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Here and Gone: New and Selected Poems

Donald Johnson

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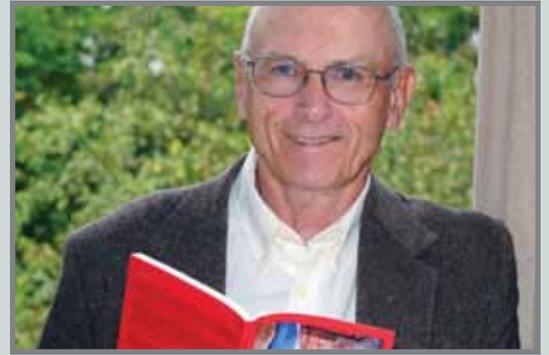
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Here and Gone: New and Selected Poems

Don Johnson



The Knee

They huddled around me, slow-handed
and quiet, light haloing their bodies blurred
by the two red pills the prep nurse
had brought to my room in a white cup.

Going down, blind-sided again,
I saw Norman Chung's face at my knee,
smiling as it did that afternoon
of my first college football game

twenty five years before in Salt Lake City—
until my first blown ligament
made me scream. The trainer said
it was stretched, and wrapped a wide Ace

Bandage around it. That night
I left half way-through *Psycho's* premiere,
unwinding the Ace in a doorway
on State Street, relieving the pressure.

So Norman Bates was part of it, too,
his face leering at me in white light,
the upraised fist at his ear
gripping the broad-bladed knife.

Purple and soft, the knee that the nurse
unwrapped the next morning wasn't mine,
but some sixty-year-old accountant's
delivered frozen by a crooked undertaker

moments before the operation.
Examining the sutured meat,
the surgeon said only, "Gooooood,"
like Karloff in *The Bride of Frankenstein*.

But now I'm being rehabilitated, helped
from one bubbling vat to another,
then onto the padded table where a sleeve
slipped over my bent leg inflates

and flattens, breathing in a rhythm
my lungs pick up. Electrodes
connected to my narrow-gauge scars
tighten and release the muscles

beyond my control. The transformer's
needle says today I took more current
than yesterday. The trainer tells me,
"You'll be a new man soon."

But when I step outside, the odor
of betadine and analgesic slips
through the door, and something
in the air, the failing light

takes me back to high school,
the door of the dank locker room
I left every evening after practice,
tired, sometimes sore, but hungry

and hard-bodied, clean as white tape,
assured of a ride home and a dinner
kept warm in the oven, certain
I would never grow old, never die.

(for Jim Connolly)

Muskrat

The muskrat, flattened
on the slough,
pushes upstream
toward the pool,
his wake defined
by sun low
enough to shadow
ripples. A heron,
all wings, neck,
legs, glides
just above its head
aiming downstream.
On parallel planes
they pass
just as a trout rises,
scribing a ring
that grows to encircle
the muskrat.
Two hooded ducks
bob beyond its compass,
mergansers,
their crest fans
luminous
against the dark green
water, the brown stalks
of weeds on the bank,
the night already
scaling trees
on the far side
of the island.

Two Hawks, A Body, A Torn Dollar Bill

That summer the rain lingered
at our back door
like the tramp
my mother had been kind to.
Cicadas returned from a time
I could not remember
and I tore up a dollar bill
while watching two hawks
torment a snake in mid-air
above the barn.

I had gone to the store
for sugar, but sneaked
into Gaten's Funeral home
to view my first dead body,
a woman whose husband
had shot her the day before.

She lay in a black dress,
her small white face
smooth as church music,
her mouth a ripe melon's
heart. I had just touched
the platinum curl below her ear
when a floorboard's creak
sent me home

where steam from my mother's
canning blistered the kitchen windows.
She did not know where I had been,
but paid me the dollar
for chores. Her hands,
rough as turkey wattles, glowed.

On the back step
I watched the hawks jostle
and collide above the weather
cock. In the seconds
between one's letting it go
and the other's taking it up
the snake writhed

in free fall. Cicadas pulsed
in the wood lot. And not
looking down, I fished
that dollar bill from my jeans
and spent it blindly on
the heavy air—for her, for her.

Hangover Fly

Tied to imitate
 a fat, white nymph,
 the hair of the dog
 dead now four years
 still takes in trout.
 Its wet bristles criss-
 cross my thumb like scars
 barbed wire inscribes
 when I shake loose
 the hook boned
 in the rainbow's jaw.

Afraid I couldn't do it
 after, I dug her grave
 in the rain
 while she watched,
 half-blind and deaf,
 nosing the slick clods
 until the clay stained
 her muzzle rusty.
 Her damp fur clotted
 on my hands when I
 lifted her into the truck.

All day I have followed
 my nymph downstream
 to where the river braids,
 spills to one sound,
 and disappears in shadows.
 My legs are gone
 to the cold. My backcast,
 collapsing in tired loops,
 threatens to bury my hook
 past the barb in the
 loose graying folds of my neck.



*Don Johnson taught in the English department at Bridgewater State College from 1971 until 1983 when he left to become chair of the English department at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, TN. After serving as chair for six years he returned to full-time teaching, and from 1992–1994 while on a leave of absence from ETSU, he taught at Iolani School in Honolulu. His poems and criticism have appeared in numerous journals, anthologies, and literary magazines. Other books include *Hummers, Knucklers and Slow Curves*, a collection of contemporary American baseball poems, and *The Sporting Muse*, a critical analysis of American poets and poetry about sport. He currently lives on seven acres along the bank of the trout-filled Watauga River in northeast Tennessee in a house that was originally constructed when George Washington was president.*