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A Reminiscence

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A Reminiscence

I met Donald Justice for the first time forty-five years ago when I came to Iowa City from Chicago to be interviewed. I was applying to be a Ph.D. candidate in a program I knew nothing about: the Writers' Workshop. I put on a tie and a jacket and went to meet Don in the River Room. As a Ph.D. applicant, I thought I should look and talk like an academic. However, I can't recall what we talked about, or if we even spoke of schooling, because after a few minutes, Kim Merker, the printer, came along, and we all went bowling. I figure I must have bowled okay that day because I was accepted.

Don's love of games is legendary. There are records of his likening the writing of poetry to simply finding a form and filling it, but his readers recognize that claim as a piece of modesty. Don's poems will last as long as any, not only because they are exquisite in sound and rhythm, not only because they are fatally precise and fabulous in their observations, not only for their graceful embodiment of the great themes, and not only for their singular transmutations of nostalgia into the sublime, but also because we experience in them a quality of emotion both genuine and complex. Don would never have wished such a compliment, but the fact is that Don's poems not only fill you with awe at their formal cunning, they can make you cry.

As a teacher, Don chose always to be on the side of the poem, defending it from half-baked attacks by students anxious to defend their own turf. While he had firm preferences in private, as a teacher Don defended all turfs. He had little use for poetic theory and is famous for stopping the onslaught of a conference on modern poetry by asking one of literature's most celebrated critics, from a microphone set up in the audience, "What does the critic *do*?" This so dumbfounded the poor fellow that Don was asked to repeat the question, which he did in an ever so slightly increased tone of satiric wonder.

I cherish my sixteen years as Don's colleague. Because of Don's wit and energy, as well as a feeling we enjoyed in those days as outsiders, our little poetry gang had an exceptional sense of com-

munity. We liked each other and played together. A friendly gamesmanship, for which Don was the chief source, defined us, not just in writing but in softball, volleyball, ping-pong, poker, you name it. If there was a pit to roast a pig over, sooner or later there would be a pit-jumping contest.

I have a carload of stories from the years of teaching and traveling with Don. A line that Don wrote in a sonnet to his father I can now address to him. The line reads, "Yet while I live, you do not wholly die." And there are literally hundreds of us who can say the same.

—*Marvin Bell*