



A Ted Hughes Website

Poems

Terry Gifford: »Only an Owl ...«

»Only An Owl...«

in memory of Fred Rue Jacobs
Dunnerdale, September 18 1999

There's a hole in the State of California.
It can be seen from across the world.
From China, Australia, Brazil,
From Cairo, Poland and France
The friends of Fred can feel the hole
In the bars of Bakersfield, the restaurants,
The new college library that was not big enough
For the books that flowed into Bakersfield
Like water through Valley View, into # 133.

I'm writing in the last house up a valley
In the Lake District and Fred is here
At midnight saying, »Hey, life ain't so bad!«
And »I've had the cancer all these years, but
Hey, I'm a success!« as I ignore my own
Mortality in pursuit of the natural wonders
In those books, the bull backlit by moonlight
In the mist of the meadow I just walked through.
I only saw it when I looked back. Looking back,

I did not expect to meet Fred in Cairo,
But when I went for breakfast on the top floor
Of the hotel there he was drinking beer,
Waiting for *people* to appear, ignoring
Brilliant parquets below. At dinner over here
His enthusiastic laughter was a little too loud
For English ears. For breakfast over there
Fred's fridge was always stocked with nuts
And beer. Just nuts and beer. »Perfect!«

When I go to the door, peer into the dark
Across the still meadow towards the woods,
I hear the owls of the valley socialising
And remember Ted's dedications in those books
In the Valley View shrine: »Only an owl
Knows the worth of an owl.« Fred was a man
Worthy of his collection, as I think Ted knew
When he wrote, »This one's for Fred,
Living his death with such knowing fun.«

Terry Gifford

© Terry Gifford

A note by Terry Gifford:

Fred Rue Jacobs, Librarian at Bakersfield Community College, California, was a long standing friend of Ted's and the leading US collector, devoting a room in his apartment to Ted's work in shelves of books and three filing cabinets of material. This collection is now with Fred's close friend Mimi Mckay in Austin, Texas. He was the life and soul of meetings of Hughes scholars and very much wanted to be at the Lyon conference. An expert on cancer treatment (»Hey, I'm a success!« he said for 12 years or more), he was devastated that he had not been able to offer his expertise to Ted, being unaware of the nature of Ted's final illness. »Only an Owl...« I wrote for his memorial gathering in Bakersfield.