Classic Poetry Series

Donald Hall
- poems -

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Donald Hall(20 September 1928 -)

Biography

Donald Hall was born in Hamden, Connecticut, the only child of Donald Andrew Hall, a businessman, and Lucy Wells. He was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy, then earned a bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1951 and a , from Oxford in 1953. Hall received a honorary PhD, Lit. from Bates College in 1991.

Hall began writing even before reaching his teens, beginning with poems and short stories, and then moving on to novels and dramatic verse. Hall continued to write throughout his prep school years at Exeter, and, while still only sixteen years old, attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, where he made his first acquaintance with the poet Robert Frost. That same year, he published his first work. While an undergraduate at Harvard, Hall served on the editorial board of The Harvard Advocate, and got to know a number of people who, like him, were poised with significant ambitions in the literary world, amongst them John Ashbery, Robert Bly, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and Adrienne Rich, whom he dated g his senior year, he won the Glascock Prize that Koch had won 3 years earlier.

After leaving Harvard, Hall went to Oxford for two years, to study for the . He was editor of the magazine Oxford Poetry, as literary editor of Isis, as editor of New Poems, and as poetry editor of The Paris Review. At the end of his first Oxford year, Hall also won the university's Newdigate Prize, awarded for his long poem, 'Exile'.

On returning to the United States, Hall went to Stanford, where he spent one year as a Creative Writing Fellow, studying under the poet-critic, Yvor Winters. Following his year at Stanford, Hall went back to Harvard, where he spent three years in the Society of Fellows. During that time, he put together his first book, Exiles and Marriages, and with Robert Pack and Louis Simpson edited an anthology which was to make a significant impression on both sides of the Atlantic, The New Poets of England and America. While teaching at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan he met poet Jane Kenyon, whom he married in 1972. Three years after they were wed, they moved to Eagle Pond Farm, his grandparents' former home in Wilmot, New Hampshire. Hall and Kenyon were profiled at their home in a 1993 PBS documentary, "A Life Together," which aired as an episode of "The Bill Moyers Journal."

In 1989, when Hall was sixty-one, it was discovered that he had colon cancer.

Surgery followed, but by 1992 the cancer had metastasized to his liver. After another operation, and chemotherapy, he went into remission, though he was told that he only had a one-in-three chance of surviving the next five years. Then, early in 1994, it was discovered that Kenyon had leukemia. Her illness, her death fifteen months later, and Hall's struggle to come to terms with these things, were the subject of his 1998 book, Without.

Another book of poems dedicated to Kenyon, Painted Bed, is cited by Publishers Weekly as "more controlled, more varied and more powerful, this taut follow-up volume reexamines Hall's grief while exploring the life he has made since. The book's first poem, 'Kill the Day,' stands among the best Hall has ever written. It examines mourning in 16 long-lined stanzas, alternating catalogue with aphorism, understatement with keened lament: 'How many times will he die in his own lifetime?' "

In 2005, he published the memoir The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon -- an intimate record of their 23-year marriage.

Hall has been closely affiliated with the Bennington College's graduate writing program since 1994, giving lectures and readings annually.

Career

To date, Hall has published fifteen books of poetry, most recently White Apples and the Taste of Stone (2006), The Painted Bed (2002) and Without: Poems (1998), which was published on the third anniversary of Jane Kenyon's death. Most of the poems in Without deal with Kenyon's illness and death, and many are epistolary poems. In addition to poetry, he has also written several collections of essays (among them Life Work and String Too Short to be Saved), children's books (notably Ox-Cart Man, which won the Caldecott Medal), and a number of plays. His recurring themes include New England rural living, baseball, and how work conveys meaning to ordinary life. He is regarded as a master both of received forms and free verse, and a champion of the art of revision, for whom writing is first and foremost a craft, not merely a mode of self-expression. Hall has won many awards, including two Guggenheim Fellowships and a Robert Frost Medal, and has served as poet laureate of his state. He continues to live and work at Eagle Pond Farm.

When not working on poems, he has turned his hand to reviews, criticism, textbooks, sports journalism, memoirs, biographies, children's stories, and plays. He has also devoted a lot of time to editing: between 1983 and 1996 he oversaw publication of more than sixty titles for the University of Michigan Press alone. He

was for five years Poet Laureate of his home state, New Hampshire (1984-89), and can list among the many other honours and awards to have come his way: the Lamont Poetry Prize for Exiles and Marriages (1955), the Edna St Vincent Millay Award (1956), two Guggenheim Fellowships (1963-64, 1972-73), inclusion on the Horn Book Honour List (1986), the Sarah Josepha Hale Award (1983), the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize (1987), the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry (1988), the NBCC Award (1989), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in poetry (1989), and the Frost Medal (1990). He has been nominated for the National Book Award on three separate occasions (1956, 1979 and 1993). In 1994, he received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for his lifetime achievement.

Hall was named the fourteenth U.S. Poet Laureate, succeeding Ted Kooser. He served from 1 October 2006, and was succeeded by Charles Simic the following year. At the time of his appointment, Hall was profiled in an Oct. 16, 2006 episode of The News Hour With Jim Leher.

Donald Hall currently resides at Eagle Pond Farm in Wilmot, New Hampshire, a small town in Merrimack County in the vicinity of fellow poet and author Maxine Kumin.

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

Closings

1

"Always Be Closing," Liam told us—
abc of real estate, used cars,
and poetry. Liam the dandy
loved Brooks Brothers shirts, double-breasted
suits, bespoke shoes, and linen jackets.
On the day Liam and Tree married
in our backyard, Liam and I wore
Chuck's burgundy boho-prep high-tops
that Liam bought on Fifth Avenue.

2

When the rain started, we moved indoors
and Liam read a Quartet aloud.
T.S. Eliot turned old and frail
at sixty, pale, preparing for death.
Then poets of new generations
died—Frank O'Hara first, then Jim Wright
with throat cancer in a Bronx hospice,
Sylvia Plath beside the oven,
Thom Gunn of an overdose, Denise

3

Levertov, Bob Creeley, Jane Kenyon...
In a New York bar, Liam told me
eccentric, affectionate stories
about a road trip in Tree's country
of Montana, and the joy they felt
in the abundance of their marriage.
At Bennington Tree said, "Fourteen years
after the wedding in your backyard,
I love Liam with my entire heart."

4

Liam's face changed quickly as he spoke,
eyes and mouth erupting with gusto
as he improvised his outrageous,
cheerful, inventive obscenities.
When I first met him—I expounded
at a young poet's do—his bearded
face was handsome and expressionless.
He would not defer to a poet
fifty years old! After a few months

5

he was revising my lines for me,
making the metaphors I couldn't.
Even now, working at poems, I
imagine for a moment Liam
disassembling them. A year ago
he watched the progress of age turn me
skeletal, pale flesh hanging loosely
in folds from my arms, and thin rib-bones
like grates above a sagging belly.

6

His body would never resemble
my body. Four or five times a week
we wrote letters back and forth, talking
about class structure, about how Tree
took charge over the Academy
of American Poets, about
poems and new attacks on free speech...
When I won a notorious prize,
Liam sent me eighty-one notions

7

about projects I might undertake.

Number fifty-six instructed me:
"Urge poets to commit suicide."
His whole life he spoke of suicide
lightly, when he wasn't preserving
the First Amendment from Jesse Helms,
or enduring two colon cancers,
or watching films, or chatting with Tree,
or undergoing heart surgeries.

8

If he walked their dog Keeper one block,
he had to take nitroglycerin.
When Jane was dying, Liam and Tree
drove up to say goodbye. I wheelchaired
Jane to a pile of books by her chair
to find the color plate of Caillebotte's
shadowy kitchen garden at Yerres
for the jacket of Otherwise, when
Tree would design it. I think of Jane's

9

horror if she were alive to know
that on August fifteenth Liam pulled
the shotgun's trigger. The night before,
wearing a tux over a yellow
silk shirt, he danced with Tree once again,
before bed and the morning's murder.
He left Tree alone and desolate
but without anger. Tree knew Liam
did what he planned and needed to do.

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

Gold

Pale gold of the walls, gold
of the centers of daisies, yellow roses
pressing from a clear bowl. All day
we lay on the bed, my hand
stroking the deep
gold of your thighs and your back.
We slept and woke
entering the golden room together,
lay down in it breathing
quickly, then
slowly again,
caressing and dozing, your hand sleepily
touching my hair now.

We made in those days
tiny identical rooms inside our bodies
which the men who uncover our graves
will find in a thousand years,
shining and whole.

Donald Hall

Her Long Illness

Daybreak until nightfall,
he sat by his wife at the hospital
while chemotherapy dripped
through the catheter into her heart.
He drank coffee and read
the Globe. He paced; he worked
on poems; he rubbed her back
and read aloud. Overcome with dread,
they wept and affirmed
their love for each other, witlessly,
over and over again.
When it snowed one morning Jane gazed
at the darkness blurred
with flakes. They pushed the IV pump
which she called Igor
slowly past the nurses' pods, as far
as the outside door
so that she could smell the snowy air.

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

Mount Kearsarge Shines

Mount Kearsarge shines with ice; from hemlock branches
snow slides onto snow; no stream, creek, or river
budges but remains still. Tonight
we carry armloads of logs

from woodshed to Glenwood and build up the fire
that keeps the coldest night outside our windows.
Sit by the woodstove, Camilla,
while I bring glasses of white,

and we'll talk, passing the time, about weather
without pretending that we can alter it:
Storms stop when they stop, no sooner,
leaving the birches glossy

with ice and bent glittering to rimy ground.
We'll avoid the programmed weatherman grinning
from the box, cheerful with tempest,
and take the day as it comes,

one day at a time, the way everyone says,
These hours are the best because we hold them close
in our uxorious nation.
Soon we'll walk -- when days turn fair

and frost stays off -- over old roads, listening
for peepers as spring comes on, never to miss
the day's offering of pleasure
for the government of two.

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.

Olives

"Dead people don't like olives,"
I told my partners in eighth grade
dancing class, who never listened
as we fox-trotted, one-two, one-two.

The dead people I often consulted
nodded their skulls in unison
while I flung my black velvet cape
over my shoulders and glowered
from deep-set, burning eyes,
walking the city streets, alone at fifteen,
crazy for cheerleaders and poems.

At Hamden High football games, girls
in short pleated skirts
pranced and kicked, and I longed
for their memorable thighs.
They were friendly—poets were mascots—
but never listened when I told them
that dead people didn't like olives.

Instead the poet, wearing his cape,
continued to prowl in solitude
intoning inscrutable stanzas
as halfbacks and tackles
made out, Friday nights after football,
on sofas in dark-walled rec rooms
with magnanimous cheerleaders.

But, decades later, when the dead
have stopped blathering
about olives, obese halfbacks wheeze
upstairs to sleep beside cheerleaders
waiting for hip replacements,
while a lascivious, doddering poet,
his burning eyes deep-set
in wrinkles, cavorts with their daughters.

Ox Cart Man

In October of the year,
he counts potatoes dug from the brown field,
counting the seed, counting
the cellar's portion out,
and bags the rest on the cart's floor.

He packs wool sheared in April, honey
in combs, linen, leather
tanned from deerhide,
and vinegar in a barrel
hoped by hand at the forge's fire.

He walks by his ox's head, ten days
to Portsmouth Market, and sells potatoes,
and the bag that carried potatoes,
flaxseed, birch brooms, maple sugar, goose
feathers, yarn.

When the cart is empty he sells the cart.
When the cart is sold he sells the ox,
harness and yoke, and walks
home, his pockets heavy
with the year's coin for salt and taxes,

and at home by fire's light in November cold
stitches new harness
for next year's ox in the barn,
and carves the yoke, and saws planks
building the cart again.

Donald Hall

Safe Sex

If he and she do not know each other, and feel confident
they will not meet again; if he avoids affectionate words;

if she has grown insensible skin under skin; if they desire
only the tribute of another's cry; if they employ each other

as revenge on old lovers or families of entitlement and steel—
then there will be no betrayals, no letters returned unread,

no frenzy, no hurled words of permanent humiliation,
no trembling days, no vomit at midnight, no repeated

apparition of a body floating face-down at the pond's edge

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

The Painted Bed

'Even when I danced erect
by the Nile’s garden
I constructed Necropolis.

Ten million fellaheen cells
of my body floated stones
to establish a white museum.'

Grisly, foul, and terrific
is the speech of bones,
thighs and arms slackened

into desiccated sacs of flesh
hanging from an armature
where muscle was, and fat.

'I lie on the painted bed
diminishing, concentrated
on the journey I undertake

to repose without pain
in the palace of darkness,
my body beside your body.'

Donald Hall

The Seventh Inning

1. Baseball, I warrant, is not the whole
occupation of the aging boy.
Far from it: There are cats and roses;
there is her water body. She fills
the skin of her legs up, like water;
under her blouse, water assembles,
swelling lukewarm; her mouth is water,
her cheekbones cool water; water flows
in her rapid hair. I drink water

2. from her body as she walks past me
to open a screen door, as she bends
to weed among herbs, or as she lies
beside me at five in the morning
in submarine light. Curt Davis threw
a submarine ball, terrifying
to right-handed batters. Another
pleasure, thoroughly underrated,
is micturition, which is even

3. commoner than baseball. It begins
by announcing itself more slowly
and less urgently than sexual
desire, but (confusingly) in the
identical place. Ignorant men
therefore on occasion confuse beer-
drinking with love; but I have discussed
adultery elsewhere. We allow
this sweet release to commence itself,

4. addressing a urinal perhaps,
perhaps poised over a white toilet
with feet spread wide and head tilted back:
oh, what'delicious permission! what
luxury of letting go! what luxe
yellow curve of mildest ecstasy!
Granted we may not compare it to
poignant and crimson bliss, it is as
voluptuous as rain all night long

5. after baseball in August's parch. The
jade plant's trunk, as thick as a man's wrist,
urges upward thrusting from packed dirt,
with Chinese vigor spreading limbs out
that bear heavy leaves—palpable, dark,
juicy, green, profound: They suck, the way
bleacher fans claim inhabitants of
box seats do. The Fourth of July we
exhaust stars from sparklers in the late

6. twilight. We swoop ovals of white-gold
flame, making quick signatures against
an imploding dark. The five-year-old
girl kisses the young dog goodbye and
chases the quick erratic kitten.
When she returns in a few years as
a tall shy girl, she will come back to
a dignified spreading cat and a
dog ash-gray on the muzzle. Sparklers

7. expel quickly this night of farewell:
If they didn't burn out, they wouldn't
be beautiful. Kurt, may I hazard
an opinion on expansion? Last
winter meetings, the major leagues (al-
ready meager in ability,
scanty in starting pitchers) voted
to add two teams. Therefore minor league
players will advance all too quickly,

8. with boys in the bigs who wouldn't have
made double-A forty years ago.
Directors of player personnel
will search like poets scrambling in old
notebooks for unused leftover lines,
but when was the last time anyone
cut back when he or she could expand?
Kurt, I get the notion that you were
another who never discarded

9. anything, a keeper from way back.

You smoked cigarettes, in inflation-
times rolled from chopped-up banknotes, billions
inhaled and exhaled as cancerous
smoke. When commerce woke, Men was awake.
If you smoked a cigar, the cigar
band discovered itself glued into
collage. Ongoing life became the
material of Kurtschwittersball.

Donald Hall

The Things

When I walk in my house I see pictures,
bought long ago, framed and hanging
—de Kooning, Arp, Laurencin, Henry Moore—
that I've cherished and stared at for years,
yet my eyes keep returning to the masters
of the trivial—a white stone perfectly round,
tiny lead models of baseball players, a cowbell,
a broken great-grandmother's rocker,
a dead dog's toy—valueless, unforgettable
detritus that my children will throw away
as I did my mother's souvenirs of trips
with my dead father, Kodaks of kittens,
and bundles of cards from her mother Kate.

Donald Hall

Tubes

1
'Up, down, good, bad,' said
the man with the tubes
up his nose, ' there's lots
of variety…
However, notions
of balance between
extremes of fortune
are stupid—or at
best unobservant.'
He watched as the nurse
fed pellets into
the green nozzle that
stuck from his side. 'Mm,'
said the man. ' Good. Yum.
(Next time more basil…)
When a long-desired
baby is born, what
joy! More happiness
than we find in sex,
more than we take in
success, revenge, or
wealth. But should the same
infant die, would you
measure the horror
on the same rule? Grief
weighs down the seesaw;
joy cannot budge it.'

2
'When I was nineteen,
I told a thirty-
year-old man what a
fool I had been when
I was seventeen.
'We were always,' he
said glancing down, 'a
fool two years ago.''

3

The man with the tubes
up his nostrils spoke
carefully: 'I don't
regret what I did,
but that I claimed I
did the opposite.
If I was faithless
or treacherous and
cowardly, I had
my reasons—but I
regret that I called
myself loyal, brave,
and honorable.'

4

'Of all illusions,'
said the man with the
tubes up his nostrils,
IVs, catheter,
and feeding nozzle,
'the silliest one
was hardest to lose.
For years I supposed
that after climbing
exhaustedly up
with pitons and ropes,
I would arrive at
last on the plateau
of walking-level-
forever-among-
moss-with-red-blossoms.
But of course, of course:
A continual
climbing is the one
form of arrival
we ever come to—
unless we suppose
that the wished-for height
and house of desire
is tubes up the nose.'

White Apples

when my father had been dead a week
I woke
with his voice in my ear
I sat up in bed

and held my breath
and stared at the pale closed door

white apples and the taste of stone

if he called again
I would put on my coat and galoshes

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.