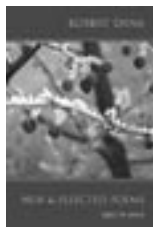


## A Life in Verse

By Richard Holinger

Book Review:

*New and Selected Poems: 1955 to 2010*,  
by Robert Dana. Anhinga P, 2010.



At Robert Dana's Memorial Service, Rick Campbell, editor of Anhinga Press and a friend of "rp" (as friends and family knew him), recalled a reading Dana gave in Tallahassee. Campbell mused that the poet, born in 1929, was part of the "Great Generation" of poets who believed in the power of poetry to save people. About to comment to a friend that today's generation views that notion with irony and skepticism, Campbell wavered when he realized, "rp had made *me* believe poetry has the power to save us."

Dana's death in February 2010 at the age of 80 ended his nearly two-year struggle with pancreatic cancer, along with his dream of holding more than the galley-proof copy of *New and Selected Poems: 1955 to 2010*. He died soon after his last beach vacation, returning home to Coralville, Iowa, where many of his poems are set, and where writers, friends and students shared his and his wife, Peg's, company. Their house, perched above a woody ravine, is surrounded by trees and gardens loaded with birds, insects and flowers that populate his poems as Giverny's lilies do Monet's canvases.

This collection arrives like a ceremonial marker on which is carved the breadth and depth of his life's work. Its striking front cover photograph, taken by the poet in his front yard, captures "Frosted Crab Apples," the close up an appropriate visual, suggesting the revelatory power of nature, its warmth and chill, and death the work inside elicits.

The five new poems that begin the book continue the style Dana first displayed in his 2004 collection, *The Morning of the Red Admirals*, with lines unhitched from the left margin and stanzas

separated with an asterisk and quadruple spacing. The poems confront an aging body not as something to fear or deny, but to simply acknowledge, like the grace of leaf fall, as suggested in "Downpour":

All our ages ringed inside us like the turnings of a tree,  
drawing up the waters of memory,

Splashing each season with leaves.

Evident even in his first published book, *My Glass Brother & Other Poems* (1957), Dana's objective correlatives plucked from nature set mood and theme: "It is winter night. Fever and chill / Rummage the blind cars on Lover's Hill," he says in "A Winter's Tale." Having been schooled more in the classical prosody of pre-modernists than modernist and contemporary free verse enthusiasts, the early poems incorporate traditional prosody, the lovely iambic couplets of "A Winter's Tale" complemented by Dana's signature personification of nature and manmade objects.

Ten years later, *Some Versions of Silence* reveals a poet more at home writing in free verse: "This room, our universe. / Its darkness / our single / star," he writes in "Final Riddle." In "The Stonecutter," Dana experiments with centered lines, left margin indention and exaggerated spacing between staccato stanzas, elements he will later revisit and embrace in his 70s.

Chisel-light,  
hammer-light

in the stone  
court.

Air eats  
into block.

In *The Power of the Visible* (1971), the poet's intimacy with nature deepens, as in "Passage": "Morning may strike us anywhere. // So that passing these woods, / seeing orders nailed to fenceposts, / to ruined trees, we may feel ourselves made strangers, / willing to stop."

From 1979's *In a Fugitive Season* to 2000's *Summer*, Dana's formal style rarely wavers from left-margin line starts and, except for *Fugitive's* brilliant blend of political, erotic and natural poems held together by the man and woman's search for love, conventional punctuation. Less confessional poet than storyteller, Dana uses a first-person persona usually inseparable from the poet himself. These verse narratives, usually grounded in everyday settings and populated with everyday objects, arrive at metaphysical or philosophical conclusions, the elegant simplicity sounding at times like a Zen master's dialogue, as in "Here and Now": "I believe in this pliers / and screwdriver; in this / hibachi and its little / lotus of fire. I believe / in this. Here. And now."

The emphasis on the subject of taking joy in the present moment reaches a crescendo with *Yes, Everything* (1994), a book celebrating not only his loving relationship with his second wife, Peg, but a transcendental infusion with nature. In "After Waking," Dana uses one of his favorite images, light: "Ask the keeper / of hogs and gardenias / whether summer / can be kept // not Circean / or as sleep / behind locked doors // but as light / carried over the line." Nothing separates humans from their surroundings, as when hikers string down a mountainside, "understanding little / of what's being said / by the billion-tongued / aspen, in the harsher / language of the sun." *Yes, Everything* sizzles with sunlight, its Whitmanesque themes of hope and joy tempered only by time.

Then comes the pivotal book, *The Morning of the Red Admirals*, introducing the poet's third and final stylistic shift. The poems break from the mostly linear narratives and left margin line starts, as if Dana recalls and embraces the ranges of voice and forms he experimented with in his thirties. The title poem, a tour de force, first describes the moment he catches sight of two red admiral butterflies; the next morning, one alights on his shoulder, "He's weightless / this migrant— / a small, wild / scrap of grace— / and I'm his resting / post on the way / to whatever far / edge of creation / breathes at the tips / of his wings." The poet's "grace" arrives not in church, but in the wild, Dana's ebullience reminiscent of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" trope in his essay "Nature," describing how "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me."

Light continues as one of Dana's central motifs to suggest spiritual transcendence, as the first and last lines of "Light" attest: "At six the kitchen glows with June / morning light. . . . / An old / man, now, I know there is no god, / that this light's his only voice."

At *Morning's* physical and metaphorical center, the extraordinary essay "In Panama," compares the red admiral butterfly, which (according to a quoted *New York Times* article) "improvised the order of its strokes freshly every time," to Dana's desire "to push on past my 'style,' to some new way of seeing and hearing and talking. To invoke a new rhythm, a new thinking . . . less compositional, more improvisational."

"Spindrift," the first poem after this declaration of poetic independence, exemplifies Dana's new flight pattern, beginning,

The wind heebie-jeebies

\*

Where's the bread of silence that can be torn and eaten?  
As children we mistook it for boredom and emptiness.

This loose, meandering, yet crafted style carries through his penultimate book, *The Other*, and into the new poems found at the beginning of the present text. The light he heralded as the god he doesn't believe in is now reflected in luminescent pages filled with white space offered by widely separated lines, the effect reminiscent of unpainted rice paper defining mist or snow in Chinese brush paintings.

"Elegy for a Hometown," not coincidentally, ends *The Other*, as it ends this posthumous volume as well. It begins with a nostalgic visit late in life to where his early life began in western Massachusetts, and ends with a foreshadowing of his death:

In the end,  
a small box of a house by the sea.

No electricity.  
No running water. Dirt floored.

Prayer,

wind & slapdash from the whereafter.

By showing the reader around his back yard, by taking us with him on vacation, by sharing intimate moments of his past, Dana invites us to partake in his transcendental ecstasy. Instead of rejecting life, as easy as it would have been for him, whose mother died before he turned 10, and whose father deserted him, landing him in a foster home until joining the Navy, Dana presses us to say, "Yes, everything."

Like the poems in this book, those frozen, frost-laden, triumphant crabapples cling to their branches.

## UPCOMING IN *NEW LETTERS*



Willis Barnstone's essay "Of This World, Poetry & Paradise."

New poems by Donald Hall, Trish Reeves,  
Linda Kunhardt, and Dave Smith.

"Calling Flash Gordon," an essay by Hilary Masters.

"Dead Silence," a new story by Robin Hemley, and more.