

THE ROSEGILL COLLECTION



Phyliss Coghill Brown

November 20, 1994

Dear Meredith,

Buffy Morgan, my poetry teacher, urged me to send you these poems written at or about Rosegill.

I think of them as "The Rosegill Collection" — and send them now as a belated birthday gift.

So glad the Arabs didn't come for the Fly-in! I feared they'd spirit you away —

—Dreyfus

[In 1994, we invited Libya's Col. Mu' ammar Qadhafi to the annual 'Oyster Fly-In' held at Rosegill. It was a publicity stunt.—Alfred Scott]



PHYLLIS COGHILL BROWN, [1920-1996].

With the design and writing of the Life Planning Seminar, Phyllis launched the Women's Resource Center where the seminar has been taught to more than 2000 women since 1976. Her inspiring energy led her to become one of the midwives of TIDES—'an anthology of creative works of women in the second half of life'—when it was born in the spring of 1992, and then TIDES Volume Two of 1993. She published both poetry and prose in that first edition and has work in *The New Virginia Review*. She was a gifted teacher, counselor and writer who shared her insights about life and people, helping others find meaning and direction in their own life experiences.

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Palette of the Salt Marsh

Green-gold the cord grass,
the salt meadow grass.
Cobalt the shadows
of clouds on the marsh.

Emerald dragonflies
soaring in tandem;
sapphire damselflies
on the rose mallows.

Raw umber the mud
held by the marsh roots;
sky-bright the dun creeks
like veins through the marsh.

Snow white the egrets
fishing the tide pools;
silver the minnows
between their black legs.

Crimson epaulettes
flashing on blackbirds;
apricot breasts of
barn swallows skimming.

Cadmium orange
the sun at setting;
purple the dusk that
turns aubergine night.

The Night the Herons Flew

There was a time on Mobjack Bay,
the sloop anchored bow to wind,
when you, who always see
beyond horizons, said
The wind is from Brazil...
Imagining its course
up the Atlantic
through the Capes,
up the Chesapeake
and into this bay,
we ate our lobster salad
in the cockpit, drank pinot grigio
and watched the sun going down.

A sudden gust, the sloop yawed,
and our view veered from
a western sky of fushia and rose
to the east and...a wall of fog.
No sky, no sandspit, no bay, nothing.
Then out of the western glow
flew one Great Blue heron,
rose-tinged, heading east,
and then another and another,
in slow majestic flight.
From every estuary of the bay
like ancient pterodactyls
the great birds flew
a compass course east,
vanishing into the wall of fog
where the world stopped.

Mystified, we gazed in wonder
as afterglow became deep dusk
and the last lumen
absorbed in dense obscurity—
and still the herons flew.
We saw all the herons of the Earth
fly east off
the edge of the planet.
We could not stop them...

Trust

A fish between his teeth,
the sleek dark otter breaks
the still surface of the creek
at dusk with the ripple
of his low bow wave.

He is swimming towards
this ancient, crooked dock
where we have seen before
only his skat, never him;
only his tracks, never him.
We do not breathe.

But he sees us and slows.
What must he think of
our verticality in his
horizontal watery world?
We stand immobile as
the weathered boathouse.
Only our eyes move, and
the flow of our love
for wild things.

He trusts. And slides beneath the dock.
Beyond, in the darkening water, he swings
wide and seems to question us
once more. And trusts again.
For now he shares the
deepest secret of his life—
the hidden entrance to his den;
the deepest value of his life—
the safety of his mate and young.

Vertical and dry, awkward-looking beasts,
so foreign to his liquid
latitudes of grace, we yet
conveyed in prayerlike silence
our awe, our vulnerability to love.
We will not break his trust

or show you the way he went.

My Constant Sky

Do not tell me the Earth revolves
or that the planets orbit suns.
The sky above this place is constant.
Infinite in depth, perhaps,
yet it is absolute.

Beyond the waters and the woods
defining these perimeters
Chaos may erupt, obscurity
descend, but here within these wide
horizons the sky endures.

Oh, variables do exist:—
the sun may fire the pinetrees to the East
before it climbs across the day;
clouds swirl and march;
flocks of birds gust like wind.
But in the night the faithful constellations
return—Orion, the Great and Little Bears,
Cassiopeia, the Pliades. I feel
the fixedness of their constancy
and plant myself beneath them.

The Kings of Thebes

A north wind blew the water
out the Bay, leaving the low tide
in our river so far from the shore
that I could walk the sands beyond
the fallen cliffs whose slippery clay
had blocked our way for many years.

I found the green and shady valley where
red foxes have a den beneath swamp maple
whose leaves turned silver in the shivering wind.
Bayberry, willow, a climbing wild rose;
spring water in rivulets fanning out
past bleached and polished trunks of uprooted trees.

Beyond, the high cliffs had eroded more.
Striations of new color had appeared—
pale salmon clay between bog iron seams,
a sand so fine, so white, it had the greyish
tinge of pearls and sifted vulnerably in drifts.

And then I saw ahead the great stone
ramp, half covered by the desert sand
leading to the wall of high reliefs,
storm-sculpted in formal rows, towering, majestic—
the Kings of Thebes in sandstone of the Nile.

Looking upward, I held a hand to shield
my eyes against the blazing desert sun,
tracing every splendid form to its height.
But though I could have sworn I was at Thebes,
I found each russet sandstone head was crowned—
almost disguised—by wreaths of blackberry snow.

The Life Vest

We walked the winter beach heads down,
butting into the raw north wind,
half-deafened by the crashing waves
of broken ice on the shelving beach.
Ice that had stretched to the distant shore—
yesterday flat and still as lead—
had thawed and was cut adrift by the tides,
then ground by the currents and the wind
until it moved once more in swells,
pulsing with thrusts of jagged power.
And every comber randomly
had tossed to shards obstructions in its path.

The duck blind that our grandson helped to build
we recognized in splintered slabs of pine
and fragments of salt-burned cedar boughs.
Bleached sticks, grey feathers, and spines of fish
were fractured remnants of an offshore nest
where osprey generations bred their young.
The twisted carcass of one small duck—
and something floating in the tide's backwash,
its colors brilliant blue and white. I stopped,
but knew before I turned it with my prod.
The life vest ...of a child. All gaily striped.
We hung it high up on a scrub oak tree,
then turned back to our blithe scavenging.

And yet it will not leave me now.
I see a story every day,
those tropic stripes in icy seas.

Plane Geometry

Seven blades of beach grass
segment the scene I view
from the April-cool dune sands
where I lie winter-bleached
surveying the emptiness
of pale smooth sea and sky.
The delineating grasses
form geometry—or art—
presenting me with
trapezoids
and triangles
and parallelograms.

Did Euclid lie upon Aegean shores,
Pythagoras beside the Nile
gazing through papyrus
to dream their propositions
of the planes of space?

The Treachery of Winter

A crystal branch,
wind-sculpted drifts,
the silence of deep snow,
the singing blades that
echoed as they carved
the frozen ponds—
I celebrated Winter!

Sweeping the snow ahead,
I'd find the hidden creek
and swiftly slide into
its tunnel of snow-arched limbs.
Weaving and swirling, I'd skate on,
lit with joy, alive in the bracing cold.
Young and skilled and free,
adoring the gift of Winter!

A change began in me
the day I traced doe tracks
down the frozen woodland lake to
the hole all ragged-edged and newly-glazed
(deep as a quarry there)
where all tracks disappeared.
I stood like Alice, stunned
by the view of another world.

Now I see the treachery
of Winter's heartless cold.
I break my brittle
bones on unforgiving ice,
grow anxious when my lover shovels snow,
and bitter when he leaves me in the storm.
I watch the river freeze
from shore to shore
trapping a heron in its grasp.

I worry that my friend
is snowbound in the mountains
with a woodpile running low.
I anguish for the homeless
my child must house tonight in
overflowing shelters of the city.
My current's gone, the furnace off,
the frozen pipes have burst.

Oh, I do remember the singing ice,
but I've given away my skates.

Dreaming The Celebration

Alone in the beached dinghy, waiting,
the woman dozes, loses track
of the tide, and finds herself
midstream, adrift in the deepest dark
of the night. A frantic struggle,
paddling through black water until
the keel crunches again on crushed shells.
From the shelter of willows
she hears but cannot see fishermen
scanning their nets in the shallows.

Something changes. Overhead soft broken
clouds of mauve and primrose.
And in this fresh born light
the woman sees now the long narrow
arcaded Renaissance porch
newly thrusting into the bay.
On it along, long white-clothed
table set with tall white tapers
burning. Guests arrive bearing
more lighted candles as morning comes.
They will sit only on one side
of the long narrow white-clothed table
on the long narrow arcaded porch.

The mystical vision comes
clear to the woman
in a sudden revelation:—
This is the Celebration
taking place all over the world
at Sunrise on this Festival Day.
She sees it all at once—
everywhere the long
white-clothed tables on the
long narrow arcaded porches;
everywhere the Celebrants
with their joy-filled faces,
with their burning tapers
in the sunrise of the world.

Near the woman
on the crushed shell beach
an old man in white linen
instructs his manservant
to prepare for the extra guest
who will come soon.

Encounter on the Dam

Past sunset we went for a ride, heading east
slowly along the sandy farm lane,
the old road from one farm to the other,
our bicycles silent between the hedgerows,
ourselves silent in the hushed afterglow.
Soon the road dipped between steepening banks,
the old layers of earth held by roots and vines—
honeysuckle, poisonoak, Virginia
creeper and long arm-thick ropes of wild grape.
Peeled white limbs of sycamore arched above.

In green twilight we rode the earthen dam
looking down on the ivy-tangled brick ruins
of an old mill the spillway used to serve.
The Lower Lake was ghostly with its drowned trees.
To the south the Upper Lake spread like fingers
between the high banks of pale pink-cupped laurel.
A snowy egret had perched for the night
on a bare branch of an overhanging pine.
The roll of a carp, the hum of an insect,
all else was silence as twilight thickened.

We reached the padlocked gate of the derelict farm
and glanced uneasily at abandoned sheds
and silos whose loose tin rattled eerily
in the faintest breeze of this late hour.
Without a word we wheeled in a slow circle
to head back to our own bright habitation.

Then stopped... Moving out of the scrub beside the lake,
there, just ahead of us, was a grey fox.
Long-legged, lean and rangy, with tattered fur,
he walked as though thoughtfully, knowing his route
but with no anxiety, no sense of threat.
Without hurry he traveled along the dam and
slipped under the strands of rusted barbed wire,
down into the ivied ruins of the mill.

And then the second one appeared—his mate?—
I was accustomed to the fox of flaming brush
with neat black boots and mask of a reveler.
One had sat at our gate at dawn and dusk
as though taunting us to come out and play.
But here was a vixen wild and private,
self contained on her spare, thin legs, undaunted
by her meager pelt, her gaunt and scrawny form.
She crossed the dam and was gone like a shadow.
It was a long while before we could move.
“Do you think they saw us?” I had to ask you.
“Of course. But they knew we were not hunters.”

Edges

The edges of the day were soft;
Ground fog at dawn,
Blue haze on the far shore
In the warmth of noon,
Mellow contours where the fresh ploughed fields
Merged with opal clouds of setting sun.

But the river had been crystal!
The sharp light of winter
Splintering in clear shallows,
Shattering into shards of gold
So bright and glittering
They pierced the soul.

I brought them home,
To hold the magic to me...
Or thought I had.
But in the night I reached to grasp
Those relics of lucidity,
Exactitudes of sparkling truths,
And clutched, instead, an insubstantial
Moonlit shadowed mist
Ephemeral as drifting cloud.

Had the crystal brilliance
Of the vision dimmed,
The alchemy of gold eclipsed?
Or was it I, gone soft at the edge
Like the day, losing clarity,
Ephemeral myself?

Quantity Time

From the perspective
Of my clearly numbered days
I count:
One noon of happiness
Surrounded by three generations
Riding six bicycles
Dodging two springing dogs
Down the mile and a half lane
To see ten swans on the river,
One eagle on a pine tree,
Seven snow geese flying.

But then I noticed
It was you who
Toted up the
Tracks of otter
And the hoofprints
Of running deer.
And when you presented me with
The count of twenty-eight
Wild turkeys in the field
I suddenly knew
It was the quality of your seeing
That had taught me,
So naturally, with love,
To value this very simple
Here and now
Arithmetic of bliss.