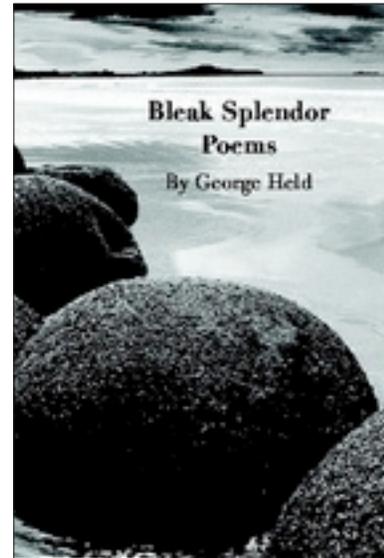


Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Bleak Splendor
Poems by George Held
Muddy River Books
Brookline, MA
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31 Pages, \$12.00



Review by Dennis Daly

In this haunting, yet modest, book of meditations, memories, and mementoes, George Held constructs a makeshift time capsule of neuro-detritus, both profane and numinous. His subjects range from wealth to mortality to nature's relentlessness to aging to outdated vocations to (even more) outdated heroes to the probable odor of Jesus Christ.

The second poem in this collection, *At the Marina*, sets the reader up with a self-conscious commentary on social justice and then cuts its neat metaphor with an infusion of wicked irony. Held describes the owner of a yacht docked at ritzy Sag Harbor,

Its proprietor, barefoot in deck chair,

*Relishes a cigar.
Gold letters on the stern emblazon
The boat's name: "Homeless,*

Cayman Islands."

This poet knows what he's about. His poem *Airing It Out*, set in a nursing home, weaves absolute magic in fashioning a penultimate "All Souls" moment before death's looming portal. Held's opening description marvelously conjures a spell of decrepitude and pre-transfiguration,

*The inmates at the old-age home
Are disrobing. In the assembly room
Dressing gowns fall from sunken shoulders,
Foundational garments pool
Around flat arches and twisted toes.*

*Stats don't lie: seven of every ten
Seniors are women, but the handful of men
Here drop trou from gaunt flanks, allow
Bellies and scrotums to sag and sway
As women free flat fallen breasts*

*From all restraint, stand shy or proud
As becomes them, gray or white locks*

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

*Freed from caps or bands and spilled
About their faces and down their backs,
Airing out decrepit bodies whose cells*

Still continue to replace themselves.

The *Dancer in the Box*, a favorite poem of mine in this collection, puts death in its place, that place being a containable sonnet that empowers the poet. Held sucks the strength from mortality in this well-engineered dirge and forces death to bow to artistic rules rather than nature's cruelty. Consider this conclusion,

*...when someone dear
Dies, I turn to the sonnet for solace, to hold
My grief, lest it run with mercurial death
To some dire end beyond a sonnet's bounds.*

*So many sonnets I've had to carpenter
These past few months that this year is *The Year
Of Death*, and still more friends fight for the breath
Of life...*

Scary, but I do remember the iceman coming to our family's door, and his tongs gripping that food-preserving block. Held memorializes his own observations of this once household god in his poem entitled *The Ice Man*. Children of that age felt awe in the presence of such physically powerful men, men whose hard work demonstrably meant something to civilization. Even as refrigerators superseded their profession, these almighty deities remained iconic to eyewitnesses of that era. Here's the heart of the poem,

*...You'd stick your tongs into the block,
Turn your back to the tail-gate and hoist the ice*

*Onto the burlap towel on your shoulder.
Bent like Atlas, you'd hump your five-foot frame
Upstairs to our kitchen sink, then deftly
Wield your ice pick to chip off enough*

*To slide the block into the top compartment
Of our icebox. That done, you'd collect your fee
And depart without a word. Your menial work
And your size belied the Colossus in our eyes,*

*Mr. Galasso, and we held our breath in awe
Each time you made your trek from truck
To kitchen...*

Typically, suicides committed by the overly wrought and despondent often mess up families with strong emotions of guilt and recrimination.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Details of such self-destructions as a rule are best left unspoken. In Held's piece *In Time* and *Out* the poet relates the untypical (at least in the dramatic sense) suicide of his father. The man was eighty-eight and in pain. Held relates his father's decision as matter-of-fact and exceedingly rational. The piece is not without irony and ends with a surprising metaphoric twist that works quite well. Here the poet addresses his father in the rather upbeat conclusion,

*...Alive, you were too feisty to let anyone
put a lid on you, even at eighty-eight.*

*By the way, the coroner told me that the pain in your gut
wasn't the cancer you feared but a strangulated
hernia, and since you always refused to see a doctor*

*it would have grimly killed you through sepsis.
So you were right to do yourself in, and just in time.
I'm writing you now that you're dead, Dad,*

*because I want to leave this record behind,
the way you left your bloody corpse
for your son to find.*

Held's final and title poem in this collection, *Savior*, breaks apart the hypostatic union of god and man. I like this piece a lot. The poet reconstructs the probable stench of the historical Jesus and repositions this contextual Christ in the bleak splendor of Galilee. Each gritty stanza adds perspective and suggests the miraculous in the material. The poem opens with questions,

*What did the Savior smell like,
A gaffe with garlic breath,
A hint of death,
Or like a kike?*

*Did his teeth stink from caries,
His feet from fungus,
His armpits, richly hairy,
Like a leper's house?*

These wide-ranging poetic perceptions stretch from the precise and often provoking particulars narrated by Held to a universal realm of wisdom and timelessness. Discover this remarkable capsular book in the future. The near future.