

## Three Poems · *Don Johnson*

### NO SCRIPTURE, TWO HYMNS

It seemed as if someone had called for silent prayer  
and the flood that had battered and torn our lives  
had gouged AMEN from our minds, as if we would stare  
at the racked hymnals for an hour, like Friends, then rise

in our own mourning with no benediction.  
The minister brooded in a middle pew, and when  
no man stood to provide us direction,  
Aunt Mary Cottrell rose in the aisle. "The men,"

she said, in a voice so low the shuffle and hum  
of any other Sunday would have drowned it,  
"are wore out. We've had hard days, and harder to come,  
with nothing put up and what crop the flood left not fit

to can. The winter will be lean, but Lord knows  
our people have seen worse times: the War, when neighbor  
stole from neighbor, when families starved and froze  
in the hollers, the fruits of women's labor

carted off or burned in pure spite. Worse still,  
the Highland winters my grandmother's grandmother  
lived through on goat bones and watery crowdie, until  
that, too, played out and the only other

way for them to survive was the daily bleeding  
of the family cow. They would mix the blood  
with seed grain and chaff, that awful porridge feeding  
them all until the poor beast, herself starving, could

give no more and lay down. That bitter time was no rare thing, but a regular torment to be borne, like the floods that scourge this valley. And their way to abide these trials was not to scorn

each other's help in silence, but to meet and travel from shippen to shed where they would lean together and raise each feeble cow to its feet and feeding on the short grass beginning to green.

And it was not just once, but a regular chore of spring that came to be called the 'the lifting,' what everyone did to go on. And more than the lifting, the leaning told, the faithful shifting

of one burden to all. It's our task to do the same, supporting one another while we pick up and rebuild. Nothing stands long without the right frame to spread and carry the weight. I've said enough."

And our silence returned beneath the heavy sound of more rain on the roof. But when the reverend stood, already singing "Lord Plant My Feet on Higher Ground," and encouraging others to rise and blend

their voices, we sang "Leaning on The Everlasting Arms" beneath his hymn, upholding again and again his prayer that carried up the valley, over our washed farms, beyond the stalled, pounding chorus of the rain.