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All in Good Time: Poems 2005-2006
Paul Hudon
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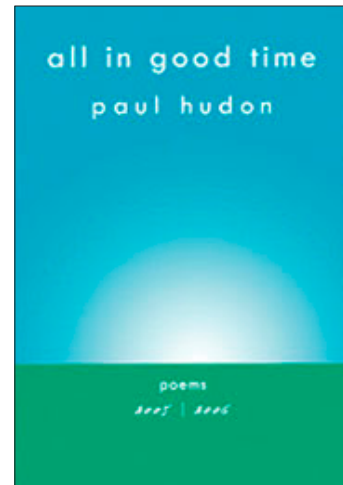
Reviewed by David P. Miller

In September 2005, historian and regionalist Paul Hudon began a series of short writings, catalyzed by surgery on his left hand. Able to use only the left thumb and forefinger, with his right hand required to do most of the work at the keyboard, and being a person compelled to write every day, he began a series of short pieces. He says, "it was nearly a month before it occurred to me I was writing a year's cycle of poems." *All in Good Time*, the resulting work, is exactly that: 365 poems stored in a volume that fits easily in the hand – which is to say that most are brief, some very much so, with only a few ranging over more than a page. The book, though, is unusual in that it feels less like a conventional collection (and wouldn't this many poems typically make up a *Collected Works*?) and more like a deeply faceted mosaic. The untitled poems, headed only by their dates, follow each other directly on the page, and yet it doesn't quite read as a diary: a minority of the entries seem to refer directly to daily events. In other words, the book is a generic hybrid, lucid and with a strong sense of momentum, if not quite placeable.

As Paul Hudon realized what the nature of his project was, he asked himself an important question about method. Would he revise the entries, or leave them as untouched records of each day's impulse – "first-draft/best-draft," as he puts it? He decided for revision, because although "each day's singularity had to leave its mark on the cycle," at the same time, "first-off/best-off is not a poetics [he could] honestly practice." Having written poems since the 1950s, he writes, "I am not willing to admit that half a century has taught me nothing." He therefore developed for himself the "Rule of 2Ts ... that topic and tone of a day's first draft can not be altered, but that everything else – any change that serves to clarify either or both – is allowed, is in fact required."

I've taken this much space to describe the book's origin, and quote Hudon's introduction, by way of explaining why it's impossible in a review of moderate length to adequately convey the variety of subject matter, voice, affect, or style in this kaleidoscopic, constantly rewarding work. What follows is a gesture toward the scratching the surface, using a handful of samples that leave the surface pretty much unscratched.

The first entry, dated September 27, opens in medias res: "Except on Tuesdays. Tuesdays I sleep late / and have breakfast on the terrace / if the weather's agreeable, which often it is not." We could infer that, on every other day, he doesn't sleep late and perhaps starts with some other activity, but we're not told and I don't think we ever find out. In many of



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these poems, there's something of an absent subject, written around but unspecified. Examples: August 18: "Say that it got by us. Tell them / we were busy buying lawn mowers." September 4 opens: "Try thinking of them as rides, the kind / you gave money for at amusement parks." There are anecdote poems that, similarly, arise as fragments, as with July 27: "We weren't there but / ten minutes / when they came to say / we had to leave. / Something to do / with air circulation, / or non circulation / as it turned out. And / in fact it was close / in there. / [...] No one knows where / this is going." In each instance, we're given enough to graze against the missing center; this results in the paradox of feeling simultaneously present to the poem and removed from it. In this connection we can note a whole series of poems, at least a dozen, concerning someone named Fenton. Cumulatively, these entries can't help but suggest a persona, though each reader's Fenton will be her own.

Paul Hudon frequently uses vernacular speech to humorous or sardonic effect. June 5: "Listen pal, if the design's / so freaking intelligent, / how's it happen my cousin / daily reminds us / he's the Kaiser's maiden aunt?" The May 20 poem sums up the Eden story in this mode, nodding to other religion-focused entries, such as June 18, July 25, and August 12. May 20:

*You was warned.
Wasn't you warned?
Keep your greedy paws
off the fruit, I said,
didn't I?
I said,
Every thing else is yours
to order and command.
And whaddaya do?
Well, you won't
make me out a fool, boy.
Skedaddle, hear? Go.
You got yourself a new
re-geem. Elsewhere.
And take the woman
with you. It'll be
sweat and broken bones
here on in for your two.
My word. Or hope to die.*

Several poems take the operation and components of language as points of reflection. On October 17, Hudon works on "verb" itself as metaphor, rather than a specific verb used metaphorically: "What's the verb has the shape / for this work? A tool fit for digging / forward, filling back, / leaving behind only an accumulate - / the matter of the fact. / [...]. Is organic a verb? What about rapture?" The poem for January 9, uses unhyphenated syllables split between short lines (as do other entries), to slow us down, force us to consider the impact of bare linguistic particles on perception:

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*sent
ence frag
ment phrase
clause
for that matter
punc
tuition*

*be
haves
like mRNA
act
ing in the blind
mid
dle of
no
where*

This cummings-like treatment of language arises elsewhere, though always in Hudon's distinct voice. March 8 takes it into puns: "where the plane / inclines to is the / quest in the quest / ion of the ion o /sphere".

I've hinted at the sense of humor that inflects many of these poems, and it's worth pointing out other instances. The Dickinson parody of Jun 26 made me laugh out loud: "I dwell in instability / a feather up my nose / more numerous innuendoes / supervening out of doors". The two-line entry for December 21 brings back the vernacular voice: "Hey, buddy, put them shades up. / We save daylight around here." This solstice suggestion connects with other seasonally- or holiday-related poems, like this sharp observation for February 22:

*president's day
marks
the American
character as it substitutes
institution day for name day
thereby caging another long
weekend by way of
honoring indifferent leadership*

There are elegiac poems here as well, overlapping with a set focused on family members (explicitly or plausibly). The tender April 6 entry brings these together, opening: "Hey, Sis, another birthday. / Only wish you were here / for it, bring your life to the party. / You could / give out favors like they came / free at no cost, / they way you did, / eating all the grief on the / table, leaving the cake / and ice cream for the kids / and their kids." By contrast, only a few days later (April 10) there's a shredding anti-elegy for someone unnamed whose near demise seems likely. The speaker offers to assist:

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[...]

Here I'll help.

*We'll pack your pretense to understanding
what's going on, your expectation of revenge
(my gawd! you had some size on that)
like they go together (which of course they do)
in the bottom, where you'll need the weight.*

[...]

*The poems will go in last,
incense on the burning coals. You remember.
The priest makes a last pass at the body
in the box, laying an odiferous cover on
the mess time has made of you. You know that.*

It may be coincidental, but as the 365-day cycle nears its conclusion, many of the longer poems make their appearance, pressing forward to beat the project's predetermined endpoint. Six days before the end, on September 20, we have the longest poem, a three-page retelling of Abraham and Isaac's persistently disturbing tale. This is told from the son's perspective much later in life, though neither man is named. As with many of the entries in the book, at the start we're dropped into the middle: "He said we had come to it. We were here. / Where exactly was not easy to say." Although the son muses in detail at what took place, the event, incomprehensible at the time, remains so in memory, senseless and unredeemed. In this telling, no ram appears as a substitute, nor is it certain that there is any deity involved. The father changes his mind, and they return home:

*He never after
spoke of it, and I would sooner
have walked into the screaming sand.*

[...]

*We were two days without work between us,
and for all the daily labor that was
a pantomime of him, this is what I see
when I see him.
This is a mystery that occupies me.*

We began on September 27, and so end on the 26th. The remarkable microcosm which makes up *All in Good Time*, physically modest (easy to hold in one hand) but conceptually vast, needs no summing up. But still, there is a goodbye – characteristically, from an unnamed person who ends this journey by simply leaving, for an unspecified place, with a promise to return.

*Mardi prochain, he said,
his back to me, waving as he walked
the path down to the well,*

made the turn, over left, and was gone.