

Shadow-feast by Joan Houlihan
ISBN 978-1-945588-08-2, \$15.95, Paper-
back, 64pp
Four Way Books

Grief Between and Beyond in Joan Houlihan's new book Shadow-feast
review by Michael Steffen



Time came in and stranded us here, writes Joan Houlihan in the third poem of her new book, *Shadow-feast*, after the Japanese Kage-zen, "a repast...offered to the spirit of the absent one loved." The poems chronicle the mourner's (Hers, section one) reflections of the dying and death of her husband; the empathetic raising of the husband's replies (His, section two); and (Theirs, section three) a sequence driven by third-person narrative being resolved intermittently back into the voice of the mourning wife.

Death, a dying of one, isolates the couple (as love had in their beginning). At some point between, we are all social, generally involved in the community, with our families, helping us shield the exhaustion of I and thou. Yet lines from the book remind us of the peculiar solidarity and isolation of a couple's union. It reminds us of Adam and Eve dressing themselves as God calls to them in the garden:

*We creaked open, listening. The past stacked high on us,
Day looked into us. Clarity without remedy... [page 5]*

The meditations bring us vivid awareness of the body as fragile medium of our affectionate bonds, our "MORTAR", the composition of the word metamorphosing through Houlihan to its definition in time as "mortification," our sensual undoing, the dissolution of the mortar itself. The double-jeopardy of possession through memory and utter loss of physical rapport enjoins upon the mourner in her wake the dire need to say, to write, to illustrate, to parallel, somehow to capture and hold this slipping away, through metaphor—"a sprung chest"—as the cry, perhaps in echoes of Paul McCartney, to let it be is uttered in turn with poignant lyricism:

*Like a sprung chest, a body opens,
empties itself at the last.
Let it be lost. Let it pass.
Where you are, you went alone
as cloud huddled cloud, muscled and blown. [page 7]*

A more traditional line on death has leaned toward the generalized consolation that we are bound by our mortality. Though it comes to us in thousands of forms, death is all one. It eradicates the prison of self and mundane suffering of corporal existence. The worst that we face may be the best we have coming. Like the first encounter with love, death is

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

dreadful in anticipation.

Yet Houlihan seeks out the particular in these meditations. Behind the curtains, half of the labor of grief is dissolution. We are bound to it, by remembrance and imagination, as we are denied the physical comforts of and hand's reach for the other. We are scrutinized of their hold on us, intricate and elaborate as we conceive the world of the dead to be.

WHAT DOES YOUR SEEING WANT?

Your scrunched eye seizes, sizes

me up: pulley-roped palliatives, craft and lies.

Washing my hands in the back, I wonder:

What's a good death?

Of course you held on and I held onto you.

We had married ourselves to a trance.

The poet's question—What's a good death?—perhaps reminds the reader of a memorable exchange in the ancient world between the Lydian King Croesus and the Greek philosopher Solon. Croesus at the height of his vast wealth and glory rhetorically and somewhat arrogantly asked the philosopher if he (Croesus) were not a blessed man. Solon replied it was necessary to wait until somebody's death to determine whether they were blessed or not. What's a good death?

Suffering helps the dying let go. A friend once told me this. Suffering the dying should help the attendant let go. Processing and deflection happen through writing, in the dual work of preserving an image in its reproduction while gaining perspective on the thing through its image as it is transformed into a work.

The book, *Shadow-feast*, we have noted, is presented in three dramatic parts, two monologues, *Hers*, *His*, and a sort of post script, *Theirs*. It's a work of expressions from imagination—biographically referential howsoever. This organization and representation lend remove to the poems, allow us to read them as we might view or read a play. It also sets the book in perspective as literary genre, with Rilke's wonderful poem on assisting the dying "Washing the Corpse," or Faulkner's streaming dramatic novel *As I Lay Dying*.

At the moment of the passing in *Shadow-feast*, the point of view quietly shifts into third-person narrative:

STILL HEARD in her head. They burn what's left.

And then he is there again...

...She served him as mother, as wife,

forced to bear up his frame... [page 20]

Death brings us to humanity in its most generic epiphany, where we all go, and upholds the general inclusive voice of fiction (and also of religion) to speak from one, masked in others, characters, historical or fancied, to the many, forming a unity of identity and cause. It may help to alleviate the mourner of an individual sense of responsibility or guilt for the deceased who has suffered no more than the extremity of his or her human condition. We all must. Though, as the *Song of Songs* reminds us, Many waters cannot drown love.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

The second section, *His*, attests to the powers of empathy which we are privy to any time we read good fiction. There is, of course, both a reason and a myth to why Poetry is not stacked in the Fiction section of libraries. In Poetry there are claims to a rudimentary or primary hold on some perception of "facts" about the imagination in the way of mimetic or onomatopoeic speech, prosodic attention, as well as social anticipation, which oddly sorts poetry off as being more genuine, maybe in the way of personal essays, than short stories, novels or drama. Some major critics like Paul de Man writing on Proust or T.S. Eliot have found it useful to dispel the distinctions between prose and verse.

It is interesting to note that the Personae of *Shadow-feast* are possessive pronouns: *Hers*, *His*, *Theirs*. This links *Shadow-feast* with Houlihan's two previous book-length poems, *Ay* ("I") and *The Us*, with their titles collecting human consciousness in nominal pronouns or suggestions thereof. Houlihan isn't the only American poet in our time to defy the sacred self, the inscrutable "I" of Walt Whitman and his song. A look at the Contents page of Jane Hirshfield's recent book, *The Beauty*, finds emphatic anaphora of the first-person possessive, as though for some question raised by the repetition: "My Skeleton," "My Proteins," "My Eyes," "My Corkboard," "My Memory," "My Weather," "In My Wallet I Carry a Card," "My Task," "My Sandwich" ... Something here is poking fun, trying to draw attention to an observation. Are we being too possessive? Too selfish? In the poem "My Proteins" Hirshfield declares most of her is not herself, not hers alone:

*A body it seems is a highway,
a cloverleaf crossing
well-built, well traversed.
Some of me going north, some going south.*

*Ninety percent of my cells, they have discovered,
are not my own person,
they are other beings inside of me. [The Beauty, page 9]*

Despite this powerful spell of ultimate subjectivity we have been put under, there are paths through empathy and belief in collective experience and power, a common wealth, which can lead us out of over-selfishness and myopic solipsism. Beginning simply by saying "She," "He," or "They" instead of "I" and "me" "me" "me". It changes one's thinking to write or read and think in another point-of-view.

*Do you know who you are?
Fist-gripped onto wheels I am
Made of what makes my voice.
You are hurting me.*

How do we find out about others? By asking them, appropriately haunting as from James Merrill's *oui-jà séances* in upper-case letters:

*IS ANYONE hurting you?
Leave me. I am work. I am legs.
I am horse shackled to cart.*

...

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

You are hurting me.

The near ecstasy survivors are pushed to in order to establish the death of the dead, this returned cruelty, has been celebrated in the danse macabre tradition of medieval times, the figure of a celebrant dancing on the mound of a grave, right up to our present Halloween, where the limit of horror and denial cedes to the ludicrous, ludic fun of costumes and low-down tricks and sweet treats. It lends us a hint of what defines the Sublime, characterized by a solemnity that borders dangerously close to the absurd. How often and how naturally laughter comes to us to resolve or respond to great emotional intensity and distress. Yeah right, whatever!

In the fourth poem of the His section, images—getting up to “climb the stairs” and failing to, “choke” and “drown”—echo moments and terms used in the elusive passing sections, pages

18-22, of the Hers section. This mirroring of fragments of speech in separate accounts of the same happenings (a method of Faulkner’s in *The Sound and the Fury*) opens the narrative spectrum of Houlihan’s book considerably, driving home a powerful point, like evidence, to confirm our unease with it: the speech of the living spirit of the dead processing their life here

in the hereafter.

from Hers
TOO SMALL for his own robe now, bowed
and listening to pump and pulse,
he lets the spoon fall to his lap,
Help me stand! Awake,

I am bound to his call but wait, wait it out,
until he won’t quiet and I rise again to struggle
him forward, inch by inch to the edge, then
hook and hoist him from under the armpits

until he is almost up, then: no, no I can’t. Let me down. [page 18]

from His

YOU WERE RIGHT. I couldn’t climb
the stairs. Breath was all I wore... [page32]

from Hers

On ribs bolted small.
I choke on. Drown in.
Rise away,
Bone. [page 21]

from His

But I’ll prove I live. I am mute, but thought-loud:
look at me, this freight I am.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

*No air I don't choke on. No bed I don't drown in.
I need to rise but my legs are away.
Then my bone split, spoke: What night is this? [page 32].*

It is at this point the book as a work and not just as a personal account comes to life. Houlihan achieves the reversal of the other voice to challenge the narrower lone self's laments, endearments and complaints. She achieves a correlative that justifies the bird's-eye-view of the couple in the third section, *Theirs*.

What did Marianne Moore say about POETRY?

*I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.*

What's more genuine than defeat? I've wondered. Reading it goes a little easier than writing. Among other things, poetry opens a space of re-encounter, re-enactment for the poet, a space of response to that which has blindsided us and left us for dead. It is at times a court of law so personal nothing can be won from it though we must plea and argue as though our lives depended on it. It is laden with contradictions no public figure could maintain in the public eye where "media" solicits immediate outcry and opprobrium, where one day So-and-so stands with this association, another day closer to elections with its victims. Personally we cannot prevent the hours turned over one by one that reach to make sense while entertaining one's pain and resentment at the burdens of departure and one's abiding love across that valley of not-knowing. This love wears at our armor of denial as it hardens into rhetoric—wears through to forgiveness which we at once, like Marianne Moore, hold in contempt and find genuine. It endows us with the gift to balance or equalize paradox versus weighing off contradictions, lending John Donne the image and illustration of the compass. It hovers in the margins all throughout *Shadow-feast*, defying conceptualization, my every air-landed stab here to tell you about it. It is a book that renders beyond tender to patience and going back and forth.

*They had each other and the one they drag, his breath
on their tongues, blown blue, head a box-wire
strung with voice. Wrists poked out,
ankles raw, pants and shirt too big.
He lurched and swayed. The look on his face baffled
and lost. Botched man. They stuffed frost
in their mouths so not to laugh, kept him alive in their huddle,
his ice-block chest with their palms, murmuring hotly
into his neck: don't go. [page 45]*