

**Carolyn Hall.** *The Doors All Unlocked.* Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012, 102 pp., perfect softbound, 4.25 x 6.5. ISBN 978-1-936848-16-4. US\$12.00.

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*the threshold of awareness*

*The Doors All Unlocked*, Carolyn Hall's third collection of haiku, moves the mind in many directions. According to recent studies of the brain, sounds too slight to reach the threshold of awareness on their own are cognitively enhanced by linkage with other, concurrent sensations such as sight. We actually hear more acutely if we can also see what is making noise. This bit of neuroscience begins to explain the evolutionary value of cross-modal thinking, that synthesis of sensory input from which we derive meaning. No accident, the poet's heightened sensitivity to and understanding of life also lies in the interfusions of perception, emotion, and memory. Such fusions are to be found throughout Hall's chapbook:

telephoto lens—  
the loon's call  
comes into focus

green quince  
I ask again  
if he loves me

altered memories  
birdsong tugging  
at the sky

If the first of these haiku speaks directly to the neuroscience, the neuroscience offers some insight into the poetic impact of the second and third. We understand precisely the tenor of the lover's question *because* of its association with bitter fruit. Responding to fusion upon fusion, we feel the nag of unresolved recall as a sound pulling on the sky *because* we have known emotional torsion in the guts.

*strands that bind*

Hall divides some 85 poems into six sections, each section its own thematic cluster. Nominally, the reader is serially

immersed in acts of attention, in small joys and sorrows, in familial community, solitude and loneliness, communion with others or its lack, and sudden tremblings before the mystery of death in life. Yet Hall is too sure an artist not to utilize these same themes as strands that bind one cluster with another. Haiku that speak to sensual perception, for example, also speak to the small gestures with which we maintain connection and grace the perplexities of deep companionship:

I let him  
remember it his way—  
spring gust

we agree to disagree—  
a swallowtail sails down  
the stream's dry fork

the gates of the lock  
close behind us  
autumn dusk

Placed early in the chapbook, "I let him" channels poems such as "we agree to disagree" and "the gates of the lock" that surface later, in sections more obviously dedicated to meditations on intimacy and death. Layers of sensory and emotional fusion within poems build into leitmotifs webbing the collection as a whole.

*an examined life*

In the warp and woof of *The Doors All Unlocked* perhaps the most compelling strand is woven of those personal intimacies that draw the reader into the middle of an examined life. That narrative picks up in middle age, when everything, it seems, is in flux.

poppies!  
my daughter calls  
just to chat

lilac  
the familiarity  
of his nakedness

dogwood blossoms  
Mom's ashes  
lighter than expected

Children grow into their own and separate lives; parents age, get sick and die; companions of the heart change—or, perhaps

worse, don't; and the reasons for all that has come before are newly called into question:

my life story  
to a stranger . . . bags shift  
in the overhead bin

*touch so light*

In Hall's hands, haiku technique is nearly invisible, her touch so light as to be transparent. Syllable and stress; assonance and alliteration; word, line, and line break—all serve meaning even as they get out of its way. Here, all the l's contribute to a sense of restraint, let loose in the final word of the poem:

a flimsy lock  
on my journal  
tulip rain

Form is wholly fluid, yet wholly formed. There are parameters. Whether in one word or twelve, one line or two or three or more, Hall's haiku build from fresh and fertile juxtapositions, from subtle, telling shifts and double meanings:

Sept  
ember

the  
sound  
of  
the  
rake  
scraping  
loneliness

No more, no less is said than must be said to convey what one poet has called "a careful incompleteness of information."<sup>1</sup> Yet with great generosity of spirit, the haiku in this collection articulate the very fragments of thought necessary to fire meaning—without anticipating that combustion. Hall is a poet of precise vision and open-ended implication. Fuel and kindling are all there, but it is the reader who must strike the match.

words . . .  
the dug-up stump  
too heavy to lift

*on the pulse points*

Hall's haiku sensibilities place her in the palpable world:

a frog fills the garden of our attention

Yet that world also includes what can only be imagined and intuited, desired, or dreamed—unconsciously felt frogs also fill the garden, though we may hardly know how to name them:

shimmer of minnows  
at the lakeshore  
this wish to fly

Again and again, Hall places her finger on the pulse points of the mind's inner landscape, scouting out our deepest needs and our deepest fears:

the long night  
my loneliness  
curls up beside him

I imagine  
dying alone  
mustard seeds

*what really matters*

Who does not know of Jane Austen's mild dismissal of her manuscript page as a "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?"<sup>22</sup> Hall's "bit of ivory" may be smaller still, but her palette is equally large. If she confines herself in her poetry to scenes from a daily life, her concerns are anything but pedestrian. Indeed, like the novelist Barbara Pym (sometimes referred to as a modern Austen), Hall asks us to consider, as Pym's characters often do, that "the small things of life [are] often so much bigger than the great things . . . like cooking, one's home, little poems especially sad ones, solitary walks . . ."<sup>23</sup> Painting ever so small stories, Hall nevertheless

grapples with what really matters—“how to sate this hunger”; “how to dress . . . for eternity.” Often somber, always honest, she finds some answer in the poetry itself:

gold-back fern  
the mark  
my words make

the lesser goldfinch goldfinch enough

Indeed. There is such a noetic quality to Hall’s poems, such a feeling of rightness in the mark her words make, that to read *The Doors All Unlocked* is to experience again and again the synesthesia of heightened awareness and being. Hall may well ponder, as surely as an Austen or a Pym, whether fine and lucid brush work, whether simple, luminous moments of common wonder, are enough. They are.

mayflies—  
an unfinished painting  
on the easel

#### Notes

1. Harry Behn, *Chrysalis, Concerning Children and Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
2. Jane Austen to Edward Austen, Chawton, Monday, Dec. 16th (1816). From James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, 1870. Retrieved June 7, 2013 from <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/auslet22.html>.
3. Barbara Pym, *Less Than Angels*. New York: Harper & Row, 1955, 104.



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