

## **Adios, Amigo: Ted Greenwald (1942-2016)**

### **Kit Robinson**

Ted Greenwald's poetry works its way from line to line, always opening outward. Set lines per stanza and stanzas per page produce formal regularity that stands open to possibility, defined as whatever happens. Whatever happens is mostly word of mouth, street diction hot off the pavement, ways of talking recognizable by ear in a particular urban environment (NYC) where verbalization goes on non-stop. The tone is upbeat, pun-loving, personable, while also take-no-prisoners, wise ass, and/or so what?

I first met Ted in San Francisco in the late 70s. Every time thereafter when in New York, we'd meet at one of his favorite hangouts, the Grand Central Oyster Bar early on, then the Tribeca bistro Capsoudo Freres, for years at Ennio and Michael's restaurant on LaGuardia Place, and finally Mumbles on Third Avenue. Ted had his place at the end of the bar and was always available, a sure bet for good conversation. About what? This, that, and the other thing. No privileged subjects, all fair game.

Books, for instance. WWII was his favored domain, the period he was born into, from Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* to military histories of the war on the Eastern Front. He turned me on to a number of great mystery writers like Ross Thomas, Donald Westlake, and Lawrence Bloch. Also *The Theory that Would Not Die* by Sharon Bertsch McGrayne, a history of Bayesian logic, and *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* by Shannon and Weaver, a seminal work of information theory. Movies too. His favorite directors, John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, Tony Scott and David O. Russell.

Collabs with Ted, always a pleasure. Occasional ones during visits to New York in the 80s. Then, around 2005, we start working by mail, a series of long works, each with a different formal scheme, which ultimately turns into a book, *A Mammal of Style*. Eventually Ted gets on email and the tempo speeds up. We study Japanese linked verse and start batting haiku-like stanzas back and forth. Send one, Ted always comes back pretty much right away, like that backgammon game back in the 80s, or late-night poker at the restaurant I witnessed once, super quick.

Talking with Ted at the restaurant about my job naming a product for a tech company, Ted writes on a bar napkin: "Hardon Software."

Nicknames his high school buddies called him: Thaddeus and Chico.

At the outset of his memoir, *Clearview/LIE*, we find Ted in grad school preparing for a teaching career. His first book of poetry, *Lapstrake*, is out, and the next, *Licorice Chronicles*, is underway. He's studying Melville and Pound with an eye to "what makes a great work great." At some point he realizes, "writing and teaching, if you do each right, with any pride in, these are two completely different jobs." In the

midst of his dissertation, he stops, decides to go his own way, “in a *follow your own mind way*.” The assertion of autonomy is absolutely characteristic. “Me myself, never feel much like living in a subordinate clause.” Reminds me of some favorite lines: “I be my own boss / I be my own police” (“The Book I Toss,” *Common Sense*) and says a lot about the man, not necessarily easy going, but always all there.

Sports, he liked the Yankees, the NY Giants, the Knicks (up to a point). MLB & NFL playoffs we’d place dollar bets and text each other while watching from opposite coasts.

A night-owl with bad habits, still Ted was a devoted family man. I heard often of Joan and Abby, not to mention Elmore the cat. Their closeness sustained him.

Ted had various different jobs, but there is no doubt what his real job was, poetry, 100 percent. Yet his work was not literary but literally all about being a person, one among many. There is a democratic strain throughout, reflected in the titles he borrowed from Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, *The Age of Reasons*, and *Own Church*, and in his sense of being, regular, without pretense, naturally social, mentally independent (“fuck-you brain cells”).

I learned something every time I talked with Ted. Speaking of Ted, I hate to use the past tense, whose verbs are only in the present.

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