

RHYS BROOKBANKS

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Rhys Brookbanks, a victim of the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, was a young poet and cultural commentator at the very start of his career. A 2008 English and History graduate of the University of Otago, and, after this, of the Canterbury University journalism course, he was in his first weeks as a CTV reporter when the quake struck. As a rookie journalist, he had already begun to publish articles and reviews on a wide number of topics - from book clubs to whale watching; from historical fiction to contemporary theatre. He had published only a handful of poems: but he already had the focus and enthusiasm that suggested the vital role poetry would have had in his future.

I first met Rhys in 2006, when he was my student on the second-year creative writing paper offered at the University of Otago. He was a quiet yet noticeably dedicated student, whose gently-framed yet perceptive feedback helped other students considerably, and whose portfolio submissions strengthened over the course of the one semester paper. His work ranged from elegiac lyrics, to political broadsides inspired by the likes of Gil Scott-Heron's 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised'. Rhys's enthusiasm for poetry carried him on to the shared role of poetry editor at *Critic* (which he held alongside another young poet, Poppy Haynes) and into active organisational roles in the Otago Literary Society, as well as for the free public readings at Circadian Rhythm. He took part in readings for Montana Poetry Day; he also had work published in *Deep South* (of which he was also editor in 2008), the *Otago Daily Times*, and in *Takahe*. In

Rhys's poem 'The Jewish Memorial on the Danube, Budapest', which appeared in *Takahe* 71, his political and historical senses merge with a grief-edged chill:

The Jewish Memorial on the Danube, Budapest

Next to the arterial road
in the shadow of parliament's rusty crown
stand 60 shoes.

Not mid-stride, marching
these shoes look together to the West.

Not toe-down, heel-high, expectant
these shoes will leave no more prints.

Not for running rough-shod through street and field
these shoes are brass, stuck-fast, and heavy,

one step
from dropping
silent and
cold
to the bottom
of this unrelenting river.

One of Rhys's last messages to me was an out-of-the blue, ebullient recollection, along with a declaration about the song 'Trapeze Swinger', by singer-songwriter Samuel Bean:

‘Just for fun - I would like to take back all the poems and songs I brought in when you asked us to bring in one of our favourite poems (I think I brought along about six because I couldn’t decide) and replace them all with this one by my favourite singer/songwriter. His band is called Iron & Wine. I like to think of him as what Robert Frost would sound like if he picked up a guitar [...] the music has the same simplicity of structure but with a deeper overall impact [as Frost’s poetry]’.

Witnessing a student’s joy in his or her work is one of a teacher’s greatest prizes. In this sense, Rhys was one of the most rewarding students I’ve ever taught. He phoned not so long ago to announce his engagement to his fiancée, Esther Jones. What a privilege it felt, to get that call: to be asked to participate in another aspect of his happiness.

I had looked forward to a long friendship, fed by a mutual love of poetic craft. I had looked forward to seeing his writing burgeon. His immediate family, Alan, Fran, and Donna Brookbanks, and his fiancée Esther, had looked forward to so much more. In an unpublished poem, ‘The Space Between’, which he asked me to critique in November 2009, he quotes Rainer Maria Rilke: ‘But granted the consciousness that even between the closest people there persist infinite distances, a wonderful living side by side can arise for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of seeing one another in whole shape and before a great sky!’ The intimate love lyric that grows from that quotation reveals a thoughtfulness, openness and tenderness that seem to be the fingerprint of his personality, as well as much of his writing. Rhys leaves all of us who knew him feeling the ache of that infinite distance.