

Poems for Donald Nicholl

*Donald Nicholl (1923–97), born in Halifax, Yorkshire, won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford but was called up in 1942 and served in the Far East. On returning to Oxford he was received into the Roman Catholic Church at Blackfriars, by Fr Richard Kehoe, in 1946. The following year he married Dorothy Tordoff, whom he had known since school days and who had found her own way to Catholicism. Conrad Pepler, Victor White and Iltud Evans, as well the library at Blackfriars, Oxford, the chaplaincy at 24 George Square, Edinburgh (where Anthony Ross became a friend), and Spode House, Staffordshire constituted the Dominican part of his world. A distinguished medievalist (his life of Archbishop Thurstan of York appeared in 1964), Donald taught at Edinburgh and Keele, before switching his interests to the twentieth century and to Russia in particular and moving to a chair in history and religious studies in California at Santa Cruz. His last academic post was as Rector of the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur, near Jerusalem. With *Holiness* (1981), *The Testing of Hearts* (1989), *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia* (1997) and *The Beatitude of Truth* (forthcoming), his guidance in the life of the spirit will not be forgotten.*

Donald

How describe the debt?

When one tear alone
warm on my cheek
seeps from the silence
of an interior grief,
and I know I am comforted
by an embrace
calm, unthreatening,
never requiring explanation;

and when, in the darkness
following small sounds and scents,
I stumble into the place
I can only, sparsely, recognise
as the next,
and know, retrospectively,
I was accompanied;

and when, utter without merit,
I feel mercy's breeze
flicking dry the damp tendrils
of neglected hair
and the resolution that has carried
softened into acceptance of grace

and thus joy;

then, oh then I see you
with discipline beyond my understanding
kneeling,
bowing your tall frame
supplicating for my waybread.

Hilary Elfick

1988

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Dear Donald

Dear Donald

These are the words which you would not let me speak
When, in that room, back bowed, for once
Cut low from those aspiring heights where always I had seen you
You summoned me for our goodbyes
And, as I struggled with the love and thanks which rose
Together in one breath for one to whom I owe so much
Your gaze, clear and steady as it always was, and your quiet words
Stilled me, seemed to say
As in all things the natural time will come

And so it has

Now, from four corners of my life, the memories return
How once, years ago, I walked with you, skipping childlike at your heels
As the long strides outpaced me, down a leafy lane
And, dazzled by the moment, giddy with ideas and tumbled thoughts
I spilled my noisy mind to your patient ears, heedless, veering on and off
The straight path you trod, with my oft-repeated "What I really think—"
And stepped before a car, and you, reaching out
Plucking me easily back, "Be careful of the road," you said
"Or you'll not think at all" and in that moment seemed
To anchor for a lifetime my scholarship in sense

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In those years

I wondered why you spurned what I most prized, as, ever distrustful
Of the picked argument, the need to conjure things from words
You headed off my clumsy overtures with "Is it warm today?" and
"Would you like some tea?" to bring me from philosophy to something
Nearer home. There, your children, lifted high and laughing
on your shoulders
Saved you from such deceits, and farmers they would be,
and foresters, you said

Yet, as I left, casual-seeming and with a smile you gave a compass-bearing
"Have you read such-and-such?", you said, and closed the door
And left me in unfamiliar silence, stopped the hard hammer of my mind
And instead, and for a lifetime, set seeds growing

Years later

Your loyalty undimmed, the letters with their "peace and love"
neatly inscribed

The conversations, slower now, and the writings
with their subtle patterns traced
Were landmarks in a far country. Then as the loss, bitter and haunting, struck
At my life, we met again, as if you sensed when to replenish where my life's spirit
Sweetened by your company, had drained. And there you sat, fresh from preaching
Holding the table's fond attention, gently mimicking, your eyes twinkling
With some mischief story as I came late to join you, and turned, asking me directly
How it had come to be. Now there were no words, just my pain and silence as
You watched, and then said simply "It happened"
and in that steady gaze freed me
Showing, for a lifetime, how to keep safe a private grieving

In later times

I saw you less, but still we talked, and I could see always in my mind
Your tall back, venerable as oak, arched down to the enquirer, your eyes sharp
Heard still in your voice, quavering now, the hesitations longer,
the words elusive
Your kindness and concern, the old fastidious taste for truth. Now again my life
Took fresh paths and uncertain I sought your help,
expecting after so many years
A token offering. And yet you called, wrote letters, tested my resolve
Giving the spur I needed, yet obliquely, as if we worked together for the aim
So that I never felt the debt, until that day when,
taking your leave, touching
With a smile the lofty plans and purposes
"It will be exciting for you" you said
Setting me joyful, leaving a lifetime's inspiration

Dear Donald

These are the words which you would not let me speak
Which, in that room, you saw was not their time
These are the lessons which I learned easily in your company
But never knew till later I had learned them
These—the commonsense that walks with intellect and is its guide
The gentle nurturing of thought which finds its own conclusion
The glad acceptance of love and loss alike finding no blame
And the courage to learn and move on—these were the gifts you gave me
Which I could not tell you as you died, and here today
These words, and thanks, and all I touch with them, are yours

Charles Evans

Breaking the Thread

Is this the last line I can write that you can read?
For still your days go drifting long and slow.
Your voice has weakened as you lie in bed.

Against the rasping sheets they turn your bones:
It's months since all we had to say was said
And still your days go drifting long and slow.

We long to ease the breaking of the thread.
The words I try to form you already know.
You read them smiling, see me in your head.

The loving that we have will never go.
Nothing now can change when life has fled.
And still your days go drifting long and slow.

I visualise you turning in your bed.
The words I try to form you already know.
It's months since all we had to say was said.

We long to ease the breaking of the thread.

Hilary Elfick
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