
PAGE-TURNER

POSTSCRIPT: PETER KANE DUFAULT (1923-2013)

By Brad Leithauser June 7, 2013



A marvellous poet whom you've probably never heard of died some weeks ago. His name was Peter Kane Dufault, and at the time of his death he was a couple of days short of ninety. On the face of it, his lack of renown is surprising, for he had some prominent supporters, including Marianne Moore and Richard Wilbur and Ted Hughes and Amy Clampitt. He was also embraced by Howard Moss, the poetry editor of *The New Yorker* from 1948 until 1987. Dufault published forty-four poems in the magazine, nearly all of them during Moss's tenure.



Dufault and I became friends in the nineties, after he objected strenuously to an adulatory review I wrote of a collection of his new and selected poems (more about this in a moment). It seems safe to say that he could be difficult to get along with. I remember him proudly telling me that another poetry editor—an admirer, like Moss—had described him as an “ornery cuss.” He radiated similar pride when explaining that he abandoned plans to attend a Harvard reunion (Class of ’47) after the authorities denied him permission to play his bagpipes at some ceremonial occasion. (It was easy for me to picture Peter, joyous mouth to the blowpipe, anarchically drowning out one speaker after another.)

It’s tempting to overstate the virtues of the recently dead, so I’ll resist declaring that, at the time of his death, Dufault was my favorite living American poet. But he was certainly among the five or six whose work counted most for me. In one way, he was preëminent: I came to think of him as the Pure Poet. If this was a romantic image, it was a romanticism he encouraged.

In the course of his life, Dufault was an amateur boxer, a fencing enthusiast, a tree skinner, a Washington lobbyist, a newspaperman, a housepainter, a fiddler, a dance caller, a combat airman in North Africa during the Second World War, and a Liberal Party candidate for Congress running on an anti-Vietnam War platform. What he wasn’t was an academic. This was fine by me. He seemed an antidote to what I saw as an emerging professionalization and careerism: poetry executives. I sometimes fear that we’ll soon enter a world where most creative young people will carry under their arm not only a poetry manuscript but an accompanying seven- or eight-page C.V., cataloguing every symposium and colloquium they’ve attended, every elementary-school classroom and open-mic bar and poetry-retreat picnic where they’ve recited their verse. Dufault

was, by contrast, a slapdash self-promoter. He was insouciant and catch-as-catch-can. His books cried out for a proofreader. His letters and postcards were a mad, winsome scramble of scribbles. I asked him once why he'd left out a lovely little poem, "Wintersong," from his selected works. (I'd found it in an old *New Yorker*.) "Guess it slipped my mind," he told me, contentedly.

I first came upon him in the seventies, in "The New Yorker Book of Poems." I fell hard for "In an Old Orchard," with its abandoned farm "still pitifully gathering all / windfalls onto its damp lap of graves," and looked up his two out-of-print collections, "Angel of Accidence" (1954) and "For Some Stringed Instrument" (1957). I didn't know then that Marianne Moore had been a fan, but affinities between them were easy to spot: Dufault, too, had an eerily sharp eye for the more idiosyncratic dwellers of the animal kingdom. Manx cats and tarsiers and mud-dauber wasps and mastodons inhabited his stanzas. He was like her, too, in being quite fanciful in his imagery (an old turkey with a head "like a loading-hook from a drowned galleon," a hefty starling seen as a "sampler-shape whose bid / to be a bird / suffers from thickness of the thread") while always respecting his creatures' fierce and inalienable reality: you never had the feeling that his was a denatured zoo, a menagerie of mere symbols. A reader was in danger of getting stung if he mistook one of Dufault's wasps for an emblem.

One of my favorites among his earlier poems is "On a Painting of a Mastodon in a Child's Picture Book." As the title promises, the vision is sketched in outsize outlines and bold primary colors: billion-year-old fossils, condors "wide as storms." But something subtler materializes when the mastodon itself rumbles into view, and we're asked to ponder

the groping divinity
that heaved that hulk,
heavy with ivory, forward
out of the black
cone forest and gray muskeg,
snows on his back.

Blake's tiger is treading nearby; Dufault has found a fresh way to ask what "immortal hand" could frame so fearful a symmetry. Both poets are transfixed by the notion of a deity experimenting with megafauna, exulting in the creation of staggeringly powerful animals.

He was constantly posing new theological questions, in an era often hostile to poetry of devotion. He looked hard at the natural world, then looked hard at its spiritual implications. "Amazon Ants" is a prime, creepy example. He offers us what might be called a micro-panorama, a sprawling canvas of a minuscule domain. Rhyming with a casual nimbleness, Dufault presents us with an insect army marching

...with a math-
'matic rigor
that is almost mineral
and makes human skin crawl
in a chill empathy. For
no one ant knows the path:

the horde is leaderless;
the foremost ants
are lost, and hesitate,
but then are caught up straight-
way in the blind advance
of those still in the press

and drawn along with them—
who in their turn
halt and are overrun....
But leave to Solomon
how all step to one stern,
if infinitesimal, drum,

though deaf to its bruit

The poem premises a universe where, at one end of a vast chain of being, the ants are real, and where, at the other, God is real; but more real than either is the reader—no Solomon—struggling to compass the sometime coldness and harshness and imperviousness of Creation.

In 1993, a book of selected poems, “New Things Come Into the World,” appeared, published by a small press, Lindisfarne, which normally didn’t publish poetry. At that time, I’d never met Dufault, though we’d exchanged some letters. I reviewed “New Things Come Into the World” in the *New York Review of Books*, writing with that special charged eagerness that comes of introducing a little-

known treasure to a potentially wide audience. I called him a “poet of vivid landscapes.” I called him “as fine an ‘animal poet’ as any American now going.” I compared him to Moore and Elizabeth Bishop and Clampitt and May Swenson. I confessed that, devotee that I was, I’d tracked down and photostatted every one of his poems listed in “The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature.” I concluded by saying that he had written at least four short poems that belonged in my own personal anthology of Best American Short Poems Since the Second World War.

“He’ll be thrilled,” various friends and editors told me. Peter wasn’t. He wrote a few days later, rather grudgingly, to thank me. He wrote a few days after that to question why he’d thanked me for a “Poetry Society piece” in which, he said, “I scarcely recognized myself.” He pointed out that “a poem doesn’t stand up much better to expert dissection and organ-removal than a frog does.” Mine was, he told me, the kind of “writing about poetry that drives me bonkers.” My obtuseness at one point had “astounded” him. I’d dismissed his political material. And so forth. He concluded by saying that “though the book only got one notice, I can say, without too much stretching the truth, ‘Well, it got mixed reviews.’ ”

Naturally, I spent a few hours mentally composing bitingly tart retorts on the subject of ingratitude. But the next day, with a cooler head, I took a higher road: I apologized if my review was imperceptive, but hoped he would appreciate that my heart, whatever the shortcomings of my head, was in the right place.

End of story—or so I thought. Many months later, on a lovely summer afternoon, I was home in South Hadley, Massachusetts, when somebody knocked on my front door. I didn’t recognize the

bearded, ragged-looking, handsome elderly man who stood on the front porch. He extended his right hand. “Peter Kane Dufault,” he said.

He’d been bird-watching at a nearby reservoir and decided to drop by unannounced. His plan could not have been purely impromptu, though, because he brought an apple pie. I invited Peter in. I liked him immediately. He was a gifted raconteur. He stayed for hours. We ate pie, and played some chess.

After that, I saw him now and then over the years. We exchanged occasional letters. He never again, as far as I know, catalogued my critical deficiencies. I think he saw my indifference toward his political poems as a moral failure rather than—my view—a reasonable aesthetic disagreement. But an amiable détente endured.

Though he slowed down, creatively, in his last decade, he continued to write beautiful poems, and did so, nobly, in an undeserved obscurity. Now and then I’d come upon someone, in person or in print, who shared my enthusiasm, and I’d feel that clandestine bond which comes with membership in a small high-minded club. I felt this keenly when I read Ted Hughes’s blurb for a later Dufault collection, “Looking in All Directions” (2000): “So fresh and new and itself... wonderful stuff. Snatches those uncatchable moments—like snatching a butterfly out of the air—then letting it go undamaged. So nimble and delicate.”

Dufault was my Pure Poet in this, too: you’d score few points with anyone—including, perhaps, the poet himself—by extolling his merits. There was nothing to be had here except enchantment.

He was never going to review your book, or serve on a prize committee that would later honor you, or write you a recommendation.

It's always a joy to encounter an unfamiliar poet whose poems speak to you as a confidant. But it is far more joyous when, as happened to me with Dufault, you find such a poet by instinct's indirection—not by way of an assignment or a friend's recommendation. Chanciness of this sort somehow feels fated. Sometimes poetry comes like a knock on the door. You rise from your chair and find it standing on your front porch. It extends its hand and, by way of identification, promisingly declares, "Peter Kane Dufault."

Brad Leithauser's most recent novel is "The Art Student's War." His collection of new and selected poems, "The Oldest Word for Dawn," has just been published. He is a frequent contributor to Page-Turner.

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