

GIFTS FROM THE DEAD

the poems of Sidonie Hall

ELIZABETH BAZELEY

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Gifts From The Dead: The Poems of Sidonie Hall

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As the generations which went through the 20th century wars are dying away with their personal and particular memories, their stories keep surfacing, not always as tradition might have them but as if in need of the attention of our time. The consequences of the events, emotions, and displacement resonate through years and families, affecting the present.

These poems are in the voices of two Canadian women. Sidonie Hall, speaking through the contemporary narrative sequence, in the course of research discovers a “notebook”, lyric evidence of the tragic disappearance of Christine, decades earlier. Their tales, of family and love, courage and disappointment, mind and changing consciousness, reflect each other and weave together to be resolved, ultimately, through the two men who connect them.

the poems of Sidonie Hall . .

MELROSE

I do not know yet
that these moments are marking
the start of the most profound, delicate friendship
I shall ever have.

I do not know this, but that I shall know in time
does not give these moments less meaning,
like the photograph you take which captures an image
only realized after its development.

Here is a tree, a wonderful very old apple tree
with scarred mossy heavy bark.
And there beyond is the river I followed,
uncoiling through hayfields like peel from a green apple.
Coming toward me, a stone path I have just walked
between hollyhocks snapdragons sweetpeas leads to

Ginger's Veranda
Herbs Hats Gifts
Teas Frozen Yogurt

where sitting in its depths at a tin table
I swirl my tongue around a creamy cone
of melon and grapefruit,
curling myself inside its flavour.

My arms are brown from the sun and an instant stops,
knotted, removed from the circulation of experience:
taste and shade are cool,
my hair slightly damp against my neck,
skin warm, garden and river caught in a skein of creation -
It floats away, string cut.

Appearing from the spell amber eyes focus me as Ginger
is speaking to me - "Sidonie, here, the directions."
On the back of her card is an address in the village
where I will find the woman,
the friend I never met and never will,
a dead woman.

The promise I make to find her
overrides the reason I have for being in this place,
in summery Melrose.

CATCHING UP WITH CHRISTINE

Her tracks were a puzzle I set out to follow this morning
as a method, an exercise, and an experience.
They were as enigmatic as the time they traced,
mud-obscured in places
where the river spread in wet years,
broken twigs meaningless
among others snapped in the return direction,
and on a bank where she surely had rested
while she ate wild raspberries, as I did,
the grass had sprung back, the canes were again laden.

Was the lad with her then?

My question had been answered ruefully with shrug and smile
which I sensed was kept for the curious
and had not changed in four decades
though I was unaffected; after all
I was merely engaged in a research project.
I left. Little was forthcoming
from the manipulations of this pair whose intersecting glances
long ago wove a cover in code.

Shallows. Bulrushes. Dragonflies.

With shocking grace a diving frog
broke the still surface. I leaned above the rings
and spiralled face to face with whorls
around two stones, tresses of weed.
If I were under weed with whorls for eyes and pebble teeth,
staring up at the willow clouds and seeing her,
I would reach out, breaking the surface into rings
to feel her presence before it went again,
withdrew beyond the frame of flowers.

A siren of cicadas, haze over the fields,
the village roofs tucked beyond the bend
and the wonderful tree inviting a stranger
so hot, tired, it was no longer me who entered its shade.
Was the lad with her?

My car had broken down on the bridge. Mysteriously.
And I pushed it across to the scenic lookout from where
she would have seen a spire rising through willow clouds
- not too far, perhaps, for a little boy to walk.
She'd have taken the child.

Christine has hidden her secrets well;
they may even be with her.
Following Ginger's directions I find
her doorkeeper chair-bound,
tongue-bound in the smoke and junk of stinking rooms
and he thinks I have been sent from heaven
to play old dance records for him.
I play his music, but no, I will not dance
nor will I marry him.
Ah dear, you see it was Ginger bought her place from him
and watched his departure enveloped in all its contents,
nothing discarded not, so he claimed, to preserve sentiment
but to burn it - fear of cold, you see.
Crippled and elderly, fearing cold.

I have a room to stay in now at Ginger's place
so that tomorrow I can return to this caged man
to rummage under his frightened eyes
through brittle papers, magazines,
broken furniture, musty linens,
for a key.

JAX AND LEO AND NORA MAE

A plait of people, I recall their strands interweaving
and now no more than a cut lock pressed in a memory book.

It was an October wedding. We stood at the chancel steps
in red, gold, russet chiffon lobed at elbow and ankle
like the leaves which twirled past leaded windows,
tricking the light and whispering outside the door.
Darcy, my sister's husband soon-to-be, was shaking
like a sapling beside Leo, my soon-not-to-be,
while my mother, Bernice, rustled behind us in the depths
of her handbag probably for her glasses and probably
she was checking on her mother, Nora Mae, behind her
on the outside where

as she was frail

we had requested the usher to seat her beside the uncles,
while Jax in her buttercream silk was taking her first steps
up the aisle on the arm of our father, John Hall
who has his own electrical appliance business
- what I saw was a rainbow bubble in which my little sister
was taking her first steps between the two gates
of our parents' arms -
Jax arrived shimmering like an escaping canary
as she was released to an amazed Darcy.

One would think he had forgotten why he was here -
I was rotating my eyes meaningfully toward his adoring sister
Michelle, who stolidly resisted my inappropriate humour,
when Nora Mae said, Shh, dear,
I'm on my way.
I won't disturb the ceremony. Give Jaqueline my blessing.

She wasn't discovered until her straw hat which I'd chosen,
grey with a sprig of berries, bounced lightly onto the floor.
A moment's silence coinciding with berries clicking tile
started a slow ripple of turning heads, rings of attention
on Nora Mae spreading until the wedding dissolved
and poor Jax had no idea whether she'd got married.

Just as everyone was betting joy the flipping coin
came down sorrow, smiles turning to dismay.
Bernice sobbed,
Jax collapsed in the arms of our dad,
the flummoxed minister asked for calm (people were murmuring)
and the groom asked his sister what happened
while Leo, his handsome features chiselled in purpose, arranged
a doctor,
a benediction,
the soloist's change of tune
and a costume parade to the vestry to bring the rites to order.

I praised him quietly for restoring dignity
and he was thanked by many,
but later I saw the clench of his jaw for what it was,
discomfiture and the saving face,
for the video camera never stopped rolling.

