

I025 USD 16.95.-

Passing Through Customs

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS



GIBBONS RUARK



Passing Through Customs

new and selected poems

2012.2 / R 89 X
GIBBONS RUARK

Louisiana State University Press
Baton Rouge 1999

Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999 by Gibbons Ruark
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America
First printing
08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 5 4 3 2 1

Designer: Michele Myatt Quinn
Typeface: Sabon
Typesetter: Coghill Composition
Printer and binder: Edwards Brothers, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ruark, Gibbons.

Passing through customs : new and selected poems / Gibbons Ruark.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8071-2361-7 (cloth : alk. paper)—

ISBN 0-8071-2362-5 (pbk: alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3568.U17P37 1999

811'.54—dc21

98-44083

CIP

Many of the poems herein have been selected from previous collections of poetry by the author: *A Program for Survival* (University Press of Virginia, 1971), copyright © 1971 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia; *Reeds* (Texas Tech University Press, 1978), copyright © 1978 by Texas Tech University; *Keeping Company* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), copyright © 1983 by The Johns Hopkins University Press; and *Rescue the Perishing* (Louisiana State University Press, 1991), copyright © 1980, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Gibbons Ruark.

The poems herein that appeared in *Keeping Company* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) are reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to the editors of the following publications, in which the poems noted first appeared: "Autumn Elegy" in *Willow Springs*; "Blue Shades for a Daughter," "Elegiac Anyway," "Househusbandry," "A Road Map for Reviewers," and "This Table" in *Shenandoah*; "Hybrid Magnolias in Late April" and "Late December" in *The New Republic*; "On Hearing My Father's Voice in a Dead Sleep" in *American Poetry Review*; "Robert Frost to Ezra Pound's Daughter from His Deathbed" in *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*; and "Two Anglo-Irish Sonnets" in *The Midwest Quarterly*.

"Swamp Mallows" originally appeared in *The Store of Joys: Writers Celebrate the North Carolina Museum of Art's Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. Huston Paschal (North Carolina Museum of Art in association with John F. Blair, Publisher, 1997).

"A Vacant Lot" also appeared in *The Pushcart Prize, XV: Best of the Small Presses* (Wainscott, N.Y.: Pushcart Press, 1990). "Househusbandry" was featured in the on-line anthology *Poetry Daily* in July 1997, and "Elegiac Anyway" in July 1998.

The author extends his grateful thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts for fellowships that supported work on many of these poems, and to Bernard and Mary Loughlin of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources. ∞

This publication is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

for Gabriel and Sarah and Tian

Contents

Words for Unaccompanied Voice at Dunmore Head / 1

Night Fishing / 3

Leaving Hatteras / 5

Transatlantic Summer Elegy / 7

Polio / 8

Singing Hymns Late at Night for My Father / 9

My Daughter Cries Out in Her Sleep / 10

A Vacant Lot / 11

Locking Up / 13

On Hearing My Father's Voice in a Dead Sleep / 14

Hybrid Magnolias in Late April / 15

To Emily, Practicing the Clarinet / 17

To Jennifer, Singing at the Piano / 18

Reading the Mail in Early Fall / 19

Blue Shades for a Daughter / 22

This Table / 23

Lecturing My Daughters /	24
A Small Rain /	26
To the Nuthatches /	27
Waiting for You with the Swallows /	29
Househusbandry /	30
The Visitor /	31
Listening to Fats Waller in Late Light /	32
For a Suicide, a Little Early Morning Music /	34
Postscript to an Elegy /	36
Essay on Solitude /	37
Autumn Elegy /	39
For My Cousin, Dead at Fifteen /	40
Chekhov: A Life /	41
Robert Frost to Ezra Pound's Daughter from His Deathbed /	42
Late December /	43
A Change in the Weather /	44
Lament /	45
Words to Accompany a Small Glass Swan /	46
Working the Rain Shift at Flanagan's /	48
Veterans /	50
With Thanks for a Shard from Sandycove /	51
The Enniskillen Bombing /	53
American Elegy /	55
Sleeping Out with My Father /	56
Reeds /	57

Basil / 59

Aubade to the Governor / 60

Words to Accompany a Leaf from Sirmione / 61

Soaping Down for Saint Francis of Assisi:

The Canticle of Sister Soap / 63

The Goods She Can Carry: Canticle of Her Basket

Made of Reeds / 64

Cold Water Dawn at Mountainy Pond:

The Canticle of Italian Coffee / 65

With Our Wives in Late October / 66

Lost Letter to James Wright, with Thanks

for a Map of Fano / 67

Sleeve / 69

Written in the Guest Book at Thoor Ballylee / 70

For the Pause Before We Decorate the Tree / 72

Trying to See Through Joe Heffernan's Glasses / 74

A Road Map for Reviewers / 76

Two Anglo-Irish Sonnets / 77

To the Swans of Loch Muiri / 79

The Road to Ballyvaughan / 81

Talking Myself to Sleep in the Mountains / 82

Impromptu Immersion in Tom's Run / 83

Words Meant to Carry over Water / 84

Watching You Sleep Under Monet's Water Lilies / 86

Words to Accompany a Wildflower from

Edward Thomas's Hillside / 87

A Screech Owl's Lament for Edward Thomas / 88

At the Graves in Memory / 90

Elegiac Anyway / 91

Larkin / 92

Weather Report to My Father / 94

Miles from Newgrange at the Winter Solstice / 95

Wildflowers Left to Live on Knocknarea / 96

Swamp Mallows / 98

*Words for Unaccompanied Voice
at Dunmore Head*

One old friend who never writes me tells another:
The boy has need of lyrical friends around him.
Don't ask me how I ever found that out,

Given as I am to these fugitive headlands
Where not so long ago the news from Dublin
Arrived washed up with driftwood from the States,

Where the gulls rehearse the local word for weather
And then free-fall through ragged clouds to the sea wrack.
The bar at the end of the world is three miles east.

Last night the music there ascended with the smoke
From a turf fire and showered down in dying sparks
That fell on lovers and the lonely ones alike

Where they cycled the dark roads home or lingered
By a bridge till every cottage light was out—
Fell silent from the night as innocent as milkweed.

All night those soft stars burned in my watchful sleep.
At dawn I abandoned my rackety faithless car
To its own persuasions, took up a stick

And leaned uphill into the wind for the summit.
No music here but the raw alarms of seabirds
And the tireless water high against the cliff face.

No more the flute and the whiskeyed tenor rising,
The chorus of faces in the drift of smoke.
This is the rock where solitude scrapes its keel

And listens into the light for an echo.
This has to be good practice for that last
Cold wave of emptiness on whatever shore,

But why do the reckoners in my nightmares
Never ask me what I said to the speechless
Assembly of whitecaps instead of was

There anyone arm-in-arm with me as I spoke?

Night Fishing

We have come again, my father and I,
To the edge of the known land, to the streak
Of sand that lips the undermining sea.
But we are not allowed this time to speak

Of horizons, for the sun has dropped
Behind us, and night is all of a piece.
The lights go out in the cottages propped
Above the black dunes, room by room the lights

Go out, the children fall asleep, and soon
Whole families sleep as calm as children,
Nursed by the motions of the wind and tide.
My fishing rod springs and quivers and the line

Loops over the breakers; I watch the sinker
Splash and start to reel in steadily, steadily,
Feeling the current drag. Downshore, my father
Tosses with a pitcher's ease, then braces

His legs against the undertow and waits.
His cigarette stings a hole in the dark.
The odor of fish grows stronger as the wind
Switches and the sea crawls to us with its sharks.

My father stands like a driven piling.
I move downshore. Somewhere not far inland,
Where the afternoon's shrimpboats are nuzzling
In their sleep, his hometown leans into the river.

Below us, empty of fishers, the old pier
Sways over climbing waters, the salt wash
Rinses the pilings scabbed with barnacles.
The timbers shudder in the tidal rush.

The water lifts, but we do not move back
Until the seaweed swirls about our thighs
And empty bait trays tumble in the slack.
We reel and pull and reel and pull again.

Somewhere in that darkened row of houses
Our women sleep in their beautiful order,
But here on the swift-dissolving shore
I drift to my father in the night's one water.

Yearly we come to this familiar coast
To wade beside each other in the shallows,
Reaching for bluefish in the ocean's darkness
Till our lines are tangled and our tackle lost.

Leaving Hatteras

Deep summer is time forgetful of its calling,
The place a screened porch hugging the home Atlantic,
My brother's voice beside me: All you do is close
Your eyes. The surf's invisible below the dunes,
But its sound is the fallback and lift of memory.

After the days of heat and stillness, heat piling
Over our heads in columns ranked immovable,
The storm-cooled breezes riffle every window shade,
Freshness billows and flaps the air like a sail.
All I do is close my eyes. A screen door shudders
And bangs and a boy lights out for the water

And it is south of here by thirty years and more
Where the shore curls inward and the dunes are lower
And a boy can see his father from the water
Cleaning and oiling his tackle in a porch chair.
By the time he gets it right the fish will vanish.

One afternoon he walks as far as the shell line
Marking the tide's reach, remembers his scaling knife,
And goes back in and puts his feet up for a minute
And wakes to a plate of oysters on the table.
Now on a sleeping-porch just wavering toward its name
My brother and I are pulling on our road clothes

Halfheartedly, a sleeve or a sock at a time,
As if we were young and moving house all over
And not just going home at the end of summer.
There is a snapshot of a kindred moment somewhere,
More formal, though we stand there in our undershorts,

August in Carolina laving our faces,
The sun through stained glass dim but unrelenting.
It is the choir room before my sister's wedding,
My father reaching to help us with our cuff links,
His brow lit with sweat or the new forgetfulness.
Here what looks like water shivers over the screens

And we breathe deep, two of us only, buttoning
Our sleeves and zipping up the nylon duffel bags,
Unless you count the lazybones in the doorway,
Stretching himself and rubbing his eyes with his knuckles,
Blinking like a child as the room turns familiar.

Transatlantic Summer Elegy

Dusk in Kinvara. An old man quietly sings
To the air. In a distant time zone, late summer
Is leaving town. From houses with small children,
The yellow porch lights flick on after supper,
Hazy constellations of dim low stars.
High stars are still, the air so still the odor
Of honeysuckle sleeps in the hedges.
This is a night to keep still in the branches
Till someone on a porch starts calling you home.
Each house circled by light is holding its breath
When suddenly out of nowhere a breeze rises
And the whole of the great night tree starts swaying
As if it were not all the leaves but one.
The wrong old man keeps singing in Kinvara.

Polio

The snore of midsummer flies at the screen,
Afternoon's tepid fog crawling my sleep.
In my unrelenting dream the fire truck
Peals round the corner, and when I wake
The sirens still confound me. From the wobbly
Room I stumble to my mother's door,
A shifting blur in the wall before me.
Her limbs are weak and rumpled on the sheet.
The empty braces glint. Their brightness hurts.
Pale pillow, damp hair, my father's shadow
Straining over her, sweat at his armpits,
Straightening, bending, straightening her leg.
Like knives her shrill cries peel the heavy air,
But he keeps at it, forcing tears back till
His eyes ache. The veins map out his anguish.
His false teeth tighten on that work of love.

Singing Hymns Late at Night for My Father

While our mother, your dark-haired lover,
Lay paralyzed with polio,
We heard your crackling voice recover

A lost tune on the radio.
Never a singer, you nearly sang in time
“You Are My Sunshine,” one more blow

Struck gladly for the March of Dimes.
Sister and I called up and pledged
Five bucks to hear it five more times.

For though on Sunday mornings you edged
Back from the pulpit microphone,
At home you offered like a cage

Of swallows your hopeless monotone.
By the old piano out of key
You sang too early, stopped too soon.

Last time I saw you, you had only
A seamy lyric in your ear,
Dandling the baby on your knee

To words you never let us hear.
If now, far from you in the close
Of night, we falter out of fear

Or out of tune or out of too much whiskey,
Bear with us, even in distress,
And when we raise the raucous noise

Of “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”
We will make an everlasting
Music with something missing.