

Ned Balbo

Joseph Harrison: A Friend in the Art

IT WAS ON A weekend getaway to a Delaware bed-and-breakfast painted in Key West colors that I first read Joe Harrison's poems with the care they deserve. I'd bought a copy of *Identity Theft* at the 2008 Waywiser Press book-release party, an annual event that, for Joe's guests, was a highlight of Baltimore's literary year. There, beside Jane on a balcony touched by sun and sea breezes, I marveled at poem after poem: the jumping carp and witty quatrains of "The Catch," the historical ironies of "To George Washington in Baltimore," the Aldabran tortoise whose demise caps a lifetime that "spanned / Mozart and Bird and Cage, / Wordsworth and Motherwell, Turner and Kees." In poem after poem, Joe's masterful stanzas convey the empathy, wit, and learning he wore so lightly in company and conversation, their dazzling rhymes and wordplay inspiring awe:

Still your trajectory,
 From coralline atoll
 To editorial encomia
 Upon your death, implies a larger story,
 Of how you came to be a
 Star of sorts, in the role
 Of figure for time itself, through silent, sheer
 Endurance of life's stages
 On a vast, sidereal scale, year after year
 Bridging the distant ages.

("To an Aldabran Tortoise, Dead at 250")

To lose a friend in the arts is to lose both the friend and all the work that might have followed. Fortunately, Waywiser's newly published *Collected Poems* volume gathers "the four mature collections of a modern master"—dust jacket praise that, in Joe's case, is no exaggeration. Yet his earlier work, too, holds much that's praiseworthy. In 2014, Syllabic Press brought out *The Fly in the Ointment*, an anthology purported to be the work of a long-dissolved Baltimore poetry collaborative whose membership comprised Barrymore Ashe, Frank Hart, Stephen Wallace, Vironique (one name only, like Beyoncé or Madonna), and our own Joseph Harrison; in fact, Joe had authored *all* the poems, most drawn from his inventive, stylistically versatile apprenticeship. The preface, attributed to Fly enthusiast and scholar "J. H. Hobson," was actually written—of course!—by Joe himself: Joseph Hobson Harrison, III.

When Joe laughingly told me of this conspiracy over drinks at the holiday party of a mutual friend and fellow poet, I jumped at the chance to extend the hoax: I'd write a review as if the Fly poets were real. (It's still around online in *Unsplendid's* farewell issue.) Joe himself got so much pleasure from his ruse that he maintained it in emails to me regarding the review-in-progress. In one, Joe quoted J. H. Hobson's view of the imaginary poets' rivalries and grudges:

To the extent I can reconstruct what happened all that time ago, I don't think it's quite accurate to say that Wallace left the group due to differences with Harrison. . . . Coexistence did seem impossible, but it was Harrison who stepped aside . . . Wallace didn't like Harrison at all; Harrison made some attempts at collegiality, largely out of loyalty to Ashe, but Wallace spurned them; Harrison didn't want to bother with all this, and moved on.

Clearly, Joe, several of whose book titles resonate with questions of identity, relished this layering of masks: the true poet pretending to be a scholar of several selves who are each invented versions of the same author—himself—and all of it a playful jab at lit crit's tiresome pretenses.

Joe was no fan of academia. He was no stranger to it, either. We may have been introduced back in the mid-80s amid the clink of cups and squeal of carts in the Johns Hopkins Gilman Hall lobby; he was a grad student studying literature, and I was in the Writing Seminars. Almost thirty years later and only a few blocks north of Hopkins, with the Jesuit university where I taught facing retrenchment, I called on Joe for his Guggenheim winner's perspective. Our recently hired outside chair had informed a department colleague matter-of-factly that she was welcome to take unpaid leave to pursue her own newly funded Guggenheim project, but if she did, her longtime writer-in-residence job would cease to exist. Joe emailed back with his usual wisdom and matchless cool:

The institutional conduct toward your colleague seems to me to border on the criminal. Most schools consider Guggenheim fellowships an honor to their school; indeed, they usually provide full pay during a fellow's Guggenheim leave. But to threaten to fire one if such leave is taken is unprecedented, as far as I know (not that I would know, necessarily—everything seems possible these days), and barbaric.

The considered blend of good manners and bracing honesty with bittersweet regret over changing times—all these I hear in the same melodious Virginia/Alabama tones in which Joe spoke and read his poetry. And hearing Joe in live performance was a joy. In October 2013, he invited Waywiser debut author Shelley Puhak and me to read as a trio in Hampden's much-missed Minas Gallery where, amid brightly hued paintings and a full turnout, Joe supplemented *Identity Theft* selections with new poems slated for his next book, the superb *Shakespeare's Horse*. (Joe, by the way, was a devoted advocate of Waywiser's authors, especially its Anthony Hecht Prize winners for whom he'd arrange a reading at the Folger Library in honor of each new volume.) By 2017, I'd joined the panel of judges who selected books for the Poets' Prize. As each of us would nominate two books published in the eligible year, I knew the competition would be steep; still, *Shakespeare's Horse* would *have* to be a serious contender; it was just so good. I submitted both nominations with high hopes. In the end, Joe's book was one of two finalists, the other by no less an eminence than Donald Hall—distinguished company that reflects a finish line where degrees of excellence are razor-thin and unavoidably subjective.

Literary friendships encompass both personal bonds and professional ties, affection and alliances. Jane and I might not have belonged to Joe's inner circle, but the time we spent with him meant a lot to us. Beyond parties and email (Joe shunned social media), Jane and I would join him and his wife Carla (later, Joe alone) a few times a year for dinners around town—our initiation into cuisines or eateries we'd never have discovered without Joe's infectious enthusiasm and gastronomic know-how. (Even when we were dining out, it felt like Joe was hosting the event, and I can still see him, knife in hand, slicing the tender steaks he grilled for his own dinner parties or keeping everyone's champagne flutes filled, chatting with avuncular good cheer.) He told wonderful stories and had the best laugh—sonorous and deeply felt. And—you know this if you've read his poetry—he was funny himself and refreshingly candid. The last time we had dinner in person, at a BYOB Persian restaurant, a chance reference cued Joe's scoffing evaluation of a particular poet's metrical chops: "Thuddingly dull!"

Jane and I didn't know it would be the last time we'd see Joe in person: the pandemic was only a few weeks away, and we'd soon enter lockdown, a status from which Jane and I would emerge only haltingly. Still, we kept in touch. In June 2020, Joe gave a Zoom reading with the inestimable Morri Creech, and when I learned *Literary Matters* had assigned his book *Sometimes I Dream That I Am Not Walt Whitman* to poet and critic Sunil Iyengar for review, I sent Joe advance word; he, too, had the lockdown blues, writing in October 2020 about both the pandemic and upcoming election:

I don't blame you for being very cautious; I'm being so myself. I fear this will be going on for quite a while longer, with cases climbing and winter coming and no national leadership whatsoever. Let's hope that starts to change Tuesday, but the change can't come soon enough. I am cautiously optimistic that the margins in crucial states will be too large to be overturned by voter suppression, Trump judges, or other instruments of skullduggery. But we shall see.

In June of 2023, when the subject of "Big Stanzas" arose during an interview conducted by Stephen Kampa for *Able Muse*, I remarked, "I'd be remiss if I didn't mention your own inventive stanzas or those of Joseph Harrison, author of *Shakespeare's Horse, Identity Theft*, and more," to which Stephen replied, "You are kind to mention anything of mine in such good company, especially that of Joseph Harrison, who is so marvelous when it comes to those complex stanzas that I am pulled in three directions: gratitude, astonishment, and not a little envy." I was emailing from a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and, at that point, not even Joe himself had reason to believe his health was failing.

Unfortunately, with our reclusive pandemic habits hard to shake, Jane and I didn't find out that Joe was dying till he was already in hospice care. Ironically, we learned the news at Baltimore's Bird in Hand bookstore where poet and translator Chris Childers was conducting a Q and A with David Yezzi about *Late Romance*, his newly published biography of Anthony Hecht—the distinguished namesake of Waywiser's prize who'd also written, in the introduction to Joe's debut volume *Someone Else's Name*, "The reader will encounter the sheer joy of a poet gladdened by his own art, alive to the liberties and limits of form and imagination." I doubt Joe could've resisted contributing to the conversation.

On the last day of January 2024, ignorant of how far his cancer had progressed, I emailed Joe in hopes that one of his caretakers was alerting him to messages received. I wanted him to know how much I loved his poems, that he could look forward to the sort of casual, in-print shout-out that confirms outstanding work is still very much on readers' minds. Stephen and I "couldn't resist talking about your excellence," I wrote regarding the interview; "I have no idea when the issue is coming out but thought I'd share the 'final draft' Joe Harrison exchange as Stephen edited it. . . . Jane & I send love & hope to drop in sometime to see you if there's a good time or opportunity on your side. In affection & admiration . . ." But we didn't hear from Joe, and on February 13, he was gone.

A few years earlier, Joe had used those very words to inscribe *Shakespeare's Horse* "For Ned & Jane, with admiration and affection for two steadfast friends in the art." I'm grateful he saw us that way. In reviewing *The Fly in the Ointment*, I wrote the following about Joe and his Stephen Wallace alter ego whose poems sat beside work credited to Joe himself:

Both poets are capable of compelling metrical verse, both are poetically ambitious, and both possess a stunning ear, though Harrison—more tender, and highly attuned to shifts of register—is clearly the superior poet.

The same might be said of Joe compared to so many real-life contemporaries. I ended the review, my own tongue faux-pretentiously in cheek, by quoting a line from Barrymore Ashe, another of Joe's invented personae: "It was fun while it lasted, original fun." I went on:

As Ecclesiastes tells us: "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour" (10:1). By contrast, J. H. Hobson's Twentieth-Anniversary Edition of *The Fly in the Ointment* offers something sweet: a glimpse of poetry's past through five truly fascinating figures who joined in rivalry and friendship to put Parnassus in their sights.

I like to think the singular Joe Harrison—the poet we loved—is in Parnassus now and that he knows his body of work, along with the gift of his friendship, brought not just "fun, original fun" but joy to all who knew him.