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Another Elegy

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Another Elegy · *Donald Hall*

in Memory of William Trout

*O God! thought I, that madest kynde,
Shal I noon other weyes dye?
Wher Joves woll me stellyfye,
Or what thing may this sygnifye? . . .
Geoffrey Chaucer, Hous of Fame*

*The task and potential greatness of mortals
reside in their ability to produce things
which are at home in everlastingness.
Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition*

*Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost . . .
T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"*

It rained all night on the remaining elms. April soaked through night loam into sleep. This morning, rain delays above drenched earth. Whitethroated sparrows shake wet from their feathers, singing in the oak, while fog snags like lambswool on Kearsarge. The Blackwater River runs high. The blacksnake budes in his hole, resurrecting from winter's coma.

Now green will start from stubble and horned pout fatten. By the pond, pussywillows will labor awake to trudge from darkness and cold through April's creaking gate.

Bill Trout remains
fixed in a long box where we left him, a dozen years ago.

*

July, nineteen-sixty: Three friends with their families visited Bill at his Maine cabin secluded among scrub pines— setting up tents, joking, frying pickerel in cool dusk.

Only Bill was divorced, drinking all night, living alone on his shabby acre. Drunk the whole week, he recited Milton's syllables of lament, interrupting our argument, told Nazarene parables, and wept for his friends and their children. While the rest of us dove from a dock or played badminton with our wives, Bill paced muttering, smoking his Lucky Strikes. Later the rest divorced and paced.

We fished the river for horned pout, Bill standing with a joint by the dam, watching the warm water thick with fish, black bodies packed, flapping and contending to breathe. Dropping hooks without bait we pulled up the horny, loricate fish, then flipped them on grass to shrivel, as we watched and joked, old friends together. Continually sloshed, Bill proclaimed that life was shit, death was shit—even *shit* was *shit*.

*

Idaho made him, Pocatello of hobos and freightyards— clangor of iron, fetor of coalsmoke. With his brothers he listened for the Mountain Bluebird as he dropped worms into the Snake River, harvesting catfish for a Saturday supper in the 1930s.

Two Sisters of the Sacred Heart cossetted him when he strayed from the boys' flock to scan the unchanging dactyls of Ovid. Landowska set out the Goldberg Variations on a hand-wound Victrola.

When he was fifteen he stayed home from fishing to number feet that promenaded to a Union Pacific tune, ABAB pentameters. At the University his teacher the disappointed novelist nodded his head—in admiration, envy, and pity—while Bill sat late at a yellow dormitory desk, daydreaming that his poems lifted through night sky to become stars fixed in heaven, as Keats's poems rose from Hampstead lanes and talks with Hunt and Haydon.

When he considered the cloth, Bill saw himself martyred. The ambition of priest and poet!—innocent; and brainless as a shark.

*

Sculptors make models for touch; singers raise voices to the possible voice; basketball players improvise humors of levitation. They jump, carve, and sing in plain air as we do dreaming.

Because emblems of every calling measure its aspiration, the basketball player shoots three hundred freethrows before breakfast; the mezzo exists in service to the sound she makes, without eating or loving except for song, selfish and selfless together; the novice imagines herself healing a dozen Calcuttas as Mother Teresa smiles from a gold cloud, and violates holiness by her daydream of holiness.

Bill Trout

woke up, the best mornings of his life—without debilities of hangover, without pills or panic—to practice joy at four o'clock dawn: to test words, to break them down and build again, patient to construct immovable objects of art by the pains of intelligent attention—remaining alert or awake to nightmare.

But the maker of bronzes
dies decapitated in the carwreck; the whitefaced mimic
dozes tied to the wheelchair; the saint babbles and drools;
carcinoma refines chemist, farmer, wino, professor, poet,
imbecile, and banker into a passion of three nerves
and a feeding tube.

At the Bayside Hospice Bill's body
heaved as it worked for air; IVs dripped; bloody phlegm
boiled from the hole punched like a grommet in his throat.

*

Another fisherman writes me: "A man's death is his own;
you take Bill's death away, for public tears." I remember
Bill depressed, drinking double Manhattans straight-up,
taunting himself: "Compassion's flack! Elmer Gantry
of Guggenheim grief!" In Coleridge's *Notebooks*,
he underlined: "Poetry—excites us to artificial feelings—
callous to real ones."

Commonly Bill recited, from John 14,
"I go to make a place," then shrugged and sang the Wobbly
hymn, "You'll eat Pie in the Sky Bye and Bye—When you Die."
After reciting Thomas Hardy, he went on to mimick Oliver.

Two years after the Maine summer, he worked for SNCC
in Alabama, in a cadre of Christians and Jews, beaten bloody
and jailed, declaiming Amos as gospel of anger and love.

Angry he married again; loving he wrote "Selma with Hellfire."

A decade after, as we sat late in a bare Port Townsend room,
bossily I reminded him to eat the wax-paper'd hamburger
cooling by his ashtray. Bill delivered a line, in his voice
as lush as an old Shakespearean's: "Ohhhh . . . to think
of the mornings I've waked with a cold cheeseburger beside me!"

He walked into water and out again; he woke in the drunktank
heaving; he trembled after electroshock; he made the poems.

*

If ambition is innocent, nevertheless it impairs those
it possesses, not to mention their irretrievable children.

In the interstices of alcohol and woe, Bill vibrated
awake to a room that surged, shook, and altered shape.
He secreted vowel-honey in images dangling from prepositions;
he praised survival.

When he finished his sojourn
at McLean, where Very and Lowell had paced before him;
when Margaret left him, removing their daughter, and Bill
declared bankruptcy; when he was unable for five years
to take Communion—he drank two Guggenheims and snorted
an NEA. He quoted Amos: “. . . as if a man fled from a lion
and a bear met him.”

From his house in Oakland, USIS
flew him to Prague, then home to detox. Once I visited him
just back from drying-out, shuffling from chair to table
like a ninety-year-old, shaking as he tried to light
his Lucky, barely able to speak.

Then in middle-age
he fell in love again. He listened again to Chaucer
and recited Spencer’s refrain as he stood by the Thames,
holding his Hindu love by the hand, or walking arm in arm
by a lake where Wordsworth walked;

or, happy in Delhi,
reading the Gita, he breathed each morning India’s fetid
exhausted air, filling his notebook in warm dawn
as parrots flashed and his throat opened with gold
vowels, line after beautiful line, all the last summer.

*

The week before he died he handed me a clutch of poems. Speechless, syllables occluded in his throat, he raised a yellow pad and wrote, "That's it." Eyes protruded from bone sockets; neck-cords strained; trunk heaved as he looked for his love who gazed out the window of the room, bare except for a crucifix, downward to the Bay and the brown edges of March.

After he died Reba gave me his Modern Library Dickinson, in which editors corrected the poet's lines. I imagine Bill in Eugene, penciling, neat in the margin, restorations of Amherst.

Each year his death grows older. Outside this house, past Kearsarge changing from pink and lavender through blue and white to green, public language ridicules "eager pursuit of honor."

Do I tell lies? ". . . in middle-age he fell in love . . ." Did he never again tremble from chair to table? At night Bill delivered his imagination and study to *Laverne and Shirley*, laughing when a laughtrack bullied him to laugh—while Reba groaned an incredulous Bengali groan—in order not to drink.

Yet again he walked in a blue robe in detox, love's anguish and anger walking beside him.

*

It is twelve Aprils since we buried him. Now dissertation-salt preserves *The Collected Poems of William Trout* like Lenin. Here is another elegy in the tradition of mourning and envy, love and self-love—as another morning delivers rain on the fishbone leaves of the rotted year. Again I measure the poems Bill Trout left on the shore of his scattery life: quatrains that scrubbed Pocatello clean, numbers of nightmare and magic, late songs in love with Reba and vowels—his lifelines that hooked and landed himself and his own for his book.

But if a new fixed star
resurrects Bill's words who labored and excelled, not even
Chaucer's or Ovid's accomplishment—"Joves woll me stellyfye"—
will revise electrodes, jail, and death at fifty.

Bill Trout is incorrigible, like the recidivist blacksnake,
sparrow, and high water that turn and return in April's
versions—cycles of the same, fish making fish—

“unless,”

Bill dying, shrivelled and absolved, wrote on a yellow
pad: “Jesus who walked from the tomb has made us a place.”