

Love, Death and Memories: On Dennis Haskell's Rhonda Poems

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Abstract

Dennis Haskell's Rhonda poems are undoubtedly the most brilliant and important part of his poetry in the sense that he wrote passionately about love, death and memories in relation to Rhonda in them. As Haskell's wife and lifelong love, Rhonda not only played a central part in his life and writing, but shaped and deepened his perception of humanity and human relationships. Despite the great impact of Modernism on modern and contemporary English poetry, Haskell's poetry is strikingly personal, accessible and lyrical. In his work, Haskell seeks to present the approximately genuine pictures of aspects of human relationships in terms of love, death and memories and ultimately, strives to make sense of the dynamics of love in our mundane life.

Keywords

Haskell, Rhonda poems, love, death, relationships, memories

Dennis Haskell is a distinguished poet from Western Australia and also a very good personal friend of mine. He was supervising my Ph.D. dissertation from 2010 to 2014 at the University of Western Australia. During my stay there, we talked more about poetry writing than about my dissertation and we've become very close friends since. Haskell strikes me as someone very passionate, honest and genuine. He is against the intellectual, impersonal and difficult poetry advocated by Eliot and Pound. Haskell never bothers to speak through a persona in his poetry and the speaker in his poems is identical to the poet himself. It goes without saying that Modernist poetry had a great impact on twentieth-century English poetry to such degree that a great number of poets dreaded expressing their feelings and emotions in their writing. Such an impact continues into the 21st century when not a small number of poets, who are more often university professors, take every effort not to sound personal, emotional or sentimental.

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However, Haskell, although a university professor for over twenty years, is an exception. He is critical of the Modernist tenets by refusing to appear intellectual, impersonal and difficult. Quite unlike the Modernist poets who wrote to appeal to a small number of elitist readers, Haskell writes to appeal to the common reader who was valued by non-Modernist poets such as W.B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost and Edna St. Vincent Millay. As a university academic, he tries very hard not to sound like one of the erudite scholars who, more often than not, employ a language that scares off the common reader. Despite the fact that the theory of impersonality has been widely internalised by contemporary university poets who are still persistent in their pursuit of Modernist tenets even decades after the Modernist movement was over, Haskell's poetry is insistently personal and true to his feelings and emotions. When it comes to the impact of Modernism on contemporary Australian literature, with a reading public in mind, Haskell argues that, "From the general reader's point of view, it is not the technically new that matters but vividness and emotional resonance" (Pierce 466). Haskell's comment is in accord with his own writing concerning the nature of poetry. What matters to his poetry is not the Modernist innovation and technique, but the capacity and courage to bring out what is real about humanity. Perhaps this explains in a way the fact that he is one of the small numbers of university professors who reject academic language in their poetry and strive to capture the reality of daily life concerning the universal themes such as love, death and memories. After reading through Haskell's poetry, I found myself returning time and again to those poems concerning Rhonda which touch upon their relationship, Rhonda's sickness and memories after Rhonda's death. Therefore, I feel the need to focus on the love poems, poems about Rhonda's sickness and treatment and poems after Rhonda passed away, in an effort to make sense of the impact of love on his life and writing.

Love Poems

Haskell's love poems are centred on his lifelong love, his wife, Rhonda. The personal and confessional nature of his writing offers direct access to his perception of love. All through the love poems, one gets the feeling that Haskell is someone who cannot tolerate distance from Rhonda; once he is away from her, he almost always sinks into recklessness and starts to long for her company and to question the meaning of his own existence. Rhonda has become, in a sense, another half of him that he is always missing her when she's not around. Therefore, Rhonda is both the subject and the inspiration of his love poems, which, more often than not, are written in Rhonda's absence. Distance is usually one of the causes for lovers' longing for one another and in Haskell's poems distance also creates unbearable loneliness gnawing at his heart. In "Incomplete and Nagged At," for instance, the poet confesses to the reader his fear of loneliness:

The worse thing is being alone.

All our talk about love
and our need for sex
is really the fear of being oneself
and that only, no-one else's life
to touch or enter: 'alone'
God's first gift.
Maybe that's what God is:
the thing we would all like to be,
who needs nothing, much less a person,
being Infinite, Innocent and Complete. (*Selected Poems* 7)

As far as the poet is concerned, "the fear of being oneself" uncovers the nature and truth about love and sexuality. He also points out that this fear is inherently human, something we cannot overcome. The constant sense of "the lack" urges one to long for another's company so as to acquire the sense of completeness. His failure of being contented with his own self compels him to feel the need to "touch or enter" Rhonda's life and this is also the pattern running through most of his love poems. Sometimes, the poet directly addresses Rhonda in the poem to express his longing for her. "Tapping" is distinctively confessional in the sense that the poet simply begins by addressing Rhonda "my love," and it makes the poem read more like a love letter in which the presence of Rhonda's absence is strongly felt but impossible to cope with:

I want desperately to write you
a poem of the scrawniest simplicity

to tap and beak inside you,
flown into a language
full beyond words

from the flurry of my feelings,
from the pit of my life

where I am now,
as dumb as the animals. (*Selected Poems* 41)

In this poem, the imagery of birds is conspicuously sexual. The poet does not shy away from what he truly feels about Rhonda. Sex is the "scrawniest simplicity" he cannot escape from; the poet's wish to "tap and beak inside you" resembles the ethos of metaphysical poets especially in terms of those poems concerning the theme of *Carpe Diem*. The poet's unquenchable hunger for touch and company results from his distance from Rhonda and his restlessness is in a sense

animalistic as he admits that he is “as dumb as the animals.” The poet is subjected to and overwhelmed by his animal instincts that he simply feels trapped both physically and mentally. In “Constancy,” written over ten years after “Tapping,” the poet finds himself thinking of Rhonda again as he always does, be it in Singapore, Canberra or any other place where he is always kept away from Rhonda, and he considers the persistence of this longing an unshakable bond between him and Rhonda:

This one constancy, as still
as a winter street telling me,
in a way that catches my breath,
that time is only a window
I could climb through
and touch you, in life, in death. (*Selected Poems* 139)

The poet’s way of overcoming the distance – a three-hour-difference – is very imaginative; the time difference, in other words, distance, is turned into a metaphor, the “window,” through which the poet is enabled to get in touch with Rhonda. The end of the poem reads almost like a vow. On a personal note, I’m always suspicious of expressions concerning death especially when death exists only as a concept, not as a reality. You don’t really know anything about death until death comes to you. For most of us, the word “death” is analogous to words such as “eternity” and “infinity” which are vague abstractions. To say that you love someone “in death” is almost like saying you will continue to love that person after his or her death, but this is not really true with Haskell. When Rhonda died at the hospital in 2012, he didn’t stay long there because he believed that the dead body was no longer Rhonda. I believe his perception of death at that moment is most genuine and thought-provoking. Therefore, I can only say that the end of this poem, especially the phrase “in death” expresses a certain degree of romantic fabrication of death as well as his faith in his love for Rhonda.

In “Letter to Rhonda,” written roughly the same time as “Constancy,” the reader notices a similar pattern running through the poem. At the beginning, the poet directly comes to terms with the distance – “four thousand kilometers” – between him and Rhonda, then he feels the need to talk to her in his head, which results from “a tough sustaining loneliness/ as silent as the sun” (*Selected Poems* 141). This is not the first time the poet admits his vulnerability, namely, his fear for loneliness, the volume of which can be enormous as that of the sun, while the silence of the sun can never bring a tranquil feel; instead, his loneliness is burning a hole inside him. The intensity of his longing for Rhonda can be strongly felt by the reader because “it is desire turning a string that tense/ just you and I can hear” (*Selected Poems* 141). This poem is perhaps the most lyrical of all the love poems written for Rhonda with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH DIDI. In the preface to his selected collection *What Are You Doing Here?* (2016), Haskell

noted, "The Australian poetry tradition has demonstrated a strong sense of the external world's is-ness, its being in itself, but it is also very lyrical – probably a result of our Celtic background. I would like to think that my poems contribute to that tradition of poetic musicality while presenting ideas that are embedded in sensory experience..." (x). On the other hand, this poem also conveys the fact that for the poet, love is something extremely personal and private, therefore "where words fail completely,/ there I am closest to you" (*Selected Poems* 141). What is unsaid between the lines is something only known to the poet, but not necessarily to the reader. In "Counting the Days," I have a feeling that the poet is almost always suffering from anxiety to a greater or lesser degree in Rhonda's absence. In this poem, the poet starts longing for Rhonda right after her departure; it leaves one the impression that he cannot even manage to spend a single day without feeling restless or even depressed. But the interesting thing is that it is just this unstoppable and unsettling longing for Rhonda that enables him to write poetry. In Haskell's case, suffering is the major drive for poetic creation; one has to remember that most of his passionate love poems before Rhonda's sickness were written in Rhonda's absence. Perhaps this is the relationship between poetry and life that works for Haskell. Perhaps one should simply ignore how the poet confesses that he is almost dying from longing for Rhonda, and remember that the unbearable longing is the very thing that urges him to create poetry. In this poem, love is certainly "that alternative universe" which follows its own rules to which he can only succumb. If everyone's love life has a centre, then that centre for Haskell is Rhonda who is the star he is orbiting around and the gravitational pull is the "density of affection" (*Selected Poems* 144). Similarly, in "Darling Street, Balmain," the poet once again does not shy away from his yearning for Rhonda:

I should have been happy, and sometimes was;
but always I thought of you
and my hungering for you – a deep absence
inside me like an inland sea...(*Selected Poems* 145)

The hungering for love and company is something that sustains his whole life as the poet makes clear in another poem, "Life is simple, an eternal hungering" (*Selected Poems* 15). Longing is undoubtedly one of the major inspirations for love poetry. Only very rarely did the poet write poems when he was going through the daily life with Rhonda close around. In "No One Ever Found You," written in the 1990s, the poet is observing Rhonda preparing for the cooking, still at a distance. There are only two stanzas in this poem. In the first stanza, the poet makes clear that Rhonda might consider herself one of the ordinary people while she is the special one in his eyes. In the second stanza, he is trying to make sense of their life together:

We have shifted cities, our shift
 into each other's lives so complete
 that any other we could scarcely know.
 Though your eyes are tired, my shoulders bony,
 it matters little where we go,
 how little we know
 and how much our lives have passed,
 our days will be filled with green
 and we grow together like the grass. (*Selected Poems* 24)

The poet points out the fact that the world in which he and Rhonda live together is insulated from the outside world to a large degree because of the density and exclusiveness of their love. The two of them have become one autonomous kingdom, somewhat isolated from the rest of the world. The poet depicts their love in a way which echoes Donne's "The Good-Morrow":

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 For love, all love of other sights controls,
 And makes one little room an everywhere.
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
 Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
 Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
 Where can we find two better hemispheres,
 Without sharp north, without declining west?
 Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
 If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
 Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die. (*Norton Anthology* 293)

The completeness of their life together resembles Donne's ideal planet formed by two loving hemispheres. Donne's planet defies and conquers death emphasising the eternity of love while the poet is more focused on this life. In my view, the imagery of grass – a symbol of life, rather than death – works much better as an ending of a poem especially in comparison with the ending of "Constancy" in which the poet wishes to emphasise love by referring to death. I have this steady belief that our feelings and emotions are most effectively expressed when poets employ tangible living things to help capture intangible concepts which, more often than not, are out of reach of words. As far as the ending of a love poem is concerned, Haskell appears more like a Romantic. The love poems written during this phase are the most beautiful and romantic and are able to arouse in the reader the universal sentiment of love. The poems written

after Rhonda was diagnosed with cancer contrast strikingly with the above love poems and the reader can also notice the differences in mood, tone and diction.

Cancer Poems

The poems written during the years 2006-2012 mainly deal with Rhonda's sickness, treatment and death; I might as well call them "cancer poems" in which the poet is compelled to come to terms with death and to make sense of death in his life. In a general sense, cancer has inevitably become the symbol of death and the poet expresses his mixed feelings and emotions about death ranging from defiance, rage, fear, hatred, helplessness and frustration. The poems written in this period are mostly dark and pessimistic. The presence of cancer is too powerful to be ignored so that the poet addresses it as "That Other Country":

In that country there is no capital planning,
no budgeting, no small talk, no migration queues,
no day to day distraction
from the dictatorship of death. Forget
the life of the mind, although the citizenry
is full of meaning. Where everyone is a refugee
the body asserts its supremacy, the economy
is measured out in medicines and pain. (*Ahead of Us* 52-53)

The title of the poem already conveys the poet's helplessness and vulnerability. The word – cancer – "will be a visa, in your passport/ an indelible stamp, and your passport/ now full of pages that you will never use" (52). Cancer becomes a country that defies human capacity and laws and in which the dictatorship of death is the only rule. This poem marks a dividing line both in the poet's life and poetry. Cancer has pushed his life into the abyss of despair and terror and his poetry into the tunnel of pain and sorrow as the poet himself makes clear that from this moment on, "the poetry is in the pity" (*Ahead of Us* 51), which he quoted from Wilfred Owen. This quotation becomes the keynote of the poems written during this phase. Sometimes, the poet is simply furious at the fact that the arrival of death is just a matter of chance as "Eventually" lays bare:

All logic, Hope, Justice
he will condense, into Luck.
Fuck those long thoughts
of your soul; his very howls
will ensure you are
a prisoner of your bowels. (*Ahead of Us* 54-55)

The poet's previous disbelief in death is ultimately overwhelmed by its unapologetic and eloquent presence. The poem begins with the title "Eventually"

and also ends with it. The whole poem is tinged with the sense of inescapability and victimisation. Also, that the end of poem repeats the beginning three lines only with the word “eventually” placed at the very end also increases the heartfelt sorrow:

The big C
is coming to visit you
and coming to visit me
eventually. (*Ahead of Us* 55)

“That Other Country” and “Eventually” can be read against the context where Rhonda’s cancer was first certified by the oncologists. “After Chemo” keeps track of Rhonda’s physical change after treatment. The whole poem is focused on Rhonda’s fallen hair resulting from the chemo, and the detailed description is tinted with indescribable pain felt by the poet:

Your hair is falling like thin rain,
like mizzle, like long, silent,
lightening snow. An invisible waterfall,
your hair cascades
or lifts away from you
like gossamer, like an inkbrush
gifting new pattern to the floors,
furring our mouths, our thickening thoughts,
our almost-said words. (*Ahead of Us* 56)

This poem seeks to be descriptive in the sense that the significance of Rhonda’s fallen hair can only be understood through abundant similes and metaphors – from mizzle to waterfall, inkbrush to autumn blossom, moths to will-o’-wisp – which document the omnipresence of Rhonda’s hair in the house and this leaves one the impression that Rhonda’s life, symbolised by her hair, is evaporating like thin air. The end of the poem reminds one how Haskell loves Tennyson’s lines – “We are not now that strength which in old days./ Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are” (*Norton Anthology* 994) – which he often mentioned in the many talks we had:

but in fact
we are as we are
together, alone, as you can see,
with elusive memories for company,
with your wisps of hair
disappearing as gently as breath. (*Ahead of Us* 57)

This poem once again touches upon the poet's concept of love: a lonely soul's need for company so as to combat loneliness. Although love bonds two people together, it turns them into a lonely castle in the enormous world. It is now two people fighting against loneliness together. Perhaps the way we feel about ourselves seldom changes. I once asked Haskell whether he strongly felt the passage of time over the years and he gave me a resolute "No!" He said he, then a man in his early sixties, still felt the same as when he was in his thirties. That is why I'm not surprised at all that he felt "we are as we are." In "Drinking," Rhonda's sickness – the threat of death – makes the poet feel the need to slow down his "grasshopper mind" (*Selected Poems* 160). The poems concerning Rhonda's sickness very often become more personal to the degree that Haskell directly addresses Rhonda as "you" in the poem:

as another mug of tea
you've asked for
but been unable to drink
is swallowed by the sink (*Ahead of Us* 58)

This way of writing helps the reader easily recognise the identity of the poet. Unlike Browning or Tennyson, who sometimes speak through a persona, Dennis does not wear any masks. He is not bothered by the fact that his writing lays bare not just his personality, but the deepest feelings and emotions he does not usually talk about even with friends. Geoff Page once commented, "Haskell does not shy away from the difficulty of conveying deep, universal emotions without sentimentality..." In my view, Haskell never considers "sentimentality" a problem, especially in terms of his poetry. I believe that the effort to convey deep emotions without sentimentality is a psychological shadow cast by Modernism whose postmodern followers understandably consider that effort worthwhile. Haskell is never a fan of Modernism though he thinks highly of Eliot's poetry; he does shy away from the impersonal and intellectual type of poetry written by the Modernists as he makes clear in the preface, "I mostly detest academic poetry and seek a poetry that uses the language as fully as possible yet speaks to that elusive creature, the common reader" (*Selected Poems* ix). Haskell's "common reader" contrasts strikingly with the elitist reader Modernist poetry required. By emphasising the common reader, the poet makes his poetic stance rather clear. "Who or Why or How or What" is one such poem laying bare his deep emotions, and the power of the poem lies in the vulnerability and sentimentality the reader can resonate with:

I wept, and couldn't accept it,
and I wondered, as the two words sank in,
who or why or how or what
had catapulted our lives away

and just as blithely decided
to fling them back. So that now
everything could seem the same as it was

except that the waiting room, the chairs,
the sky outside, our hands, your
turbaned wisps of withered hair,

were all new, entirely. (*Ahead of Us* 61)

Haskell's poems are tinged with his personality which he never tries to hide from the reader and his poems read more like aspects of him his friends are so familiar with. I remember one time he was giving a poetry reading on an occasion at the University of Western Australia. At the beginning, he was giving a casual talk. He was almost laughing through the talk because of his great sense of humor but then he moved on to mention the hard times Rhonda had been going through and he suddenly burst into tears. Rhonda was still sitting there in the first row in the audience. That is how he could be very emotional even in public, but it leaves one with the impression that he is someone who is so real that he does not even need a persona because his self and persona are mostly identical. In regard to this poem, I love the one-line ending in particular. I feel more strongly about this type of ending because I sometimes employed this technique in my own writing long before I read his poetry. I remember I was really surprised when I first read the poems because they resonated so strongly with my style. This kind of one-line ending weighs the most in the poem and is what we call "the poetic eye" in Chinese poetry. "The poetic eye" usually refers to the most important line or stanza in a poem which goes beyond the descriptive nature of other lines or stanzas and ultimately elevates the whole poem from broken details and pieces to the status of real poetry. "The poetic eye" is the part which turns the ordinary into magic, words into poetry and more often falls on the one-line-stanza ending of the poem. Besides, the one-line-stanza ending is often seen in Russian poetry with which Chinese readers are often familiar with.

"Belief" is a poem which directly deals with death. In the poem, death is personified as the third person "he" who defies "your useless proclamations" (*Ahead of Us* 64). The title plays on the word "belief" in the sense that for human beings belief is usually a matter of choice while for death, belief is never a choice but a reality. Men's belief or disbelief looks so small, vulnerable and futile when faced with the certainty of death as the poet points out, you "may close your eyes/ and resolutely say you do/ not believe in death./ But, true or untrue, death/ will never/ not believe in you" (*Ahead of Us* 64). "So Much Courage" deals with Rhonda's choice to stop chemo and say farewell to their families and relatives. It takes a lot of courage for one to make that decision and accept the outcome:

You would have no more
of the barely restrained
hair-desiccating, gut-shucking
horror of chemo.
You were calm
as if *we* were leaving you
yet I was fighting furies
I dare not show.
You said it was worse
for me than you:
I never believed it. (*Ahead of Us* 66)

As a witness to and observer of Rhonda's courage, this poem conveys more of the poet's psychology, and Rhonda's courage is more effectively presented by the poet's inner emotions which also influence the way the poet describes Rhonda's behaviour, as he mentions she "... spoke to each with a thud/of quiet finality..." (*Ahead of Us* 67). In effect, the "quiet finality" tells more about the way the poet makes sense of Rhonda's decision than about the way Rhonda truly feels at that point. The whole poem reads more like the way the poet struggles to cope with Rhonda's choice and tries to understand the significance of living in the face of death. "Renewal" is a special poem especially in terms of its rhythm. The poem consists of short lines made up of two to four words and the usually conversational fluidity is broken into breathless pieces as stanza one indicates:

Your driver's license
renewal notice
arrives in the post
innocently enough
– after all, it's just
a notice,
part of the trivial,
pay-attention-to-this,
administrative detail
of our lives. (*Ahead of Us* 68)

If we say that love changes everything, perhaps we can say the same about death. A small detail in their life now acquires unusual significance when it comes to a choice related to death. The tension gradually created by the rhythm in the first stanza quickly builds up in the second as Rhonda has to make a choice between one year and five:

You must choose
one more year or five.
"Just one",

you say, playing
 the Scotsman's daughter,
 "I wouldn't want
 To waste the money"; (*Ahead of Us* 68)

The solemnity of the seemingly practical choice brings a sense of finality. Rhonda's choice also arouses the dread of the approaching death in the poet. The renewal of her driver's licence is one of the multitudinous trivial details of our mundane lives, while an apparently small decision of no significance foreshadows the division between life and death. Any choice, when confronted with death, takes some courage to make. The choice, though sensible and realistic, also reflects Rhonda's realistic attitude towards death. In "Plato's Error," the shadow of death is described as a "light-defiant vacuum" into which their lives have been sucked. Shadows, rather than the real things, become the main theme of life. This is a rather dark and pessimistic poem, while the poet's sense of humour occasionally emerges and lends to the heavy-hearted poem a little bit of comical element as one reads:

Your skin, thinned out like paper,
 itches constantly, and you scratch
 like a dog with fleas.
 It's the medicines they say. (*Ahead of Us* 69)

The seemingly comical simile arouses in the reader not laughter but pathos. However, "Six Years" might be considered the most distressful and helpless poem written during this period of time. In the previous poems, we see more of the poet's vulnerability and what we see in Rhonda is often composure and courage, while in this poem, we see vulnerability on both sides, but especially that of Rhonda:

You cry in the shower
 at your wasted, hairless body,
 your now small breasts
 sagging like two
 unanswerable questions,
 and I listen, hidden beyond the door
 helpless, useless. (*Ahead of Us* 71)

The imagery such as the "hairless body" and "sagging small breasts," together with the simile that compares Rhonda's breasts to "two unanswerable questions" compels one to come to terms with the poet's helplessness and despair. Once again in this poem, one notices the typical one-line stanza, one is in the middle of the poem – "It is exhausting" – and the other comes at the end:

Whatever I do, whatever I think,
The unstoppable core of me

Is already grieving. (*Ahead of Us* 72)

The powerful one-line ending brings one the sense of fatality and tragedy. "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning" is about the last few days of Rhonda's life, especially Saturday night and Sunday morning when Rhonda was hospitalised and dying. The first time I read the poem was in April this year when Haskell was attending an Award ceremony for Poetry Translation at Zhejiang University, when he gave me a copy of *Ahead of Us*. I remembered I was skimming through the collection as I had already read some of the poems years ago in Australia when suddenly this poem caught my attention. I was startled when I glanced at the title. As I moved on reading through the poem, it was like experiencing a heart attack because details of the whole poem were exactly as what Haskell told me about Rhonda's last few days not long after Rhonda's death. I wasn't sure then whether he had already written the poem when he told me the details. I have to admit that Haskell has very good memories about the details, perhaps because he is always a good storyteller. He has the magic to enable one to relive the scenes and dialogues which are imprinted in his head. I remembered, it took a couple of hours for him to finish telling me the details of Rhonda's final hours while the poem takes about ten minutes to read. The story he told me is longer than the poem which is more compressed and focused, more like the essence of what happened in Rhonda's final hours. So far, this is one of the few narrative poems Haskell has ever written:

The blood draining
from your body, your lips purpling,
the longer I stayed
the less you looked like you. (*Ahead of Us* 87)

When Dennis told me he didn't stay long in the hospital after Rhonda's death, I remembered I asked him the reason and he said something like, "That's not Rhonda any more. That's not her!" He believed that Rhonda was already gone and what was left there was just a corpse. At first, it was a bit difficult for me to make sense of what he said, because in Chinese culture, people would keep the body of a dead family member for a few days, sometimes as long as possible, in order to "accompany" that person one last time. Rhonda's death marked the beginning of a new journey, one which was paved by memories and on which Haskell was trying to make sense of love after death.

Memories and Grief

I'm not sure whether Haskell had Thomas Hardy at the back of his mind when he decided to revisit the places which enabled him to relive the past memories of Rhonda, but I remembered I did have a little talk with him in his office when Rhonda was enduring the last few months of her life. I asked him whether he could possibly imagine what things would be like when Rhonda was gone. He answered "No" and explained that he really had to live in that situation to know. I then asked him whether he would act like Thomas Hardy revisiting the places he and Emma once visited as a happy couple. He seemed at a loss: "I don't know. I really don't know. Maybe." Haskell wrote in the preface to *What Are You Doing Here*, "Many of the poems will make it obvious that I am an agnostic but they do display, I hope, a strong sense of spirituality even as they stress the importance of the world's specificities, especially of its apparently simple things, the elements of ordinary life" (x). As it turned out, Haskell did act like Hardy after Rhonda's death. "64 A Princedale RD" is a poem about his revisiting the London apartment in which he and Rhonda once lived for a period of time. Haskell was questioning the nature of his revisit and trying to make sense of what life actually meant for him without Rhonda:

and somehow, of all the photos
over all the years, it's these,
of you in London, young, full of hope.
full of adventure, the future
piling up in your pretty smile,
that razor wire my throat.
Somehow I can't credit
that it has all gone,
is sealed over now
in death, in all time's mystery
and menace, and I stood opposite the door
a pathetic figure in an ordinary street
on an ordinary day, if a sunny day
in London can be thought
ordinary, and tried to hold it all
in to me
uncontrollably. (*Ahead of Us* 92-93)

I believe the beautiful memories he had of Rhonda when she was still young and pretty are the very thing that drew him to London again and helped him cope with the difficult times after Rhonda passed away. Memories become central in sustaining his spiritual needs and preventing him from falling apart. Memories convinced him that death was not the end of everything. In "Narvik Twice," Haskell visited Narvik in Norway again, forty-one years later, and came to the realisation:

I do remember, now
I've come back alone.
Narvik is bigger no doubt
but still just a town:
there's nothing here
beyond memories
that make me
what I am. Some of them
I'm discovering again. (*Ahead of Us* 95)

That memories define who we are and that we are nothing without memories is what Haskell discovered about memories at that point. Even discovering lost memories is a way of discovering part of us we have long forgotten. In the poem, the poet finds himself a total stranger there and starts questioning the meaning of his second visit:

You are dead. Why have I come?
A need to tell myself
that it is over, to seal
closed our love, our marriage
and all that it meant?
Sometimes now I reel
like a ghost in my own life. (*Ahead of Us* 95)

I have every reason to believe that Dennis made the visit long before figuring out the motives behind his action. Perhaps he was trying to find a way out of the chaos he struggled to cope with. Perhaps he needed to find out what Rhonda meant to him after she was gone. Or, perhaps he was trying to solve the riddle of love after death. Life seemed unreal, so did himself. It seemed that he came here for an answer he was not sure he could get. The question mark indicates that he was still searching for the answers and that there was no guarantee that he would find them. That is also why his revisit seems to satisfy his intangible need and to rub salt in his wounds simultaneously. Haskell's way of construing the world resembles that of Wallace Stevens, namely, no meaning exists outside our mind, which is why memories play such a critical role in our conception of people and places. The apartment in London and Narvik in Norway would be meaningless to Haskell without memories concerning Rhonda. Memories make the past an inseparable part of the present, and the other way around.

Apart from memories, grief is another major theme concerning the poems written after Rhonda's death. In effect, memories and grief are often interconnected with one another in the poems. Dennis once commented on Australian mentality that, "We have a pragmatic cast of mind" (*Selected Poems* x). However, the pragmatic aspect is often overwhelmed by or mixed with the

emotional swings. In “Oranges,” the poet tries to capture the sense of an ending after Rhonda’s funeral:

The morning of your funeral;
 I washed my hair
 with the last of your shampoo
 as if to get part of you,
 the smell of you, on me;
 and now I toss the empty container
 into the bin’s mouth. (*Ahead of Us* 88)

The funeral service functions as a ritual which, for the poet at least should mean something. The fact that he washes his hair with the last of Rhonda’s shampoo is the deliberate effort to get himself prepared for the ritual – the sense of an ending. Haskell once wrote in a poem about his mother that, “My mother is a realist” (*Selected Poems* 54). I believe the realist mentality runs in the family because Haskell is also realist in a sense, tossing the container into the bin after its one last use. However, the sense of an ending does not necessarily mean the end:

I visit family and friends,
 who are kind
 but getting on with their lives,
 as they must. They don’t see
 a planet that
 has stopped spinning
 or me merely spectating,
 adrift on a distant star. (*Ahead of Us* 89)

The end of one thing always means the beginning of another. It seems that the end of Rhonda’s life marks the beginning of a difficult journey of grief. Perhaps that is just the meaning of death for the living:

It is finished.
 All the suffering done, the long years of pain.
 Yet the unsatisfiable monster of grief
 heaves like a tortured animal.
 What can I more honestly do
 but take up an orange and bite? (*Ahead of Us* 89)

As an unapologetic realist, the way the poet copes with grief is by picking up what is left behind and continuing the journey of life. Eating the oranges Rhonda left behind is a way of fighting against the “monster of grief.” In “Widower,” the bitterness of coping with the dark days after Rhonda’s death causes him to battle

against the word “widower,” the social identity which he feels is forced upon him and his fury is hard to hide:

“Widower”: this pathetic run
of weak, short syllables
says nothing about me
or everything, catching on
my every breath
the low, dark aftermath of death. (*Ahead of Us* 101)

He rejects the overly general identity for the reason that, as an individual, this word says nothing about his emotions and reactions which can only be understood by him, not by the society which gives him that meaningless tag. The poet's rage against the word might seem a professional sensibility; in fact, he is struggling to deal with grief, more often in vain. Perhaps for a writer, the most effective way of coping with grief is through writing about it. I'm not surprised to find another poem written at this time is simply titled “Grief.” In the first three stanzas of the poem, the poet employs three similes, namely, “like a whale with an arbitrary tale,” “like a cat with a ball of string” and “like a coin tossed into the sun,” to create the impression that grief, certainly caused by death, has gotten the better of him. In other words, he is under the sway of grief and lives in the shadow of death. He genuinely admits this by refuting other poets' attitude towards death:

‘Death shall have no dominion’
one poet wrote,
and another,
‘Death, thou shalt die!’
Grief will tell you
one was a joke
and the other a lie:
your emotions, your rationality, your ideas,
all are flimsy
faced with its seriousness, its
unimpeachable dramatic whimsy. (*Ahead of Us* 97-98)

“And Death shall have no dominion” is the poem written by Dylan Thomas who expresses the romantic sentiment that though death might destroy the body, the soul will keep on living. The poet calls Thomas' view of death “a joke” for the reason that he does not believe there is any such thing as a soul. In John Donne's “Holy Sonnet X,” he presents an argument against the power of death, “One short sleep past, we wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die” (*Norton Anthology* 320). The poet insists that death takes away everything, your body and your mind, and there's nothing left. He does not trust Thomas' romanticism, or Donne's metaphysical worldview. As someone who is not

necessarily religious, his comprehension of death is more down to earth. In “Insistence,” he points out at the beginning of the poem, “The dead have nothing to do with us./ It is only the living who inhabit/any dimension we can begin/ to understand....” However, he frequently dreams of Rhonda, which troubles him:

then each dark
 4am
 you silently summon me;
 telling me
 that I understand nothing.
 It is you.
 But it is not you, and never will be. (*Ahead of Us* 99)

The poet’s assertion that the dead have no contact with the living turns out to be wrong because he underestimates the power of memories in which Rhonda is still very much alive. Dreams are the domain of one’s unconscious of which the poet is not in charge. Since dreams are the creation of the poet’s unconsciousness, they have everything to do with the poet, but not necessarily with Rhonda. It is not the “persistent zombies” (99), but his memories of Rhonda that cause his insomnia. No matter how the memories continue to trouble him, the living has to keep on moving as the poet claims, similar to Robert Frost, that “I have so many promises to keep” (*Ahead of Us* 100).

All through Dennis Haskell’s seven collections of poetry, the Rhonda poems are the most powerful and brilliant and perhaps are most likely to have an enduring impact on the reader. Rhonda Haskell (1947-2012) played a central role in Dennis Haskell’s life and writing. Through the Rhonda Poems, the reader is not only able to get a better sense of the poet’s perception of love, death and memories, but to resonate with the rhythms of his feelings and emotions every step of the way. His love for Rhonda is individual, but also universal in the sense that it runs through his whole life even after her death. Ultimately, the Rhonda poems offer the best way of understanding the poet’s life, his personality, mentality, and the meanings he has been trying to pursue and create both in his life and writing.

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