

Classic Poetry Series

Donald Justice

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

A Birthday Candle

Thirty today, I saw
The trees flare briefly like
The candles on a cake,
As the sun went down the sky,
A momentary flash,
Yet there was time to wish

Donald Justice

A Map Of Love

Your face more than others' faces
Maps the half-remembered places
I have come to I while I slept—
Continents a dream had kept
Secret from all waking folk
Till to your face I awoke,
And remembered then the shore,
And the dark interior.

Anonymous submission.

Donald Justice

Absences

It's snowing this afternoon and there are no flowers.
There is only this sound of falling, quiet and remote,
Like the memory of scales descending the white keys
Of a childhood piano--outside the window, palms!
And the heavy head of the cereus, inclining,
Soon to let down its white or yellow-white.

Now, only these poor snow-flowers in a heap,
Like the memory of a white dress cast down . . .
So much has fallen.

And I, who have listened for a step
All afternoon, hear it now, but already falling away,
Already in memory. And the terrible scales descending
On the silent piano; the snow; and the absent flowers abounding.

Donald Justice

Anonymous Drawing

A delicate young Negro stands
With the reins of a horse clutched loosely in his hands;
So delicate, indeed, that we wonder if he can hold the spirited creature
beside him
Until the master shall arrive to ride him.
Already the animal's nostrils widen with rage or fear.
But if we imagine him snorting, about to rear,
This boy, who should know about such things better than we,
Only stands smiling, passive and ornamental, in a fantastic livery
Of ruffles and puffed breeches,
Watching the artist, apparently, as he sketches.
Meanwhile the petty lord who must have paid
For the artist's trip up from Perugia, for the horse, for the boy, for
everything here, in fact, has been delayed,
Kept too long by his steward, perhaps, discussing
Some business concerning the estate, or fussing
Over the details of his impeccable toilet
With a manservant whose opinion is that any alteration at all would spoil it.
However fast he should come hurrying now
Over this vast greensward, mopping his brow
Clear of the sweat of the fine Renaissance morning, it would be too late:
The artist will have had his revenge for being made to wait,
A revenge not only necessary but right and clever --
Simply to leave him out of the scene forever.

Donald Justice

Bus Stop

Lights are burning
In quiet rooms
Where lives go on
Resembling ours.

The quiet lives
That follow us—
These lives we lead
But do not own—

Stand in the rain
So quietly
When we are gone,
So quietly . . .
And the last bus
Comes letting dark
Umbrellas out—
Black flowers, black flowers.

And lives go on.
And lives go on
Like sudden lights
At street corners

Or like the lights
In quiet rooms
Left on for hours,
Burning, burning.

Submitted by C.K.

Donald Justice

In Bertram's Garden

Jane looks down at her organdy skirt
As if it somehow were the thing disgraced,
For being there, on the floor, in the dirt,
And she catches it up about her waist,
Smooths it out along one hip,
And pulls it over the crumpled slip.

On the porch, green-shuttered, cool,
Asleep is Bertram that bronze boy,
Who, having wound her around a spool,
Sends her spinning like a toy
Out to the garden, all alone,
To sit and weep on a bench of stone.

Soon the purple dark must bruise
Lily and bleeding-heart and rose,
And the little cupid lose
Eyes and ears and chin and nose,
And Jane lie down with others soon,
Naked to the naked moon.

Donald Justice

Love's Strategems

But these maneuverings to avoid
The touching of hands,
These shifts to keep the eyes employed
On objects more or less neutral
(As honor, for time being, commands)
Will hardly prevent their downfall.

Stronger medicines are needed.
Already they find
None of their strategems have succeeded,
Nor would have, no,
Not had their eyes been stricken blind,
Hands cut off at the elbow.

Donald Justice

Men at Forty

Men at forty
Learn to close softly
The doors to rooms they will not be
Coming back to

Donald Justice

Men at Thirty

Thirty today, I saw
The trees flare briefly like
The candles upon a cake
As the sun went down the sky,
A momentary flash
Yet there was time to wish

Before the break light could die
If I had known what to wish
As once I must have known
Bending above the clean candlelit tablecloth
To blow them out with a breath

Donald Justice

Ode to a Dressmaker's Dummy

Papier-mache body; blue-and-black cotton jersey cover. Metal stand. Instructions included.

-- Sears, Roebuck Catalogue

O my coy darling, still
You wear for me the scent
Of those long afternoons we spent,
The two of us together,
Safe in the attic from the jealous eyes
Of household spies
And the remote buffooneries of the weather;
So high,
Our sole remaining neighbor was the sky,
Which, often enough, at dusk,
Leaning its cloudy shoulders on the sill,
Used to regard us with a bored and cynical eye.

How like the terrified,
Shy figure of a bride
You stood there then, without your clothes,
Drawn up into
So classic and so strict a pose
Almost, it seemed, our little attic grew
Dark with the first charmed night of the honeymoon.
Or was it only some obscure
Shape of my mother's youth I saw in you,
There where the rude shadows of the afternoon
Crept up your ankles and you stood
Hiding your sex as best you could?--
Prim ghost the evening light shone through.

Donald Justice

On The Death Of Friends In Childhood

We shall not ever meet them bearded in heaven
Nor sunning themselves among the bald of hell;
If anywhere, in the deserted schoolyard at twilight,
forming a ring, perhaps, or joining hands
In games whose very names we have forgotten.
Come memory, let us seek them there in the shadows.

Donald Justice

Pantom Of The Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on,
Without end and with little apparent meaning.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on
We managed. No need for the heroic.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.
I don't remember all the particulars.
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows
Thank god no one said anything in verse.
The neighbors were our only chorus,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
What audience would ever know our story?
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the actual world.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
We did not ourselves know what the end was.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.
People like us simply go on.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

Anonymous submission.

Donald Justice

Poem

This poem is not addressed to you.
You may come into it briefly,
But no one will find you here, no one.
You will have changed before the poem will.

Even while you sit there, unmovable,
You have begun to vanish. And it does not matter.
The poem will go on without you.
It has the spurious glamor of certain voids.

It is not sad, really, only empty.
Once perhaps it was sad, no one knows why.
It prefers to remember nothing.
Nostalgias were peeled from it long ago.

Your type of beauty has no place here.
Night is the sky over this poem.
It is too black for stars.
And do not look for any illumination.

You neither can nor should understand what it means.
Listen, it comes with out guitar,
Neither in rags nor any purple fashion.
And there is nothing in it to comfort you.

Close your eyes, yawn. It will be over soon.
You will forge the poem, but not before
It has forgotten you. And it does not matter.
It has been most beautiful in its erasures.

O bleached mirrors! Oceans of the drowned!
Nor is one silence equal to another.
And it does not matter what you think.
This poem is not addressed to you.

Donald Justice

Sadness

1

Dear ghosts, dear presences, O my dear parents,
Why were you so sad on porches, whispering?
What great melancholies were loosed among our swings!
As before a storm one hears the leaves whispering
And marks each small change in the atmosphere,
So was it then to overhear and to fear.

2

But all things then were oracle and secret.
Remember the night when, lost, returning, we turned back
Confused, and our headlights singled out the fox?
Our thoughts went with it then, turning and turning back
With the same terror, into the deep thicket
Beside the highway, at home in the dark thicket.

3

I say the wood within is the dark wood,
Or wound no torn shirt can entirely bandage,
But the sad hand returns to it in secret
Repeatedly, encouraging the bandage
To speak of that other world we might have borne,
The lost world buried before it could be born.

4

Burchfield describes the pinched white souls of violets
Frothing the mouth of a derelict old mine
Just as an evil August night comes down,
All umber, but for one smudge of dusky carmine.
It is the sky of a peculiar sadness—
The other side perhaps of some rare gladness.

5

What is it to be happy, after all? Think
Of the first small joys. Think of how our parents
Would whistle as they packed for the long summers,
Or, busy about the usual tasks of parents,
Smile down at us suddenly for some secret reason,
Or simply smile, not needing any reason.

6

But even in the summers we remember
The forest had its eyes, the sea its voices,
And there were roads no map would ever master,
Lost roads and moonless nights and ancient voices—
And night crept down with an awful slowness toward the water;
And there were lanterns once, doubled in the water.

7

Sadness has its own beauty, of course. Toward dusk,
Let us say, the river darkens and look bruised,
And we stand looking out at it through rain.

It is as if life itself were somehow bruised
And tender at this hour; and a few tears commence.
Not that they are but that they feel immense.

Donald Justice

Sestina: Here in Katmandu

We have climbed the mountain.
There's nothing more to do.
It is terrible to come down
To the valley
Where, amidst many flowers,
One thinks of snow,

As formerly, amidst snow,
Climbing the mountain,
One thought of flowers,
Tremulous, ruddy with dew,
In the valley.
One caught their scent coming down.

It is difficult to adjust, once down,
To the absense of snow.
Clear days, from the valley,
One looks up at the mountain.
What else is there to do?
Prayer wheels, flowers!

Let the flowers
Fade, the prayer wheels run down.
What have they to do
With us who have stood atop the snow
Atop the mountain,
Flags seen from the valley?

It might be possible to live in the valley,
To bury oneself among flowers,
If one could forget the mountain,
How, never once looking down,
Stiff, blinded with snow,
One knew what to do.

Meanwhile it is not easy here in Katmandu,
Especially when to the valley
That wind which means snow
Elsewhere, but here means flowers,
Comes down,
As soon it must, from the mountain.

Donald Justice

The Assassination

It begins again, the nocturnal pulse.
It courses through the cables laid for it.
It mounts to the chandeliers and beats there, hotly.
We are too close. Too late, we would move back.
We are involved with the surge.

Now it bursts. Now it has been announced.
Now it is being soaked up by newspapers.
Now it is running through the streets.
The crowd has it. The woman selling carnations
And the man in the straw hat stand with it in their shoes.

Here is the red marquee it sheltered under.
Here is the ballroom, here
The sadly various orchestra led
By a single gesture. My arms open.
It enters. Look, we are dancing.

Donald Justice

The Evening of the Mind

Now comes the evening of the mind.
Here are the fireflies twitching in the blood;
Here is the shadow moving down the page
Where you sit reading by the garden wall.
Now the dwarf peach trees, nailed to their trellises,
Shudder and droop. You know their voices now,
Faintly the martyred peaches crying out
Your name, the name nobody knows but you.
It is the aura and the coming on.
It is the thing descending, circling, here.
And now it puts a claw out and you take it.
Thankfully in your lap you take it, so.

You said you would not go away again,
You did not want to go away -- and yet,
It is as if you stood out on the dock
Watching a little boat drift out
Beyond the sawgrass shallows, the dead fish ...
And you were in it, skimming past old snags,
Beyond, beyond, under a brazen sky
As soundless as a gong before it's struck --
Suspended how? -- and now they strike it, now
The ether dream of five-years-old repeats, repeats,
And you must wake again to your own blood
And empty spaces in the throat.

Donald Justice

The Tourist from Syracuse

One of those men who can be a car salesman or a tourist from Syracuse or a hired assassin.

-- John D. MacDonald

You would not recognize me.
Mine is the face which blooms in
The dank mirrors of washrooms
As you grope for the light switch.

My eyes have the expression
Of the cold eyes of statues
Watching their pigeons return
From the feed you have scattered,

And I stand on my corner
With the same marble patience.
If I move at all, it is
At the same pace precisely

As the shade of the awning
Under which I stand waiting
And with whose blackness it seems
I am already blended.

I speak seldom, and always
In a murmur as quiet
As that of crowds which surround
The victims of accidents.

Shall I confess who I am?
My name is all names, or none.
I am the used-car salesman,
The tourist from Syracuse,

The hired assassin, waiting.
I will stand here forever
Like one who has missed his bus --
Familiar, anonymous --

On my usual corner,
The corner at which you turn
To approach that place where now
You must not hope to arrive.

Donald Justice

To A Ten-Months' Child

Late arrival, no
One would think of blaming you
For hesitating so.

Who, setting his hand to knock
At a door so strange as this one,
Might not draw back?

Donald Justice

Villanelle at Sundown

Turn your head. Look. The light is turning yellow.
The river seems enriched thereby, not to say deepened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

Or are Americans half in love with failure?
One used to say so, reading Fitzgerald, as it happened.
(That Viking Portable, all water spotted and yellow--

remember?) Or does mere distance lend a value
to things? --false, it may be, but the view is hardly cheapened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

The smoke, those tiny cars, the whole urban millieu--
One can like anything diminishment has sharpened.
Our painter friend, Lang, might show the whole thing yellow

and not be much off. It's nuance that counts, not color--
As in some late James novel, saved up for the long weekend
and vivid with all the Master simply won't tell you.

How frail our generation has got, how sallow
and pinched with just surviving! We all go off the deep end
finally, gold beaten thinly out to yellow.
And why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

Donald Justice