

Mary Randlett: Lasting Images of Theodore Roethke

The work of Olympia, Washington master photographer Mary Randlett ranges from architecture and portraiture to the powerful natural imagery of her home state in the Pacific Northwest.

Her remarkable photographs are held in the permanent collections of more than three dozen major institutions nationwide, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution. Among her most acclaimed images are those of more than 500 of the region's writers and artists that she captured during her half-century career behind the camera.

One of her first experiences photographing a Washington-based artist -- poet Theodore Roethke -- would turn out to be one of her most memorable. Three weeks after the session, Roethke died of a heart attack. Her photographs of the Pulitzer-Prize winner are the final

images of the poet. The photos from this session have been reprinted in publications around the world. One was used as the front cover of Roethke's biography, *The Glass House, The Life of Theodore Roethke* by Allan Seager. Randlett's work, along with that of fellow-Seattle photographer Imogene Cunningham and West Coast filmmaker Ray Meyers (director of the film, *In a Dark Time*) constitute a visual archive of the poet during one of his most artistically productive periods. Roethke was a member of the English faculty at the University of Washington from 1947 through his death in 1963. Randlett described her interaction with Roethke that summer day in 1963.



at his home
in Seattle -
Last photo before
his death in August 1963

Theodore Roethke
July 1963

ROETHKE HOME MUSEUM (RHM): How did the assignment to photograph Roethke come about?

RANDLETT: My mother, Elizabeth Willis was very involved in the arts community in Seattle area. She knew Ted and Beatrice Roethke. She arranged for me to photograph Ted. At the time, they were living in a studio cabin on Bainbridge Island but had a home in Seattle, where I photographed Roethke. Although I had been a photographer since college, it was around this time that I was coming into it as a profession on a full-time basis.

RHM: Can you give us an idea of how the session went?

RANDLETT: I drove to Roethke's home in Seattle in the morning. It was July 18, 1963. Roethke and his wife, Beatrice, met me on the porch. Beatrice left soon to run some errands. I told him just to go about his day and I'd take pictures of him around the house. He sat down to read his mail. Above him was a wonderful painting that he liked. He told me that he got it from the artist. He traded it for one of his handwritten poems in France. Then we moved to a white room -- I remember the white walls, curtains and couch. He told me that this was the room where he liked to read. He got a book, plopped himself down and let it fall on his chest and closed his eyes like he was asleep. I took photographs of him on a white sofa. Then we went into the living room. He looked out the window and said, "Jesus Christ, it's the cops." I didn't know at the time that he had dealt with mental illness in the past and the police in that

respect. But they were just passing by. We eventually moved out to the porch. I had only read one of his poems at that point, "The Rose." I think it had been published in *The New Yorker*. So I had him sit by a rosebush that was growing by the porch. That ended up being one of the best photos.

RHM: How many images did you take?

RANDLETT: I was there for one or two hours. Altogether I took three or four rolls of film.

RHM: Did Roethke ever see the images?



RANDLETT: No he did not. After I finished taking the photos, I went on vacation to Orcas Island with my then-husband and four children. So I didn't have time to develop the pictures. It was only after we returned that I heard he had died (August, 1, 1963). He had a heart attack while swimming in the pool at the Bloedel's house on Bainbridge Island. Once the news of his death started to spread, I got a lot requests for the pictures, including some from as far away as England.

RHM: Do you still get requests for the Roethke images?

RANDLETT: Oh, yes. They are still quite popular. In fact *Poetry Northwest* is going to feature many of them in the magazine this summer (2013). The picture of him on the porch has been used in many places over the years. I'm very careful about what images I allow to be published. I respect my subjects and don't want to use anything that I don't feel shows them in a good light. There are some people who have wanted to publish the photos of Roethke pretending to sleep. I've had to say sorry, I can't let that happen because he looks dead. I also still print and sign photos of Roethke when I get requests. I'm 88 and still printing! I'd really like to stop some day but for now I'm still taking orders.

Randlett's relationship with the Roethke legacy continued for decades after his death. She continued to photograph his friends, students and artists influenced by the poets work including David Wagoner, Carolyn Kizer, Joan Swift, Robert Sund, Duane Niatum and Richard Eberhardt. She also photographed visual artists Morris Graves and Mark Tobe, the only time the two were photographed together.