection, however small. He died on the threshold of his success. Wishing that the book should be the most adequate picture it was possible to give of an important poet of my own generation, I was very anxious not to encumber it with second-rate work, and I hope I would not have been deterred from confining it to ten or eleven good poems, if that had been necessary. But soon after the news of Richard's death came the first copies of a series of poems that had fulfilled his promise in such a way that his voice took on in them the authority of a complete and new poet. Some time after this, many fascinating poems and fragments we had never seen came to light from a huge folder of early work which had somehow survived the general slaughter. Their interest was great enough to make them candidates for what seemed likely to be his only book.

At the last moment, an important folder of Richard's poems and a verse play came to light in his old rooms at Oxford. The poems in this folder were all or nearly all written in America in 1951 and 1952, some of them, but not all, survive in manuscript versions in his diaries and note-books. The folder has a title page, Lyric and Prose Poems, and it may represent his first attempt at a book. One or two of the poems were included in his Fantasy pamphlet, but there are others better than these which simply dropped out of sight. The verse play is lightweight, I had heard him speak about it with a certain scornful affection, but he never overvalued it. The best two lines of it are:

*Actaeon was chased by his very own hounds
And he was killed by their accurate
wounds...*

There are many better fragments in his other unpublished poems.

In the choice of his last work I have tried to be absolutely rigorous. With the poems of the period when I knew him, when he was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, I may have been a little more generous than he apparently was himself, but still parsimoniously just. Although I included everything on his own list (in a few cases with reserved judgment) I left uncollected poems he printed during his lifetime. The small selection I have given of his early work has been chosen for its variety and the light it throws on his development. It was mostly written when he was studying writing under Theodore Roethke. One or two poems had an experimental interest, or were the first treatment of a theme he later made important. In no case anywhere in the collection has a poem been included for the sake of a single or a few good lines.

The development of Richard's poetry appears in the light of his unpublished work as steadier and more interesting, because more purposeful, than had at first seemed clear. It was not unconnected with the size and nature of his subjects. His style

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had undergone the sternest academic refinement under Theodore Roethke, and he was interested from the beginning in a variety of poetic forms. There was an airy and insubstantial canzonetta, for which he still felt an affection several years after writing it, startling to those who were used to the massive vigour of his Oxford poems. But his advance was sure-footed, and always in an area central to his subject. His verse became more and more fitted to say the things he had to say; the light strength of his first experiments combined in his last few poems with the powerful rhetoric he had adapted to slowly maturing thoughts, and which he was finally able to fuse into a few direct and compact lines.

His interest in a long, searching, rather Elizabethan line was not an Oxford discovery, although its development certainly fitted his Oxford preoccupations, the study of Shakespeare and the hammering out of his own philosophy of life. The greatest issues were at that time the nucleus of his mind's life. They were already present in *December, 1951*, his earliest poem, and in *The Green World*, written a year or two later. Poems like *The Phoenix* were a direct development of these. At the same time he never ceased trying to temper the strength of these brooding poems, and his early, probably unfinished poem *The Soldiers*, and a poem like *The Prairie* show the same bias for particularity (perhaps the most genuine sign of an authentic poet) that make possible *The way I see you*, and in the end *A small request*.

His own written and published lines worked for years in his imagination, both the conceptions and the lines themselves. In several unpublished poems there are lines which affected him in this way, and the strong conception of human life and of the universe which was the core of so many of his poems was present in the earliest. This conception underwent a development impossible to separate from that of his poetry. It was not only their technique which altered, but the growth was at once linguistic and intellectual; the poetry he in the end wrote would not have been attainable except as a personal development. To put it in the opposite way, his most personal process was his poetry, and the power which determined his poetic development was the pressure of his growth.

Richard was everything that he experienced. He was the great cat in the zoo downtown, he was the boys in Brooklyn growing old and the Young Criminal beautiful as lilies, he was Orestes and the boy Theseus, he was the birds above the estuary

at Seattle, and the motorcyclist on the Wall of Death.

Mankind mounts his metal Pegasus,
And rides in wall his spine a stiff horizon,
His arms an effeminate branch loose at the wrists,
His thighs grip the grumbling equine engine....

Images of bewilderment, of aggression, and of rough life carried in his later work the overtones his voice carried, tones that were latent or implicit in his violence from the beginning. He fell on books as he did on life with a violent and exigent hunger, and the history of his talent is also the history of its dissatisfaction.

*... when the keeper throws you meat, you're
not grateful.*

re are questions of biography too deep and far-reaching to be asked by a friend or a critic, and even if that were not so, my intention is to discuss here only what directly concerns his poetry. But it ought to be said that he was not unhappy, that his restless, comprehensive love of life was one of his most permanent qualities, and that in the last year and a half before he died his poetry was certainly affected by his very happy marriage. It was also of course affected by his disease, from the consciousness of which some of the terrible but beautiful images of his poems seem to have come.

*But the soul is relentless and, though it is
the most
Susceptible to, is the least alterable by pain.*

*

Factual accounts of Richard Selig's life and tributes to him have appeared in *Gemini* (now no longer printed) which is reprinted below, and in *Encounter* for April 1958, and elsewhere. Thanks are due to Mr. Wesley Wehr for collecting some early work, to the President of Magdalen College Oxford, to Dr. Bennett, to Mr. Alan Pryce-Jones for advice, and to Mr. Quentin Stevenson, who at an early stage made an accurate and most helpful choice of the twenty best poems.

All the journals, manuscripts, typescripts, and some letters are in the library of Harvard University.

Of Richard himself no more need be said, since his poems say enough, and this collection is not a monument of piety but of poetry.

- Peter Levi, sj

Peter Levi (1931-2000) was a friend of Richard Selig and of Mary O'Hara. He was best man at their Oxford wedding. Later he was to become Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1984-1989). Below are a few of Mary O'Hara favourite poems from the above collection, now out of print. Some of them she has put to music and recorded.

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A SMALL REQUEST

You who feel the instructive hand of God
Raise boils and welts upon your chosen skin,
Whose self-affliction quells the offended rod
And gets you up the hillside out of sin,

You whose suffering is a sign of grace,
You whose privilege is to feel more pain,
Whose hope is Heaven and to see God's face
Please recall how gently falls the rain;

And when, if you remember me, you pray,
Pray thus for me: "Though he loves the earth
Too much, do not send his soul away:
Give him a small garden and a hearth".

FROM THE SIXTEENTH FLOOR

Pardoning this borough for its evil,
I look past the tops of buildings, to where
The sky is. Remembering that man's malice,
This man's fate: the former's cunning,
The latter's jeopardy – seeing the sky,
Placid in spite of soot and heartache,
I am reminded to pray. Redemption,
Like our janitor, comes as we go home:
A stooped man turning out the lights.

EROS

His heart held a hundred roses,
Roses red as thundering Mars:
His heart was a city full of love,
Assaulted city, sieging stars.

The rain that fell all day
From heaven, down from heaven falling,
Could not melt his heart away
Nor flood, that red vine killing.

Green stones, dark earth, O Love!
The lips of all the world foretelling,
Red lips foretell that city's fall
And darkness falling over all.

With falling dark the milky stars,
Cold white stars encircled him:
Around the city heaven's wars
Did rend him limb from limb.

But limb by limb revived, O love!
The single sun came up once more.
A strange explosion in the heart
Did, in her arms, that vine restore.

WHERE BUBBLES DAWDLE

Where bubbles dawdle, green wands wave and
tadpoles jerk;
Where slow pond water slowly scurling flows,
Seeming still- the sky and half the meadow
mirrored;
And moderate Nature rests in pondside reeds,
Drowns in the meadow, dreams in water
volumes:
Everywhere one looks, tranquillity does soothe
the gaze,
Peace placates the wild senses, and truth lies
sleeping.
Look down into the pond, change your element.
Let Fancy take you. Plunge down. Your ear
cannot hear,
Your lings dare not stir. Yet the blood buzzes:
Fancy feeds you air. Your eyes are clear.
You swim among silence in the green world.

(Beginning of a long poem unwritten. This was the last thing
Richard Selig wrote.)

Biographical Note: Richard Selig

Richard Selig was born in New York City on October 29, 1929, the son of Ambrose Selig, a Wall Street corporation lawyer. He graduated from McKinley High School in Washington, D.C., with the American Legion medal.

He studied Psychology at the Occidental College of Los Angeles, Art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Drama and Greek at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., French at the Sorbonne and English at the University of Washington in Seattle, from where he graduated in August 1952, and where he later held a teaching fellowship.

During his college days there were intermittent periods when he undertook various trades: picture frame maker, woodworking mechanic on the Boeing 707, stoker on the collier .s. Isaac T. Mann, motion picture extra and actor.

From 1953 to 1956 he resided at Magdalen College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar from Pacific Northwest. In September 1956 he left England and returned with his wife to New York where he worked as a public relations writer with the Western Electric Company.

He died on October 14th, 1957