



THE OLD LIFE

DONALD HALL



New Poems

THE OLD LIFE

Donald Hall



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THE
NIGHT
OF
THE
DAY

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Cool October, Monday night. I waited for kickoff
at nine o'clock as the long day declined
when I turned older than my dark-haired father
ever got to be. I leaned back sleepy in my chair
as the Dallas Cowboys kicker approached the tee
and was startled to hear a pickup in the drive.
At the door I found Larry Lamorte, agitated
and pointing backward down dark Route 4.
"Dawn!" he shouted. "Dawn! There's something
in the road! Heifers! Bulls!"

Looking past him
into the moonless night, I saw bulky forms
that moved heavily on blacktop, as incongruous
as battleships on Eagle Pond. Larry's old Datsun
shuddered as he apologized, "Sorry not to help.
I promised Earlene I'd watch that show about apes."

I stared through the dark at the creatures:
heifers? Bulls were unlikely. Through the dark
I watched their ruminant motion, black on black,
and thought: If a late night Plymouth hurried
over the hill at sixty-five, somebody could die.
Inside I woke Jane to telephone Peg Smith,
our constable who usually rounded up black Labs,

not Holsteins, and to wake our neighbors
downstreet. After I walked back out, approaching
cow shapes that hovered over macadam, I heard
Dave Perkins's door slam and watched father and son
walk toward me, black moving against blackness,
and heard David hallo through the silence,
"Whose heifers do they be?"

When David and I
were boys — and I visited for the summer, up
from Connecticut — all the old Route 4 farmers
kept a few cattle, raised one or two heifers,
and sitting on stools alongside runty Holsteins
squeezed out two cans of bluish milk a day;
the milk truck stopped at dawn. In return
for the old men's haying, milking morning and night,
hauling ice from the pond for summer's milk,
and raising field corn, H. P. Hood & Co.
mailed them a monthly check, sometimes as much
as twenty dollars. The summer I was thirteen,
my grandfather and I spent an August day chasing
two wild heifers that escaped from a pasture,
but tonight's skinny creatures were tame. Whose
could they be? Nobody raised cattle nowadays
in this valley of old pastures becoming woodlots
(houselots sometimes, and sometimes video
outlets) with only a few fields flat enough
for a tractor to work in; now, to break even,
you needed to milk fifty registered pedigreed
Holsteins — and borrow from Fleet to buy
a milking machine, a stainless-steel cooling tank,
a Macintosh computer, and a frontloader
to spread manure on three hundred hayable acres —

and still you worked sixteen hours;
or you labored all week at the mill to support
your addiction to Holsteins.

David and Paul and I
cowboyed the seven heifers from Route 4
to the field beside our barn where their ancestors
had chomped for a hundred years. Whose could
they be? I called my cousin Sherman Buzzle
— selectman, deer hunter, carpenter, pig raiser;
who knew every voter in Wilmot by name —
and woke him where he lived two miles away
in a white Cape with many sheds that our common
great-grandfather built, and asked him
if anybody nearby still kept a herd of cattle.
Sherman was curious. Right after I hung up
(Jane bundled herself into three sweaters
and came outside to help), Sherm's 4 x 4 GMC
maneuvered into the driveway, and he swaggered
to join us — forty years old, hitching green
workpants under his belly, burly or maybe fat
but strong — and peered through darkness
at loose heifers munching asters by the barn.

Then Peg Smith's new Ford braked at the margin
of the road with her flashers flashing,
and she heaved uphill to join us. Just behind,
her deputy Ned Buttrey parked his Plymouth van,
sparking another cadence, and approached
grinning with one tooth. Ned looked back
at Route 4's shoulder blinking on-and-off,
said, "Looks like quite some party," and laughed,
joining our circle.

We gossiped together,

mostly ignoring the heifers that mostly
ignored us back as they moseyed to browse.
Now I saw the cattle clearly enough: young,
not yet bulked-out, bony, old-style Holsteins.
Somebody driving down Route 4 saw car lights
pulsing; he braked, backed up, parked, turned
his flashers on, and joined us. Now we were eight,
but David said goodnight; he needed to load
his truck at five; and Paul went to high school,
David reminded us, who had left school at fourteen.
The quiet father and son walked home together.
I noticed how, not thinking of anybody watching,
they were holding hands.

Sherman listed neighbors
who kept cows: Bill Marcik across the pond,
who raised sheep for the wool that his wife Sally
spun and wove, kept a few decorator Holsteins;
but *seven* heifers? We agreed it couldn't be Bill.
Jane mentioned Willy DeLord; when she said his name,
everyone laughed. Sherman spoke common knowledge:
"Willy likes to fence the front of his pasture.
He never gets around to fence the back."
But Willy's disheveled hill farm straggled
on Ragged Mountain five miles north, too far
for Willy's heifers to wander. Peg had a thought:
"Maybe perhaps Ed Ek keeps cows?" Knowingly
Sherman nodded. "Penelope," he said. "But Penny
died on Ed last year November. Old age."
Ned remarked that Sherm remembered names of cows
even though they never voted, "or hardly ever."
We laughed and stomped our feet. The stranger

said maybe these cows were wild, like the bears
that came back to our woods after a hundred years.
I told him I liked the notion of feral cows
returning to this New Hampshire valley
of disappearances.

Then I went back inside
to telephone Bill Marcik, just to *do* something,
and Bill answered, "Well, let me see.
Mother and daughter were there at eight o'clock.
Want me go see? I'll take a look." I told him no;
I doubted even *his* two cattle could multiply
into seven so fast. "Do you have an idea
whose they might be?"

"Try Willy," Bill said.

Walking back, I heard the sound of stories
in a laugh that rose abruptly from the circle,
from pale faces over sweaters and down jackets
beside the barn — a laugh that ended a story
with gaiety's flare, like a wooden match striking
gold inside a stove. I said, "They're not Bill's.
Bill said try Willy." Nobody had an idea;
nobody fretted. Somebody started to tell the one
about the bull butting the vet that brought syringes.

Well, *I* fretted: "What do I *do* with them?"
Sherm offered: "Feed them poems. They tell
you've got extra. They tell you keep old bales
of poems stacked in the hayloft."

We kept a roof
over our tie-up, but no cows stirred under shingle
since my grandfather's heart gave out
thirty years ago. Did I want to wear overalls?

For a moment I milked the cattle of daydream
morning and night; but no: I knew how I wanted
to spend my day. I farmed in the summers of boyhood
and that was enough of farming.

But whose heifers
were they? I jogged inside to ring up
Willy DeLord, asleep five miles away or not.
When I told him who I was, and said I was sorry
to wake him, and mentioned the heifers,
Willy's doleful voice ascended to interrupt me:
"Ohhh, *darn*. Ohhh, *darn*. I'll be down — *darn!*
darn! — as soon as I find my pants."

With Willy
on his way, Jane and I alone could have kept
the heifers in place, but nobody wanted
this impromptu party to end; we felt giddy,
the way children do when something extraordinary
keeps them up past bedtime and rules are broken,
all rules are broken, as they are in Paradise.

Sherm told about plowing one February morning
at three o'clock as a snowstorm finished:
"I was scraping Jones's driveway up near Willy's
and saw the electric light in Willy's tie-up."
He found Willy sound asleep, snoring, his head
rising and falling on a Holstein's ribcage.
I remembered my grandfather's tales of Pete Butts,
the Willy DeLord of another day. Peter Butts
planted corn in August and stacked hay in his barn
mixed with snow: Pete's hay turned black, rotting
in his rotting loft, and he died in the poorhouse.

Peg Jones was telling how Willy's father

was a martinet of whitewashed tie-ups
and exact routines — while Willie can't sell his milk
because his barn would never pass inspection.
Sherm told how he and his brother Grant
took three days to muck out decades of cowshit,
black straw, and spider webs from Willy's tie-up
after H. P. Hood & Co. mailed its ultimatum.
"It took Willy one week to make it dirty as ever.
So Willy can't pay town taxes, July and December"
— he farms to feed his family: growing a garden,
churning butter the way his grandmother did,
feeding milk to pigs in order to smoke bacon,
slaughtering Holsteins to grind for hamburger —
"and every year in the fall, for taxes" (Sherman
said it aloud), "Willy sells another piece
of his daddy's farm."

No one spoke. Changing
the subject without changing it, Ned Buttrey
remembered how Peter Butts never cut stovewood
one winter, "so instead Pete burned old bed frames
that he hauled down from the attic, busted
rocking chairs, spinning wheels, picture frames,
and wooden chests that saved dead people's
frocks and union suits." He burned broken tables
enough to stock ten antique shops, or enough
to buy himself an oil furnace, but Pete
never thought of attic things as ANTIQUES FOR SALE.
He used up useless stuff, and the green captain's
chair his great-granddaddy dozed in burned hot,
real hot, in the rusted Glenwood kitchen range.
The last thing he burned that year — Peggy tells us;

all of us know these stories — was his outhouse.
Pete pulled it down with the nineteen twenty-four
John Deere Model D that he used for a tractor,
and sawed it up for the stove, ending
with the five-holed ancient plank, “which didn’t
smell too good when it burned, is what
they say.”

Each of us waited to add a story,
this storytelling night — it was so dark
we never saw each other’s faces except
when Sherman lit a Camel; we knew each face
by its voice’s shape — but before we told another,
Willy DeLord’s enormous rusting Buick
sang on its dying bearings into the driveway.
(Sherm took time to mention, dropping his voice,
that Willy never changed his motor oil.
“You know that row of wrecks behind his barn . . .”)
Then Willy bounced from his car, grinning, cringing
with apology, and groaning, “Gol darn it to heck!”
Victoria drove the car. Stepping out,
she followed Willy a pace behind, smiling faintly
to let you know it was Willy’s predicament,
not hers. (*Willy was hers.*) “Sorry we took so long,”
she said. “We couldn’t find Willy’s pants.”
In Victoria’s headlights we watched Willy, garlanded
with rope, creep up on his loitering creatures.
He wore pinstriped gabardine trousers, muddy black
wingtip shoes, brown suspenders that rounded up
over his belly, and a Sears workshirt with many darns.
Our circle tightened to watch him as he roped
his cattle one by one, tying quick knots

around each black and white neck, his bulky body agile and quick, until he hitched his heifers together and straightened up — smiling, puffing, and proud.

By now it was midnight, three hours after kickoff: no more traffic, which was good because Willy had to drive his cattle now five miles home, tapping their sluggard backs with a birch sapling. Would Willy repair his fence tonight? No, no. Maybe tomorrow his seven heifers would graze Route 4 again.

He waved goodbye, driving his cattle, as Victoria rolled the Buick three miles an hour behind him, headlights on bright to forewarn an oncoming car. Now Peggy, Ned, Sherm, and the stranger made goodbyes and headed to their machines; one by one, starters whirred, engines caught, headlights lit, flashers stopped flashing, and cars U-turned to vanish. Jane went inside, to bed and electric blanket.

Silence and darkness returned, blessed dark silence, interrupted again by Larry Lamorte's rusty Datsun crushing the driveway's gravel. "Dawn! Dawn! Dawn! Who belonged to them bulls?"

Then I had the night to myself. No moon, no stars, no trucks, no heifers, no friends, no stories, and no sound: Only dark fields and darker road, black on black, and I was alive, older than my dark-haired father ever got to be, sleepy, not wanting to sleep, happy, startled by happiness.

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THE
THIRTEENTH
INNING

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