

# A THIN TIME

*an anthology of the  
all souls' day poets*



*edited by*  
Sidney Hall Jr. and  
Joan Weddle

HOBBLEBUSH

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## INTRODUCTION

*Joan Weddle*

IN THE AUTUMN of 1997, I had spent several weeks caring for my dying mother and was returning to New Hampshire after her funeral. When I arrived, people were gearing up for Halloween, a holiday that in our culture has lost its way, or at least found a new, perhaps not so impressive one. I began to think about the tradition of All Souls' Day and how that day is observed in other cultures. In Mexico *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead is a notable event. Families gather and go to the cemetery to tend to the graves of loved ones. They bring special foods and sing traditional songs. The tone is respectful and joyful. This is the reflection that led me to invite a group of friends who write poetry to come to my home one Sunday afternoon and honor those they have loved and lost. What took place that day gave birth not only to a yearly tradition but also to a new family. These were all individuals who understood the power of the word, but by coming together we all learned a new respect for the way language can transform our lives. We also developed a deep respect for one another's work—and for one another's soup and enchiladas as well, since we always sit down to a terrific dinner after an afternoon of talking and reading.

We meet each year on the first Sunday in November, close to the All Souls' Day holiday. We represent three states and seven professions. Some of us write professionally while others write as an unavoidable expression of our inner processes. It is an unpretentious, but stimulating mix. At each gathering we begin with the breaking of an egg to symbolize a new beginning, a mystical tradition started by Melody, one of our members. Then we go out into my yard for a bulb planting, where we each speak of someone we have lost, while pushing a bulb into the earth.

A few weeks after our first meeting my son Jonathan died unexpectedly. A memorial garden for Jonathan is part of the

landscape in my back yard. I am told by other group members that Jonathan's memory has permeated all of our meetings. Every member of the group, as would be the case for almost any group of individuals who gather together, has lost someone essential in recent years. We have created an extensive memory garden for those lost brothers, friends, fathers, mothers, and others.

After planting the bulbs we sit in my living room and share some of what we have written over the course of the year. It is hard to read and not talk, and so we share our reactions to each other and we go off on tangents. But there is a deep common current and recurring rhythm that runs through the readings, usually surprising to us all. We have good conversations. We often ask for poems and prose pieces to be repeated. We are constantly amazed at the transforming power of words.

When we sit down to dinner, the conversation continues, and often becomes less reverent as dinner stretches out into the evening. Sam curses the evils of institutional religion, Sid and Charlie rant and swear about politics, Melody is whimsically philosophical, and June, Sally and Jeanne laugh and drop little gems of language into the conversation without knowing it, as when the talk turned to the characteristics of the month of November and Jeanne said, "Yes, November is a thin time."

During the same evening we had talked about the possibility of making a book out of our gatherings, because a friend of mine had suggested this idea. When Jeanne made her remark, we immediately foresaw the name of our anthology: *A Thin Time*.

This book is a compilation of the poetry and prose that we have shared over the years. We believe that the spirit of our sharing and the written result of it will be of interest to others, and help others deal, as we have, with the reality of death. It has been my privilege to host these gatherings. Although All Souls' Day is about honoring the dead, for our group it is mostly about the living. We honor the spaces left behind by those we have loved and lost, and fill them as well as we can with our poetry, conversation, laughter, and our growing love for one another.

A THIN TIME

*Sally Ballard*

RAISON D'ÊTRE

I learned this years ago.  
We are here to move inanimate objects.  
That red jeep in the driveway  
would not leave unless we took it  
for a ride.

This pen I hold would still be lying  
on my desk were it not for my need  
to write.

The blue and white towels would hang  
forever if I did not crave their lushness  
after a bath.

Nothing would move, not my robe,  
not my slippers which I will soon  
be taking to the kitchen.

I can sense the anticipation the juice glass  
is feeling as I approach, and the plates  
and cutlery.

I'm almost there.



**HIS EYES**

In the end there were his eyes —  
Dark, blue-green, oceanic —  
And almost nothing else.  
His face became abstract, Cycladic,  
Its geometry distorted,  
Its mobility restricted by the pain.  
As illness overcame him  
He seemed to grow less physical:  
He became all length, no mass.  
And in the end his sea-deep eyes  
Were almost all there was.

*Melody Zahn Russell*

PLAIN BREAD

I ate plain bread  
out of the plastic bag  
dry and almost molding.

It was all I had,  
and it tasted good.

*Sidney Hall Jr.*

## A TREE PLANTING

Dear Jon,  
it may seem  
with time, that we begin  
to forget, that we let the mind numb a little,  
that new seasons blow in unrooted  
to seasons that have passed.  
But that is only seeming.

What we are really doing is  
taking you slowly, piece by piece,  
into ourselves; your pain is moving  
into our bones; your smile is becoming  
the way we walk; your song  
becoming the way we read a book;  
your stride is becoming  
the way we feel about living.  
Everything you are is finding its way  
into the face and the body we turn to others.

You know all this without trying,  
but it comes hard to us, who are only living.  
And so we plant this tree in one of the places  
where you were alive, because  
we need to tell ourselves what you already know.

This tree too will take you up  
from the traffic of this field  
into its roots and into its branches and leaves,  
and become a comfort to us,

and to everyone who comes here,  
because it will keep saying and keep saying  
the thing you believe:  
that death and life  
can only grow together.

PLANTING THE BULBS

Digging the holes,  
pelting, icy rain  
stings aging fingers,  
locking them in place.  
Gray wind whips  
across the hardened ground,  
as the latest configuration  
is determined.  
Planning for bursts of color  
after the long gray-white winter.  
Planning for tender green shoots  
to pierce frost-laden earth.  
Planning for flowerheads boldly opening  
in chill spring rains.  
Planning for resurrection.