

*I Read You Green,
Mother*

Poems by

Will Inman

Edited by David Ray and Judy Ray

HOWLING DOG PRESS

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Cover painting, "Near Prescott, Arizona," by David Chorlton

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of the poems in this book were published in:

Because We Love (Anderie Poetry Press); *Clark Street Review*;
Chiron Review; *Freedom Isn't Free*; *Images*; *Prayers to Protest*;
Poems that Center & Bless Us (Pudding House Publications);
Ranges (Minotaur Editions); *The Laughing Dog*;
and *The Yellow Butterfly*.

ISBN: 978-1-882863-81-5



HOWLING DOG PRESS
P.O. Box 853, Berthoud, CO 80513-0853
www.howlingdogpress.com

DEDICATION

The Author wishes to thank those who have empowered his work over the years, including Michael Annis, Clyde Appleton, Jennifer Bosveld, Karen Bowden, David Chorlton, Marion Cracraft, Michael Gregory, Carl Hanni, Michael Hathaway, Sherman Hayes, Roberta Howard, Ruth Moon Kempher, Burgess Needle, Mike Nicksic, Michael and Hannelore Rattee, David and Judy Ray, Vernon Rowe, Melissa Tibbals-Gribbin, Jim Watson-Gove, and the editors of diverse publications that have helped bring his poetry to those other friends, his readers. He also wants to thank The Poetry Center of the University of Arizona for their stewardship of the Will Inman Scholarship and The Tucson Poetry Festival for the Will Inman Award.

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PREFACE

When I have asked fellow poets if they could tell me their most basic definition of their work, their answers have often proved haunting. Etheridge Knight told me, "In a word, 'Desperation!'" Will Inman's word was "Always go deeper!" I have never had a chance to ask Jimmy Santiago Baca, but in a letter to Will Inman he once described a goal that included "hurling, catapulting the black stone soul into the abyss... incantating the deadly secrets of life itself, the heartbeat booms of my life shaking and trembling between the lines with beauty, with ever shimmering presence."

In that exchange of letters with Jimmy Santiago Baca, Will Inman expanded his description of his own aesthetic:

you dive with the black stone into the abyss, you risk all...you create a living tapestry, a whole soul....Taking the total surrender of blind dive...is a hell of a truer, deeper risk than doing it in a drugs or drink destructive plunge...whole galaxies can explode and *still* be part of the larger universal harmony....you're like Whitman: you contain multitudes, and they're not just mobs of globs, they're great dynamic forces, but your kind of awareness also carries whole futures in its unfolding. This has nothing to do with 'being great' or getting credit for genius or any of that, it is organic with hurricanes, earthquakes, the great cries of human pain, the tornadic leaps of hope and fury working in each other.

Will Inman's *Beruf* - his calling - has been to follow wherever the Muse leads, down the dusty road from his little house or to vigorous protests both in his writing and other forms of passionate activism for humanitarian causes.

Judy Ray and I first met Will after we had included a poem of his in our anthology, *Fathers*. Will himself, it seems, had long been something of a father figure for members of his writing workshops, not only in academic sessions during his

early teaching, but also in such venues as homeless shelters and prisons. Richard Shelton, famous for his own influential and long-term creative writing workshops in prisons, commented of Will Inman: "Like Whitman he embraces the world: 'Not because I am everything/ but because I am of everything.'"

Sam Hamill, responding to *Surfings: Selected Poems of Will Inman*, wrote: "Will Inman's poetry is informed by a lifetime of compassionate social engagement - from the War Resisters League to working with the homeless - and composed with an educated ear for natural idiom, cadence and image that W. C. Williams or Denise Levertov would admire. This is poetry that is earned, a rich vein in Whitman's grand tradition."

Poetry that is earned! - an interesting concept. I suppose it is possible for a poem to be tossed off in a session of idle reflection, and I certainly welcome and am grateful when one seems to have arrived in this manner as a gift. Some of my favorite poets have written as if crickets and nightingales have shown up at their doors as special deliveries.

Curious as to what Will Inman might offer should we at this moment be engaged in a discussion, I have just opened at random my copy of *Surfings* - the so-called Virgilian dip for inviting Synchronicity and Serendipity.

I open to "What Friend in the Labyrinth" on page 91, and see that its first line is "I stand at the rim of what's accepted...I never expected/ to be grateful to flies."

Good enough! We are poets who welcome the fly and the cricket, the nightingale and the crow, but some of us have had to work harder than others to seek a Thou for an I, a Reader for the fruits of our labor.

Will Inman is one of those. With his unique and intriguing aesthetic, he has earned what the gods have given him, though he still refuses to capitalize the word God.

David Ray
Tucson, Arizona, Election Day, 2008

I Read You Green, Mother

When my father was put in
earth, my mother's grave
grew seventeen years one
month and a day or so, she
lay under english ivy, but I
suddenly saw between those dark
green leaves, other young green
first strange light green leaves I
recognized poison ivy, on my mother's
grave poison ivy, I had to kind of
laugh, but that was not the only other
ivy than english, there was also
virginia creeper, fiveleaf fingers and
non-irritant, with the other vines, that
english death ivy, poison ivy like
irony in her outthrust undefeated
jaws...also two dogwood seedlings
tree of the cross they lynched that
Jesus on, never grew straight again,
grows like a curse and a blessing on my
mother's grave...then...at foot end...
a magnolia sprout, southern lady
pretensions her hillbilly tongue never
quite betrayed her to, still flowering
in the corpse, though...and...near the
head, two small oak sprigs, strength she
somehow never lost...but, most strange
of all, and center, near poison ivy, a
small yaupon, holly, *ilex vomitoria*
which Carolina coastal Indians took
to purge out winter, boiled leaves from
every spring, drank, vomited, came
clean again...
broke old vessels of past year,

wove new, molded new, made
everything new...

O I read you, Mother I
read your messages, you talk green
to me

of poisons in the vine,
of gentle green creeping with death,
of lynched saviors, of fallen
pretentions, of oaks
rooting truth strong between teeth,
and of a purge to vomit me of your
death, of your

memory, thanks,
Mother, I read you green

I shall not weep at your grave
but I vomit out your death. You
claim from me only that I
live and make things new
I read you, Mother. I
read you green.

Sound is More Subtle Than Footsteps

Sound is more subtle than footsteps,
but most anyone who learns to walk – can
learn to speak.

She walks out of a long
corridor of time and in through my ears, her
voice carries her presence, whole and fresh,
her news is good, her spirit strong.

I can
stand back after all those years,
now without grab, and behold her flourishing
and be glad.

Yet I can tell she relishes telling me her
triumphs, as I cherish telling her mine: we
do not need to prove against: and though our
victories may not be **with**, they run parallel
down a common field of meaning.

The invisible rose that opens between us now
once shrank bitter between dark bracts:
took years to let the deep bloom
brave naked air.

I lay no claim on her, my
set-free love floats serene on quiet ripples
of a wide lake, takes a whole sky
to receive

from Delia Ellen Inman
1893-1949

burdens

She carried them to flatlands, to swamp country,
she carried first hills of blue ridge, she
carried huckleberry paths: stone-lined wells,
dug narrow, remembered her innards with chill
water hot summers, swift small streams with
bottoms muddy after swim but clear over stones
when fished, tobacco barns and black gum trees,
deep-hooded bonnets and long gingham dresses
washing, Granny Young settin dusk on the porch
smoking her pipe seeing visions, say **damn!** cut
finger harvesting cabbages sure go to hell -
all these she carried east, this ragged web,
seasons mixed like hogshead cheese - wild
strawberries, june apples, chestnut trees yet
unblighted, snow trudge to school and chill
outhouse, horse shoes flung raising dust
four-dollar hat from Mt Airy, mama dreaming
of wide streets with great mansions, dies a week
later, papa dead drunk not yet fifty, built
first flue-cure tobacco barn in Surry County.

She leaves nine brothers, runs away with two
younger sisters, brushed her teeth with frayed
end of a sturdy twig, broke ice in a porch pan
to wash her face of a morning - she carried
these carried her.

Society people down east in
Wilmington snickered at her hillbilly brogue,
she'd never eaten **tame strawberries** how they
laughed. Willie grinned weak under fierce
shamed eyes staring, what hills broke in her

ribs, what streams bled.

Mountain women
chewed bits of meat, fingered them weaning into
young ones' mouths. Now I carry shreds still
digesting me.

from **The South is a Dark Woman**

1.

The South is a dark woman,
mother of my soul.

Tenderly she got me
from the shadow of a bent wave,
tenderly she left me
at the edge of the surf.

Among all the dunes of white faces,
I never forgot her face.
Her darkness kept cool a place for me
in a rib around my heart
where a dream could mend my waking.

2.

From white columns I would set out,
down cement walks I strode,
from the stone bridge I descended
into ribs of the swamp creek.

There she was with me,
her breath and her presence:
if I did not listen,
she would speak with me;
if my ears did not strain,
I could hear her voice.

Cypress trunks rose brown and tall,
and in the roof of the swamp
cypress needles and vines
wove her green mantle into the blue:
if I did not listen,
I could hear her breathe.

In the shade, cardinal flowers bloomed
and hummingbirds drank sweet honey
at my mother's dark mouth.

At her brown breast, I drank,
to her black mouth I pressed my white ear,
I leaned to her heartbeat,
I yearned to the stroke of her wounded hands.

Though she was forbidden me, I never
forgot her face.