

Classic Poetry Series

Donald Justice
- poems -

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Donald Justice(12 August 1925 - 6 August 2004)

Donald Justice was an American poet and teacher of writing.

Life and Career

Justice grew up in Florida, and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Miami in 1945. He received an M.A. from the University of North Carolina in 1947, studied for a time at Stanford University, and ultimately earned a doctorate from the University of Iowa in 1954. He went on to teach for many years at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the nation's first graduate program in creative writing. He also taught at Syracuse University, the University of California at Irvine, Princeton University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Justice published thirteen collections of his poetry. The first collection, *The Summer Anniversaries*, was the winner of the Lamont Poetry Prize given by the Academy of American Poets in 1961; *Selected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1980. He was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 1991, and the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry in 1996.

His honors also included grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1997 to 2003. His *Collected Poems* was nominated for the National Book Award in 2004. Justice was also a National Book Award Finalist in 1961, 1974, and 1995.

Of Justice as teacher, his student and later colleague Marvin Bell said in a eulogy, "As a teacher, Don chose always to be on the side of the poem, defending it from half-baked attacks by students anxious to defend their own turf. While he had firm preferences in private, as a teacher Don defended all turfs. He had little use for poetic theory."

Of Justice's accomplishments as a poet, his former student, the poet and critic Tad Richards, noted that, "Donald Justice is likely to be remembered as a poet who gave his age a quiet but compelling insight into loss and distance, and who set a standard for craftsmanship, attention to detail, and subtleties of rhythm."

Justice's work was the subject of the 1998 volume *Certain Solitudes: On The Poetry of Donald Justice*, which is a collection of essays edited by Dana Gioia and

William Logan.

"There Is A Gold Light In Certain Old Paintings"

1

There is a gold light in certain old paintings
That represents a diffusion of sunlight.
It is like happiness, when we are happy.
It comes from everywhere and from nowhere at once, this light,
And the poor soldiers sprawled at the foot of the cross
Share in its charity equally with the cross.

2

Orpheus hesitated beside the black river.
With so much to look forward to he looked back.
We think he sang then, but the song is lost.
At least he had seen once more the beloved back.
I say the song went this way: O prolong
Now the sorrow if that is all there is to prolong.

3

The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work.
One day the sickness shall pass from the earth for good.
The orchard will bloom; someone will play the guitar.
Our work will be seen as strong and clean and good.
And all that we suffered through having existed
Shall be forgotten as though it had never existed.

Donald Justice

A Birthday Candle

Thirty today, I saw
The trees flare briefly like
The candles on a cake,
As the sun went down the sky,
A momentary flash,
Yet there was time to wish

Donald Justice

A Dancer's Life

The lights in the theater fail. The long racks
Of costumes abandoned by the other dancers
Trouble Celeste. The conductor asks
If she is sad because autumn is coming on,
But when autumn comes she is merely pregnant and bored.
On her way back from the holidays, a man
Who appears to have no face rattles the door
To her compartment. How disgusting, she thinks;
How disgusting it always must be to grow old.
Dusk falls, and a few drops of rain.
On the train window trembles the blurred
Reflection of her own transparent beauty,
And through this, beautiful ruined cities passing,
Dark forests, and people everywhere
Pacing on lighted platforms, some
Beating their children, some apparently dancing.
The costumes of the dancers sway in the chill darkness.
Now sinking into sleep is like sinking again
Into the lake of her youth. Her parents
Lean from the rail of a ferryboat waving, waving,
As the boat glides farther out across the waves.
No one, it seems, is meeting her at the station.
The city is frozen. She warms herself
In the pink and scented twilight of a bar.
The waiter who serves her is young. She nods assent.
The conversation dies in bed. Later,
She hurries off to rehearsal. In the lobby,
Dizzy still with the weight of her own body,
She waits, surrounded by huge stills of herself
And bright posters announcing events to come.
Her life—she feels it closing about her now
Like a small theater, empty, without lights.

Donald Justice

A Map Of Love

Your face more than others' faces
Maps the half-remembered places
I have come to I while I slept—
Continents a dream had kept
Secret from all waking folk
Till to your face I awoke,
And remembered then the shore,
And the dark interior.

Anonymous submission.

Donald Justice

Absences

It's snowing this afternoon and there are no flowers.
There is only this sound of falling, quiet and remote,
Like the memory of scales descending the white keys
Of a childhood piano- outside the window, palms!
And the heavy head of the cereus, inclining,
Soon to let down its white or yellow-white.

Now, only these poor snow-flowers in a heap,
Like the memory of a white dress cast down...
So much has fallen.
And I, who have listened for a step
All afternoon, hear it now, but already falling away,
Already in memory. And the terrible scales descending
On the silent piano; the snow; and the absent flowers abounding.

Donald Justice

American Sketches

CROSSING KANSAS BY TRAIN

The telephone poles
Have been holding their
Arms out
A long time now
To birds
That will not
Settle there
But pass with
Strange cawings
Westward to
Where dark trees
Gather about a
Water hole this
Is Kansas the
Mountains start here
Just behind
The closed eyes
Of a farmer's
Sons asleep
In their work clothes

POEM TO BE READ AT 3 A.M.

Excepting the diner
On the outskirts
The town of Ladora
At 3 A.M.
Was dark but
For my headlights
And up in
One second-story room
A single light
Where someone
Was sick or
Perhaps reading
As I drove past

At seventy
Not thinking
This poem
Is for whoever
Had the light on

Donald Justice

Anonymous Drawing

A delicate young Negro stands
With the reins of a horse clutched loosely in his hands;
So delicate, indeed, that we wonder if he can hold the spirited creature
beside him
Until the master shall arrive to ride him.
Already the animal's nostrils widen with rage or fear.
But if we imagine him snorting, about to rear,
This boy, who should know about such things better than we,
Only stands smiling, passive and ornamental, in a fantastic livery
Of ruffles and puffed breeches,
Watching the artist, apparently, as he sketches.
Meanwhile the petty lord who must have paid
For the artist's trip up from Perugia, for the horse, for the boy, for
everything here, in fact, has been delayed,
Kept too long by his steward, perhaps, discussing
Some business concerning the estate, or fussing
Over the details of his impeccable toilet
With a manservant whose opinion is that any alteration at all would spoil it.
However fast he should come hurrying now
Over this vast greensward, mopping his brow
Clear of the sweat of the fine Renaissance morning, it would be too late:
The artist will have had his revenge for being made to wait,
A revenge not only necessary but right and clever --
Simply to leave him out of the scene forever.

Donald Justice

Banjo Dog Variations

Tramps on the road: floating clouds. OLD CHINESE POEM

1

Agriculture and Industry
Embraced in public on a wall—
Heroes in shirt-sleeves! Next to them
The average man felt small.

2

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
By Vassar girls surrounded.
They harmonized expertly; oh,
Their little true hearts pounded.

Joe went on smiling.

3

I thought I saw what Trotsky saw,
A friendly cossack wink;
And then his friends brought down their clubs.
Christ, what would Trotsky think!

4

Train had just slowed for the crossing when
Out from the bushes jumped a hundred men.
With baseball bats and iron bars
They persuaded us back onto the cars.

5

And out of dirty fists sometimes
Would bloom the melancholy harp.
Then low-low-low on the gon-doh-lah
We swayed beneath our tarp.

And far lights moving in and out of rain.

6

What you do with the Sunday news
Oh, citizens of the great ruffraff,
Is you put the funny papers in your shoes.
It gives the feet a laugh.

7

We read our brothers' shirts for lice
And moved around with the fruit,
Went north to Billings for the beets
And had three good days in the jail at Butte.

8

We chalked our names on red cliffsides,
High up, where only eagles dwelled.
Each time a big truck went by below,
The earth trembled like a woman held.

9

And we passed fields of smoking stumps
Where goats sometimes or ponies grazed.
Abandoned tractors stood against the sky
Like giant fists upraised.

10

But if we bent our knees it was
To drink from a creek's rust-colored slime,
And splash our chests with it, and rub our eyes,
And wake into another world and time.

11

Let us go then, you and me,
While the neon bubbles upward ceaselessly
To lure us down back streets and alleyways,
Where we may wander and be lost for days.

Many days and many hours.

12

I miss the smell of the ratty furs
And saturday night cologne and beer,
And I miss the juke and the sign that read:
NO POLICE SERVED HERE.

13

Off Mission, wasn't it? The old
White Angel Breadline, where we met?
You had just come west from Arkansas,
But the rest of it I forget.

A cup of coffee; afterwards a hymn.

14

Once we stood on a high bluff,
Lights fanning out across the bay.
A little ragged band of Christs we were,

And tempted—but we turned away.

15

And didn't I see you Saturday night,
After the paycheck from the mill,
Bearing a pot of store-bought lilies home,
One budding still?
Ah, oh, my banjo dog!

Donald Justice

Bus Stop

Lights are burning
In quiet rooms
Where lives go on
Resembling ours.

The quiet lives
That follow us—
These lives we lead
But do not own—

Stand in the rain
So quietly
When we are gone,
So quietly . . .
And the last bus
Comes letting dark
Umbrellas out—
Black flowers, black flowers.

And lives go on.
And lives go on
Like sudden lights
At street corners

Or like the lights
In quiet rooms
Left on for hours,
Burning, burning.

Submitted by C.K.

Donald Justice

Counting The Mad

This one was put in a jacket,
This one was sent home,
This one was given bread and meat
But would eat none,
And this one cried No No No No
All day long.

This one looked at the window
As though it were a wall,
This one saw things that were not there,
This one things that were,
And this one cried No No No No
All day long.

This one thought himself a bird,
This one a dog,
And this one thought himself a man,
An ordinary man,
And cried and cried No No No No
All day long.

Donald Justice

Extraits

The Man Closing Up,' from 'Night Light' (1967),

would make his bed,
If he could sleep on it.
He would make his bed with white sheets
And disappear into the white,
Like a man diving,
If he could be certain
That the light
Would not keep him awake,
The light that reaches
To the bottom.

our vision of life's journey: from 'Sestina on Six Words by Weldon Kees'

There is no way to ease the burden.
The voyage leads on from harm to harm,
A land of others and of silence.

'The Miami of Other Days'

The winter streets an orchestra of horns
And gods slept under tabernacle tents
That sprang up overnight on circus grounds
Like giant toadstools yearning for respectability.

In a portrait of himself at age seven he writes :

sometimes he would squat among the foul weeds of the vacant lot,
Waiting for dusk and someone dear to come
And whip him down the street, but gently, home.

'Poem to Be Read at 3 A.M.'

Excepting the diner
On the outskirts
The town of Ladora
At 3 A.M.
Was dark but

For my headlights
And up in
One second story room
A single light.

A more recent poem on the Great Depression shows his cynical side:

Agriculture embraced Industry,
Mammothly, on public walls.
Meanwhile we camped out underneath
Great smiles on billboards fading.

How shall I speak of Doom, and ours in special,
But as of something altogether common ?

Donald Justice

Hell

R. B. VAUGHN speaks:

"After so many years of pursuing the ideal
I came home. But I had caught sight of it.
You see it sometimes in the blue-silver wake
Of island schooners, bound for Anegada, say.
And it takes other forms. I saw it flickering once
In torches by the railroad tracks in Medellín.
When I was very young I thought that love would come
And seize and take me south and I would see the rose;
And that all ambiguities we knew would merge
Like orchids on a word. Say this:
I sought the immortal word."
So saying he went on
To join those who preceded him;
and there were those that followed.

Donald Justice

Henry James At The Pacific

-- Coronado Beach, California, March, 1905

In a hotel room by the sea, the Master
Sits brooding on the continent he has crossed.
Not that he foresees immediate disaster,
Only a sort of freshness being lost --
Or should he go on calling it Innocence?
The sad-faced monsters of the plains are gone;
Wall Street controls the wilderness. There's an immense
Novel in all this waiting to be done.
But not, not -- sadly enough -- by him. His
talents,
Such as they may be, want a different theme,
Rather more civilized than this, on balance.
For him now always the recurring dream
Is just the mild, dear light of Lamb House falling
Beautifully down the pages of his calling.

Donald Justice

In Bertram's Garden

Jane looks down at her organdy skirt
As if it somehow were the thing disgraced,
For being there, on the floor, in the dirt,
And she catches it up about her waist,
Smooths it out along one hip,
And pulls it over the crumpled slip.

On the porch, green-shuttered, cool,
Asleep is Bertram that bronze boy,
Who, having wound her around a spool,
Sends her spinning like a toy
Out to the garden, all alone,
To sit and weep on a bench of stone.

Soon the purple dark must bruise
Lily and bleeding-heart and rose,
And the little cupid lose
Eyes and ears and chin and nose,
And Jane lie down with others soon,
Naked to the naked moon.

Donald Justice

In Memory Of The Unknown Poet, Robert Boardman Vaughn

But the essential advantage for a poet is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

T. S. ELIOT

It was his story. It would always be his story.
It followed him; it overtook him finally—
The boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

Probably at the end he was not yet sorry,
Even as the boots were brutalizing him in the alley.
It was his story. It would always be his story,

Blown on a blue horn, full of sound and fury,
But signifying, O signifying magnificently
The boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

I picture the snow as falling without hurry
To cover the cobbles and the toppled ashcans completely.
It was his story. It would always be his story.

Lately he had wandered between St. Mark's Place and the Bowery,
Already half a spirit, mumbling and muttering sadly.
O the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

All done now. But I remember the fiery
Hypnotic eye and the raised voice blazing with poetry.
It was his story and would always be his story—
The boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

Love's Stratagems

All these maneuverings to avoid
The touching of hands,
These shifts to keep the eyes employed
On objects more or less neutral
(As honor, for time being, commands)
Will hardly prevent their downfall.

Stronger medicines are needed.
Already they find
None of their stratagems have succeeded,
Nor would have, no,
Not had their eyes been stricken blind,
Hands cut off at the elbow.

Donald Justice

Men At Forty

Men at forty

Learn to close softly

The doors to rooms they will not be

Coming back to

Donald Justice

Men At Thirty

Thirty today, I saw
The trees flare briefly like
The candles upon a cake
As the sun went down the sky,
A momentary flash
Yet there was time to wish

Before the break light could die
If I had known what to wish
As once I must have known
Bending above the clean candlelit tablecloth
To blow them out with a breath

Donald Justice

Nostalgia And Complaint Of The Grandparents

Les morts
C'est sous terre;
Ça n'en sort
Guère.
LAFORGUE

Our diaries squatted, toad-like,
On dark closet ledges.
Forget-me-not and thistle
Decalcomaned the pages.
But where, where are they now,
All the sad squalors
Of those between-wars parlors?—
Cut flowers; and the sunlight spilt like soda
On torporous rugs; the photo
Albums all outspread ...
The dead
Don't get around much anymore.

There was an hour when daughters
Practiced arpeggios;
Their mothers, awkward and proud,
Would listen, smoothing their hose—
Sundays, half-past five!
Do you recall
How the sun used to loll,
Lazily, just beyond the roof,
Bloodshot and aloof?
We thought it would never set.
The dead don't get
Around much anymore.

Eternity resembles
One long Sunday afternoon.
No traffic passes; the cigar smoke
Curls in a blue cocoon.

Children, have you nothing
For our cold sakes?
No tea? No little tea cakes?
Sometimes now the rains disturb
Even our remote suburb.
There's a dampness underground.
The dead don't get around
Much anymore.

Donald Justice

Nostalgia Of The Lakefronts

Cities burn behind us; the lake glitters.
A tall loudspeaker is announcing prizes;
Another, by the lake, the times of cruises.
Childhood, once vast with terrors and surprises,
Is fading to a landscape deep with distance—
And always the sad piano in the distance,

Faintly in the distance, a ghostly tinkling
(O indecipherable blurred harmonies)
Or some far horn repeating over water
Its high lost note, cut loose from all harmonies.
At such times, wakeful, a child will dream the world,
And this is the world we run to from the world.

Or the two worlds come together and are one
On dark, sweet afternoons of storm and of rain,
And stereopticons brought out and dusted,
Stacks of old Geographics, or, through the rain,
A mad wet dash to the local movie palace
And the shriek, perhaps, of Kane's white cockatoo.
(Would this have been summer, 1942?)

By June the city always seems neurotic.
But lakes are good all summer for reflection,
And ours is famed among painters for its blues,
Yet not entirely sad, upon reflection.
Why sad at all? Is their wish so unique—
To anthropomorphize the inanimate
With a love that masquerades as pure technique?

O art and the child were innocent together!
But landscapes grow abstract, like aging parents.
Soon now the war will shutter the grand hotels,
And we, when we come back, will come as parents.
There are no lanterns now strung between pines—

Only, like history, the stark bare northern pines.

And after a time the lakefront disappears
Into the stubborn verses of its exiles
Or a few gifted sketches of old piers.
It rains perhaps on the other side of the heart;
Then we remember, whether we would or no.
—Nostalgia comes with the smell of rain, you know.

Donald Justice

October

Summer, goodbye.
The days grow shorter.
Cranes walk the fairway now
In careless order.

They step so gradually
Toward the distant green
They might be brushstrokes
Animating a screen.

Mist canopies
The water hazard.
Nearby, the little flag lifts,
Brave but frazzled.

Under sad clouds
Tow white-capped golfers
Stand looking off, dreamy and strange,
Like young girls in Balthus.

Donald Justice

Ode To A Dressmaker's Dummy

*Papier-mache body; blue-and-black cotton jersey cover. Metal stand.
Instructions included.*
-- Sears, Roebuck Catalogue

O my coy darling, still
You wear for me the scent
Of those long afternoons we spent,
The two of us together,
Safe in the attic from the jealous eyes
Of household spies
And the remote buffooneries of the weather;
So high,
Our sole remaining neighbor was the sky,
Which, often enough, at dusk,
Leaning its cloudy shoulders on the sill,
Used to regard us with a bored and cynical eye.

How like the terrified,
Shy figure of a bride
You stood there then, without your clothes,
Drawn up into
So classic and so strict a pose
Almost, it seemed, our little attic grew
Dark with the first charmed night of the honeymoon.
Or was it only some obscure
Shape of my mother's youth I saw in you,
There where the rude shadows of the afternoon
Crept up your ankles and you stood
Hiding your sex as best you could?--
Prim ghost the evening light shone through.

Donald Justice

On A Painting By Patient B Of The Independence State Hospital For The Insane

1

These seven houses have learned to face one another,
But not at the expected angles. Those silly brown lumps,
That are probably meant for hills and not other houses,
After ages of being themselves, though naturally slow,
Are learning to be exclusive without offending.
The arches and entrances (down to the right out of sight)
Have mastered the lesson of remaining closed.
And even the skies keep a certain understandable distance,
For these are the houses of the very rich.

2

One sees their children playing with leopards, tamed
At great cost, or perhaps it is only other children,
For none of these objects is anything more than a spot,
And perhaps there are not any children but only leopards
Playing with leopards, and perhaps there are only the spots.
And the little maids that hang from the windows like tongues,
Calling the children in, admiring the leopards,
Are the dashes a child might represent motion by means of,
Or dazzlement possibly, the brilliance of solid-gold houses.

3

The clouds resemble those empty balloons in cartoons
Which approximate silence. These clouds, if clouds they are
(And not the smoke from the seven aspiring chimneys),
The more one studies them the more it appears
They too have expressions. One might almost say
They have their habits, their wrong opinions, that their
Impassivity masks an essentially lovable foolishness,
And they will be given names by those who live under them
Not public like mountains' but private like companions'.

Donald Justice

On The Death Of Friends In Childhood

We shall not ever meet them bearded in heaven
Nor sunning themselves among the bald of hell;
If anywhere, in the deserted schoolyard at twilight,
forming a ring, perhaps, or joining hands
In games whose very names we have forgotten.
Come memory, let us seek them there in the shadows.

Donald Justice

Pantoum Of The Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on,
Without end and with little apparent meaning.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on
We managed. No need for the heroic.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.
I don't remember all the particulars.
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows
Thank god no one said anything in verse.
The neighbors were our only chorus,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
What audience would ever know our story?
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the actual world.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
We did not ourselves know what the end was.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.
People like us simply go on.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

Anonymous submission.

Donald Justice

Poem

This poem is not addressed to you.
You may come into it briefly,
But no one will find you here, no one.
You will have changed before the poem will.

Even while you sit there, unmovable,
You have begun to vanish. And it does not matter.
The poem will go on without you.
It has the spurious glamor of certain voids.

It is not sad, really, only empty.
Once perhaps it was sad, no one knows why.
It prefers to remember nothing.
Nostalgias were peeled from it long ago.

Your type of beauty has no place here.
Night is the sky over this poem.
It is too black for stars.
And do not look for any illumination.

You neither can nor should understand what it means.
Listen, it comes with out guitar,
Neither in rags nor any purple fashion.
And there is nothing in it to comfort you.

Close your eyes, yawn. It will be over soon.
You will forge the poem, but not before
It has forgotten you. And it does not matter.
It has been most beautiful in its erasures.

O bleached mirrors! Oceans of the drowned!
Nor is one silence equal to another.
And it does not matter what you think.
This poem is not addressed to you.

Donald Justice

Sadness

1

Dear ghosts, dear presences, O my dear parents,
Why were you so sad on porches, whispering?
What great melancholies were loosed among our swings!
As before a storm one hears the leaves whispering
And marks each small change in the atmosphere,
So was it then to overhear and to fear.

2

But all things then were oracle and secret.
Remember the night when, lost, returning, we turned back
Confused, and our headlights singled out the fox?
Our thoughts went with it then, turning and turning back
With the same terror, into the deep thicket
Beside the highway, at home in the dark thicket.

3

I say the wood within is the dark wood,
Or wound no torn shirt can entirely bandage,
But the sad hand returns to it in secret
Repeatedly, encouraging the bandage
To speak of that other world we might have borne,
The lost world buried before it could be born.

4

Burchfield describes the pinched white souls of violets
Frothing the mouth of a derelict old mine
Just as an evil August night comes down,
All umber, but for one smudge of dusky carmine.
It is the sky of a peculiar sadness—
The other side perhaps of some rare gladness.

5

What is it to be happy, after all? Think
Of the first small joys. Think of how our parents
Would whistle as they packed for the long summers,
Or, busy about the usual tasks of parents,
Smile down at us suddenly for some secret reason,
Or simply smile, not needing any reason.

6

But even in the summers we remember
The forest had its eyes, the sea its voices,
And there were roads no map would ever master,
Lost roads and moonless nights and ancient voices—
And night crept down with an awful slowness toward the water;
And there were lanterns once, doubled in the water.

7

Sadness has its own beauty, of course. Toward dusk,
Let us say, the river darkens and look bruised,
And we stand looking out at it through rain.
It is as if life itself were somehow bruised
And tender at this hour; and a few tears commence.
Not that they are but that they feel immense.

Donald Justice

Sestina: Here In Katmandu

We have climbed the mountain.
There's nothing more to do.
It is terrible to come down
To the valley
Where, amidst many flowers,
One thinks of snow,

As formerly, amidst snow,
Climbing the mountain,
One thought of flowers,
Tremulous, ruddy with dew,
In the valley.
One caught their scent coming down.

It is difficult to adjust, once down,
To the absense of snow.
Clear days, from the valley,
One looks up at the mountain.
What else is there to do?
Prayer wheels, flowers!

Let the flowers
Fade, the prayer wheels run down.
What have they to do
With us who have stood atop the snow
Atop the mountain,
Flags seen from the valley?

It might be possible to live in the valley,
To bury oneself among flowers,
If one could forget the mountain,
How, never once looking down,
Stiff, blinded with snow,
One knew what to do.

Meanwhile it is not easy here in Katmandu,
Especially when to the valley
That wind which means snow
Elsewhere, but here means flowers,

Comes down,
As soon it must, from the mountain.

Donald Justice

The Assassination

It begins again, the nocturnal pulse.
It courses through the cables laid for it.
It mounts to the chandeliers and beats there, hotly.
We are too close. Too late, we would move back.
We are involved with the surge.

Now it bursts. Now it has been announced.
Now it is being soaked up by newspapers.
Now it is running through the streets.
The crowd has it. The woman selling carnations
And the man in the straw hat stand with it in their shoes.

Here is the red marquee it sheltered under.
Here is the ballroom, here
The sadly various orchestra led
By a single gesture. My arms open.
It enters. Look, we are dancing.

Donald Justice

The Evening Of The Mind

Now comes the evening of the mind.
Here are the fireflies twitching in the blood;
Here is the shadow moving down the page
Where you sit reading by the garden wall.
Now the dwarf peach trees, nailed to their trellises,
Shudder and droop. You know their voices now,
Faintly the martyred peaches crying out
Your name, the name nobody knows but you.
It is the aura and the coming on.
It is the thing descending, circling, here.
And now it puts a claw out and you take it.
Thankfully in your lap you take it, so.

You said you would not go away again,
You did not want to go away -- and yet,
It is as if you stood out on the dock
Watching a little boat drift out
Beyond the sawgrass shallows, the dead fish ...
And you were in it, skimming past old snags,
Beyond, beyond, under a brazen sky
As soundless as a gong before it's struck --
Suspended how? -- and now they strike it, now
The ether dream of five-years-old repeats, repeats,
And you must wake again to your own blood
And empty spaces in the throat.

Donald Justice

The Tourist From Syracuse

<i>One of those men who can be a car salesman or a tourist from Syracuse or a hired assassin.

-- John D. MacDonald</i>

You would not recognize me.
Mine is the face which blooms in
The dank mirrors of washrooms
As you grope for the light switch.

My eyes have the expression
Of the cold eyes of statues
Watching their pigeons return
From the feed you have scattered,

And I stand on my corner
With the same marble patience.
If I move at all, it is
At the same pace precisely

As the shade of the awning
Under which I stand waiting
And with whose blackness it seems
I am already blended.

I speak seldom, and always
In a murmur as quiet
As that of crowds which surround
The victims of accidents.

Shall I confess who I am?
My name is all names, or none.
I am the used-car salesman,
The tourist from Syracuse,

The hired assassin, waiting.
I will stand here forever
Like one who has missed his bus --
Familiar, anonymous --

On my usual corner,
The corner at which you turn
To approach that place where now
You must not hope to arrive.

Donald Justice

To A Ten-Months' Child

Late arrival, no
One would think of blaming you
For hesitating so.

Who, setting his hand to knock
At a door so strange as this one,
Might not draw back?

Donald Justice

Variations On A Text By Vallejo

Me moriré en Paris con aguacero ...

I will die in Miami in the sun,
On a day when the sun is very bright,
A day like the days I remember, a day like other days,
A day that nobody knows or remembers yet,
And the sun will be bright then on the dark glasses of strangers
And in the eyes of a few friends from my childhood
And of the surviving cousins by the graveside,
While the diggers, standing apart, in the still shade of the palms,
Rest on their shovels, and smoke,
Speaking in Spanish softly, out of respect.

I think it will be on a Sunday like today,
Except that the sun will be out, the rain will have stopped,
And the wind that today made all the little shrubs kneel down;
And I think it will be a Sunday because today,
When I took out this paper and began to write,
Never before had anything looked so blank,
My life, these words, the paper, the gray Sunday;
And my dog, quivering under a table because of the storm,
Looked up at me, not understanding,
And my son read on without speaking, and my wife slept.

Donald Justice is dead. One Sunday the sun came out,
It shone on the bay, it shone on the white buildings,
The cars moved down the street slowly as always, so many,
Some with their headlights on in spite of the sun,
And after awhile the diggers with their shovels
Walked back to the graveside through the sunlight,
And one of them put his blade into the earth
To lift a few clods of dirt, the black marl of Miami,
And scattered the dirt, and spat,
Turning away abruptly, out of respect.

Donald Justice

Villanelle At Sundown

Turn your head. Look. The light is turning yellow.
The river seems enriched thereby, not to say deepened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

Or are Americans half in love with failure?
One used to say so, reading Fitzgerald, as it happened.
(That Viking Portable, all water spotted and yellow--

remember?) Or does mere distance lend a value
to things? --false, it may be, but the view is hardly cheapened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

The smoke, those tiny cars, the whole urban milieu--
One can like anything diminishment has sharpened.
Our painter friend, Lang, might show the whole thing yellow

and not be much off. It's nuance that counts, not color--
As in some late James novel, saved up for the long weekend
and vivid with all the Master simply won't tell you.

How frail our generation has got, how sallow
and pinched with just surviving! We all go off the deep end
finally, gold beaten thinly out to yellow.
And why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

Donald Justice

Women In Love

It always comes, and when it comes they know.
To will it is enough to bring them there.
The knack is this, to fasten and not let go.

Their limbs are charmed; they cannot stay or go.
Desire is limbo: they're unhappy there.
It always comes, and when it comes they know.

Their choice of hells would be the one they know.
Dante describes it, the wind circling there.
The knack is this, to fasten and not let go.

The wind carries them where they want to go.
Yet it seems cruel to strangers passing there.
It always comes, and when it comes they know
The knack is this, to fasten and not let go.

Donald Justice