

BREATHING A POET'S UTTERANCE: RE-READING HAZEL HALL

By Eleanor Berry

Once a poet has finished a poem and given it over to readers, it becomes theirs. The breath of the lines is no longer the poet's but that of each person who reads them. That is the strange truth proclaimed by Hazel Hall's poem "Your Audience," in which the audience addresses the poet:

Poet, your utterance becomes my breath.
The rhythm of my pulses is the song
That burned in yours when once your blood was flame
And sang an hour of silence into fire.

There is a burning intensity to the poetry that Hazel Hall wrote during her brief life (1886-1924), spent mostly confined to a wheelchair and staying in one room of her family's home in Portland. Reading her poems feels to me like learning to breathe at once more quickly and more deeply than normal.

Hall's poetry has been collected in three books. Two of them, *Curtains* and *Walkers*, were published in quick succession near the end of her 38 years. The third, *Cry of Time*, was published posthumously. Then, some 75 years after her death, Oregon State University Press published a combined volume of all three books, *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, edited and introduced by Eugene poet John Witte.

The combined volume allows one to experience each of the original books as a distinct whole or to sample from the full range of Hall's poetry. In a recent re-reading, I did some of both, starting with the last few poems, then going through the posthumous *Cry of Time* from beginning to end, after that sampling *Walkers*. I finished by reading *Curtains* straight through.

In *Cry of Time*, the poet is feeling the limits of verbal art. The poem "Breath" celebrates its subject as "speech forever on the tongue, / Forever missing shape of word, too fine / A

passion to be tempered by a sound.” Hall’s evident zeal for making, for utterance, is balanced by a profound conviction that much properly belongs to silence. Nonetheless, she strives to articulate, through imagery, something so elusive as what it is to be a separate self. The short poem “Said to a Bird” ends with these lines: “And you shall *be*, and being there, / You will have shaped an instant to / the sleek mad contour that is you.” The bird addressed here seems to be a figure for the poet, whose writing shapes a brief interval to the contour of her sensibility.

The poems of *Walkers* derive from the paralyzed poet’s observations of those walking up and down the street beneath her window. They seem to her to “cry themselves in passing by,” and her poems articulate the selves she sees in their dress, posture and movement, hears in their tread. Her succinct characterizations of individual walkers are variously admiring, critical, challenging, and sympathetic. In one poem, she turns her gaze appraisingly on the self at the window, and in another, those she whom she has been observing “arraign” her:

Do you not remember?
Admit that we
Have quieted your fingers, flung a light
Across your mind by day and soothingly
Have wandered through your heart when there was night.

When, in my re-exploration of Hall’s poetry, I arrived back at her first collection, *Curtains*, I saw how effectively it introduces her to readers. The opening section establishes and explores the setting of the poet’s room, her vantage behind its window and door, within its walls. The constriction is palpable, but equally so is an extraordinary intensity of sensuous experience. For this poet, sunlight falling through a window onto her hands is felt as “more beautiful / Than hands should hold,” and “sudden earth-breaths through an opened door” can awaken ecstasy. From within her room, Hall imagines the earth and sky and sea more vividly than most of us

experience them directly. In these poems, even lassitude, weariness, and resignation are experienced intensely.

The second section of *Curtains*, titled “Needlework,” contains the poems for which Hall is best known. They derive from the work she did, until her eyesight failed, for livelihood. This poet was also a skilled maker in another medium, and the poems reflecting on her work as a seamstress hold a special fascination. That work was both fine and tedious. One poem, “Monograms,” tells of monogramming “Seven dozen napkins, / With tablecloths to match.” Much of the work required suppression of her imagination as she was obliged to follow a particular pattern over and over again. A tension between discipline and impulse is a repeated theme in these poems. So is a sense of connection to “All the tired women / Who sewed their lives away.” But these poems also convey an artist’s delight in her materials and their possibilities:

Bolts of dimity I take,
Muslin smooth and cool;
These my fingers love to make
Beautiful.