
White Apples and the Taste of Stone

Donald Hall

1946–2006

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1. Early Poems

Old Home Day

Old man remembers to old man!
How bat struck ball upon this plain,
Seventy years ago, before
The batter's box washed out in rain.

Love Is Like Sounds

Late snow fell this early morning of spring.
At dawn I rose from bed, restless, and looked
Out of my window, to wonder if there the snow
Fell outside your bedroom, and you watching.

I played my game of solitaire. The cards
Came out the same the third time through the deck.
The game was stuck. I threw the cards together,
And watched the snow that could not do but fall.

Love is like sounds, whose last reverberations
Hang on the leaves of strange trees, on mountains
As distant as the curving of the earth,
Where the snow hangs still in the middle of the air.

Wedding Party

The pockmarked player of the accordion
Empties and fills his squeezebox in the corner,
Kin to the tiny man who pours champagne,
Kin to the caterer. These solemn men,
Amid the sounds of silk and popping corks,
Stand like pillars. And the white bride
Moves through the crowd as a chaired relic moves.

We are the guest invited yesterday,
Friend to the bride's rejected suitor, come
On sudden visit unexpectedly.
And so we chat, on best behavior, with
The Uncle, Aunt, and unattractive girl;
And watch the summer twilight slide away
As thunder gathers head to end the day.

Now all at once the pockmarked player grows
Immense and terrible beside the bride
Whose marriage withers to a rind of years
And curling photographs in a dry box;
And in the storm that hurls upon the room
Above the crowd he holds his breathing box
That only empties, fills, empties, fills.

Exile

Each of us waking to the window's light
Has found the curtains changed, our pictures gone;
Our furniture has vanished in the night
And left us to an unfamiliar dawn;
Even the contours of the room are strange
And everything is change.
Waking, our minds construct of memory
What figure stretched beside us, or what voice
Shouted to pull us from our luxury—
And all the mornings leaning to our choice.

To put away—both child and murderer—
The toys we played with just a month ago,
That wisdom come, and make our progress sure,
Began our exile with our lust to grow.
(Remembering a train I tore apart
Because it knew my heart.)
We move to move, and this perversity
Betrays us into loving only loss.
We seek betrayal. When we cross the sea,
It is the distance from our past we cross.

Not only from the intellectual child
Time has removed us, but unyieldingly
Cuts down the groves in which our Indians filed
And where the black of pines was mystery.
(I walked the streets of where I lived and grew,
And all the streets were new.)
The room of love is always rearranged.
Someone has torn the corner of a chair
So that the past we call upon has changed,
The scene deprived by an intruding tear.

Exiled by death from people we have known,
We are reduced again by years, and try
To call them back and clothe the barren bone,
Not to admit that people ever die.
(A boy who talked and read and grew with me
Fell from a maple tree.)
But we are still alone, who love the dead,
And always miss their action's character,
Caught in the cage of living, visited
By no faint ghosts, by no gray men that were.

In years, and in the numbering of space,

Moving away from what we grew to know,
~~We stray like paper blown from place to place,~~
Impelled by every element to go.
(I think of haying on an August day,
Forking the stacks of hay.)
We can remember trees and attitudes
That foreign landscapes do not imitate;
They grow distinct within the interludes
Of memory beneath a stranger state.

The favorite toy was banished, and our act
Was banishment of the self; then growing, we
Betrayed the girls we loved, for our love lacked
Self-knowledge of its real perversity.
(I loved her, but I told her I did not,
And grew, and then forgot.)
It was mechanical, and in our age,
That cruelty should be our way of speech;
Our movement is a single pilgrimage,
Never returning; action does not teach.

In isolation from our present love
We make her up, consulting memory,
Imagining to watch her image move
On daily avenues across a sea.
(All day I saw her daydreamed figure stand
Out of the reach of hand.)
Each door and window is a spectral frame
In which her shape is for the moment found;
Each lucky scrap of paper bears her name,
And half-heard phrases imitate its sound.

Imagining, by exile kept from fact,
We build of distance mental rock and tree,
And make of memory creative act,
Persons and worlds no waking eye can see.
(From lacking her, I built her new again,
And loved the image then.)
The manufactured country is so green
The eyes of sleep are blinded by its shine;
We spend our lust in that imagined scene
But never wake to cross its borderline.

No man can knock his human fist upon
The door built by his mind, or hear the voice
He meditated come again if gone;
We live outside the country of our choice.

(I wanted X. When X moved in with me,
I could not wait to flee.)

Our humanness betrays us to the cage
Within whose limits each is free to walk,
But where no one can hear our prayers or rage
And none of us can break the walls to talk.

Exiled by years, by death no dream conceals,
By worlds that must remain unvisited,
And by the wounds that growing never heals,
We are as solitary as the dead,
Wanting to king it in that perfect land
We make and understand.
And in this world whose pattern is unmade,
Phases of splintered light and shapeless sand,
We shatter through our motions and evade
Whatever hand might reach and touch our hand.

Newdigate Prize, Oxford, 1953

Exile (1968)

A boy who played and talked and read with me
Fell from a maple tree.

I loved her, but I told her I did not,
And wept, and then forgot.

I walked the streets where I was born and grew,
And all the streets were new.

Elegy for Wesley Wells

Against the clapboards and the window panes
The loud March whines with rain and heavy wind,
In dark New Hampshire where his widow wakes.
She cannot sleep. The familiar length is gone.
I think across the clamorous Atlantic
To where the farm lies hard against the foot
Of Ragged Mountain, underneath Kearsarge.
The storm and hooded wind of equinox
Contend against New England's bolted door
Across the sea and set the signals out
Eastport to Block Island.
I speak his name against the beating sea.

The farmer dead, his horse will run to fat,
Go stiff and lame and whinny from his stall,
His dogs will whimper through the webby barn,
Where spiders close his tools in a pale gauze
And wait for flies. The nervous woodchuck now
Will waddle plumply through the garden weeds,
Eating wild peas as if he owned the land,
And the fat hedgehog pick the apple trees.
When next October's frosts harden the ground
And fasten in the year's catastrophe,
The farm will come undone—
The farmer dead, and deep in his plowed earth.

Before the Civil War the land was used,
And railroads came to all the villages;
Before the war, a man with land was rich;
He cleared a dozen or two dozen acres,
Burning the timber, stacking up the stones,
And cultivated all his acreage
And planted it to vegetables to sell.
But then the war took off the hired men;
The fields grew up, to weeds and bushes first,
And then the fields were thick with ashy pine.
The faces of prosperity and luck
Turned westward with the railroads from New England.
Poverty settled, and the first went off,
Leaving their fathers' forty-acre farms,
To Manchester and Nashua and Lowell,
And traded the Lyceum for the block.
Now the white houses fell, among the wars,
From eighteen sixty-five, for eighty years,

The Georgian firmness sagged, and the paint chipped,
~~And the white houses rotted to the ground.~~

Great growths of timber felled grew up again
On what had once been cultivated land,
On lawns and meadows, and from cellarholes.
Deep in the forest now, half covered up,
The reddened track of an abandoned railroad
Heaved in the frosts, in roots of the tall pines;
A locomotive stood
Like a strange rock, red as the fallen needles.

The farmer worked from four and milking time
To nine o'clock and shutting up the hens.
The heavy winter fattened him: The spring
Required his work and left his muscles lame.
By nineteen forty, only the timid young
Remained to plough or sell.
He was the noble man in the sick place.

I number out the virtues that are dead,
Remembering the soft consistent voice
And bone that showed in each deliberate word.
I walk along old England's crowded shore
Where storm has driven everyone inside.
Soon I will leave, to cross the hilly sea
And walk again among familiar hills
In dark New Hampshire where his widow wakes.
The length of Wesley Wells, old man I loved,
Today was carried to the lettered plain
In Andover
While March bent down the cemetery trees.

My Son My Executioner

My son, my executioner,
I take you in my arms,
Quiet and small and just astir
And whom my body warms.

Sweet death, small son, our instrument
Of immortality,
Your cries and hungers document
Our bodily decay.

We twenty-five and twenty-two,
Who seemed to live forever,
Observe enduring life in you
And start to die together.

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