



The Painted Bed: Poems

Donald Hall

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Donald Hall's fourteenth collection opens with an epigraph from the Urdu poet Faiz: "The true subject of poetry is the loss of the beloved." In that poetic tradition, as in THE PAINTED BED, the beloved might be a person or something else - life itself, or the disappearing countryside. Hall's new poems further the themes of love, death, and mourning so powerfully introduced in his WITHOUT (1998), but from the distance of passed time. A long poem, "Daylilies on the Hill 1975 - 1989," moves back to the happy repossession of the poet's old family house and its history - a structure that "persisted against assaults" as its generations of residents could not. These poems are by turns furious and resigned, spirited and despairing - "mania is melancholy reversed," as Hall writes in another long poem, "Kill the Day." In this book's fourth and final section, "Ardor," the poet moves toward acceptance of new life in old age; eros reemerges.

The Painted Bed: Poems Details

Date : Published May 7th 2003 by Mariner Books (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780618340750

Author : Donald Hall

Format : Paperback 112 pages

Genre : Poetry, Literature, American

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From Reader Review The Painted Bed: Poems for online ebook

Hope L. Justice says

Let me say this book is excellent, but I found it uneven. I loved the pace, its sweeping motion. It built me up into this beautiful sad place I almost couldn't bear, only to watch it drop off and dwindle and waste my emotional investment in the last section of the book, 'Ardor'. Honestly I found myself going, who cares, about the entire last section. I could've done completely without.

A highlight for me, possibly my favorite moment:

'You think that their/dying is the worst/thing that could happen./. Then they stay dead.'

Anna says

A poem from The Painted Bed:

White Apples
by Donald Hall

when my father had been dead a week
I woke
with his voice in my ear
I sat up in bed
and held my breath
and stared at the pale closed door

white apples and the taste of stone

if he called again
I would put on my coat and galoshes

Marie Chow says

Cut to the Chase:

This is a relatively short collection by a poetry master. Though I don't often read poetry, when I do pick up a collection, it almost always has Donald Hall's name on it. This is not my favorite by him, but it's very, very well-written. Detailing the years directly after his wife, Jane, passed away, this is his second collection dealing with the emotional desolation of losing his mate. I prefer *Without*, and feel like this is almost its ugly stepsister... but still, if I hadn't been comparing it to *Without*, I'm sure I would have rated it (even more) highly.

Greater Detail:

Some examples from the book:

“AFFIRMATION

To grow old is to lose everything

Aging, everybody knows it.

Even when we are young, we glimpse it sometimes, and nod our heads

when a grandfather dies.

...

The pretty lover who announces

that she is temporary

is temporary...

...

Let us stifle under mud at the pond's edge

and affirm that it is fitting

and delicious to lose everything.”

“KILL THE DAY

...

When she died, at first the outline of absence defined

a presence that disappeared. He wept for the body

he could no longer reach to touch in bed on waking.

...

When the coffee cup broke, when her yellow bathrobe

departed the bathroom door, when the address book

in her hand altered itself into scratchings-out,

he dreaded the an adventure of self-hatred accomplished
by the finger or toe of an old man alone without
an onion to eat betwee slices of store-bought bread.

...

“THE AFTER LIFE

When Alice Lind finished
praying over Jane’s coffin.
three hundred neighbors
and poets stood in spring
sunshine. Then Robert
started to sing “Amazin
Grace.” out of the silence
that followed he heard
his own voice saying,
“We have to go, dear.”

...

”

Comparison to Other Books:

I think that Hall is a great poet, and I think a great place to start would be White Apples and the Taste of Stone as it gives you a wide range of his work, spanning 60 years (it also has a CD which is wonderful – I attended a reading with Hall once and there’s really nothing quite like hearing poems read by the author himself). I think Without is by far one of the most moving books I’ve read and details Hall’s emotions and life after his younger wife passes away... as I said in the review, this kind of feels like the lesser in a continuing series, but still... good.

Clarissa says

says the word "suppleness" far too much

Jen says

The Painted Bed is Hall's second book (2002) dealing with the death of his wife, fellow poet Jane Kenyon. In this book, he writes about his grief and anger in the 2-3 years after her death, concluding in an awkward last section about finally making new attempts at sex and attraction. But the majority of the book is about loss in general, the loss of Jane but also other losses he has witnessed in the place and house he has known all his life.

The third section of the book is one poem, "Daylilies on the Hill 1975-1989," that reads like an elegy to the lifestyle of the rural northeast. The dates, however, correspond to Hall's and Kenyon's years there before cancer entered their lives (Hall had his battle before Jane had hers). It's a poem worth rereading for other associations. The poem ends with the rending of old elms to make way for a cancer-like modern housing development.

Most of the poems in this volume are free verse. However, in the section "Her Garden," all of the poems are in rhymed stanzas. Most of them I was not enamored with, yet it contains two of the most touching poems in the book for me, "Hiding," and "The Wish." The last I find beautiful and haunting and quote it here in full:

I keep her weary ghost inside me.
"Oh let me go," I hear her crying.
"Deep in your dark you want to hide me
And so perpetually my dying.
I can't undo
The grief that you
Weep by the stone where I am lying.
Oh, let me go."

By work and women half distracted,
I endure the day and sleep at night
To watch her dying reenacted
When the cold dawn descends like twilight.
How can I let
This dream forget
Her white withdrawal from my sight,
And let her go?

Her body as I watch grows smaller;
Her face recedes, her kiss is colder.
Watching her disappear, I call her,
"Come back!" as I grow old and older.
While somewhere deep
in the catch of sleep
I hear her cry, as I reach to hold her,
"Oh, let me go!"

I find this a marvelous echo of Thomas Hardy's "The Voice," (<http://www.portablepoetry.com/poems/t...>) the last two lines of which are the epigraph for the section "Her Garden" in which "The Wish" appears.

One aspect of this book overall that I enjoyed, and which I feel provides a unity that otherwise would not be there, is the recurrence of their dog Gus. Sometimes he is comic but more often he's an example of innocence and a call to the living world. Part of the awkwardness of the last section, "Ardor," is that Gus doesn't make an appearance in any of the poems.

The New York Times Book Review is quoted on the cover as saying *The Painted Bed* is a "Job-like comedy," a rather bizarre way to describe this book. If anything is comic, it is the last section, but after the previous sections in which we are wound up in genuine grief and the hard work of letting go, it feels more like a desecration. It seems to be solely about a desire for sex as opposed to a desire for union and there is no reflection attending the desire, just a catalog of encounters. I think the poems there should have waited for another book.

I admit I was hesitant about reading this book because of its subject matter, but I didn't find it depressing. It's about the deadening static of grief but it's also about a search and a struggle for what to keep and what to relinquish. The narrative arc is light, interrupted by remembrance, but it's there, an almost involuntary movement forward. For that reason, I recommend reading it from cover to cover. Don't stop. Push through and observe just as Hall had to.

Elizabeth Thorpe says

There are some great, five star poems in here, but the collection is uneven. It might be personal preference, but I think the New England poems are much stronger than the post-Jane love poems.

J & J says

Reading about the death of Hall's wife was very difficult and I'm in awe of his ability to express his feelings so honestly and raw.

Nan says

Hall is a consummate craftsman, but I'm not sure I have what it takes to appreciate sections like *Ardor*. Who cares what the ballerina could do? And why write a villanelle about it? Still, I appreciate Hall's celebration of what is lost, his affirmation "that it is fitting/and delicious to lose everything."

Denise says

so moving

Ruth says

In the internet age, everything is shorter and quicker. It was not hard for me to figure out that K means Okay, but I had to look up that SMH means “shaking my head”, and it was quite a while before I learned tl;dr =too long, didn’t read.

My point is shorter doesn’t necessarily mean easier to understand. Which is one thing I have always loved about poetry. Of course, there are long poems, that go on for hundreds of pages, but mostly you can see a bunch of text on a page and know it is a poem. Reading a poem is an experience, and a very personal experience, so any lit crit rhetoric takes a back seat, I just savor and try to understand, reading over and over if I want.

I thought this was a good collection of poems. In some, I don’t like the very last line, and find the trailing of an ending not worthy of the previous lines. (Such as the poem “Barber”.) But mostly I just enjoy reading them-- line by line. The theme is grief, so there is a lot of sadness. This does get a little heavy, but there are a few breaks, such as “Love Poem” which is three stanzas of three lines, no mention of sick beds or disease, or dying at 47 years old.

I worry I am being too maudlin in seeking out books such as this. Its opening quote is:

“The true subject of poetry
is the death of the beloved.”
(cited author Faiz Ahmed Faiz).

But, I have not intention of stopping. This is from “Kill the Day”:

“He envied whatever felt nothing: He envied oak
Sills and the green hill rising and the boulder
By the side of the road”

Mary Helene says

This is the continuation of the story. Here's a poem from this collection:

In June's high light she stood at the sink
With a glass of wine
And listened for the bobolink
And crushed garlic in late sunshine.

I watched her cooking, from my chair.
She pressed her lips
Together, reached for kitchenware,
And tasted sauce from fingertips.

"It's ready now. Come on," she said.
"You light the candle."
We ate, and talked, and went to bed,
And slept. It was a miracle.

Aloysius Lionel says

Presenting a variety of forms and tones, this volume of poems center on the poet's profound and carefully wrought utterance of grief for his wife's loss. His unparalleled use of euphony and tension has testified to Poetry's genuine role i.e. the remembrance of things past and the beloved's death. It is through our grip of memories, whether they are celebratory or lamentable, that we are able to lend language its penultimate poetic function. And we need to control the passions, and we need to learn from Donald Hall. The title is enough for us to see how the author devised his sporadic mourning: giving the event of loss some height, symmetry and color. My personal favorites are "Kill the Day", "Retriever" and "Barber"

Jacob Reid says

The first book of Donald Hall's poetry I've ever read and it was absolutely brilliant. His poetry is simple and does not require deep reading, although you can absolutely do so. I'd say the first half of the book is not for the faint of heart because of the raw depression and sadness that is in the words, but when it comes to grief there is no other way of experiencing it.

Patty says

It took me much too long to finish this book. I buried it under a pile of other books and discovered it while trying to clean my house. These are powerful poems, especially those that deal with loss.

There was a point when I would much prefer to read Jane Kenyon than Donald Hall. I somehow related to her poems more readily than to his. But now she is gone and I visit his pain like touching a sore tooth. I want to know how Hall's grief feels. I have not been to the place he now lives in. - I am not anxious to get there, but it feels right to visit.

The epigraph to this book is "The true subject of poetry is the death of the beloved." This phrase comes from Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a Pakistani poet. Hall seems to have taken this to heart, he has written two books about his reactions since Jane Kenyon died.

I recommend this book to those who grieve a beloved's death; to anyone who reads poetry and to those who miss Jane Kenyon's writing.

Tom says

Hall wrote this after the death of his wife, and fellow poet, Jane Kenyon. I think it must have taken a lot of bravery to write this book. There's a poem where he describes having sex with someone who is not his wife (presumably after her death) that's haunting, all the more so for its playful tone in the villanelle form. Couple this book with Kenyon's poem "Otherwise," and it's heart breaking.

