



FIRE and RAIN

Selected Poems 1993-2007

RD Armstrong

Volume 2



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INTRODUCTION

When I first came up with the idea of doing a retrospective of my work, a sort of “**Raindog Reader**”, a number of people were wondering why I was in such a hurry to get my books into the public arena. After all, I'm not even sixty, so what's the big rush? I considered that before I started this project, but I kept coming back to the idea that I wasn't getting any younger. Truth be told, I was worried that something might happen to me before I could get my life's work published. Not to worry the reader, as far as I know things are good, but I just had a feeling that something was coming, just over the horizon. It's the same way I felt back in September 2001 when I started a mammoth road trip up north, not knowing what was going to happen in a week or so (9-11).

I never really thought that the publication of these books would prove to be a financial success...after years of publishing in the Alternative Small Press; I had come to realize that it really was a labor of love. Few small presses are ever really financially successful, although some are sustaining (but there's rarely an IRA involved). No, I knew that I had to publish these poems myself, to cut through the red tape and other B.S. I knew that, as an editor/publisher, I had burned enough bridges over the years as to make it nearly impossible to get a fair shake. And even though, as a publisher, I had a decent track record, I did not have that as a poet. You need to be able to sell books before someone takes a chance on you. Such is the poetry game in today's market. It's so much easier to take matters into your own hands and “get 'er done.” I'm definitely a proponent of DIY (Do It Yourself).

The first volume of Fire and Rain featured poems from 1993 to 1999. This volume picks up in '99 and continues to 2007. This collection (volume's one and two) serves to present what I consider to be the best of my current catalog of poetry, representing a period of fifteen years. There are three exceptions not included here, but because of the size of those poems, I have presented them in a third volume entitled **On/Off the Beaten Path** (one of the poems details the trip I mentioned earlier).

I hope that the reader, as well as my fans, will find this second volume a rewarding book and worth the time it takes to read.

RD Armstrong

THE COLLAGE PERIOD

(Lee Krasner at LACMA winter, 1999)

The painter's work in this
faze of her life, reflects the
frustrations of seeing the man
she had loved for so long
going to hell inside a bottle.
The Collage Period, as it is
described on the museum wall,
began some two years before her
husbands death in a traffic accident.
Her husband was some beatnik
guy named Pollack who'd gotten
famous for dribbling paint on canvases.
Unlike Pollack, Krassner never settled
into a "style", evolving, instead, through
many different fazes such as the
Collage Period, which began as an act
of outrage and revenge through self-destruction.
According to the museum historian
Krassner, in a fit of pique, tore down,
then up, the entire contents of her studio
one night, probably after a row with Mr. P.
Two weeks later, when she returned
to the scene of the crime, she realizes
that her supposed folly is, in fact a cathartic
purging of epic proportions, larger than the
monumental canvases so popular during
those postwar years. As I'm reading this
I'm thinking less about catharsis as a metaphor
and more about what you see as you stand
in the doorway with your anima charged
artist's eyes searching the room for some
clue as to what all this means.

I only realize it later
after you have gone
only then see the
connections
between life / death ~
the ragged mind and
broken heart ~
the flowing line
and the hungry canvas.

On A Tear

for Jay

I heard you were drunk in the Castro
That you howled like a dog at the crescent
That your name has been immortalized
In several fast food joints along hwy 101
That you're one bad som-bitch when you
Can get up a head of steam

I heard you were drunk and nodding out
With a beer for breakfast in North Beach
You and your cronies
Rattling the cages of the MAN!
Scaring the civilians like some
God-damned rock & roller
Just like you were a kid again
Just like the good/old bad/old days

I heard you tore up the town
Like you knew tomorrow would
Not notice your absence
As if you could tear forever
As if the page would never end
The ink would never dry
The ideas would never go away

But all the ink pushers
The sowers of the dream
That long gone dream
Papa and all his crew
They all know how you think
You are a new day dawning
To their sorry old yesterday
But your day is months past-due

How can you not see it
Like some overpass graffiti?
The writing is up it's new and fresh
Shouting your name/number
Time is running out Brother
This is no time to be napping on the tracks
Wake up! The train's a-coming
It don't make no stop here
Not for you not for no one.

The Soon To Be Rapture

Mingus on the box
And Kerouac
Freshly resting
On my brow
With such fine
Company
What man wouldn't
Find a way
To make this
Lazy afternoon
Pass slower?

Mingus racing
Up and down the
Neck of that up-
Right bass like a
Crazy game of tag
While Dolphy (Eric)
Unraveled the sweet
Here-after mysteries
Of Space and Time
Using an alto sax
Like a divining rod -
Searching for a "now"
Interpretation, a
New constant by
Which we will all
Live as one in the
Soon to be rapture.

And Kerouac (Jack)
With bony fingers
No longer gripping
Reality with one hand
On the stick shift
And one on the wheel
Is he cruising the road
In an eternal midnight
Memory meltdown
From inside his tomb
Or from the steps
Of some nirvana just
Over the border near
Juarez or Denver?

And what of Neal
(My favorite) the
Real deal? What
would he say to
us now, ancient
words or back-hand-
ed 'fuck you's?

Is it hard to think
With a head that
Looks like a flat-
Ene penny? Is it
Neal? All gone you
Say? All gone &
Just worms and
Muck left behind
As if to say "yeah,
We're done here,
Man, what's next?"

What IS next?
Armageddon?
Gloria and chaos?
6 inches of 'hot'
or 8 inches of 'ho-
hum'? Won't
Matter anyway
The days are out-
Numbered by the
Sad faces of history.

We will all miss
The songs of the
Bird soon enough.

YardBird Burned

YardBird burned
All Wick — No Candle
Made it to the sun and back
Unlike Icarus —
YardBird couldn't burn out —
his spirit was the flame by which
HE burned.

YardBird burned
'til there was only
a husk left
'til all the notes —
the be-boppin' bitty
black notes —
were piled at his feet
like cigar ash.

YardBird
swung his sax
in a mighty arc
like an ax
spinning like
a Dervish
carving
a niche
out of the
"don't-take-it-for"
granite walls
of Swing-Jazz-Tradition.

YardBird shaped
a Bop See-gar-cough-a-gus
out of his to-brief-time
spent on planet Earth.
The Bop-line
firing volley after volley
of bitty-black notes
skyward — unleashing
them like blackbirds
blotting out reality's
harsh light 'til
the wee-wee hours.

YardBird was never
at ease, at rest
Fingers always a blur
accelerating
ACCELERATING
ACCELERATING
until time shifted gears
in self-defense —
into SLOW-motion then to

stand
still.
YardBird smiled 'cause
only he saw the joke.

YardBird burned.
Did not really play
his sax — it played him
Played him until his "reed"
fell apart — broke down
disintegrated
Broke Bird down —
Time finished him
with a smile
on his face —
death by cosmic relief

You say it was H that
took his life but you
are wrong.
H lulled Mr Charley
into slowing down
Hip-no-(N)ticed him
H slowed him down —
promised him the means
to survive this heartbreak
We call life.

H slowed the bird down —
gave Time a clean shot.
Time took it from there.

YardBird Burns Still.

Tamale Solstice

Returning home from a day of painting
I meet the Tamale Man outside the gate
He always appears to be very happy
to see me, and not just because I mean
another sale.

And I am very happy to see him too,
and not just because his tamales are
always warm and fresh and just spicy
enough for my temperamental gringo
stomach.

The Tamale Man always greets me
with a big wave and a grin that
makes you feel like the prodigal
son, returning after a long journey.

“Aye, amigo, nescessita tamales blah blah blah?”

(My Spanish runs out pretty fast but
the universal language of cash/dinero
takes over and) he’s taking a steaming
tamale or two out of his little cooler
that rests inside the wagon that serves
as his cart.

“Gracias, these are muy tasty” and I
emphasize this by rubbing my belly
and grinning right back at him.

“Adios!”

“Adios!”

I am glad to have my Uncle Tamale
in the family, especially now
during these dark days of winter
as families bask in their abundance
and those of us with little or naught
struggle to retain both perspective
of the events around us and a sense
of dignity and humanity while so many
around us struggle to let the beasts
inside them loose.

Adios, tio.

PHD

Half of my life
has been spent
with either a hammer
or a paint brush in
my hand. It was all
I needed for a
while. But then
I added a beer can
to the equation
and things got out
of hand; and they didn’t
get better until I got
that thing out of
my hand. Once I
got past that
I tried putting
other things in
my hands
things that go boing!
in the night or things that
make you feel so good
that you want to take out
a full page ad or
things that start in
your head and become
real at your fingertips.
I knew then that I
didn’t want to die with
a hammer in my hand that I
wanted more that I
desired the creative path
that led beyond
my immediate locale.
Ten years later I am
nearer to but not
close enough to cease
my explorations.

With
out desire or passion
there is only the clatter
of automation.
Without a means of expression
there is only silence.

Without the poetry of ideas
there would be no point
in picking up that paint
brush or hammer.

A head without hands is
a novelty
But hands without a head
that’s death.

Scene Glimpsed on a Sunday Morning

from the window of my car
outside Tiny Naylor's:
three women stretching
their hamstrings
standing on one leg each
like herons in the shallows at dawn.

the herons got nothing to worry about.

REVELATION

Cock
is
hard

Cunt
is
harder

Life
is
hardest.

Poem Written While Hunched Over The Sink

Watching the swirls of pink
going clock-wise down the drain
I remember your note

You remember
the one where you
observe that everything
in your life is going
along just swell:
your job
your new wife
your modest little condo
how these are the best years
(no doubt)
of your life

And yet you can't seem
to catch your breath
can't seem to get down
to business
creatively speaking
How the muse has left you
high and dry
You think you'd be inspired
surrounded by all these great poets
but you are not.

As I am hunched over the sink
noting the swirling poetry
of my decline
I think, listen Hemingway
before you cock the hammer back
and squint into that oncoming
oblivion
you better stop and observe the
simple gifts that life drops
on your front lawn

Unless you are dead already
or in some kind of middle-class coma
you'd have to be pretty stupid not to notice
all the poetic moments around us
even hunched over the sink
on a Friday morning
as it swirls down
the drain.

Occasional Lover

Afterwards
Taking in the room
I stop at the shrine of pictures
on your bureau:
family, the family dog
the soon-to-be-ex-husband
But no sign that I was ever here
no trace of my impact on you
except an unmade bed and
you coming out of the bathroom
looking flummoxed and happy.

I want my legacy to be more
than a sly smile that fades
over coffee and toast
More than walls that echo with the
passions of the desperate and lonely
More than a brief memory painted
on the breath of night evaporating
like the dew at sunrise.

Sebastapol

Shimmering eucalyptus trees
Rustling in a foggy breeze:
Image shaken loose from
The house of memory by
The smell of three eggs
In the frying pan.

IRON BUTTERFLY *for John Carroll*

Passing a shop window
this afternoon and seeing
a sheet-metal sun done
in your old style
I did a double-take thinking
you were back in town
(which of course can never
be true again since you
are in a place from which
there is no return)

So there I was and here I
am now gazing at the
butterfly you made for me
out of welding rod (it was
such a great idea) thinking
how I keep thinking about
how you resurfaced after
nearly twenty-five years
and reached out to me
(or maybe I was just one
of the last survivors of our
motley little band of misfits
left in the area) and how
maybe I waved you off
when I should have
waved you on

In Haiku

It's always
The moon
In the
Bucket.

Always the
China doll
With porcelain
Skin as pale
And white
As snow.

You never hear
About the tiny
Cracks, or the
Other signs of age.

In Haiku
All is timeless.

It's always
The moon
In the
Bucket.

Never the
Razor's bite
Or the sting
Of aftershave.

In Haiku

It's always
The moon
In the
Bucket.

Always the
Ship dissecting
Mt. Fuji's
Calm
Reflection.

Always the
Heron
Taking
Inventory.

Always the
Thoughts of
You turning

In your sleep
Pulling the
Sheets tightly
To your breast.

In Haiku

The kiss lingers
Snow never melts
Rain mists gently
And
The moon
In the
Bucket
Always returns
No matter
How long
It takes.

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“RD Armstrong’s ‘Fire and Rain’ [Volume 1] is mostly all ball busters and roses. One of the best larger collections by an American poet that this reader has read, in many moons.”

—Doug Draime

“You have a way of describing other people because you know yourself pretty well and can relate. A fine big book -- glad it’s out there and I hope lots of people read it.”

—Leonard J. Cirino

“Upon dipping into Fire and Rain, I could not help but take note of the quality of this collection: the quality of the poems and the clear writing style that the reader is offered with this book. Armstrong is ever the social critic, and the 185 poems included in this manuscript are a testament to his original vision. Working from the sweat of life, Armstrong is a talent that plants itself in your mind with his rough-and-ready voice of delicate lyric and refined narrative. He is a poet who does not creep from behind but is full-frontal in his twist of a line and his blue-collar sensibilities. To not recommend the work of RD Armstrong to new readers would be sinful and sad, because here is a poet with a voice that will challenge even the most hard-ass critics of poetry.”

—B. L. Kennedy