

## Devotion, Labor, Utopia: The Poetry of Joe Hall

“Doubt not, O poet, but persist.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

### I: *Spirit Citizen of the Universe*

In response to the American call to make it new Joe Hall’s mixed genre forms and sonorous multi-voiced poems give the chorus the stage. Whereas Susan Howe writes through Emily Dickinson, Hall writes “into” or “through” distinct historical events of relevance today. In his latest book, *Someone’s Utopia* (Black Ocean, 2018), Hall writes through Oneida, the famous utopian community in upstate New York.

“Utopia” means “nowhere,” literally, unrealizable vision baked into its etymology, yet a realm of perfection remains a distinct location in the human imagination. The word came into being when Saint/Sir Thomas More, inspired by Amerigo Vespucci’s discovery of the Americas, imagined an ideal society of communal pacifism and good will called “utopia.” About 300 years later, in the time of Marx, when governments of industrialized nations became more centralized and could exert greater control over populations, the dystopia emerged: a society engineered to dehumanize its inhabitants. With the rise of totalitarian regimes and millennial and/or technological fears, dystopias now breathe the cultural oxygen once reserved for utopias: Orwell’s *1984*, Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* received more attention than Aldous Huxley’s *The Island*, B. F. Skinner’s *Walden II* or Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, modern utopias. With the popularity of the dystopia in a political climate of facial recognition technology, censorship, internet warfare, racism and fascism, why invoke the utopia rather than the dystopia? Why project the possibility of a perfect place when, as Hall witnesses, most of us spend our waking lives witness to emotionally difficult patterns of injustice? The answer is poetry’s hope: this hope may only live between covers in fleeting moments, yet this envisioning of an ideal world displays radical optimism.

Whereas other utopias present an alternative society, Hall’s poetry doesn’t preach or project. Oneida came into being during the middle of the 1800s under the leadership of John Noyes. The community didn’t recognize individual marriage but rather “complex marriage.” This approach essentially eliminated monogamous fidelity, which Noyes saw as a kind of individual ownership akin to possessing personal objects or goods. Hall’s poetry gives voice to the members of this community. How did they control jealousy and competition in open and prescribed relationships? “My heart in such a confusion,” replies one of the voices.

“The hour is coming. It has come,” Hall echoes Noyes in the first poem of the sequence, which refers to a religious awakening Noyes experienced that left him convinced humanity lives in a

state of perfection. Noyes saw independence and fertile America—nature's bounty of "orchard, meadow, woodland" in Hall's poetry—as his right. The voices in Hall's poetry endure the egotism, insularity and misplaced idealism of utopia formation.

Oneida established sustainable industries, including the famous line of silverware, but the community suffered from the same challenges as other utopias: unaccepted by society, the community failed to establish a leader after Noyes had to flee to Canada due to charges of statutory rape filed by a group of clergymen. Hall's poetry experiences the humanity of this utopic experiment in its peaks and valleys.

Only a third of *Someone's Utopia* takes Oneida as its focus; the book begins with a section of dialogues called "Greetings: Play for 2 Voices" that uses the language of recovery as a kind of invocation. Like a new beginning out of rehab or a birth or transformation, these poems use sonograms, tantrums, reinventions and the splintering of selves as tropes to communicate new life and beginnings. Within this series, "Séance" relates the creation of poetry to the practice of communicating with spirits. This view recasts the classical sense of the inspired rhapsode as a "spirit citizen of the universe":

If the aspirant is earnest, if he is willing to comply with the conditions necessary to success, then by sitting he can develop some phase of mediumship, which will give him the soul satisfaction of conscious cooperation with angels who work constantly

to prove to man to be a spirit citizen of the universe, existent in Eternity.

After this invocation of sorts, the middle section of the book, "\$∞/hr," takes up the theme of work. Hall writes into the greenhouse, printing press and shipping plant in rustbelt places like Baltimore, where voices reflect upon occupational risks such as fires, hammer blows, explosions, and the loss of limb and life. This mixed genre poetry has elements of cultural anthropology and reportage. Hall interweaves interviews about work from the perspective of the writer-in-the-field; the result is news that stays the news, W.P.A. work remixed, the best of poetic realism. The lines don't suffer simple theoretical reduction; these are poems of "extruded potato paste and cheese dust," fragrant of bleach, ammonia and tobacco, of shifts, layoffs, clocks, treadmills, assembly lines, cashiers and exurbs. Yet Hall's poetry renders these hard times with "a drop of Virgilian honey." He explores not only the language of toil but also the poetic beauty and epicness of labor:

To the Potomac in waders, a path across  
the inlet, think another job

from pallet to whirring press

two-stoke engine shake my hands  
heated sap perfume

the rose's petals passage from a greenhouse  
on a high plain way over there

*Someone's Utopia* is equivalent to a concept album in its range of registers and emotions. For example, Hall's sackcloth salt-of-the-earth lines feature "Vicodin roses," workers poisoned while applying pesticides to roses, and someone jumping on flowers gone to seed in the dumpster to make room for more trash. Traces of a long creative struggle are reflected in typographic experiments; half of some poems are struck through as if to indicate their removal. In *Fanzine* (January 27, 2014) Hall attested to this destructive impulse: "Sometimes I hate my writing and want to throw it away, erase every physical and digital trace of its existence, have it encrypt itself." This critical passion powers Hall's poetry through our era of oversharing to present distinct particulars that fulfill the American call for innovation.

## II: *O Beast! O Christ!*

Take the trailer park as the epitome of American capitalism, a kind of wasteland overflowing with trash, drugs, guns, fires, explosions, violence and tabloid culture, peopled with the poor, lost, forgotten, suffering, disabled and insane. Now picture its inhabitants searching amid this for an altar, beseeching "O Beast! O Christ!" for help and direction. This is the territory of Joe Hall's second collection, *The Devotional Poems* (Black Ocean, 2013).

Hall read "Post Nativity" from this book at the "Benevolent Armchair" reading series organized by the Chris Toll and Barbara DeCesare in the Bromo Seltzer Tower in Baltimore. Hall read with all the apocalyptic fervor and thunder of a preacher. Afterward Hall explained the poem was inspired in part by living in a trailer park in Southern Maryland. Later at the bar Adam Robinson, a.k.a. Publishing Genius, asked Hall if he could publish the poem as a chapbook. Much later two poets I respect made plans to tattoo on their bodies: "O Beast! O Christ!"

As the title suggests, the personas in *The Devotional Poems* are devoted to a search despite the destruction, disaster, disintegration and pain of life:

O Beast! O Christ!  
Where is your profile?  
I can't find you  
in this field of pixels,  
these words made in China

As part of this search there is the plea to become a kind of vehicle: “please/ Make me your mug, your pipe, your ashtray.”

Searching and devotion are also themes in Joe Hall’s earlier book, *Pigafetta Is My Wife* (Black Ocean, 2010). Pigafetta was an Italian explorer and scholar who kept a journal during Magellan’s circumnavigation of the globe. Pigafetta was also a survivor, one of the 18 men who returned home from the 237 men who originally set out. In *Pigafetta Is My Wife*, Hall intersperses poetry inspired by Pigafetta’s journey and journal with poetry for Cheryl, from whom the speaker is temporarily separated. In this equation Cheryl becomes associated with Pigafetta, the starving survivor of exploration, though “wife” also suggests taking exploration as a mate.

*My Wife is Pigafetta* contains tongues, hells, angels, saints, fires, cups and blood. This all seems fitting from a historical perspective given the Christian aims underlying European exploration during the age of discovery. But *The Devotional Poems* also uses similar imagery, as in “Where you appear in a hood of flames in the crown of a tree/ live power lines whipping around you.” This repeated overlaying of the sacred onto the everyday figures into a kind of visionary stance:

To live  
is to borrow, and if we borrow  
to live, then all must be  
a heap of trash, so rejoice

Devotion to a search for something better despite degradations in a debased present figures throughout Hall’s poetry, such as in *Pigafetta*’s “disaster shrines.” His poems question themselves, displaying humane self-doubt, the uncertainty of prayer and the acknowledgement of limitations. Surreal in a visceral sense, Hall’s poetry is unremorseful in its depiction of violence and pain, a la Frida Kahlo. The subtext asks the reader whether he or she can take it: all the horrors, confusions and reversals of life. On this question Hall’s poetry isn’t prescriptive. Hall writes, Beckett-like, “If you leave then I will be alone,” and the same may be said of Hall’s poetic witness via chorus to human endeavor and vision.