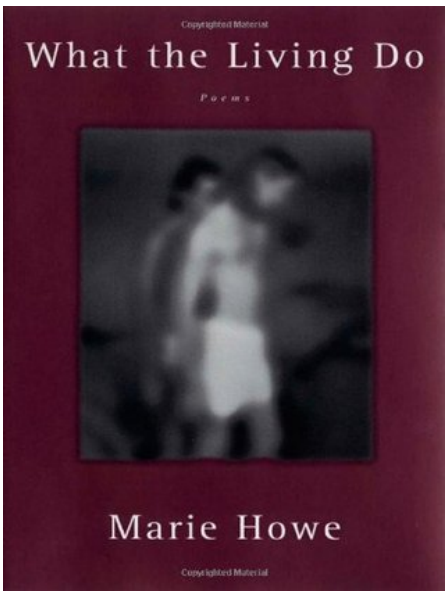

What the Living Do: Poems

Marie Howe

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What the Living Do: Poems Marie Howe
Informed by the death of a beloved brother, here are the stories of childhood, its thicket of sex and sorrow and joy, boys and girls growing into men and women, stories of a brother who in his dying could teach how to be most alive. *What the Living Do* reflects "a new form of confessional poetry, one shared to some degree by other women poets such as Sharon Olds and Jane Kenyon. Unlike the earlier confessional poetry of Plath, Lowell, Sexton et al., Howe's writing is not so much a moan or a shriek as a song. It is a genuinely feminine form . . . a poetry of intimacy, witness, honesty, and relation" (*Boston Globe*).

What the Living Do: Poems Details

Date	:	Published April 17th 1999 by W. W. Norton (first published 1997)
ISBN	:	9780393318869
Author	:	Marie Howe
Format	:	Paperback 91 pages
Genre	:	Poetry, Death, Contemporary

From Reader Review What the Living Do: Poems for online ebook

Alexandra Chubachi says

Beautiful. Honest. Heartbreaking. Had to savor these slowly.

Megan says

At first I found this book hard to read after Howe's first book "The Good Thief," in which every poem is completely surprising. These poems are more traditional and, if compared to "The Good Thief" feel almost formulaic. But when I was finally able to set the first book aside and read "What the Living Do" as a book on it's own, it won me over. It's long for a book of poems--and I'm not sure that every poem was necessary--but when I finished the excellent final title poem I went back and read the first section and found myself crying in a coffee shop. Howe writes in plain language about the unsolvable tragedies that befall young girls and grown up women, but she's never dire. She always goes on living, wants to live. Even the most selfish, disorderly, wrong feelings get their place here--and they don't destroy everything, they just are.

Mira Joseph says

My dad died in June. After, I felt so guilty every time I laughed at a joke or enjoyed a movie or stopped thinking about my grief for even a moment. How could I ever be joyful again when someone I loved was dead? A wise quote online helped me- *my love does not lie in the pain of my grief.* And the titular poem of this collection. Now, every time I find happiness, I respond to the corresponding guilt with Marie Howe's wisdom: *I am living. I remember you.* Death and mundane happinesses don't go together easily, but Howe manages to reconcile them.

Twila Newey says

I took my boys to the public pool yesterday and finished WHAT THE LIVING DO, BY MARIE HOWE. I need to write a poem entitled "crying at the public pool". This is a gorgeous collection as a whole. It goes to the darkest places that grief and aloneness take the human heart and still comes up for breath, reaches for the light. I highly recommend it. Go out and buy it today. #twilareads2017

WHAT THE LIVING DO

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there.
And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we spoke of.
It's winter again: the sky's a deep headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living room windows because the heat's on too high in here, and I can't turn it off.

For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the the street the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it. Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass. We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss--we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless:
I am living, I remember you.

-Mary Howe (p.90)

Mary says

A haunting collection of poems about the enduring claim of childhood memories and the fierce attachment of siblings from an unhappy home. The poems highlight the texture and details of everyday life--rinsing dishes, walking through snow, hearing birds. Vignettes of joy and sorrow and sharp observation.

Steven says

In Ms. Howe’s second collection of poems, she continues to mine the minutiae of daily life to create deep ruminations on mortality and the struggle to find joy amidst the difficulties of human relationships with the living, the dying, and the dead. The poems move through four narratives: recollections from a childhood wrought with sexual abuse and other difficulties associated with gender identity, the death of a gay brother, the death of a female friend with cancer, and a tumultuous love affair between a man and a woman. By juxtaposing these situations, Ms. Howe is able to trace the psychological effects of growing up with the fear associated with abuse, especially for females, and how that ties to an adult woman’s ability to deal with romantic love and its related issues of trust and commitment. This narrator clings to her dying brother, the only vestige of positive family identity left in her life, and finds it near impossible to love another man “without irony or condescension” (31). It is a harrowing and fascinating journey that Ms. Howe traces with expert precision and even manages to end on a positive note, with “a cherishing so deep/for [her] own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat” and the human ability to “remember” everything (90).

Richard says

This extraordinary book of poems should have won the Pulitzer Prize and the NBCC Award. No one knows how to look at things that hard to look at with such clear eyes as Marie Howe.

Melanie says

Poems of unsayable grief and the study of the minutes and breaths surrounding a death. The doing that is left and the getting on.

It is bleak reading with enough truth and generosity to redress the hurt.

.....

The Gate

I had no idea that the gate I would step through
to finally enter this world

would be the space my brother's body made. He was
a little taller than me: a young man

but grown, himself by then,
done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,

rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold
and running water.

This is what you have been waiting for, he used to say to me.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This -- holding up my cheese and mustard sandwich.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This, sort of looking around.

Nicole says

I read this book of poems in the Elliot Bay Book Store and it stayed in mind for months until finally, I returned to that same store and bought it. The poems are melancholy and plain. Just tiny stories about life with people who are dead or dying and I find them very pure and worth remembering. They should put poems like THESE on Metro buses. Now that would change the world.

Craig Werner says

Very few works of literature deal as unflinchingly with the experience of loss and grief--in this case the death of Howe's brother--with Howe's lyrical power. She mixes poems about her brother's illness and death with a second set dealing with a family background involving alcoholism and abuse. It would have been easy for her poems to have slipped into what James Baldwin, writing about stories of African American youth, called "the usual bleak childhood fantasy," but she doesn't. She's survived, not unscarred, but with a graceful resilience that lets her make her way through the lingering shadows. A great book.

The best poems in a very consistent collection: "Sixth Grade," "In the Movies," "The Promise," "The Gate," "The Dream," "Prayer."

Peter Kerry Powers says

"What the Living Do" manages to give me an unsentimental but still deeply felt picture of the pain of living beyond loss. The immediate occasion for these poems is the death of several friends and family members over what seems, in the context of this books at least, a relatively short period of time. The real focus, however, is not so much on the dying--the psychic and physical pain of disease, the fear of a passage elsewhere--as it is on the poet herself, or at least her personae. These are not elegies then; or at least not elegies to the dead so much as elegies to who we imagine we must have been before the clefts and rifts that the loss of those we love opens in our lives, or perhaps elegies to the selves we imagine we might have become. Finally, though, these are poems of hope. I would not call them poems of overcoming. Grief remains, and in some sense we become, as we age, people who remember the dead, in our voices and in our silences. But poems of hope in that they recognize that we do go on. This is what the living do: they go on, carrying with them acts of remembrance such as these.

Lauren says

Reread this today on the subway and had to fight back tears; this book is as powerful as it was when I first read it so many years ago.
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Original review from October 2009:
Oh I got this from the library, but my, I really need to get a copy for myself. Ivy, Tom and I saw her read at Poets House weeks ago and I loved the title poem so much, I requested this collection from the library. I had no idea she'd written "Practicing"--a poem Laura Rice read to us in Merion many years ago--and while, at first, her poems reminded me so much of Sharon Olds' "The Dead and the Living," they hit closer home the further I read. I want to know these poems so much better than I know them now. Do, do, do go and read it.

Jenna says

This isn't the kind of poetry I usually read -- Howe's work is heavier on narrative and lighter on logodaedaly

than my usual fare -- but I liked it. Howe's imagination seems to operate on a bigger scale than many poets: her individual images/metaphors/phrasings/word-choices may not always be the freshest produce on the market, but the grand arcs of the story she tells across the course of these fifty interlinked poems are richly imagined. I especially admire the brave way in which she confronts -- and finds meaning in -- moments drawn from many diverse facets of her protagonist's life (childhood relationships with family, sexual relationships in later life, her dynamic relationship with her religious faith, etc.), and the way she then ambitiously tries to *integrate* all these little pieces into a coherent picture of one person's emotional coming-of-age. I especially like how she depicts her protagonist's childhood interactions with her father, her brother, and the "neighborhood boys" and the way these apparently shaped her views on gender roles. It reminds me of the "Just-So Stories," the way she evokes the universal human desire to explain everything through cause-and-effect.

Although this book is very much a "concept album," the individual poems working together like little vignettes to tell a novel-sized story, some of the poems ("The Boy," "Buddy") do stand remarkably well on their own. Moreover, there are some fine images here and there: e.g., Howe's description of the marks her high-heels made in the snow, which looked like "exclamation points" as she walked in the more standard-looking footsteps of her siblings who had come before.

Ken says

I just read Howe's latest book, *Magdalene*, where it slowly dawned on me that her endings are not of the standard "wow-'em-with-a-twist-or-sudden-truth" variety ordinarily associated with successful poetry, but of the *sotto voce* type. Soft-spoken. Simply there. To the point where the reader is leaning in a bit, as if to better understand its softness.

Anyone I mentioned Marie Howe to mentioned back this earlier book, one that has "Living" in the title but chronicles the death of her brother to the AIDS epidemic. Well, SOME poems do. Others are devoted to the innocently dark terrain of youth, where there's a Freudian field day going on without the one-legged sack race, and later, some muse on adulthood and trying to build a life with a boyfriend.

Before long, you realize you have one of these "Howe does she do it?" poets in your hands. It doesn't seem like much is there, and yet something is undeniably there. Let me try that, the erstwhile poet says, similar to the erstwhile short story writer who reads Hemingway and says, "Gimme that pen. This is easy." (This is followed by embarrassingly bad imitation trying to be original.)

Here's one of her simple ones. Simply beautiful, especially since, following the narrative of preceding poems and an abusive father to be avoided, it take on double meaning.

The Copper Beech by Marie Howe

Immense, entirely itself,
it wore that yard like a dress,

with limbs low enough for me to enter it
and climb the crooked ladder to where

I could lean against the trunk and practice being alone.

One day, I heard the sound before I saw it, rain fell
darkening the sidewalk.

Sitting close to the center, not very high in the branches,
I heard it hitting the high leaves, and I was happy,

watching it happen without it happening to me.

And here, in a poem about her brother, we see the velvet-soft ending:

The Gate by Marie Howe

I had no idea that the gate I would step through
to finally enter this world

would be the space my brother's body made. He was
a little taller than me: a young man

but grown, himself by then,
done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,

rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold
and running water.

This is what you have been waiting for, he used to say to me.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This—holding up my cheese and mustard sandwich.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This, sort of looking around.

Ordinary, in its extraordinary way. And I kinda liked it. And I kinda learned from it.

Nathan says

There are few things I enjoy more than "discovering" a new poet.

The truly good books are fewer and farther between than I'd like.

This one? Worth every penny I spent on it.

And I'll be getting another of hers soon.

I think that says it all... ;-)

Dr. Nub

Misha says

This collection of poetry is largely an elegy to the author's brother who died of AIDS. This poem....which I first read in Will Schwalbe's BOOKS FOR LIVING...is simply poignant.

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My Dead Friends

by Marie Howe

I have begun,
when I'm weary and can't decide an answer to a bewildering question

to ask my dead friends for their opinion
and the answer is often immediate and clear.

Should I take the job? Move to the city? Should I try to conceive a child
in my middle age?

They stand in unison shaking their heads and smiling—whatever leads
to joy, they always answer,

to more life and less worry. I look into the vase where Billy's ashes were —
it's green in there, a green vase,

and I ask Billy if I should return the difficult phone call, and he says, yes.
Billy's already gone through the frightening door,

whatever he says I'll do.

Julia says

I devoured this book and after it was over, I had the sharp metallic taste for poetry on my tongue, it never went away. Howe opened my mind to wordplay that wasn't too playful, that conscripted a message but somehow came across as unremarkable and stunning. Teh one time I saw her speak, her hair was enormous, she was late and all I could think of was how like the moon she is.

Tony says

Marie Howe's second book is an immensely moving book about the death of her brother by AIDS. It is plain-spoken, narrative, intense. Instead of giving a review, I'm going to paste in one of Howe's poems and an excerpt from an interview with her that really gets at the heart of the book.

The Boy

My older brother is walking down the sidewalk into the suburban summer night:
white T-shirt, blue jeans-to the field at the end of the street

Hangers Hideout the boys called it, an undeveloped plot, a pit overgrown with weeds, some old furniture thrown down there,

and some metal hangers clinking in the trees like wind chimes.
He’s running away from home because our father wants to cut his hair.

And in two more days our father will convince me to go to him – you know where he is – and talk to him: No reprisals. He promised. A small parade of kids

in feet pajamas will accompany me, their voices like the first peepers in spring.
And my brother will walk ahead of us home, and my father

will shave his head bald, and my brother will not speak to anyone the next month, not a word, not pass the milk, nothing.

What happened in our house taught my brothers how to leave, how to walk down a sidewalk without looking back.

I was the girl. What happened taught me to follow him, whoever he was, calling and calling his name.

From Interview:

John’s living and dying changed my aesthetic entirely. That’s solely responsible--my involvement and response to his living and dying with AIDS. I wanted after that to make an art that was transparent, that was accessible to people who don’t usually read poetry, to my brothers and sisters—wonderful, intelligent, smart people who want to read poetry if they know what to read. Regular people. And I wanted it to be the kind of talk that people talk in sick rooms, where it is very direct and very understated. I wanted to make movies without the photographer’s thumb in the way. I wanted to get out of the way and let some of these things just unwind, so people could see in and have their own experience. It became very important to me to document

some of the things that happened. Of course they are still transformed, but that became important to me. And then of course that influenced the whole rest of the book, deeply. I didn't want anything about that book to be obscure. The situation was difficult. I wanted it to have a simple surface, but to allow in the depths that of course occur every moment in ordinary life. So it was very hard, and getting started was very hard. There are no metaphors and there is no slant. That was the main reason that book changed.

Now I want never to write anything personal again. I'm struggling with it a lot. This new work is personal, but it's also deflected through some other stories and voices. It's still so new it's hard to talk about, but I really don't want to tell any more biographical stories or use those stories as ways into experience. I don't know what happened. I really don't. It's still in the stages where I'm showing poems to readers and they go, "No. No. Yes. No. No." And I realize in the last two years I've been swimming around.

I wish I were a different type of writer, sometimes I do. When Johnny died I was walking with Stanley Kunitz in front of my apartment building in Cambridge. It was a few months after Johnny died and I was saying to Stanley, I feel as if something has me in its mouth and is chewing me. Everyone who has known grief knows this. I hadn't known it quite yet, but it is nothing new to everybody else who has known grief. I said I feel something has me in its mouth chewing me and there is nothing for me to do but be chewed, and Stanley said, "Yes, and you must wait to see who you'll be when it's done with you." Because I wanted to write right away, and I couldn't, and I had to wait to see who I was going to be after this experience sort of had me for a while. I feel that's what's happening now. I have to wait and keep writing, but wait to see what really wants to have a hold of me next and who I am and then to write the next real collection.

Jennifer says

This book was recently recommended to me by a dear friend. As the subject matter was relevant to my current state of mind in some ways, I bought it immediately and devoured it in a few hours. I know I'll be returning to many of these poems over the years. These were breathtaking and beautiful.

Sarah (Starry Night Reader) says

4.5
