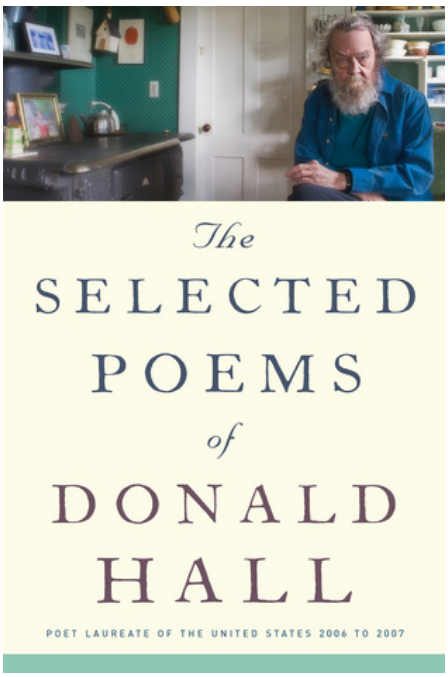

The Selected Poems of Donald Hall

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Former poet laureate Donald Hall selects the essential work from a moving and brilliant life in poetry.

Long-Listed for the 2016 National Book Award

Donald Hall was an American master, one of the nation's most beloved and accomplished poets. Here, in his eighties, having taken stock of the body of his work—rigorous, gorgeous verse that is the result of seventy years of "ambition and pleasure"—he strips it down.

The Selected Poems of Donald Hall reflects the poet's handpicked, concise selection, showcasing work rich with humor and eros and "a kind of simplicity that succeeds in engaging the reader in the first few lines" (Billy Collins).

From the enduring "My Son My Executioner" to "Names of Horses" to "Without," Donald Hall's best poems deliver "a banquet in the mouth" (Charles Simic) and an "aching elegance" (*Baltimore Sun*). For the first-time reader or an old friend, these are, above all others, the poems to read, reread, and remember.
"However wrenching [Hall's poems] may be from line to line, they tell a story that is essentially reassuring: art and love are compatible, genius is companionable, and people stand by one another in the end" (*New York Times Book Review*).

The Selected Poems of Donald Hall Details

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From Reader Review The Selected Poems of Donald Hall for online ebook

mwpm says

It is a lost road into the air.
It is a desert
among sugar beets.
The tiny wings
of the Spitfires of nineteen forty-one
sink under mud in the Channel.

Near the road a brick pillbox
totters under a load of grass,
where Home Guards waited
in the fogs of the invasion winter.

Good night, old ruined war.

In Poland the wind rides on a jagged wall.
Smoke rises from the stones; no, it is mist.

- **An Airstrip in Essex, 1960**, pg. 7

* * *

Then the knee of the wave
turned to stone.

By the cliff of her flank
I anchored,

in the darkness of harbors
laid-by.

- **"Reclining Figure"**, pg. 13

* * *

It discovers by night
what the day hid from it.
Sometimes it turns itself
into an animal.
In summer it takes long walks
by itself where meadows
fold back from ditches.

Once it stood still
in a quiet row of machines.
Who knows
what it is thinking?

- **The Poem**, pg. 20

* * *

Pale gold of the walls, gold
of the centres of daisies, yellow roses
pressing from a clear bowl. All day
we lay on the bed, my hand
stroking the deep
gold of your thighs and your back.
We slept and woke
entering the golden room together,
lay down in it breathing
quickly, then
slowly again,
caressing and dozing, your hand sleepily
touching my hair now.

We made in those days
tiny identical rooms inside our bodies
which the men who uncover our graves
will find in a thousand years,
shining and whole.

- **Gold**, pg. 35

* * *

She was all around me
like a rainy day,
and though I walked bareheaded
I was not wet. I walked
on a bare path
singing light songs
about women.

A blue wing tilts at the edge of the sea.

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

The tiny skeleton inside
remembers the falter of engines, the cry
without answer,
the long dying
into and out of the sea.

- **The Blue Wing**, pg. 42

* * *

Back of the dam, under
a flat pad

of water, church
bells ring

in the ears of lilies,
a child's swing

curls in the current
of a yard, horned

pout sleep
in a green

mailbox, and
a boy walks

from a screened
porch beneath

the man-shaped
leaves of an oak

down the street looking
at the town

of Hill that water
covered forty

years ago,
and the screen

door shuts
under dream water.

- **The Town of Hill**, pg. 62-63

* * *

Like an oarless boat through midnight's watery
ghosthouse, through lumens and shallows
of shadow, under smoky light that the full moon
reflects from snowfields to ceilings, I drift
on January's tide from room to room, pausing
by the wooden clock with its pendulum that keeps
the beat like a heart certainly beating, to wait
for the pause allowing passage
to repose's shore - where all waves halt
upreared and stony as the moon's Mycenaean lions.

- **Moon Clock**, pg. 71

* * *

it is a snail
that hesitates on a hedge
under eucalyptus

it is a fist
it is a wooden propeller

it is an accurate nose
like an adding machine
powered by perfect electricity
yet it has no cord
it does not run on batteries

it is an observatory
for observing moons and planets
I watch it
revolve

it is a birchbark canoe
Abenakis paddle

it is the egg
of a demonstrable bird
do not sit on this nose
it might hatch

- **Nose**, pg. 93

* * *

You think that their

dying is the worst
thing that could happen.

Then they stay dead.

*

In a week or ten days
the snow and ice will melt
from Graveyard Road.

I'm coming! Don't move!

- **After Three Years**, pg. 109

* * *

After she died I screamed,
upsetting the depressed dog.
Now I no longer
address the wall
covered with photographs,
nor call her "you"
in a poem. She recedes
into the granite museum
of JANE KENYON 1947-1995.

Nursing her I felt alive
in the animal moment,
scenting the predator.
Her death was the worst thing
that could happen,
and caring for her was best.

I long for the absent
woman of different faces
who makes metaphors
and chops onions, drinking
a glass of Chardonnay,
oiling the wok, humming
to herself, maybe thinking
to herself, maybe thinking
how to conclude a poem.
When I make love now,
something is awry.
Last autumn a woman said,
"I mistrust your ardor."

This winter in Florida

I loathed the old couples
my age who promenaded
in their slack flesh
holding hands. I gazed
at young women with outrage
and desire - unable to love
or to work, or to die.

Hours are slow and weeks
rapid in their vacancy.
Each day lapses as I recite
my complaints. Lust is grief
that has turned over in bed
to look the other way.

- **Ardor**, pg. 123-124

Jenna says

A nicely trim (<200-pp.) verse collection spanning the decades-long career of New Hampshire's best-known living poet, heavily autobiographical, largely inward-looking, meditative, and fundamentally traditional in its reliance on straightforward narrative as a vehicle for quiet epiphanies about death and the cycle of the seasons. If you're looking for, I dunno, scintillating wordplay or exciting formal experimentation or risky political or philosophical engagement, then this may not be the book for you (although, for the formalists out there, there is some rather interesting work in nonce forms and also in syllabics toward the end). This book would most satisfy the desires of a reader in search of a contemporary American analogue of Wordsworth or Hardy (Hardy as poet, not Hardy as novelist): much could be learned from Hall about mourning, about the farming life, about the land. I personally bought this book in the hopes that it might help me better understand New Hampshire, and I think it does do that -- in many of the poems I saw resonances with the personalities of some of the people I have met here.

This poem (not really representative of the book as a whole) made me laugh:
https://www.poeticous.com/donald-hall...

Marcia says

Reading *The Selected Poems of Donald Hall* took me to a place where the bones of New England were exposed with love and dignity. Familiar mountain names conjured up post card pictures in my mind, but the words of the poet gave personality to those pictures. “Ox Cart Man” took me full circle in that man’s life. “Old Timer’s Day” reminded me of a very special Number Nine. And, finally, “Love Is Like Sounds” left me this:

Love is like sounds, whose last reverberations

Hang on the leaves of strange trees, on mountains
As distant as the curving of the earth
Where the snow hangs still in the middle of the air.

Poet Laureate of the United States from 2006 to 2007, Donald Hall, now in his late eighties, handpicked this selection of his poems for inclusion in this collection. He says, “A friend insists that no one should publish a poem written after eighty. I hope I wrote good things, young and old, but my best work came in my early sixties. Over the years, I felt my poems gradually diminish. I lost my powers as everyone does. It was frustrating at first, but finally I accepted the inevitable. How could I complain after seventy years of ambition and pleasure?”

This collection shows no diminishing of this poet. It is ambitious and a pleasure to read.

Shawn Thrasher says

Donald Hall looks crazy on the cover of this book. Not serial killer crazy, but crazy like an artist, crazy like he'd be dangerous to know and talk to, he'd expand your mind, he'd confuse you with beautiful words, he'd lead you down precarious adventurous paths you weren't expecting to trod.

His poems are like that too. When you read poetry, some poems are complicated. Sometimes that is a good thing. Sometimes it is not. Some poems sing. Some poems prod. Some poems plod. Some poems are not right for that time but need to age, like wine or cheese, to be appreciated later. Hall's poetry encompasses all of that.

Hall's wife died, and for five years, that's all he wrote about. Those poems are excruciatingly sad. They are difficult and complicated. They will make you weep. They will make you angry and ask why. They will remind you of deaths you have known, and deaths you will know, and your own impending death.

He writes about other things too. Happy things, and nature things. Sex. The past. "Names of Horses" (which is one of my favorite poems in the collection). Aging ("to grow old is to lose everything. Aging, everybody knows it. Even when we are young." That's powerful stuff).

"Storms stop when they stop, no sooner, leaving the birches glossy." That's so true, it hurts.

His afterwards is the most excellent kind of prose, a poet's life distilled beautifully into paragraphs. Don't skip it.

Nathan Albright says

This collection of poems is properly a "best of compilation" of poems from a celebrate contemporary poet and the husband of the late poet Jane Kenyon, to whom some of these poems are dedicated. As someone who is no stranger to reading collections of poetry [1], I found this book to be an excellent one. There is considerable interest in the fact that this poetry captures a long span of the career of the poet, where the poems begin with a clear rhyme and meter and move on to more experimental forms with free verse and then

end in a more conventional format, showing a great deal of change over time, even if that change ended up being more cyclical in nature. For those who want an introduction to the work of this noted poet, although he not one I have ever come across before, this book is certainly a good way to do that, and may even encourage the reader to check out some of the poet's previous collections of poetry that gave him the stature to be a poet laureate of the United States. He may be no William Stafford, but few people are.

In terms of the body of work here, this collection of poems is a bit less than 150 pages long in total. The poet even helpfully explains his approach at the end of the book in his Postscriptum, the way he writes about his obsessions (like death, sex, nature, and the quirkiness of human interactions) and that like many poets he likes to write in the early morning hours. The poems themselves are a wide gambit. Some of them are highly quotable and a few of them are deeply reflective, running the gamut from a meta reflection on poetry as well as snow to poems showing the glory of lovemaking or the way that affairs are immensely destructive to one's well-being as well as the quality of one's relationships. Some of the poems even reflect a view of a vengeful and just God executing his wrath on a disobedient world, which is quite a striking contrast. Many of these poems, though, dwell on death and decay and the ravages of time and memory, which suits this melancholy and autumnal/wintry poet well. You will not appreciate this book very well if you want sunny and cheery poems, but if you want darker and more reflective poems, this will definitely do the job.

A great deal of the appeal of this book is likely to be from readers of poetry who are fond of Jane Kenyon and want to see how her other half lives. The poet reflects on how after her untimely and early death to leukemia at 47 that he wrote nothing about her death for a period of about five years and that she and him were the first readers of each other's poetry in a deeply collaborative process. Not being particularly familiar with the works of Jane Kenyon, I found them of interest in the way that they showed the author as a human being of deep feeling, but those readers who are interested in the relationship between writers will find much of interest here in that regard. To be sure, the relationship between these two poets is not nearly as dramatic as that between the late Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, who later became poet laureate of Great Britain for his troubles, but the book is certainly one that can be celebrated for the context it has in the relationship between poets and those around them, for this is a poet who certainly draws from his own life in crafting his poems to an admirable degree.

[1] See, for example:

https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...

https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...

https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...

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https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...

Cooper Renner says

Perhaps the very strongest poems here are the rhymed and metered elegies to Jane Kenyon, inspired by the poems Thomas Hardy wrote in the wake of his first wife's death.

Pam ?Because Someone Must Be a Thorn? Tee says

If it's hard to review books in a way that provides help to those who might want to buy them-- or not. It's near impossible to do the same with a book of poems. A collection of poems can vary so much, and poetry like wine can be pleasing to one person and leave another frowning. Poems are so very personal. So what can I tell you...

Donald Hall has written all kinds of poems during his long life. Some for children, some for adults. This book is for adults. It's a collection from the many stages of his life. The first poem is about the birth of a child. There are poems of aching sadness stemming from the death of his beloved wife. And there are words just about the normal things, of days on a farm.

Besides saying that this collection is not for children, I think the most useful thing I could tell you is that these poems are accessible. They aren't obtuse or stubborn about giving up their meaning. And if you are like me and like poetry but read it very seldom, I think this little volume would be a nice addition to your shelves.

Kay says

Since I normally don't read poetry, one has to consider this when reading this review. I read this because of my enjoyment of one of Donald Hall's prose books and simply read this out of curiosity. Some of the poems I really enjoyed and others I just found absurd. Considering he's one of the masters of poetry, this doesn't speak well of my appreciation of poetry. However, it is my honest review.

Jeff says

Most all of us have, at one time or another tried to write poetry. I suspect that percentage is extremely high for the people who use a site like Goodreads. I have written poetry, I wrote one for my wife on Valentine's Day just recently. Sometimes I even think it's pretty good. Then, innocently, one picks up a book of the poetry of Donald Hall. It is like being a decent player on your high school team and suddenly trying to play in the NBA. Not only are you outclassed, but you see how much talent the best in the world have.

In this collection of Hall's work there is nary a piece that is not meaningful. Some of these poems though, it is something that a person like you or me could no more accomplish than, using that same example, could my 5'6" son dunk a basketball.

Inevitably, the most meaningful poems here are those that he wrote during the sickness and after the death of

his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon. In " Letter With No Address" he describes for his departed wife his days, his schedule, and how he is getting on. Writing of the weather, their neighbors, but also in several stanza's wondering about where she, or her spirit, might be. Truly moving.

In " Weeds and Peonies " he describes her garden the summer after she dies. Memories of her flood him as he watches the flowers grow and yet also suffer from the lack of her special attention.

The short " After Three Years " features this

You Think hat their
Dying is the worst
Thing that could happen

Then they stay dead.

And in the lengthy " Kill the Day " her death is torturous to him. After a year he can no longer write to her as if she is still there. He writes :

Whatever the measure of joy in the day's day
no pleasure carries with it one part in ten million
of agony's vastation in loss and abandonment

Thankfully the collection also features other works from happier times. " Christmas Eve in Whitneyville " is an exquisite reflection by a man in his sixth decade as he returns to his boyhood home to celebrate Christmas. Memories of the past flood to him

" The Days " is a remarkable piece in which he sits in a chair and realizes ten years have passed since another time he did so.

Suddenly he has the idea that thousands and thousands of his
days lie stacked into the ground like leaves

The passage of time is reflected in " Kicking the Leaves" . In this remarkable piece he remembers this activity at various points of his life, visiting his Grandparents as a boy, in college, and now at the old farm in his fifth second year, realizing he now has surpassed his Father who died at this same age.

" The Day I Was Older " also finds Hall reflecting on his Father and Mother. He writes:

Last night at supper time I outlived my Father, enduring
the year, month, day, hour, and moment
when he lay back on a hospital bed in the guest room

And then continues .....

.....Now I have waked
More mornings to frost whitening the grass,
read the newspaper more times, and stood more times
My hand on a doorknob without opening the door.

This, as I review it, becomes even more treasured a collection in my mind. I think it shall be five stars.

Christopher says

When asked what kinds of poems he wrote, Donald Hall replied his poems were about "Love, death, and New Hampshire." I loved his poems about the first two subjects.

This self-curated collection from Hall (who died recently in late June 2018) is wonderful, if of sometimes limited relatability. His most moving poems regard the death of his wife and his struggle with that. In everything from the small routines he no longer takes part in or his attempts to find solace in other women (always temporary), his ability to delve into the nooks and crannies of life.

Hall writes beautifully and powerfully of mourning and regret. Struggling with the loss of his wife, with old age, and with the realization of the same, in an afterword he says that most people think poets do their best work while young, but he thinks his best work occurred in his 60s. I can't disagree.

Ken says

I am simpatico with most of Hall's interests: nature, New England, farms, cows, horses, food, history, gardens, marriage, and death. There's a nice mix of styles, too, unlike some poets who write like one-trick ponies.

This book is a small selection of Hall's best according to Hall. Many of them are inspired by the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon. Granted, this is an unwanted Muse, but life deals randomly, and the God who giveth happiness takes it away just as quickly. Some of us are lucky, some of us unlucky, and some both.

Here's a meaty example of Hall's hallmark style:

Eating the Pig
BY DONALD HALL

Twelve people, most of us strangers, stand in a room
in Ann Arbor, drinking Cribari from jars.
Then two young men, who cooked him,
carry him to the table
on a large square of plywood: his body
striped, like a tiger cat’s, from the basting,
his legs long, much longer than a cat’s,
and the striped hide as shiny as vinyl.

Now I see his head, as he takes his place
at the center of the table,
his wide pig’s head; and he looks like the javelina
that ran in front of the car, in the desert outside Tucson,
and I am drawn to him, my brother the pig,

with his large ears cocked forward,
with his tight snout, with his small ferocious teeth
in a jaw propped open
by an apple. How bizarre, this raw apple clenched
in a cooked face! Then I see his eyes,
his eyes cramped shut, his no-eyes, his eyes like X’s
in a comic strip, when the character gets knocked out.

This afternoon they read directions
from a book: The eyeballs must be removed
or they will burst during roasting. So they hacked them out.
"I nearly fainted," says someone.
"I never fainted before, in my whole life."
Then they gutted the pig and stuffed him,
and roasted him five hours, basting the long body.

* * *

Now we examine him, exclaiming, and we marvel at him—
but no one picks up a knife.

Then a young woman cuts off his head.
It comes off so easily, like a detachable part.
With sudden enthusiasm we dismantle the pig,
we wrench his trotters off, we twist them
at shoulder and hip, and they come off so easily.
Then we cut open his belly and pull the skin back.

For myself, I scoop a portion of left thigh,
moist, tender, falling apart, fat, sweet.
We forage like an army starving in winter
that crosses a pass in the hills and discovers
a valley of full barns—
cattle fat and lowing in their stalls,
bins of potatoes in root cellars under white farmhouses.
barrels of cider, onions, hens squawking over eggs—
and the people nowhere, with bread still warm in the oven.

Maybe, south of the valley, refugees pull their carts
listening for Stukas or elephants, carrying
bedding, pans, and silk dresses,
old men and women, children, deserters, young wives.

No, we are here, eating the pig together.

* * *

In ten minutes, the destruction is total.

His tiny ribs, delicate as birds’ feet, lie crisscrossed.
Or they are like crosshatching in a drawing,
lines doubling and redoubling on each other.

Bits of fat and muscle
mix with stuffing alien to the body,
walnuts and plums. His skin, like a parchment bag
soaked in oil, is pulled back and flattened,
with ridges and humps remaining, like a contour map,
like the map of a defeated country.

The army consumes every blade of grass in the valley,
every tree, every stream, every village,
every crossroad, every shack, every book, every graveyard.

His intact head
swivels around, to view the landscape of body
as if in dismay.

"For sixteen weeks I lived. For sixteen weeks
I took into myself nothing but the milk of my mother
who rolled on her side for me,
for my brothers and sisters. Only five hours roasting,
and this body so quickly dwindles away to nothing."

* * *

By itself, isolated on this plywood,
among this puzzle of foregone possibilities,
his intact head seems to want affection.
Without knowing that I will do it,
I reach out and scratch his jaw,
and I stroke him behind his ears,
as if he might suddenly purr from his cooked head.

"When I stroke your pig’s ears,
and scratch the striped leather of your jowls,
the furrow between the sockets of your eyes,
I take into myself, and digest,
wheat that grew between
the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers.

"And I take into myself the flint carving tool,
and the savannah, and hairs in the tail
of Eohippus, and fingers of bamboo,
and Hannibal’s elephant, and Hannibal,
and everything that lived before us, everything born,
exalted, and dead, and historians who carved in the Old Kingdom
when the wall had not heard about China."

I speak these words
into the ear of the Stone Age pig, the Abraham
pig, the ocean pig, the Achilles pig,
and into the ears
of the fire pig that will eat our bodies up.

"Fire, brother and father,
twelve of us, in our different skins, older and younger,
opened your skin together
and tore your body apart, and took it
into our bodies."

James says

I was reading this collection before his death was announced and finished it now. It is a beautiful selection, culled by the poet himself, from the entirety of his career. Many of the poems center on his care-giving and ultimate loss of his beloved wife Jane Kenyon. A stunning introduction and survey of one of America's greatest poets.

Christine Zibas says

Now in his 80s, this former Poet Laureate claims he has lost his touch with poetry (although he is still writing prose...most recently a book of essays). He's lost a lot of other things along the way, including his wife at 47. Yet the imagery captured in his poetry assures his readers that much remains and much has been shared of his life through his carefully selected words.

In the Afterword that appears at the end of "The Selected Poems of Donald Hall" -- as well as in the November/December 2015 issue of "Poets & Writers" magazine -- when asked "What do you write about anyway?" Hall replies "love, death, and New Hampshire." Indeed, it is through his surrounding landscape (New Hampshire) that he is able to bring forth the deeper sentiments that linger just below the surface of a life.

Two of my favorites from this collection, "Kicking the Leaves" and "The Stump" seem to embody all that is the landscape, as well as family, memories, love, and death. It is through the language of trees, leaves, and the mountains that Hall best expresses his love, anxiety, despair, and coping skills. Many of the poems focus on the death of his wife and her absence. I must admit I tend to favor the ones that speak more of childhood clocks, Holsteins, and haying. For me, they present the wider epic vision of a life well lived.

In this collection, a survey of his entire career, Hall has selected what he thinks are his best, from a life of poetry that began when he was 12 and continued more than 60 years. This is a glimpse of a poet's life, but one that cuts deep and wide.

Rebecca says

Best selection of his poems, from Donald Hall himself. “Now that I’ll make no more poems, I want to collect a concise gathering of my life’s work.” Indeed, he has. As the book jacket states, “For the first time reader or an old friend, these are, above all others, the poems to read, reread, and remember.”
Some of my favorites are “Kicking the Leaves”, “Mount Kearsarge”, My Son My Executioner”. “Affirmation” brings a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes. This man has opened up a whole new world of poetry to me.

Kathleen Mickelson says

This is a book that I've read a little of each morning over the first half of this summer. That Donald Hall passed away when I was in the middle of the book was particularly poignant given that he wrote, in an essay at the end of this collection, about not making anymore poetry now in his old age. These poems are from a lifetime of work, of love and marriage and living in New Hampshire. They honor the miracle of the everyday, tease apart the complicated feelings of growing older and the losses that go with aging. These are poems to return to again and again, gleaning from them something new every time.
