

Sondra Ball Retrospective
poetry anthology by Omar Azam

Sondra Ball, poet and pioneering webzine editor, passed away this spring. Biweekly for the past thirteen years, she published a selection of fresh work alongside guest poems. As a young poet trying to delineate my own identity, I found her outsider aesthetic a revelation. She had deep roots and her vision was penetrating, her canvas inclusive. Her work had a sensitive sagacity and unique voice. She was also a master of the craft and of the power of language, meaning, and lyricism. Her journal, *Autumn Leaves*, became a retreat for what I have called the "blood red hearts on society's chopping block."

Like all good poets, Sondra's poems bloom from the center of the universe, from a generous heart with a deep sense of reverence for primal relationships. Her unique background as a member of the Native American and Quaker communities informed her approach. In this retrospective, we read a selection that showcases the multifaceted ways she expressed lyrical truth:

My Mother Told Me

My mother told me,
"Sing!
Sing songs of planting corn.
Sing songs of harvesting squash.
Sing songs of cooking beans."

My mother sang.
Always, the woods echoed with her voice.
She sang the ceremonies:

child birthing,
child naming,
initiation,
wedding,
death.

She sang the songs of women.
The mountains rang with her voice.

At night beside the fire,
she sang warrior songs,
women warrior songs.

And she told me,

"Sing!
Sing the birthing songs.
Sing the dying songs.
Sing the warrior songs.

Sing, daughter, sing.
Sing all the accountable songs.
Sing all the unaccountable songs
that ring
and gleam

and dance
in the stream of life."

Explaining Love

I tire of explaining love.
Only love can explain love,
understand love,
embrace love.
Love reaches out wildly,
touching love in others.
The intellect tries to tame love
to words and images and thoughts,
but never domesticates it fully.
For love thrives in wild places,
and can be totally embraced only by love.

Sondra was an adept harvester of the ironic turn of phrase, as we see in these three short poems:

A July Morning

Mountains
wrapped in shadows:
I pause beneath their cliffs,
listen to my death song among
their rocks.

Echoes Traveling

echoes traveling
through the sap sweetened forest
axes stroking trees

On the Veranda

on the veranda
looking at the coming dawn
the apricot clouds
remembering one born dead
who never saw a sunrise

Sondra respected the recondite poetic moment, knowing that while words fall short, small poems can leave big impressions. She had the humility to leave space for the reader's identity within her poems. She shared childlike joy and disappointment and within their interplay, weaved a spiritual commentary:

Seductive Darkness

seductive darkness
of the night
blissful moments
of delight

the fire blazing
higher, higher
tones of cedar
tints of musk
tender moments
of desire

bodies merging
golden wine
words are shaken
from our minds

Self Image

rehearsing
myself

reversing
words, actions

changing
re-arranging
rhymes
rhythms

until
I am wrung out

Behind

behind closed doors
hateful words,
fists falling like rain

child closes down
to hide pain
to hide tears

builds a wall
concealing years
of guilt and blame

behind the wall
tears fall
invisibly

Sondra's concerns revolving around social justice and spiritual liberation consistently challenge the reader without insulting. She is a fly on the cosmic wall, living a mystic's life, an archetypal traveler with a pocketful of wisdom:

Twice a Month

In the shallow light of this small church basement,

we meet and talk:
me and you and these young Indian women
who sleep in cold rooms without heat,
on park benches,
in cardboard boxes near the river.
We meet and talk;
and with our eyes we ask hard questions
that have no answers,
with our hearts we dream hard dreams
that have no promise.

My Poems Are

My poems
are attempts to teach love.

All the pain in them—
the horror of the tortured child,
the terror of the falling bomb—
are pleas to you
to hold the suffering in your arms,
to shelter them from evil,
to bring them to the arms of God.

I wish God would speak directly to you.

But this God
who flung the sky around the earth,
who flung stars across billions of miles of space,

is sometimes too shy to speak in words.

So he pinches me—softly—
and I write these poems for him.

My poems are always imperfect.
I do not have God's voice.

But,
for now,
I give what I have,

while waiting
for God to decide to speak to you himself.

*Find more of Sondra's work in [Autumn Leaves](#), [Mindful of Poetry](#), and [Writing World](#).
Omar Azam is a poet and publisher of [Subjective Substance](#). His poetry can be found at [Autumn Leaves](#)
and [Unlikely Stories](#).*