

Edwin Rolfe Selected Poems



Edwin Rolfe

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Rolfe was born Solomon Fishman in Philadelphia to a family of Russian immigrants (Nathan and Bertha). His father, a shoemaker, was an active trade unionist and a member of the Socialist Party of America. His mother, a friend of Margaret Sanger, was an advocate of women's rights. He joined the Communist Party in 1925 and published his first poem, "The Ballad of the Subway Digger" in 1927. He became a student at the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1929 but left in his second year to move to New York to become active again in politics, befriending Langston Hughes among others. He married Mary Wolfe in 1936. His first book, *To My Contemporaries* (1936) appeared shortly before Rolfe moved to Spain to volunteer for the Spanish Civil War as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Rolfe worked for a year as editor of the brigade newspaper *Volunteer for Liberty* and, though not particularly fit to be a soldier, joined the troops in 1938. He arrived back in the U.S. in 1939; he published a history of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion later that year. He was drafted in 1943, but by that point Mary had accepted a job in Los Angeles; Rolfe joined her there after the war. Rolfe published a mystery novel, *The Glass Room*, and worked on the fringes of the film industry until his was blacklisted in 1947. He died of a heart attack.

To My Contemporaries. New York: Dynamo Books, 1936.

First Love and Other Poems. Los Angeles, Larry Edmunds Bookstore, 1951.

Permit Me Refuge. Los Angeles: The California Quarterly, 1955.

Collected Poems. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Trees Became Torches. Selected Poems. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

A Dedication

Here, then, the equivocal catch of a long voyage,
part land-, part sea-won; half accident, half choice:

the colors of your :fireside spectrum, but arranged,
blended in bolder pattern, sign of their slow sea-change.

And if, all my Penelopes, there's little you recognize,
blame Time, not me; nor strain your sceptic eyes.

It's the world that's altered. Look, and you shall :find
my singular faith and all my old companions at my side.

The catch is curious, I grant, but the turbulent seas
of my long and wavering wanderings shaped every heresy.

Outlandish, fragile gifts; but the spirit's more robust
than had I sailed in calmer seas where the tame fish cluster.

Accept them, then, cleansed now of the salt-exiling sea,
proofs of the homeward journey through all those perilous years.

Many an Outcast

Many an outcast calls me friend
and with that word compels
my pity to embrace his loneliness,
my meagre share of goodness to expand
till friendship and intense
compassion warm us both.

Many a weakling thinks me strong
and with his thought endows
my weakness with an unsuspected power,
unearths within my heart a fire
and in my mind an iron
that was not there before.

Many a fool has called me wise
and, doing so, has forced
the little sense I had to rise
up from its deep morass of ignorance
clear to the surface, there to solve
his problems and my own.

And loveless girls have called me love.
These do I most enshrine
because their simple longing builds
love amid lovelessness, and gilds
even the tarnished feelings till they shine—
yes, theirs and mine.

Bequest

Be proud, young rejoicers, jesters, poets,
of the rich lore of your art, of your sure way
of seeing the heart beating when all others
describe the deceptive skin and the hypocrite eyes.

Tell of the wars but do not forget the dawn's
light on the first squad of sentries: how they see
with wonder the new day's birth and how its light
is meaningful beyond their power to explain.

Neither ignore the seasons, nor their clothes
upon our earth: men remember the grass
and sun and the snow of winters: these remain
always with them, beyond words, even in dream.

Yes, these are the things that live in men longest,
that glow in their sacred moments, that spring to the brain
as seed leaps toward the earth, to grow, to flower
in darkness, to kindle life, always to be reborn.

This is our art, O brother, comrade, friend:
speak of these things always or others will forget them.
The wisest father's best bequest to his son
is his own unwritten work, the words of the poets.

Mystery

The corpse is in the central square, in the spring sun.
The hilts of two jewelled daggers tremble on her breasts.
The blood is cold, corked, on her black and rigid nipples.
Her face in death is beautiful. She has obviously been raped.

Around her walk the busy men, their heads filled with figures.
The women go by with their empty baskets, obsessed with menus,
with many mouths, with the ancient alchemy of mothers
transmuting lead to gold and coppers into bread.

Only the pigeons and the anarchic children hover around her,
the doves bemoaning the death and the child-eyes grave
on the casual brutal bier. All others hurry past.
The sight is familiar as dust in the city air.

Somewhere, it is assumed, an invisible detective
broods darkly in a dark room, his black shoes on the desk,
assuring and reassuring no one in particular
with slow words and fumbling words, in the ritual of despair:

“Sooner or later, mark my word, we’ll identify the woman,
and from that to finding the killer is just a small step...”
Only the children stand silent, and stare, stare
at the broken body, the lifeless face, the living opulent hair.

Ballad of the Noble Intentions

What will you do, my brother, my friend,
when they summon you to their inquisition?
I'll fire from the heart of my fortress, my brain,
my proudest possession.

And what will you say, my brother, my friend,
when they threaten your family's food instead?
Like Christ, I'll be silent. Man does not live
only by work or by bread.

I will think of the poets who fashioned my mind;
of the singing strokes of my vivid Old Masters,
of the meaning of my own works. These outweigh
all minor disasters.

And what if your treasures are trampled by swine?
What if they foul your art and your science?
I'll answer with anger, go down, if I must,
hurling pearls of defiance.

I will answer with anger, speak up with passion,
defy them again with my famed indignation.
But what if they babble of danger, and cite
the imperilled nation?

For it's they who imperil our country, my friend,
they are the worms at the core of the matter.
How will you answer their glib accusations,
their hypocrite chatter?

I've only contempt for these cloven-tongued men,
these pack-rats that roam our land in committees
with their clques and their clatter, spreading their lies
through our sleeping cities.

I will stand like an oak in maturity, like

a craft of fine timber against the sea's fury.
But what if these little men posture and act
as both judge and jury?

I'll read them bold pages from Areopagitica,
quote Milton and Marvell to rout and abuse them.
The best words of men of all ages will rise
to my tongue to confuse them!

*

And what did you do, dear brother, dear friend,
when you stood at last in the pygmies' forum?
I spoke with good sense, old friend, I talked with
restraint and decorum.

I decided that boasting like Milton were vain,
or refusing, like Marvell, their guineas with anger.
I patterned my self after Waller, who lived
more richly—certainly longer.

I engaged them in skilful debate, since I felt
that mere youthful defiance was unrealistic.
I told what I knew, or I thought, to be true;
it was harmless, anachronistic.

And what did you say, dear brother, old friend?
What were the truths you hastened to utter?
Not words—just a disinterred corpse from a grave,
on a neutral platter.

And there were some living men too that I named.
What harm could it do them, after two decades?
Besides, as I've reason to know, it was all—
after all—in the records.

Just look at the transcript, dear brother, dear friend.
Is there anything in it to make a man shudder?
Is there anything there to make anyone think

that I've lost my rudder?

No, nothing at all, dear stranger, lost friend,
nothing to move me to grief or to mourning.
It's yourself you betrayed, it's yourself who lives on
as a living warning.

Your act of survival betrayed not your friends,
but yourself most of all-no need now to cavil.
Live on, as you must, but be happy with Waller,
not Milton, or Marvell.

For you've toppled the bridges you had with your youth,
your promising present and excellent future.
No masterpiece ever can heal such a wound, nor
a surgeon's suture.

You killed your own scope, sad stranger, lost friend.
My affection is dead; it's too frayed now, and grieving.
And that was your crime; in the noon of your life
you resigned from the living.

Idiot Joe Prays in Pershing Square and Gets Hauled in for Vagrancy

Let us praise,
while time to praise remains,
the simple bullet,
the antique ambushade
and. the fanatic justice-crazed assassin—
we who have made
and used napalm
and casually—
alone among all men—
dropped on Man
the only atom bomb.

A Poem to Delight My Friends Who Laugh at Science-Fiction

That was the year
the small birds in their frail and delicate battalions
committed suicide against the Empire State;
having, in some never-explained manner,
lost their aerial radar, or ignored it.

That was the year
men and women everywhere stopped dying natural deaths.
The aged, facing sleep, took poison;
the infant, facing life, died with the mother in childbirth;
and the whole wild remainder of the population,
despairing but deliberate, crashed in auto accidents
on roads as clear and uncluttered as ponds.

That was the year every ship on every ocean,
every lake, harbor, river, vanished without trace;
and even ships docked at quays
turned over like harpooned whales, or wounded Normandies.

Yes, and the civilian transcontinental planes
found, like the war-planes, the sky-lanes crowded
and, praising Icarus, plunged to earth in flames.

Many, mild stay-at-homes, slipped in bath tubs,
others, congenital indoors-men, descending stairs,
and some, irrepressible roisterers, playing musical chairs.
Tots fell from scooter cars and tricycles
and casual passersby were stabbed by falling icicles.

Ah, what carnage! It was reported
that even bicarb and aspirin turned fatal,
and seconal too, to those with mild headaches,
whose stomachs were slightly acid, or who found they could not sleep.
All lovers died in bed, as all seafarers on the deep.

Till finally the only people left alive
were the soldiers sullenly spread on battlefields
among the shell-pocked hills and the charred trees.
Thus, even the indispensable wars died of ennui.

But not the expendable conscripts: they remained as always.
However, since no transport was available anywhere,
and home, in any case, was dead, and bare,
the soldiers wandered eternally
in their dazed, early-Chirico landscapes,
like drunken stars in their shrinking orbits
round and round and round and round

and (since I too died in the world-wide suicide)
they may still, for all I know, be there.
Like forsaken chessmen abandoned by paralyzed players.
they may still be there,
may still be there.

