

## VERN RUTSALA (1934-2014)

By Ada Molinoff

Vern Rutsala, called “the gentle giant of Oregon poetry” by The Oregonian’s Jeff Baker, died April 2. A teacher at Portland’s Lewis and Clark College from 1961 to 2004 and the author of 17 books, he was recognized by Literary Arts’ 2014 CES Wood Award for his “enduring and substantial literary career.”

Rutsala’s prize-winning *How We Spent Our Time* (2006) includes verbs in every title—“Departing...”; “Dreaming...”—to highlight life’s essential elements. Poet Donald Justice said Rutsala demonstrated “how to put to maximum use the simplest things in our lives.”

An example of Rutsala’s attention to everyday things can be found in this passage from the title poem of *The Moment’s Equation*, a 2005 National Book Award finalist. The piece is about the poet, his father, and other laborers in a bar after work.

But there is some cross-grained meaning

I reach for in the linked rings [of glasses] and the pattern  
of cigarette butts in the ashtray.  
It’s a meaning like the wavy sweat stains  
on hat bands and the worn spots on work pants,

it’s in what is truly said by the burnished  
silver corners of black lunch pails. Something  
rubs and speaks there the way it speaks  
in those hammer handles rubbed smooth

as glass and the business ends of shovels  
brilliant as polished chrome.

Lines and stanzas flow into one another in a cadence evocative of work’s ongoing rhythm. Rutsala’s detailed imagery acknowledges these men’s lives and conveys his

respect for them. As former Oregon Poet Laureate Lawson Inada has said, Rutsala wrote “enduring poetry.”

I experienced Vern’s qualities when we met in 2005 at Pacific University’s MFA in Writing program. He would be my first-semester advisor, commenting on my poems and analyses, and I wondered about our match. One afternoon I paused in front of him and his wife Joan, sitting beside each other on a low concrete wall.

“Do I mail you revised poems or only new ones?” I asked him anxiously.

“I’ll read whatever you send me,” Vern answered.

“Oh...thanks,” I said, relaxing.

A magnifying glass deciphered his handwriting, which, he told me, had prompted a friend to say he could serve as “the scribe for a tribe of ants.” In the margin of an analysis, he queried, “But what does this poem *mean*?”—a comment that now makes me smile.

Vern’s initial criticism stung, but his encouragement kept me going, and my poems improved. Celebrating the “v. good” he’d penned next to a particular image, I teased him that if he wrote out the negative feedback, he ought to write out the “very.” When I threatened to address my next packet to “V. Rutsala,” he chuckled.

Most important in my memory of Vern Rutsala is his careful reading of my work, the precious gift of his taking my writing seriously.