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The Museum of Clear Ideas. Donald Hall. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993, 120 pages, $18.95 hard.

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Donald Hall is zealously and enthusiastically committed to poetry. It is his calling, his profession, his joy. He preaches poetry, he proselytizes, and he makes converts. Donald Hall's poems and his public readings are celebrations of poetry's essence: he persuades the audience to believe in its power and its efficacy. Hall frees poetry's spirit and its vitality from the pretensions of academe, so that it is no longer an inert display sequestered in the exhibition halls of academic classrooms, to be illuminated at the whim of scholar–curators. This is not to imply that Hall panders to the demotic. His poems are admired and highly valued by the best writers and critics of the generation. Rather, as *The Museum of Clear Ideas* demonstrates, Hall's poetry is inclusive and accessible: it rewards academics and non-academics alike, the average reader as well as the trained reader.

The Museum of Clear Ideas is startling in its brilliance. It is simultaneously entertaining for "the common reader" and certain to send once and future scholars scurrying to identify a wealth of references, allusions, and sources, as well as real life counterparts for the likes of Mâitre Zero, Glaucus, Bill Trout, Senator Hell, Flaccus, Camilla, and Jennifer. The inhabitants of *The Museum of Clear Ideas* clearly share aspects of behavior and personality with "real" people. Versified versions of Hall himself, Jesse Helms, Robert Bly, James Wright, Jane Kenyon, and Ezra Pound are verifiable, for example, and readers will be confirming other doppelgangers for years to come.

The book's structure illustrates Hall's method and his adept, if brash, strategy for achieving something akin to universal appeal. A prefatory poem, *Another Elegy*, dedicated to the memory of a fictional American poet, William Trout, introduces virtually all of the book's major themes in seven pages, death and the forces that defy it chief among them. This is followed by the long section, *Baseball*. Hall has written extensively about baseball; indeed, he has built a reputation as one of the best of an increasing number of litterateurs chronicling the game. In *Baseball*, the narrator "explains" the sport to Kurt Schwitters, the German Dadaist famous for his collages.

Why Kurt Schwitters? In part because Schwitters built monuments to the ongoingness of life: "whose work was clothing, office, bedroom,/and carapace, who glued together/assemblages of ordinary things—cigarette wrappers, bus tickets,/ads—first to make collage, and then to/inhabit." In Hall's previous book of poems, *The One*

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Day, building a house became one metaphor for writing poetry, and it became a symbol, too, for living one's work; in *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, Schwitters' collage house parallels Hall's verse museum (etymologically, "the place of the muses"—so Hall brings together poetry, history, art, science, the collection of a culture's representative artifacts, or those worthy of enduring, in his structure). Hall's museum and Schwitters' work have another very important thing in common: just as Schwitters made his structures from objects which proponents of elite art might have rejected, Hall's museum includes exhibits which the patrician advocates of high art doubtless deem unsuitable. Baseball is only one such artifact. But this is one of Hall's strengths, and it may be at the heart of his greatness: he makes connections where lesser minds see only boundaries. At last Schwitters seems to share a kindred spirit with Hall, and baseball belongs in serious poetry.

Baseball's form is apt; it consists of nine sections, corresponding to nine innings. Each "inning" comprises nine stanzas, with nine lines to a stanza and nine syllables per line. *Baseball*'s structure encloses traditional poetic concerns, giving lyrical support to the claims Hall has repeatedly made for the popular pastime in his essays: that baseball has always been the poet's game, that baseball lends itself to examining "the meaning of life," that because it is pure of meaning, baseball is ideal for accreting meaning.

The book's third section inverts *Baseball*'s tactic, locating its structure not in the popular but in the select: classical Latin poetry. This section, entitled *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, takes its form from Horace. Hall has appropriated the "look" of Horace's first book of Odes and at the same time "updated" a number of Horace's concerns. For example, he takes the famous "Nunc Est Bibendum" and restates it as "Let's get burnt," rewriting the Horatian original as an opportunity to celebrate, by breaking out the cider, a temporary victory over the forces of "fund-raising, bigotry, merde, contempt for art" represented by Senator Jesse Helms (with, perhaps, a sly wink at the practical Horace's sycophancy toward the power brokers of his era). The lines of demarcation between past and present are erased.

Using Horace, Hall obliterates other boundaries, for while he invokes high art (the *only* art worth studying, of course, in those days whose passing cultural elitists such as Allan Bloom so lament, when education's higher standards demanded an appreciation of Latin poets), and adroitly employs classical allusion—making it difficult for the reader to resist linking Horace and Donald Hall—he provides his own "comeuppance." Most of these "Odes" are "tagged" with a brief rejoinder, beginning "Or say," which often contradicts, counters, or rebuts the original "ode." These "retorts" are "Horsecollar's Odes." The jarring use of Horace Horsecollar, a lesser Disney character who appeared in cartoons and comic books, usually with Mickey Mouse, generates a wealth of questions. Is he Horace/Hall's alter ego, an inner voice edged with cynicism? Or is he a demotic Horace, proof that elite and popular art can attain the same intensive level of meaning and feeling? And what is the reader to make of that extra complication, the presence of Flaccus in these poems? Is Flaccus meant to suggest the domestic poet? Quintus Horatius Flaccus, at home, the daily person removed from his public persona? The guardians of high culture may find Hall's impudence at counterpointing Horace and Horace Horsecollar outrageous, but such connections are central to *The Museum of Clear Ideas*' method and its meaning. It is just such daring that has made Hall one of America's best poets.

The book's fourth and final section is *Extra Innings*. Again, the popular envelops the poetic. Each extra inning expands the basic nine of baseball: the 10th has 10 ten-line stanzas of ten syllables per line, the 11th has all elevens, and the 12th

assembles twelves. This structure goes beyond the merely clever, it is relevant. The form reproduces the theme of expansion, first introduced at length in the seventh inning (appropriate to the seventh inning stretch, of course: Hall is never averse to fun, even when he is most serious).

As the narrator explains to Schwitters:

> Kurt, may I hazard
> An opinion on expansion? Last
> winter meetings, the major leagues (al-
> ready meager in ability,
> scanty in starting pitchers) voted
> to add two teams. Therefore minor league
> players will advance too quickly,
>
> 8. with boys in the bigs who wouldn't have
> made double–A forty years ago.
> Directors of player personnel
> will search like poets scrambling in old
> notebooks for unused leftover lines,
> but when was the last time anyone
> cut back when he or she could expand?
> Kurt, I get the notion that you were
> another who never discarded
>
> 9. *anything*, a keeper from way back.
> You smoke cigarettes, in inflation-
> times rolled from chopped-up banknotes, billions
> inhaled and exhaled as cancerous
> smoke. When commerce awoke, Merz was awake.
> If you smoke a cigar, the cigar
> band discovered itself glued into
> collage. Ongoing life became the
> material of Kurtschwittersball.

"Ongoing life," characterizes the game, the procreating human race, the transfer of art and literature's masterpieces from age to age. Yet death is central. Without death, "ongoingness" is trivial. Without "ongoingness," death is triumphant.

> Baseball, like sexual intercourse
> and art, stops short, for a moment, the
> continuous indecent motion
> of time forward, implying our death
> and imminent decomposition.

Hall's poetry has never evaded death. From his very early poems, such as "My Son, My Executioner" through the classic "Names of Horses" to the most recent confrontation with the psychic consequences of his father's death in *The One Day*, Hall has confronted humanity's fundamental dread. But death is more conspicuous in *The Museum of Clear Ideas* than in any of Hall's previous work. Donald Hall is frank, honest, and outspoken, characteristics which overflow into his poetry. He

has been deeply distressed by death twice recently. First, his wife Jane underwent surgery for a carcinoma and was declared "clean," an event obviously contributing to these poems. Second, Hall underwent cancer surgery himself three years ago ("and it was I who constructed a quiet/carcinoma at the top of my colon"). He writes of "watching my grave open" and transforms this experience into poetry as forthrightly as he has the most mundane events:

> We understand that we will
> also die, but claim, or wish to believe,
> that women and men who appear to stop time by their products
> never depart from being.
>
> Nonetheless, Sabina disintegrates in her bare graveyard—
>
> **********
>
> Or say: Good master Horsecollar
> At Dartmouth–Hitchcock and in terror
> Removed a carcinoma, D.V.
> Timor mortis conturbat me.
>
> Sabina died ten years ago.
> Flaccus endures. death's sworn foe,
> As Marvin burns melanoma away.
> Timor mortis conturbat me.
>
> Kim died of the cure. My old teacher
> Inhaled a carton of throat cancer
> And each generation learned to die.
> Timor mortis conturbat me.
>
> Fran was the first. She was run over;
> Glaucus leapt under earth for cover.
> Great ruth it were that it should be.
> Timor mortis conturbat me.

Hall's confrontations with death provide some of the book's most joyous moments. "The truest/aphrodisiac is our certain knowledge that we will die: We sweat,/we pant, we drop our pants whenever we touch/the subject of dying . . . ." The counterpoint of "pant" and "pants" and the line break at "touch" (the equivalent of the off-speed pitch) are characteristic Hall. Great art may "stop time" and appear to subdue death at least briefly, but whimsy, too, is a potent force.

These poems are made rich by death, as the subject is examined from many angles: rich psychological insights ("all tears/weep for the weeper."), ("Let us pull back the blanket, slide off our bluejeans,/assume familiar positions,/and celebrate lust in Mortality Mansions") as well as reversals of respected psychological theory: "we pound/and jab ourselves into each other" to sublimate our will to die. Sex "relaxes our lust for oblivion/by substituting oblivion." And more seriously, he writes often of love as a weapon against death: "Let us descend, Camilla, to the long white/house that holds love and work together,/and play familiar music on each/other's skin. Today we won't worry about/weather, depression, or war; about bad luck/for our labors; about heart attacks/or metastasis to the liver."

This book is much richer than excerpts, whatever their individual splendor, can suggest. For in this volume, as he has done increasingly well in each new book, Hall

captures and conveys "'the oceanic experience,' when we understand (with a sensation which is often frightening) our connections with everything. There is no demarcation between ourselves and the universe of space or of time. Our smallness among the pieces of time in the universe is terrifying; but our connectedness is comforting."

Ultimately, it is the sense of "connectedness" characterizing *The Museum of Clear Ideas* that does, indeed, comfort. The "granite arks" of survivalists in Idaho connect them with a chosen Israelite; learning about sex in a Mercury links American adolescents to Roman youth and God's messenger, Mercury. Baseball expands the poet's "pitch" to include two professions, and when "Dwight Evans put it all together" one night, he became a collagist of Schwitters' magnitude. Monuments of language connect us and connect for us.

Consider water. April rains link Chaucer, Eliot, and Hall at the same time joining "Bill Trout . . . fixed in a long box where we left him, a dozen years ago," a rain delay in Fenway, "naps as shallow as puddles" or as "profound as the Pacific Ocean," tears, female beauty ("there is her water body. She fills/the skin of her legs up, like water;/under her blouse, water assembles,/swelling lukewarm; her mouth is water,/her cheekbones cool water; water flows/in her rapid hair. I drink water/from her body as she walks past me . . . ." This leads to morning light, to submarine pitches, to the confusion of beer drinking and love because of the urge to micturate, and then back to "voluptuous" rain.

Ultimately, Hall has done what poets want. "It was Sigmund Freud, I believe, who inquired,/'What is it that poets want?'" As people, they want what we all want, "diversions." But as poets "Crooked or straight, poets mortgage their prospects/for an improbable goal: to make objects/carved in the abiding stone of language;/to leave, when they die, durable relics." *The Museum of Clear Ideas* is surely a durable relic, and it ends with a "durable relic" from baseball, one of those living moments that characterize the "ongoing" nature of the game. When fans think "again how Carlton Fisk ended Game Six/in the twelfth inning with a poke over the wall," they share a fixed moment of exultation. Could an American poem have a more appropriate conclusion than a moment from baseball which seems to have stopped time, a moment captured in a work of art aspiring to do the same? In the night beyond the wall is a lost series and the season's end. But it is Fisk's home run that lives on, and "stops short, for a moment, the continuous indecent motion of time forward."