

Classic Poetry Series

Donald Hall

- poems -

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A Poet at Twenty

Images leap with him from branch to branch. His eyes brighten, his head cocks, he pauses under a green bough, alert.

And when I see him I want to hide him somewhere.

The other wood is past the hill. But he will enter it, and find the particular maple. He will walk through the door of the maple, and his arms will pull out of their sockets, and the blood will bubble from his mouth, his ears, his penis, and his nostrils. His body will rot. His body will dry in ropey tatters. Maybe he will grow his body again, three years later. Maybe he won't.

There is nothing to do, to keep this from happening.

It occurs to me that the greatest gentleness would put a bullet into his bright eye. And when I look in his eye, it is not his eye that I see.

Donald Hall

Affirmation

To grow old is to lose everything.
Aging, everybody knows it.
Even when we are young,
we glimpse it sometimes, and nod our heads
when a grandfather dies.
Then we row for years on the midsummer
pond, ignorant and content. But a marriage,
that began without harm, scatters
into debris on the shore,
and a friend from school drops
cold on a rocky strand.
If a new love carries us
past middle age, our wife will die
at her strongest and most beautiful.
New women come and go. All go.
The pretty lover who announces
that she is temporary
is temporary. The bold woman,
middle-aged against our old age,
sinks under an anxiety she cannot withstand.
Another friend of decades estranges himself
in words that pollute thirty years.
Let us stifle under mud at the pond's edge
and affirm that it is fitting
and delicious to lose everything.

Donald Hall

An old life

Snow fell in the night.
At five-fifteen I woke to a bluish
mounded softness where
the Honda was. Cat fed and coffee made,
I broomed snow off the car
and drove to the Kearsarge Mini-Mart
before Amy opened
to yank my Globe out of the bundle.
Back, I set my cup of coffee
beside Jane, still half-asleep,
murmuring stuporous
thanks in the aquamarine morning.
Then I sat in my blue chair
with blueberry bagels and strong
black coffee reading news,
the obits, the comics, and the sports.
Carrying my cup twenty feet,
I sat myself at the desk
for this day's lifelong
engagement with the one task and desire.

Donald Hall

Christmas party at the South Danbury Church

December twenty-first
we gather at the white Church festooned
red and green, the tree flashing
green-red lights beside the altar.
After the children of Sunday School
recite Scripture, sing songs,
and scrape out solos,
they retire to dress for the finale,
to perform the pageant
again: Mary and Joseph kneeling
cradleside, Three Kings,
shepherds and shepherdesses. Their garments
are bathrobes with mothholes,
cut down from the Church's ancestors.
Standing short and long,
they stare in all directions for mothers,
sisters and brothers,
giggling and waving in recognition,
and at the South Danbury
Church, a moment before Santa
arrives with her ho-hos
and bags of popcorn, in the half-dark
of whole silence, God
enters the world as a newborn again.

Donald Hall

Distressed Haiku

In a week or ten days
the snow and ice
will melt from Cemetery Road.

I'm coming! Don't move!

Once again it is April.
Today is the day
we would have been married
twenty-six years.

I finished with April
halfway through March.

You think that their
dying is the worst
thing that could happen.

Then they stay dead.

Will Hall ever write
lines that do anything
but whine and complain?

In April the blue
mountain revises
from white to green.

The Boston Red Sox win
a hundred straight games.
The mouse rips
the throat of the lion

and the dead return.

Donald Hall

Je Suis une table

It has happened suddenly,
by surprise, in an arbor,
or while drinking good coffee,
after speaking, or before,

that I dumbly inhabit
a density; in language,
there is nothing to stop it,
for nothing retains an edge.

Simple ignorance presents,
later, words for a function,
but it is common pretense
of speech, by a convention,

and there is nothing at all
but inner silence, nothing
to relieve on principle
now this intense thickening.

Donald Hall

Name of Horses

All winter your brute shoulders strained against collars, padding
and steerhide over the ash hames, to haul
sledges of cordwood for drying through spring and summer,
for the Glenwood stove next winter, and for the simmering range.

In April you pulled cartloads of manure to spread on the fields,
dark manure of Holsteins, and knobs of your own clustered with oats.
All summer you mowed the grass in meadow and hayfield, the mowing machine
clacketing beside you, while the sun walked high in the morning;

and after noon's heat, you pulled a clawed rake through the same acres,
gathering stacks, and dragged the wagon from stack to stack,
and the built hayrack back, uphill to the chaffy barn,
three loads of hay a day from standing grass in the morning.

Sundays you trotted the two miles to church with the light load
a leather quartertop buggy, and grazed in the sound of hymns.
Generation on generation, your neck rubbed the windowsill
of the stall, smoothing the wood as the sea smooths glass.

When you were old and lame, when your shoulders hurt bending to graze,
one October the man, who fed you and kept you, and harnessed you every morning,
led you through corn stubble to sandy ground above Eagle Pond,
and dug a hole beside you where you stood shuddering in your skin,

and lay the shotgun's muzzle in the boneless hollow behind your ear,
and fired the slug into your brain, and felled you into your grave,
shoveling sand to cover you, setting goldenrod upright above you,
where by next summer a dent in the ground made your monument.

For a hundred and fifty years, in the Pasture of dead horses,
roots of pine trees pushed through the pale curves of your ribs,
yellow blossoms flourished above you in autumn, and in winter
frost heaved your bones in the ground - old toilers, soil makers:

O Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost.

Donald Hall

Sudden Things

A storm was coming, that was why it was dark. The wind was blowing the fronds of the palm trees off. They were maples. I looked out the window across the big lawn. The house was huge, full of children and old people. The lion was loose. Either because of the wind, or by malevolent human energy, which is the same thing, the cage had come open. Suppose a child walked outside!

A child walked outside. I knew that I must protect him from the lion. I threw myself on top of the child. The lion roared over me. In the branches and the bushes there was suddenly a loud crackling. The lion cringed. I looked up and saw that the elephant was loose!

The elephant was taller than the redwoods. He was hairy like a mammoth. His tusks trailed vines. Parrots screeched around his head. His eyes rolled crazily. He trumpeted. The ice-cap was breaking up!

The lion backed off, whining. The boy ran for the house. I covered his retreat, locked all the doors and pulled the bars across them. An old lady tried to open a door to get a better look. I spoke sharply to her, she sat down grumbling and pulled a blanket over her knees.

Out of the window I saw zebras and rattlesnakes and wildebeests and cougars and woodchucks on the lawns and in the tennis courts. I worried how, after the storm, we would put the animals back in their cages, and get to the mainland.

Donald Hall

The Alligator Bride

The clock of my days winds down.
The cat eats sparrows outside my window.
Once, she brought me a small rabbit
which we devoured together, under
the Empire Table
while the men shrieked
repossessing the gold umbrella.

Now the beard on my clock turns white.
My cat stares into dark corners
missing her gold umbrella.
She is in love
with the Alligator Bride.

Ah, the tiny fine white
teeth! The Bride, propped on her tail
in white lace
stares from the holes
of her eyes. Her stuck-open mouth
laughs at minister and people.

On bare new wood
fourteen tomatoes,
a dozen ears of corn,
six bottles of white wine,

a melon,
a cat,
broccoli
and the Alligator Bride.

The color of bubble gum,
the consistency of petroleum jelly,
wickedness oozes
from the palm of my left hand.
My cat licks it.
I watch the Alligator Bride.

Big houses like shabby boulders
hold themselves tight
in gelatin.
I am unable to daydream.
The sky is a gun aimed at me.
I pull the trigger.
The skull of my promises
leans in a black closet, gapes
with its good mouth
for a teat to suck.

A bird flies back and forth
in my house that is covered by gelatin
and the cat leaps at it

missing. Under the Empire Table
the Alligator Bride
lies in her bridal shroud.
My left hand
leaks on the Chinese carpet.

Donald Hall

The Man In The Dead Machine

High on a slope in New Guinea
The Grumman Hellcat
lodges among bright vines
as thick as arms. In 1943,
the clenched hand of a pilot
glided it here
where no one has ever been.

In the cockpit, the helmeted
skeleton sits
upright, held
by dry sinews at neck
and shoulder, and webbing
that straps the pelvic cross
to the cracked
leather of the seat, and the breastbone
to the canvas cover
of the parachute.

Or say the shrapnel
missed him, he flew
back to the carrier, and every
morning takes the train, his pale
hands on the black case, and sits
upright, held
by the firm webbing.

Donald Hall

Villanelle

Katie could put her feet behind her head
Or do a grand plié, position two,
Her suppleness magnificent in bed.

I strained my lower back, and Katie bled,
Only a little, doing what we could do
When Katie tucked her feet behind her head.

Her torso was a C-cup'd figurehead,
Wearing below its navel a tattoo
That writhed in suppleness upon the bed.

As love led on to love, love's goddess said,
"No lovers ever fucked as fucked these two!
Katie could put her feet behind her head!"

When Katie came she never stopped. Instead,
She came, cried "God!" and came, this dancer who
Brought ballerina suppleness to bed.

She curled her legs around my neck, which led
To depths unplumbed by lovers hitherto.
Katie could tuck her feet behind her head
And by her suppleness unmake the bed.

Anonymous submission.

Donald Hall

Wolf Knife

In the mid August, in the second year
of my First Polar Expedition, the snow and ice of winter
almost upon us, Kantiuk and I
attempted to dash the sledge
along Crispin Bay, searching again for relics
of the Frankline Expedition. Now a storm blew,
and we turned back, and we struggled slowly
in snow, lest we depart land and venture onto ice
from which a sudden fog and thaw
would abandon us to the Providence
of the sea.

Near nightfall I thought I heard snarling behind us.
Kantiuk told me that two wolves, lean as the bones of a wrecked ship,
had followed us the last hour, and snapped their teeth
as if already feasting.
I carried the one cartridge only
in my riffle, since, approaching the second winter,
we rationed stores.

As it turned dark,
we could push no further, and made
camp in a corner of ice hummocks,
and the wolves stopped also, growling
just past the limits of vision,
coming closer, until I could hear
the click of their feet on ice. Kantiuk laughed
and remarked that the wolves appeared to be most hungry.
I raised my rifle, prepared to shoot the first that
ventured close, hoping
to frighten the other.

Kantiuk struck my rifle down and said again
that the wolves were hungry, and laughed.
I feared that my old companion
was mad, here in the storm, among ice-hummocks,
stalked by wolves. Now Kantiuk searched
in his pack, and extracted
two knives--turnoks, the Innuits called them--
which by great labor were sharpened, on both sides,
to the sharpness like the edge of a barber's razor,
and approached our dogs
and plunged both knives
into the body of our youngest dog
who had limped all day.

I remember that I consider turning my rifle on Kantiuk
as he approached, then passed me,
carrying knives red with the gore of our dog--
who had yowled, moaned, and now lay
expired, surrounded
by curious cousins and uncles, possibly

hungry--and he trusted the knives
handle-down in the snow.

Immediately after he left the knives, the vague, gray
shape of wolves
turned solid, out of the darkness and the snow, and set ravenously
to licking blood from the honed steel.
the double-edge of the knives
so lacerated the tongues of the starved beasts
that their own blood poured
copiously forth
to replenish the dog's blood, and they ate
more furiously than before, while Knatiuk laughed,
and held his sides
laughing.

And I laughed also, perhaps in relief that Providence had delivered us
yet again, or perhaps--under conditions of extremity--
far from Connecticut--finding there creatures
acutely ridiculous, so avid
to swallow their own blood. First one, and then the other
collapsed, dying,
bloodless in the snow black with their own blood,
and Kantiuk retrieved
his turnoks, and hacked lean meat
from the thigh of the larger wolf, which we ate
grateful, blessing the Creator, for we were hungry.

Donald Hall