

Cultural Daily

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Review: *Paloma* by Jennifer E. Hudgens

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, June 13th, 2018

Paloma

by Jennifer E. Hudgens

Blood Pudding Press

December 2017

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*She was always rescuing strays
when no one rescued her.*

*Now she's in a box
for safekeeping.*

(Dedication)

How is it even possible for a person to recover from the murder of a loved one? Or move forward with anything approaching detachment and peace? In the new chapbook *Paloma* by Jennifer E. Hudgens (Blood Pudding Press December 2017), the speaker's dear friend has been brutally slain. Family and friends are stunned, in denial, angry, heartbroken.

This book is dedicated to Lauren Kate, the speaker's friend. The resulting poems are extremely touching; at times, they even made me cry. And at times, I laughed, too (see "Too Much," which imagines the dead friend as playful poltergeist). With honesty and sensitivity, in *Paloma* the speaker deconstructs the friend's death and its history and aftermath.

Stages of grief in these poems?

The old cliché that there are stages of grief that a bereaved person must go through apparently has a lot of truth to it. The poems in *Paloma* reflect diverse mindsets in reaction to the speaker's friend's death. Grief is not one single emotion, but a whole range of feelings. The emotions involving mourning need to be experienced, worked through, felt, and accepted, one step at a time.

Part of mourning is remembering. The speaker calls her friend "[m]y punk-rock gothic-pixie little sister." The speaker continues, "We were smoke signals under staircases in troll holes / Back seats." The speaker also says that the friend is the "[f]irst person I'd ever met who wasn't a

goddamned imposter” (“1996”). The speaker celebrates the relationship:

... *We were flannel and glitter Steel-toed boots stolen*
Poultry in fake bellies We danced down aisles...
I wished you were still here
We could pretend we owned the world
For a little while Maybe we did

(“*Grocery Shopping With Jane*”)

The murder itself occurred with “no warning or warm up” (“Lauren Kate is dead”). Sad music doesn’t erase the speaker’s sorrow: “There’s not enough volume to drown out the sound of my hands clenching / Teeth clambering for warmth...Her body too damned cold...” (“A Co-Worker Asks Why the Music is Sad”). “The breaking The grieving” / is familiar.” Yet the speaker confesses, “I don’t know / if I’m real anymore....” The speaker asks, “Where the hell is this / better place people are always talking about..../ I’ll keep playing sad music / Sobbing in the kitchen” (“Bizarre Love Triangle”).

The speaker indulges in the fantasy that Lauren Kate is still alive somehow: “...You must be hiding in a small town waiting tables / Serving shitty coffee and sloppy apple pie” (“Smart Money’s on Harlow”). Isn’t this called *denial*?—But denial is a part of mourning, a natural reaction to the death of a loved one.

Unfortunately, there is always room for regret in cases of sudden death. Guilt can play a part in the grief process. Possibly we come to regret not doing more for the deceased friend, replaying key moments that we think might have made a difference in the deadly outcome. “...Our last conversation One-sided *You / said Hey, I really need to talk to you if you have time* (“Too Much”). Unfortunately, the speaker was under a lot of stress and couldn’t get back to her friend right away (“I was in the E.R. / Twisted ankle car broken down”) (“Old Photos”). Personally, I think this shows that the speaker is human, and the speaker needs to forgive herself for being fallible.

The poet doesn’t sensationalize

Part of the sensitivity of the poet is evidenced by the fact that there is no gratuitous violence in these poems, and the poet wisely avoids sensationalizing the murder. Only in the very last poem in the chapbook (there are 14 poems in this slim, but powerful volume) does the speaker let loose in a tortured torrent, ending the chapbook with a punch:

Are you asleep in the wall
 with rats in a wood chipper...
 ... Were you eaten by zombies or republicans Are
 they still simmering your small bones...
 Is it cold in there Will the monster who did this
 Ever pay?

(“*Ten Pints*”)

There is also no false sentimentality here. Fittingly, like a good trial lawyer trying to impress a jury, the poet layers detail upon detail, building her case. For example, in the poem “Spiders {A

Lullaby},” the poet compares death to a spider, saying “Fuck that spider I want to peer into its mouth Count every hair and tooth Counting your bones fragmented in its throat.”

For all I know, Jennifer E. Hudgens could have had a tough time writing these poems; however, the poetry in this chapbook looks and reads like the poems just flowed out, carried by the speaker’s strong, distinctive voice.

The chapbook is a collector’s item

The actual physical book is hand-made by Blood Pudding Press and is a piece of art unto itself. The cover, front matter, and “innards” of the book are of high quality, heavy, tinted paper. The binding is string/yarn that resembles a feather boa (no real feathers used). Readers can choose among several colors of cover and binding (I chose hot pink cover with pink, blue, and multicolored bindings).

The cover art for *Paloma*—featuring a likeness of Lauren Kate—is a collage made by the lost friend, Lauren Kate herself. And it fits the book as if it were an organic whole. Anyone who appreciates fine chapbooks will likely appreciate this book.

I read the entire chapbook at one sitting, and I have to admit, I was “blown away.” I recommend this collector’s item book to readers who appreciate an interesting speaker, good imagery, and sensitive, touching poems that manage to stay convincingly real. *Paloma* by Jennifer E. Hudgens is a keeper, for sure—and for all the right reasons.

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