

Killdeer

by Phil Hall

Toronto: Book Thug, 2011, ISBN 978-1-897388-81-5, 125 pp., \$18.00 paper.

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

On the title page one finds the subtitle “essay-poems.” Simply put, essay-poems define measured ‘tries-at’ and here result, with remarkable success, in inhabiting as many spaces and perspectives as Hall attempts. The poems usually start off being about one thing and end up about quite another. They are essays, poems, and attempts to explore past adventures and relationships into the unknown but highly suspected.

In *Killdeer*, winner of the 2011 Governor General’s Award, poet Phil Hall sums up and moves on. Use these three gathered exclamations as an underpinning: “Clarity is not pure – it’s intricate” (59); “Error is character” (60), and “To invite texture not topic” (72). *Killdeer* is Hall at his most congenial, his most accessible and appealing (though he’s always been that). He may profess not to invite topic, but I can point out a few recurring ones here: charming, wandering recollections of the writing life, investigations into the ‘how’ of writing (not the physical detailing of space, hours and instrument used that seem to be *de rigueur* on interview programs, but the philosophical grounding and emotional attachment of language and the direction in which it heads for the poet), the personal history of his life in his writing, and the passing of the hot potato of experience around the circle in our lives.

A poem about him and Libby Scheier visiting New York where she was abused as a child startles with a different intensity upon each reading. Details pop out unexpectedly, and the two of them sound courageous and almost slapstick in their quest for closure. Powerlessness contributes to the hard edge of the unspoken, and Hall crafts the necessity and truth of speechlessness and fear into the shadows, under the sink. The exhaust fan in the bathroom of their motel is a “little stink fan.” They are both drinking heavily at that point, so the reader senses things will not turn out well, yet they turn out better than they might, even if “Pathetic at trust – we bullied from each other what final affections we got” (70).

The long poem about meeting Margaret Laurence (“Becoming a Poet”) rings uncomfortably but humanly true as both novice and seasoned author fumble through expectations and reality “toward invitation & conduit.” The artist as young man and pilgrim learns to strip away pretensions and look into the faceted mirror of all the people he is becoming and all the people he comes from. He sounds genuinely humble and grateful.

Hall’s writing taps the serendipity of err instead of the textbook’s leading ear, not knowing being in clear ascendancy – “a *though* that was meant to be *thought*” (83) – over the known and doubtless. He never aspires to cleverness and hip – “My mother used to buy plastic curtains” (20) – nor does he hide behind his considerable talent. I read in Hall a recognition and condemnation of classism, something along the lines of Matthew Good’s lyrics in “Vancouver National Anthem”: “We all live downtown/ Paying blood, no parking/ Sleep on the ground/ Step over ourselves.”

Who is the kind of human Hall lights up for? Try Nicky Drumbolis, book collector, bookseller, small publisher, and self-studied scholar. I might call him a limping failure if I were a member of the landed gentry, but I’ve rented my entire life, so I can call him a dancer. Hall’s nudge at poetic

essay-biography ties together “Drumbolis’s preservation instinct” with the torching of Baghdad’s National Library and the poverty of our gift economy (think Christmas glut, Black Friday splurge).

Hall doesn’t intend this poem to be conscience slapping. No, “The history of the typed word is being squirreled away – fought for” (55) by Drumbolis, Hall writes, and that makes the book collector necessary, even extraordinary.

I can think of no other poet more deserving of this year’s Governor General’s Award than Phil Hall. 🍷

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