

DAVID HAMILTON

On White Apples and the Taste of Stone

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One night almost a year ago, two days home from having read in the *International Herald Tribune* of Donald Hall's appointment as Poet Laureate, my wife asked about Hall's work, what was special about it? She remembered his visit several years earlier and having sat with Jane Kenyon, talking about depression and marrying older men. Hall's jacket photos, she says, are those of a satyr, which she means as a compliment, not only to Hall but to Kenyon. So I read her passages from "Her Long Illness," of their getting the bad news and working on *Otherwise*—"Wasn't that fun? / To work together?"—then a page or so later, "No more fucking." How great, Rebecca said, to have our laureate put "fucking" in a poem. "In several," I replied, remembering also that he had once reported Jane's lament in a letter.

Hall has been an occasional contributor from before my time with this magazine, and Kenyon has appeared here several times too, starting with "American Triptych," which entered her first collection and was one of my first choices thirty years ago. One image in it, "the repeated clink of a flagpole / pulley in the doorway of a country store," still fixes our winters for me. Hall had been a senior colleague at Michigan and I'd known the two of them slightly. So my tentative letter a couple of years later when I sought a point of view from beyond Iowa City. It drew a surprisingly rapid reply—I had no idea Hall was an avid correspondent—then for years our letters saluted back and forth, filling several folders.

"He doesn't hold back, does he?" Rebecca observed. I had turned to "Letter with No Address," in which Hall finds Kenyon's Saab, its trunk lid "delicately raised, / as if proposing an encounter" with his Honda; then to "Conversation's Afterplay"—"'Shh, shh,' you said. / 'I want to put my legs around your head'"—and finally to "Tennis Ball," in which Hall, walking their dog Gus in the cemetery where Kenyon lies buried, notices that Gus notices four long naked legs unshielded by a gravestone and distracts him from investigating further. But Hall

can't resist a backward glance as he and Gus return to the car. The next morning, my pastor asked, as she was off to instruct youngsters in taking communion, "Did he really say she 'restarted' him?"

The poems just mentioned come from late in these "Selected Poems 1946–2006" and are not all about Kenyon. Hall is a poet of fierce appetite and is fierce as a poet of appetite. From early poems like "Self-Portrait as a Bear" to "O Cheese," "Eating the Pig," and "Great Day in the Cows' House" in which he luxuriates in a cow's extravagant moooooo, to poem after poem of sex, Hall affirms carnal appetite and better with sex than booze: "Katie could put her feet behind her head...Her suppleness magnificent in bed," that from a late villanelle.

Hall has read the old masters and knows well the grotesquery of sex and age. He is as furious about the waste of sex as he is joyous in its pleasures. Of an affair he reports, "we pull off our clothes like opening junk mail," and in another poem warns, "When the young husband picked up his friend's pretty wife.... a prophetic voice spoke in his mind's ear... 'The misery you undertake this afternoon / will accompany you to the ends of your lives,'" which they know and which does not deter them. But "why this whining?" he concludes,

...you cherished the first time
a new one reached behind her back
to unfasten her bra, or slipped her
pants down hooking thumbs over black
silk.

Life with Kenyon is the other side of this story, twenty years of harmony in New Hampshire. Appetite led them and led them well. In an interview, Hall remembers being "thrilled" with Willa Muir's proud claim that she and Edwin "lived by [their] wits" and telling Robert Graves how he envied Graves's way of making a living by his prose. "Have you ever tried," Graves inquired. Soon they did. Poems in the morning after coffee and the *Boston Globe*. Prose in the afternoon, for pay and so miscellaneous. Thus their round of days: work, napping and love making, sometimes by Eagle Pond, then more work. Reading Henry James aloud after dinner, an inning or two of the Red Sox before bed. *Kicking the Leaves* (1978), Hall's seventh book of poems, was the first one written largely from the vantage

of New Hampshire and then the first of seven to chronicle their life there and Kenyon's death. *White Apples* privileges their move, which comes half way through the sixty years from which these poems are selected; in this volume of over 400 pages, we are at Eagle Pond by "Maple Syrup" on page seventy-five.

Another of Hall's appetites is for throwing himself into different forms and styles. In the early poems, we find rhymed iambic pentameter, firm but flexible blank verse, and echoes of Frost. Another early poem begins, "Hang it all, Ezra Pound, there is only one sestina" then becomes another. During the sixties, Hall, like other poets of his generation, found a degree of freedom and room for experiment in syllabics. More or less simultaneously, a freer verse emerges, some of it joining Robert Bly and James Wright in their pursuit of Latin American surrealism and the "deep image." Hall refashions earlier poems:

The wreck of the small
airplane sleeps
drifted to the high-tide line,
tangled in seaweed, green
glass from the sea....

He embraces Whitman, finding his body, as has already been quoted,

buoyant in the ocean of leaves, the night of them,
night heaving with death and leaves, rocking like the ocean.

Later come self-discovered forms, marshaled as leverage on invention more than as restriction: his "Horsecollar" poems in which he fills out the silhouettes of Horatian stanzas; baseball poems written by "innings," nine nine-line stanzas per inning until "Extra Innings," require additional lines and stanzas; the undulating, eloquently plain spoken lines of "Her Long Illness," and imitations of Hardy, written, as were so many of Hardy's poems, as laments for a dead wife:

Her Garden

I let her garden go
let it go, let it go
How can I watch the hummingbird

Hover to sip
With its beak's tip
The purple bee balm—whirring as we heard
It years ago?

This sad and gentle poem is one of my favorites.

Another of Hall's inventions is a discursive, sometimes prophetic voice, hovering around the idea of blank verse and used to philosophize, judge, mourn, and narrate as he finds need. *The One Day* is a book length poem entirely in this form, included in its entirety in *White Apples*. "I don't write my poems," he said once, "I *accumulate* them...the way a reef grows coral." These poems accumulated to become one of Hall's major efforts. At their center is "Four Classic Texts," embraced by "Shrubs Burnt Away" and "To Build a House." A woman, a "sister"—and Hall never had a sister, so she is a composite of mother, grandmother, wife and whomever else—speaks for Hall in much of the first and third sections, her voice a moving and surprising extension of his own. His theme is "to build a house" of work and of dying, a house that may sustain the arts of life, a house made for one mythic, transcendent "day" of extended blessing. The "classic" texts denounce, and "denounce" is no exaggeration, all that would trivialize that effort. Hall says what he thinks in these poems. Again and again, our old baseballer throws strikes. And no, he does not hold back.

Though sometimes I wish he would and suspect I am not alone in being infrequently receptive to lines so judgmental. I prefer the harrowing poems of Kenyon's illness and death, given to the muted cadences of sustained mourning and to the acceptance, as if of Fate, of all but unpronounceable medical language. "I could not stop writing," he says. I believe him and am grateful for it. Nevertheless, I will return more often to Hall's lyric presence, where the arc of sentence meets that of song, from "Names of Horses"—another long time favorite—to,

The weeds rise rank and thick
let it go, let it go....

Precisely where he does hold back, I extend myself more to Hall's heartbroken music.