

Jack RIP

When I look at my calendar, I see that two weekends ago I have listed a reading in White River Junction: Jack Wiler and Teresa Carson reading their poetry. Between then and now I have heard them read, e-mailed Jack about how excellent the reading was, heard from Jack about his pleasure with the reading and then learned via e-mail that Jack had died. As George Harrison once put it, “It’s all too much.”

When I think about Jack, which I have been doing over and over and over, it puts me in mind of when I first discovered William Blake’s work in an anthology in college. I sat in the back of a classroom reading Blake’s proverbs and wondering how they ever let this guy into the book. Even then I realized there were two worlds of poetry. One was the sanctioned world where people accumulated prizes and reputations. Some of those people were genuine poets and many others added to the mountain of frivolity, claptrap and sentimentality the human race is permanently enamored of. The other world was much murkier but it was where all that couldn’t be sussed out by the age resided—supposed madmen like Blake, for instance. It was also where many of those poems resided that burnt a hole in people’s hands and hearts so that they had to pass them on to others. It was where the phrase “You gotta hear this” resided.

Jack was very much a “you-gotta-hear-this” poet. I’ve lost track of the number of people, particularly young people, to whom I have given Jack’s work and who have been amazed and delighted. They didn’t know such a poet existed and, indeed, where would they find out. Jack’s poetry specialized in burning every bridge he could get his hands on. He had no use for cant, thereby removing himself permanently from the playing fields of academe. A playful moralist, he consistently presented himself and the rest of humanity in a wonderfully candid light—people were remarkable creatures and people were full of shit.

It’s an attitude I have never had an argument with. Once when I was writing a book about teaching poetry, I called Jack up and told him I wanted to put a poem by him in the book. The rub was that the book would likely be used by teachers in schools--people who instinctively shied away from obscenity. “Do you have any poems that don’t have ‘fuck’ in them?” I asked. A pause ensued at his end of the phone. “I don’t think so,” he answered, “but I’ll look.” It wasn’t that Jack reveled in obscenity. It was rather, as with other satirists, that if you were going to go down into the guts of humanity, you better be ready to use gutty language—all the stuff of making nasty.

Many people at this point in time believe in poetry as self-expression but I’m not sure how many believe in poetry as poetry. Jack very much did. When he said to me that his career was in the toilet, my response was, “Where else would you want it to be?” Again, he paused and then said, “Well....” That word contained all his insight, smarts, bravado, hurt, and passion. He knew he wasn’t the official version. Some days he wanted to be but that’s understandable. Life wore Jack down plenty but he kept getting up, almost literally rising from the dead. His friends all knew

how sick he was but who expected him to die? Jack had his finger permanently in the poetry socket and emitted real electricity. When you heard him read, you felt something very important was at stake. Are you going to start waking up or are you not?

Jack would be making fun of any number of things I have written here. That was who he was. I will always miss him. (2009)