

**Burn Out poems by Stephen Honig**

*Review by Karen Klein*

Reading Stephen Honig's fifth book of poems, *Burn-out*, this reader is struck by the author's voice. He is conversational, addressing the reader directly, telling us if we seek certainty, don't read his poems in Section 1 "About Myself" which he admits is "much confused." He is an astute observer of self and the ordinary dilemmas of being an aging human, caught in our historic period and this United States. Sometimes laconic, dismissive, wry, he always questions without getting or giving answers, but sometimes good advice. One such is "be careful when you choose to clean your closets basements/attics back rooms...you are asking for a dialogue with time."



This advice is taken from the first poem in Section 1 *Memory of Objects*--because "my objects/have memories" which the poet needs "to tell me who I was/before I am myself." We can wonder what he means about "myself"; aren't we always ourselves, no matter how old? Perhaps he means his changing self as in *Process of Erosion* when he became conscious of his "new self" and "opted to be the real me--/but could not find him anymore." Here's mystery: who is this "real me?" Perhaps only the objects that have memories can tell him, but as he asserts at *Summer Beach's end* "There is no danger as perilous as memory."

The dangers he alludes to are succinctly expressed in the brutal *Thoughts on Vacation*: "Vacation is rebellion against what it is we do/when we do the things we do...a revel of freedom/...fear of returning home/a crushing sense of what awaits--/home never takes a vacation." What crushes is his sense of "personal malaise" expressed in *The Dirges*: "thinking of church tomorrow/ when God will explain/why when I cried no one came" and from *Careful Woman*: "I do not want to tell you more,/it just brings out my pain/of nights alone, sitting at home/with time to fail again." These last two poems are from Section 2 "About My Women," a chronicle of leavings and losses, disappointments and sorrows. But *Summer Beach* also contains close observation of the physical surround and bodies loving: "smells of cocoa butter and peanut butter", "we lay so close your sweat/ran down my arms and legs./...your breath exhaled clams and garlic/into my nostrils./...feeling sand between our hips as/we were together in the dune."

There is so much pain in the first two sections, I expected Section 3 "About Pain" to be a continuation. But the poet surprises and moves to history. He tells us that pain is "a fundamental component of life." He refers us to his late father who "was wont to say when unhappy about something: 'I'm not complaining, I'm only reporting.'" He reports "icicles drip into the hearts of men," tells of "kid's blood in the alley,...the old lady full of virus dead in her room with no one to care/" and realizes "to look at the truth, well/who gives a shit/I ask you."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

Honig's Section 4 "About Death" moves to the theme that has shadowed the earlier sections. He chronicles writing condolence letters, lists the "common wisdom about life and death," including "Life sucks and then you die" a quote from Voltaire, "We never live; we are always in the expectation of living," and the oft-expressed truth: "it is always too soon." He addresses the Jewish philosopher, Spinoza with "Apologies" as he tries to sort out belief, questions about looking for god, does god exist, does the poet's life or death matter, does it relate to god, what use is "the silence of gods." There is no answer, just the knowledge that he, like all of us, will at some point die. This fifth book was published when he was 80. Increasingly aware of his aging, with a sly smile he promises us he when he has something more to say about his age, he will put it in his next book.

Section 5 contains poems that Honig feels do not fall into the categorizations that have structured the first 4 sections, but many of these poems carry the feelings and themes of the previous ones: a dream that leaves him with "only a melancholy I cannot understand.", "the disease of being American.", "to assert understanding robs you a vision/of the reasons you always fail." In this section he dialogues with another heavy hitter, Soren Kierkegaard and the unanswered questions are the most provocative raised in the book. The poet's tone is playful, serio-comic, he teases Kierkegaard by riffing on his famous title Fear and Trembling: "Is it what you feel when God tests you,...

Or is it how you feel today, /or every day?" "Is your fear a test--and of what?/ Who was there, to ask Isaac?/ Well, God but he's not telling."

I found two poems that spoke from the core of this poet in his combination of humor, sometimes flippant, but deadly serious. From different sections, they both refer to death, to the maybe afterlife. The first, Red Bicycle is a narrative that will resonate with persons of a certain age who have been kids when the most desired gift was a Schwinn bike. It is a narrative about his getting a Schwinn Black Panther which was stolen when he was a boy in Brooklyn riding up Dead Man's Hill and attached by a gang. The poem begins with his wish to be buried with his Schwinn as he describes the many ways his corpse might be disposed of. He doesn't care if his dead body is buried in a casket, cremated, or thrown to the sea, from the heart of his loving memory, he wants the bike to be back with him "working horn in its compartment./ Please make sure that the horn batteries are fresh--/you might never know when you might want to signal."

The second, The Jewish Joke, interestingly enough, is from Section 1 About Myself. It took me a while to get it, to hold its full power, its bitterness, its suffering, its truth about "centuries that can only be explained by a shrug of the shoulders."

*"The joke:*

*Two dead Jews arrive at heaven's gates and await their entrance interview.  
At one point they break out in laughter.*

*G-d unused to such things, made inquiry: "Wherefore dost thou jest over  
some event from life?"*

*"Oh," one dead man replied as if chatting with a friend over Passover wine,  
"—you wouldn't understand—you had to be there."*