

With news from Gloucester, Rockport, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Essex and surrounding communities

CAPE ANN BEACON

SITTING IN

'An Innocence of Vision'

Remembering the poet Peter Todd

Peter Todd did well in the hard-knocks school of life - he survived. Tossed around in the state's foster child system as a very young boy, Peter later had to leave grade school to help himself and his family survive. He worked in Gloucester all his life, from shining shoes to cleaning offices, to driving cabs - and survived. He and his devoted wife, Barbara, seriously injured in a car accident in the 1976, survived. Diagnosed with cancer, Peter survived by many years the docs' first prognoses. And through much of that life's rough ride, over the last 40 years, Peter wrote poems. Over 800 poems! All composed with enthusiasm, a great love for Gloucester, and touching sincerity, something I call his innocence of vision.

Now, the poems survive. Peter Todd's poetry is direct, unadorned. It is genuine folk poetry, like the self-taught painting styles of Ammi Phillips or Sheldon Peck. Reading Peter's poem-profiles of Gloucester personalities and places, I often think of the portrait art of Peck and others. Here, from "The Train Depot," is such a Gloucester portrait:

*The Shoe Shine stand I worked each day
With customers of the city and Hollywood fame
Such as Mayor Corliss with words of wisdom to say
And Arthur Godfrey, Roger W. Babson just two by name,
The ticket man, Roger Edwards, a true friend,
Bunny at the Newspaper Stand with the candy he gave
And Sophie Tucker who once in a while dropped by to lend...*

True to his spontaneous,



JOHN RONAN

folk roots, Peter did not revise poems or read the work of others. Once written down, for the first and last time, he'd pass the poem along, on the napkin or the back of an envelope, admitted flaws and all. Peter's reluctance to revise or read did not come from false pride; it came from humility, a sense he was unworthy. He had left school early and wasn't about to go back and become grammatically pure, to bone up and compete with more refined, educated scribblers. I learned about Peter's reading habits on my television show when I asked what poets he liked. He said, with wonderful frankness, that he didn't read poetry. I smiled: "Not even mine, Peter?" He answered, "Sorry, John."

Peter's appointment as Poet Laureate was not popular with some of the city's art guardians. He made errors, seemed basic, was far from politically correct... What's worse, Peter Todd did not have the poetry pose. There are well-known poets who rely less on talent than on pose - looking hip and aloof, styled, crucial. Peter was better than that. At his appointment, our protectors, mad for pose, were silent. Peter wasn't exactly Nobel Laureate material, one snoot said to me. True. Nor am I. Nor are the snoots. The art guardians missed the point: community.

A chapbook of Peter's



Peter Todd.

poetry, "Innocence of Vision," was recently put together by Kirstin Martin, Kathleen Valentine, Lucinda Seigel, photographer Jay Albert, Rufus Collinson, myself, and others. It features a forward by Mayor Theken. Profits go to Peter's family. For the back cover, I wrote:

"I had Peter Todd on my local television show, 'The Writer's Block' with John Ronan, a couple of times in the last few years. I have never had a more genuine, more honest guest. A real folk poet, he wrote of his immediate world, his friends, the city ... with enthusiasm and love, pressing his work into palms as soon as he finished a page. He was open and humble, a man without pretense. Authentic Gloucester.

Peter last appeared on "The Writer's Block" in March of 2014. It was show No. 290 and is available on the Cape Ann TV website's Video page: <http://capeanntv.org/video/> Go to the Writer's Block with John Ronan playlist; the tape is now first in the queue.

To buy a \$10 copy of Innocence of Vision or for more information, email or call Kirstin Martin: kirstin@spartx3.com (917-523-9163).

—John Ronan is a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow and former Gloucester Poet Laureate. He is host of "The Writer's Block" on Cape Ann TV.

HOPE

the steady flow...