

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

May 27, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



In the Well

My father cinched the rope,
a noose around my waist,
and lowered me into
the darkness. I could taste

my fear. It tasted first
of dark, then earth, then rot.
I swung and struck my head
and at that moment got

another then: then blood,
which spiked my mouth with iron.
Hand over hand, my father
dropped me from then to then:

then water. Then wet fur,
which I hugged to my chest.
I shouted. Daddy hauled
the wet rope. I gagged, and pressed

my neighbor's missing dog
against me. I held its death
and rose up to my father.
Then light. Then hands. Then breath.

Andrew Hudgins¹

✧ Reflections

Here is a poem I love but which I have hesitated to feature, wondering if perhaps readers would find it “too dark,” or be left asking that question my former students of all ages would sometimes pose: where are all the happy poems? If you have read *Wellspring* long enough, though, you know already some version of my answer: while I appreciate and (long for) joy in art, I have also found that what might at first reading seem like darkness can, if I am patient and careful, transform, shape-shift into a much more promising possibility, something truer and even, surprisingly, light-filled. After all, art itself—the very act of writing—is one of hope; expression in any form seems to me a step toward what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls “the new presence inside us, the presence that has been added.” Simply in creating, we offer evidence of some future, some—as this poem leads me to say—sense of “then.”

¹ “In the Well” by Andrew Hudgins, published in *The Southern Review*. Used by permission of the author.

And I cannot forget that we are still in the Easter season! Season of tomb-dark death but season, too, of *then*, of resurrection. It could very well be that “then” is an essential part of the vocabulary of faith.

Hudgins is a poet admired for many reasons—his formal control, his engagement with religious tensions (guilt, sacrifice, powerlessness), and his abilities as a narrative or “story-telling” poet. This poem uses exact rhyme, iambic meter (an unstressed and then a stressed syllable), and an evenly-measured four-line stanza structure—all elements of precision and restraint with the lyric. To summarize the “story” of the poem, we can gather that a child has been lowered into the well by way of a rope in order to retrieve the neighbor’s drowned dog: it is a strange and disturbing narrative. It is also one many would characterize as “Southern Gothic,” in the spirit of William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O’Connor, and Carson McCullers—transgressive writers who challenged the principles of the Enlightenment by framing sometimes jarringly bleak and even violent or wicked stories against a backdrop of the fantastical, the grotesque, and the surreal.

I draw your attention to but one moment of Hudgins’s brilliance: the final exact rhyme of death/breath. Though paradoxical or contrary—in death, of course, one is without breath—the exactness of that rhyme fulfills the expectation for it; by the end of the poem, the ear is attuned to be predicting that rhyme-resolution, a closing of the door that the beginning of the stanza has opened. And so to resolve death with its rhyme, breath, points to something much larger, something that transcends the specific narrative, something that transcends even the very metaphor with which the poem is working: the well is deep and dark, home of rot and blood and death, but the well has both exit and entrance at once, and—perhaps most importantly of all—the rope (the noose) that lowers us down is the self-same rope by which we are rescued.

And then it is light again. Here are the hands. We may emerge gagging, clutching the wet fur of despair, but we emerge at last. And then what... then what. Perhaps that is when the real work of the poem, or of a life, begins.

✧ About the poet

Andrew Hudgins was born in Killeen, Texas, into a military family that moved frequently around the American south. He was educated at Huntingdon College, the University of Alabama, and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and he is the author of several collections of poetry and essays. His first book, *Saints and Strangers* (1986), was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and his third collection, *The Never-Ending* (1991), was a finalist for the National Book Award. He has taught at numerous institutions including Baylor University, the University of Cincinnati, and Ohio State University.



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