Turning time around: Donald Hall may not be producing any more new poems, but the eighty-six-year-old author of more than fifty books is still revising; still polishing

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Article Preview:

OLD age sits in a chair," Donald Hall writes in his new book, Essays After Eighty, "writing a little and diminishing." And so it's not a surprise on a late August afternoon to find the former U.S. poet laureate and author of more than fifty books, including twenty-two poetry collections, perched by a window of his New Hampshire home like a rare bird, resplendent with beard feathers, pecking at a manuscript. It's a hot, still day, and the poet who once barnstormed the country stumping for poetry, speaking out against the Vietnam War, is a few weeks shy of eighty-six--his once-notable height a rumor. Hall responds to a knock slowly, rising deliberately and moving to the door with a walker, like a man who has learned the hard way just how unreliable feet can be as they approach ninety.

He waves me through an immaculate New England kitchen into the living room, where it is easily ten degrees cooler. "It's the wonder of a porch," Hall says, and begins telling a story about his great-grandparents, who bought the house in 1865, and his grandparents, who ran its farm when he was a child. Those days have long passed, though, along with so much else. The chair Hall once burrowed into later burned when he dropped a cigarette. He sits down in its replacement. There's no car outside either; driving is something he's had to give up too. These forfeitures, and the fact that we are in a town without a store, lends the room a hermetic, plush silence. Andy Warhol prints surround us. There is a portrait with President Obama, who awarded Hall the 2010 National Medal of Arts. I wonder if I should have taken Hall's response to my interview request at face value--that he was "old as hell," that he would get tired.

But over the next few hours something remarkable happens. Hall turns time around. His face brightens, his voice deepens--he expands. Arms waving, eyes flashing with a performer's glee, he unleashes energetic and startlingly pitch-perfect impressions--of his longtime friend Robert Bly, of the sonorous-voiced Geoffrey Hill. Tale by tale the room peoples with ghosts. Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Adrienne Rich parade through his stories and recede. A different era of poetry, when anthologies could lead to fistfights, is briefly resurrected, a time when one could live by one's wits rather than on an adjunct's crumbs.

In many ways we have Robert Graves to thank for these hours of narrative fireworks. Half a century ago, Graves visited the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where Hall was then teaching, and encouraged the young poet to make a go of freelance writing. All it took, Graves instructed, was a twenty-minute nap and a bit of mercenary energy. All that was required, Graves said, was for the poet to use everything he had. Almost immediately after Graves departed Michigan, Hall began his first prose book--String Too Short to Be Saved: Recollections of Summers on a New England...

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Many more examples of the narrative device abound, including a 1927 comic strip describing a seven-word version—“For Sale, A Baby Carriage; Never Used!”—as “the greatest short story in the world.” The more that Haglund and Quote Investigator’s Garson O’Toole looked into the matter, the harder they found it to “believe that Hemingway had anything to do with the tale.” The legend of the bet and the six-word story grew: Arthur C. Clarke repeated it in a 1998 Reader’s Digest essay, and Miller mentioned it again in a 2006 book. He bought a phrase book and the sentences in the phrase book were short and he saw that the short sentences in the phrase book were good, because you said what you needed to say and nothing more. Two more days passed before Susan and I could be sure that we had searched every corner of the enclosure and accounted for the very last of the intruders. We followed that up with an inspection of the whole length of the fence and a reinforcement of all doubtful sections. Four months later they broke in again. This time a number of broken triffids lay in the gap. Our impression was that they had been crushed in the pressure that had been built up against the fence before it gave way, and that, falling with it, they had been trampled by the rest. It was clear that we should have to take new def Most of the book is about scientific discovery through the ages - for example, how we have developed from travelling everywhere by foot or horse to the invention of the motor car. It even goes on to discuss how we might travel in the future, as we explore other planets. Tom Flint is like any other 14-year-old boy until the day his scientist parents are taken by a criminal gang. In a thrilling race against time, Tom climbs mountains, dives to the bottom of the ocean and might even have to go to the moon to save them! This book is part of a series that helps young people develop their talents and includes books on drawing and film-making F Life On Screen – Ever wondered what it's like being a film star?