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Another Reminiscence

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Another Reminiscence

I think back warmly to interviewing Don, with Ed Folsom, on my front porch in the fall of 1979. It was my first extended encounter with him, and my first interview. I was new at Iowa, and he had just won the Pulitzer Prize. I recall his courtesy, even a kind of courtliness, that distant September when I neglected to check the batteries so we got nothing on tape and he, treating my bumbling gently, agreed to sit with us all over again. Then, when I prepared a transcript and showed it to him, he took the time to revise himself carefully, in pencil, line by line. That old typescript is a treasure somewhere in my files, and in it are several touchstones I've never forgotten. One was his observation that William Carlos Williams was the modernist he turned to most often if, as he put it, "I'm looking to learn something." Another was his almost off hand remark that he thought "each line of a poem ought to contain at least three interesting things." The third was his notion that "Elizabeth Bishop was Marianne Moore perfected." So a first cheer for fecundity of invention, which was what he admired in Williams; another for building line by line and paying close attention to each one; then his affirmation of perfection over invention, should it come to that. Or call perfection, for him, the more sublime invention. I can think of little in our literature more subversive than that.

On a much more recent day, he visited my undergraduate class, read a few poems and answered questions. What is it like to write so many sonnets, Mr. Justice? "Oh, they're not so many, really; Shakespeare must have written twelve times as many." How does it feel to write them in so many varying patterns, hardly two alike? "I haven't really thought about that and am not sure that I can say, but you could, perhaps, find out for yourself."

"Perhaps" was a signature word of his, implying always an at least equal "and perhaps not," but he offered only the hopeful edge to my students. As he offered me too with his solicitude for our *Iowa Review* picnics, coming as a show of support even after they were all but unbearable for him. His diet would no longer tolerate beer and brats; wine wasn't much better, or potato salads, in the sun, on a picnic bench on a deck not shaded enough. But he made a point of

being there until he no longer could, and then, always, there was a note of apology.

He liked dogs and met mine early on. Not long after, Ramón and I found Don walking along the Iowa River. He was marching our direction, head down, high stepping: one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four, and making repeatedly, it seemed, the sign of the cross. “Oh,” he said, looking up as he came abreast of us, “I was composing something.” By that time, we’d guessed that ourselves, and we turned and walked with him and he could not help but notice, though he avoided mentioning, two large catfish handed to me only moments before by a fisherman at Crandic Park. They were still flopping and threatening escape from a plastic sack I had carried for another purpose. Eventually we passed a construction site with some inviting cement blocks, and Don offered to take charge of Ramón, who is pale of heart, while I ended the misery of the fish. Delicately, Don sheltered my pet from my violence by walking him over to the river bank and making sure both their backs were turned.

Then there was the time I thought to do an all-poetry issue and make it a more comprehensive collection of current American poetry than we had ever attempted. Naturally I invited Don’s participation, and he allowed, politely but firmly, that he didn’t think he’d care to be part of any such project. I was not surprised for he always implied, without of course saying a word to this effect, that editing a literary magazine was a futile task unless one could refrain from coming out more than once every other year, at the most frequent. After all, how many of our contributors would really invent anything, much less nurture perfection? Nevertheless he came to our picnics, and I plunged ahead with my plan and soon after noticed his painting on the cover of his then new, *New and Selected Poems*. “Don,” I wrote, “where there’s a painting this fine, there must be more,” and he quickly invited me to come look. So that year his paintings graced our covers, including both covers, front and back, of the issue he had declined to enter. He became the Alpha and Omega of that issue, and, perhaps, the most lasting contribution to it. The front cover image of that issue stands out again now on his *Collected Poems* as sadly we find—I’m leaning on a couplet of his—that “Don Justice has gone, taking both his pianos; we’ll be hard up for music now well beyond Iowa.”

—David Hamilton