**“The Stuff of Fancy and One Silk Belief”**

*In Memoriam: F.D. Reeve*

Honors College, Wesleyan University, September 20, 2013

Admiral Peary’s Island—I could see it in the distance, appearing and disappearing amidst the swells of Casco Bay. Franklin, who had directed my senior thesis some years before and who had read a poem at my wedding, was maneuvering the dinghy through the swells, charting as direct a course as possible and yet trying to find level water. As he labored with the oars, I turned a darker shade of green. We had been sailing for a couple of days, and through sheer force of will I had commanded my viscera to behave, not wanting to appear weak to the man I so idolized. Upon reaching the island, I spent an hour in the good Admiral’s bathroom, at one point telling Franklin that he should return to the dinghy without me: I simply couldn’t go back to the merciless seesaw of the waves. Peary, you will recall, was the first man to reach the North Pole. As I ponder my thirty-three year friendship with Franklin, I think how Peary-like he was: the same spirit of self-reliant discovery, applied to life and politics and, of course, the literary arts, animated him and, I should say, his marvelous teaching.

That teaching included memorable courses in literature and creative writing, but it also extended to the table saw and chainsaw and countless other mechanical arts. Franklin, I discovered, was as generous in the woods as he was in the classroom—and thank god. Once, he had to rescue me from a tree-felling predicament: while trying to take down some poplars for firewood, I miscalculated how they would fall and instead erected a towering, yet thoroughly inadvertent, teepee. Another time, he had to save me from a piano moving disaster. My mother-in-law had shipped an old upright to our home in Vermont. My wife had begun taking lessons again—this time from the woman who was teaching Ignat Solzhenitsyn, the great writer’s son. As I attempted to get the steel-backed monster inside, it went *through* the deck—in the exact shape of an upright piano—and sunk into the wet soil below. (The deck was half-rotten and in desperate need of repair.) As if he were Archimedes himself, Franklin rigged a block-and-tack pulley system and calmly dislodged the behemoth. Looking back on my ineptitude, I now see that the piano was of a piece with my poems and with the life I was trying to forge. As musical instruments in their own right, what those poems and that life required was someone to patiently coax them out of the mud. Franklin played that role gloriously.

A kind of spiritual largess was always on display. When a friend of mine, a gynecological surgeon newly married and just out of medical school, was paralyzed in a freak car accident, he invited her and her husband to Vermont; by the end of the weekend, he had helped them to uncover a more livable future. He could connect with people by meeting them on their own terms and by nudging them into a more expansive version of themselves. I will always remember when he made Thanksgiving dinner at the soup kitchen I managed in Florida. Franklin cheerfully improved not only the assembly line process, but also the ethos that pervaded the endeavor. He enthralled everyone—especially the “clients,” as the hungry were termed. The next day, on a walk in Paynes Prairie, we happened upon a bull gator, some 12 feet long. As his poems make clear, Franklin revered the natural world: his generosity made room for, and indeed honored, its mute splendor. He looked at the gator, utterly fascinated; the gator looked back at him, smiling. (That’s code for it bared its teeth.) It then moved off of the path on which we stood and into the swamp below. For months afterward, I joked that Franklin had once again saved my life.

And so, what a pleasure it was to occasionally return the gift of generosity, in however small a way. In the late 1980s, I helped to arrange the premiere of *Nightway*, Franklin’s long poem about the Navajo nine-day ceremony of personal purification, which had been set to music and dance, at the boarding school where I taught. The following night it opened at the New School in New York. Years later, I helped to arrange a production of *The Puzzle Master*, another long poem set to music, at Grinnell College where I now teach. I mention these two works because in them, as in the Urban Stampede and the many Blue Cat poems, Franklin realized his dream of reuniting the arts, which was always a figure for the way that people might come together and transform their social relations. And now I have one last chance to express my gratitude. With John Thurner, fellow Wesleyan grad and Franklin’s closest friend, I am presently shepherding a final Blue Cat manuscript into print, as Franklin died before he could correct the galleys.

Since the 1960s this feline Jeremiah has been saucily denouncing American injustice. Listen to the cat, in this new collection, pay tribute to a recent Wall Street protest movement:

No adobe for me nor vinyl & frame

Nor any tract you can name;

I want a great blue tarp

Like a tent and a red paper carp

To show which way the wind is blowing,

And a thick down suit when it’s snowing—

For I’m off to the moon where men once went

But nobody now collects rent

And it doesn’t matter where you’ve come from

When you live on the sunny side of the Sun.

While you still have your wits and are willing to fly

Come with me to the moon and *occupy! occupy!*

“Out of the life we have, art creates the life we want,” writes Franklin in the re-released *Robert Frost in Russia*, an account of the poet’s 1962 meeting with Nikita Krushchev, for which Franklin served as translator. In *The White Monk: An Essay on Melville and Dostoyevsky,* he elaborates on the idea: “The imagination wants a system made by words, colors, sounds, or mathematical symbols within which to confront the alternatives behind experience.” The artist’s job is thus “to press hard questions against the prevailing way of life.” With his own astonishingly varied work and with his teaching and political commitments, Franklin did exactly what his mentor at Princeton, the great critic R.P. Blackmur, claimed Henry Adams had done: prove that “a full response to life in his own country and time was possible, and that all assent and revolt and despair were alone meaningful in terms of that possibility.”

Without the example of Franklin Reeve, I don’t think I would ever have learned Polish; lived in Poland during the early 1990s; translated Polish literature; protested two wars in Iraq; run a soup kitchen; been a foster father; adopted a badly abused, nonspeaking six year old boy with autism from foster care (a boy who is now Oberlin College’s first nonspeaking student with autism); been a professor and writer; and built a house with my own hands. (Don’t worry, that house is sturdy: like my writing skills, my carpenter skills improved considerably.) Franklin taught me what was possible—what, with work and passion, you could pull out of yourself and thereby become. “Life’s design,” he writes in a late poem, [is] “to cut our wood like facts yet / to enfold the stuff of fancy and one silk belief.” I give thanks for this dear and beautiful man. I miss him terribly.  
   
--Ralph James Savarese ‘86