

DAVID FARWELL / Strand Palace¹

In 1995, Fran Herndon arrived in Vancouver from San Francisco. She had come to attend a conference, “The Recovery of the Public World,” held to honour the poetry and poetics of Robin Blaser, my late partner. It was an exciting and interesting event with people attending from all over North America. Fran arrived with a large painting which was exhibited in a show at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, across the street from where the conference was being held at what is now Emily Carr University. The painting, a large watercolour measuring 30 inches x 40 inches, showed four figures dancing around a pond. It had and still has a mystical rather magical quality about it and appears timeless. I can remember Robin’s response to Fran’s painting the first time he saw it. After gazing at it for some time he turned to me and said: “I know exactly where it will hang in the living room.” I don’t know what Fran’s intentions were regarding that painting, but I do know that she left Vancouver without it and today it may be seen in the exact spot in our living room that Robin chose.

Robin and Fran were long-time friends. They met at Berkeley in the late 1940s when Robin, newly arrived from that great metropolis of Twin Falls, Idaho, fell into friendship with those figures that were to determine his poetic direction for the rest of his life, Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan. Fran was a part of that magic circle of artists, poets, actors, and writers that gathered in and around San Francisco in the late 40s and early 50s which resulted in a renaissance of art and literature on the West Coast.

I first met Fran in the late 1970s when Robin, after a major falling out with some of his fellow poets resulted in his move to Canada, began to reconnect with his San Francisco roots. On several occasions we stayed at Fran’s wonderful home on 15th Avenue—not far from the Golden Gate Bridge, the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, and the Presidio—a home filled with paintings and sculpture, both hers and by artists she has known from the San Francisco area. I remember

¹ This piece was delivered on the occasion of the opening of a show of paintings by Fran Herndon at Blanket Contemporary Art gallery in Vancouver on Friday, April 27th, 2012. Fran Herndon was in attendance.

my first visit to her home. We had flown down from Vancouver and taken a cab to her address. Robin pulled a key from his pocket and let himself in. He hadn't told me that Fran was away—probably on one of her walking tours in Europe or other parts of the United States. (I should explain that Fran is a walker with a capital W. Last June in San Francisco, when she and I walked to Le Chapeau, a great little French restaurant where we were to celebrate my 66th birthday, I was in a sweat by the time we got there after trying to keep up with Fran. Believe me when I say that she can Walk.) Walking through her home that first time and trying to imagine the kind of person who lived in that marvelous space, I remember saying to myself, “I think I'm going to like this person.” And when I finally met you some days later, I did and I still do.

Back in 1965 when Robin arrived in Vancouver he had a number of Fran Herndon paintings with him. There were two in the basement that he frequently went downstairs to look at. They were, unfortunately, too large to hang in our home. One was a portrait of Jack Spicer walking along a beach and the other a portrait of Robin holding a large bundle of sagebrush, a very Idahoian symbol. When talking with Fran over a drink on Wednesday afternoon, shortly after she got off the plane from San Francisco, she explained that she had asked a friend to mail her some sagebrush so that she could include it in the painting. And so there it is. Both those paintings are now at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at UBC.

There are other paintings of Fran's that we collected over the years. I remember one visit during which Robin grabbed an oil painting right off the wall in Fran's foyer. As I remember it, Fran, after working with watercolours for a number of years, had decided to experiment with oils again and this was her first finished piece. It was too large to roll and carry onto the plane so we had it shipped. And I am embarrassed to say that the cost of the shipping was more than what we paid Fran for the painting. But with exhibitions such as this wonderful celebration of Fran's art I hope those days are gone.

In September 2008, Robin and I flew to San Francisco and were picked up at the airport by several students from the University of California, Berkeley, and driven over the Bay Bridge to the campus. Robin had been invited to give a poetry reading in the Morrison Room of the English Department, a beautiful room with amazing acoustics. He was not in very good shape by then. It was not until several

months later that he would be diagnosed with a brain tumour, but there were definite signs during this visit that all was not well. Two days later—the day after Barack Obama had been elected the President of the United States of America—we were driven back across the Bay Bridge and set up camp in the St. Francis Hotel on Union Square in downtown San Francisco. Robin made me promise not to contact anyone in the city. He was quite content to sit at the window of our suite in the St. Francis and watch the goings on in Union Square. Two months earlier we had done the same thing in New York. We spent a week seated at a small table under a statue of Dante in a park opposite the Lincoln Center. I made frequent trips to the Starbucks close by for coffee and for sandwiches at lunchtime. We had breakfast at the Flame, a greasy spoon a block away, and dinner at a great Italian restaurant across the street. The rest of the time we sat under the shadow of Dante and watched the world go by. It seemed like an extended meditation. In retrospect, it was a wonderful slow motion farewell.

But in San Francisco, when Robin decided that he didn't want to eat lunch in the hotel that September day, we made our way down to the lobby and out into the brisk fall breeze. We hadn't got half a block before we saw, striding toward us, Fran Herndon, looking, as Robin would say, "marvelous." And so we had lunch together at that hotel with the enormous bouquet in the lobby. Fran, I know you were upset at Robin's condition, but you didn't show it and I have to tell you it was that chance meeting that he remembered and talked about most when we returned to Vancouver. You were positively the best thing that happened on that trip. I don't know what stars or gods brought that meeting about, but I have thanked them many times over. And I thank you for then and now.

Fran Herndon—I love your work and I love you.