1961

Donald Hall

A Hundred Thousand Straightened Nails

When I was growing up, I spent every summer helping out on my grandparents' farm. My grandfather was a great storyteller and told me anecdotes to go with every face whose portrait hung in the farmhouse gallery, those long rows of silhouettes, daguerreotypes, tinted photographs and snapshots which my grandmother kept in the parlor and the sitting room. The portraits had names which I recognized on headstones when we visited graveyards. Though I loved the bright flowery borders and the white paint of the farmhouse, and though I loved our haying in the dry heat of the fields, I was always aware that New Hampshire was more dead than alive. Walking in the dense woods, I learned to be careful not to fall into the cellar holes.

If I was morbid, it was not my grandfather's fault. He was interested only in lively stories about the dead, and he lived so completely in the dramatic scenes of his memory that everything was continually present to him. My grandmother was occasionally elegiac, but not enough to influence me. When I was nine I saw my Great-Aunt Nannie, blind and insane, dying for one long summer on a cot in the parlor, yet my own lamentation for the dead and the past had begun even earlier. Many of my grandfather's stories were symptoms, to me and not to him, of the decay of New Hampshire; a story might include a meadow where the farm boys had played baseball, or a wood through which a railroad had once run.

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I found myself, too, taking some of the characters in his stories at a value different from his. So many of them lived a half-life, a life of casual waste. He often talked about Washington Woodward, who was a cousin of ours. I knew Washington well, yet my image of him was a mixture of what I had observed and what my grandfather had told me. The whole farm was composed of things which Washington had made or at least repaired, so there was no end of devices to remind my grandfather of a story about him. Most of them were funny, for Washington was eccentric, yet after I had finished laughing, even perhaps when I lay in bed at night and thought over what had happened in the day, the final effect of the stories was not comic. I turned Washington into a sign of the dying place. I loved him, and I could feel his affection for me. Yet when I thought of the disease that afflicted New Hampshire, I knew that my grandfather's face was the exception to disease. The face of sickness was the mouth and moving beard, the ingenious futility of Washington Woodward.

This was a paradox, for Washington hated corruption and spied it everywhere like a prophet. Yet unlike a prophet he retired from corruption to the hills, meditated it, and never returned to denounce it. He bought a few acres high up New Canada Road, on Ragged Mountain, in 1895. He lived there alone, with few forays into the world, for the more than fifty years until he died.

I have seen pictures of him, in the farmhouse gallery, taken when he was a young man. He was short and muscular of body, handsome and stern, with a full black mustache over a downcurved mouth. I remembered him only as old, for even in my first memories he must have been sixty. The image I retained had him bent nearly double from the waist, with quick bright eyes and his mouth jiggling his beard in an incessant monotone.

When Washington was young, my grandfather told me, he was already the misanthrope who would exile himself. He had been the youngest of eleven children in a family related to my grandmother. His father, everyone admits, was lazy and mean. Their house burned down, and the children were boarded with various relatives. Washington was only six but already embittered and even surly when he came to live with the Kenestons. My grandmother was a baby. He stayed until he was twelve, and he always looked back to those years as a golden age; my grandmother's family was the great exception to the misanthropic rule. To my grandmother, he was an older brother; when she nursed him

during illnesses late in his life, she was remembering someone who had been kind to her when she was as dependent as he had become.

He would never have left the Keneston house of his own will. When Washington was twelve, his father drove into the farmyard on his broken-down wagon and called for him until he came out of the barn where he had been wandering with little Katie. Washington knew the sort of man his father was, but he knew that sons obeyed fathers. When he had reached the wagon his father told him to lift a hundred-pound sack of grain out onto the ground, and then back into the wagon again. When he did it without straining, his father said, "You're big enough to work. Get packed up. You're coming home."

Washington ran away four years later and set up on his own as a hired hand and an odd-jobber. He was a hard worker and skillful. The best thing about him was his pride in good work. By the time he was twenty-five, he had repaired or built everything but a locomotive. Give him a forge and some scraps of old iron, my grandfather said, and he could make a locomotive too. I knew him to shoe a horse, install plumbing, dig a well, make a gun, build a road, lay a dry stone wall, do the foundation and frame of a house, invent a new kind of trap for beavers, manufacture his own shotgun shells, grind knives and turn a baseball bat on a lathe. The bat was made out of rock maple, and so heavy that I could barely lift it to my shoulders when he made it for my thirteenth birthday. The trouble was that he was incredibly slow. He was not interested in your problems, but in the problems of the job itself. He didn't care if it took him five weeks to shingle an outhouse that plumbing was going to outmode in a year. This was one outhouse that would *stay* shingled, although the shingles might protect only the spiders and the mother cat.

His slowness cost him money, but money did not matter to him. He did not even call it an abomination like drinking, cardplaying, smoking, swearing, lipstick and dancing; he simply did not think of it. He needed no more for supper than bread and milk. Did anyone else? If he didn't care about money, he cared about people sticking to their word; he cared about honor, whether it concerned his pay or the hour at which he was to finish a job. Once a deacon of the church asked Washington to fix the rickety wheels of a carriage. Washington told him it would be four dollars, and he spent six full days at the forge strengthening the wheels and adding supports until the axles would have carried five tons of hay, much less the deacon and his thin wife. But the deacon said, when the carriage was delivered, that four dollars was too much, and that three dollars was what the job was worth. Washington refused to take anything, and he never sat in his pew again, for if deacons cheated, churches were corrupt. He read his Bible by himself.

During all his years of solitude, he was extraordinarily sociable whenever he saw his family, as if the taciturnity he had assumed with his solitude was unnatural. He stored up, alone in his shack, acres of volubility which the sight of a relative discovered. If I remarked to him that an apple he had given me was a good apple, he might say, "Well, I remember; that apple came from the tree by the woodchuck hole in the northeast corner that leans toward the south; though it don't lean too much; down in that patch there; it's from a splice, that branch is, from a big tree, high as a house, on John Wentworth's land; his orchard behind his cowbarn beside the saphouse; well, the tree, old John Wentworth's been dead twenty years' tree, was always a good one for apples, big and meaty with plenty of juice to them; and one summer about 1919, no, 1920 I guess, I was working up to John's; I was fixing some sap pails had leaks and I shingled the icehouse, the back of it, where you couldn't see from the road but it was about gone; I'd done the front before and I told him the back would need doing; I was there as much as two months, ten weeks I guess; and it come apple time while I was there, and I helped him picking and he come up here and helped me; and I had my few trees up here, not so many as now, not half so many, as I reckon it, and one time I was mending a water pipe that fed the horse trough, it had come loose, and John didn't have no more solder, so I had to come all the way back to the shop; and as I was going I stopped to look at the tree, the big one, and I thought about asking John if I could splice off a limb as part pay; well, I never did get back that day because I saw a deer in the peas when I got here. . . ." And then he would tell how he waited for the deer and shot him, and what he had done with the pelt, and what John Wentworth had said to him when he asked for the limb, and how he had spliced it to his own tree, and on and on until, if the body had been strong enough, Washington would have talked out the whole contents of his mind. Scratch him anywhere and you touched his autobiography. Any detail was sufficiently relevant if it kept the tongue moving and the silence broken. My grandfather's many memories, on the other hand, were separated into stories with just enough irrelevant material of the past to keep them circumstantial; they had form, and you knew when he had come to a stopping point. Washington was a

talking machine capable of producing the recall of every sensation, every motive, of a lifetime; and all the objects of his world could serve him like Proust's *madeleine.*

It was not the past that interested him, but talking. If he had known about contemporary politics, he would have been willing to use it as his pretext for speech; but in the pursuit of independence he had cut himself off from everything but his daily sensations. The talking was the same when he was young and when he was old. When we visited him at his shack, he would invariably trot alongside the car or buggy as we left, jogging a hundred yards farther with the story he couldn't end. My mother remembers from her girlhood, and I from twenty-five years later, how my grandparents would go to bed while he was talking, and how he would drone on for hours in the dark. When he was old and sick, he would talk in his chair in the kitchen while they read in the living room. Sometimes he would laugh a little and pause, as he reached a brief resting space in his unfinishable monologue. My grandmother learned to say, "Is that so?" whenever there was a pause. My grandfather swore that she could do it in her sleep.

Washington always wore the same costume in the years I knew him. The only thing that ever differed about his appearance was his beard, for he shaved in the summer and let his hair grow for warmth in the winter. He wore heavy brown overalls, patched and stitched, and a lighter brown workshirt stitched so extensively that the cloth had nearly vanished under the coarse stitches; over these he wore a light, nondescript workcoat, and in winter a thick, ancient overcoat with safety pins instead of buttons. He often spent his evenings sewing by the light of a candle until his eyes hurt.

Washington had built his shack on the slope of Ragged Mountain on the western, downward side of New Canada Road, two miles up from U. S. 3 by the road, but half a mile as the crow flies. He had a small pasture for cattle, a hen yard, geese wandering loose, a good orchard of various apple trees and other northern fruits, and at various times he kept pigs, goats, ducks and a dog. His shack was small, and it had grown smaller inside every year. Layers of things saved grew inward from the walls until Washington could barely move inside it. A tiny path among the boxes and animal pelts led from the door to a cross path from an iron stove to a Morris chair. Washington slept upright in the chair every night.

If he found a board in a ditch as he walked home from the day's work, and if the board had a bent nail in it, he would hammer the nail out of the board with a rock and take it home. If the board would make kindling or if it was strong enough to build with, he would take it along too. He would straighten the nail with a hammer on the anvil at his lean-to shop and put it in a box with other nails of the same dimensions. He might have to move a dozen other boxes to find the right one, but he would know where it was. It wasn't that he was a miser, because he cared nothing for the money he saved by collecting used nails. And when he died he did not, like the misers reported in the newspapers, leave a hundred thousand dollars in the back of a mirror; he left a hundred thousand straightened nails. He saved the nails because it was a sin to allow good material to go to waste. Everyone knows the story about the box of pieces of string, found in an old attic, labeled "String too short to be saved."

Besides nails, Washington kept a complete line of hardware and parts: clasps, hinges, brackets, braces, hoe handles, axe heads and spare rungs for ladders. He also saved elk, moose, bear, beaver, fox and deer pelts. On the wall beside the door were his rifle and shotgun and boxes of shells and cartridges. He was a good shot and a patient hunter. Until he was old he shot a big buck every year and ate nothing but venison until the bones were bare. Once a year, in the early fall, he had my grandmother bake him a woodchuck in her big oven. Only when his legs were so bad that he did not dare to wait out an animal, for fear that he would not be able to move after being still, did the woodchucks and hedgehogs manage to eat his peas and his apples and in this way avenge their ancestors.

He ate one kind of food exclusively until he finished his supply of it. Often it would be nothing but oatmeal for a week. Again he would buy two dozen loaves of stale bread and eat nothing else until the last moldy crust was gone. I remember him eating his way through a case of corn flakes; and when the woodchucks had eaten his garden, one winter, he ate a case of canned peas. It was no principle with him, but simply the easiest thing to do. When he was old and sick, living a winter in the rocking chair in my grandmother's kitchen beside Christopher, the canary, he bought his own food and kept it separately, in a cardboard box beside him. At this time he had a run on graham crackers. He did not eat on any schedule, and sometimes my grandparents would wake up in the middle of the night to hear him gumming a cracker, his false teeth lost in the darkness of a Mason jar.

When he was younger he must have been nearly self-sufficient. For much of each year he would refuse outside jobs from anyone, unless my grandfather particularly needed a mowing machine fixed or a scythe handle made when the store was out of them. And often he wouldn't take any money from my grandfather, although my grandmother would try to pay him in disguise with shirts and canned vegetables and pies. To pay the taxes on his land he worked a few days a year on the county road gang, repairing the dirt roads that laced the hills and connected the back farms with the main road in the valley. For clothing he had his gifts, and I know that he once made himself a coat out of fur he had trapped. For food he had all the game he shot, and he kept potatoes and apples and carrots and turnips in a lean-to (the food covered with burlap a foot thick to keep it from freezing) beside his shack, and he canned on his small stove dozens of jars of peas, tomatoes, corn and wax beans.

When he took an outside job or made a little money by peddling patent medicines like Quaker Oil or Rawleigh's Salve, he might buy himself a candy bar or five postcards or a pad of paper, or he might give it away. When my mother and her sister were at college, they sometimes had a letter from Washington with a nickel carefully wrapped inside. The patent medicines were before my time, and my grandfather told me about them. Washington would occasionally fill a large basket with his vials and jars, cut himself a walking stick, and set out to peddle on the back roads. He would sleep in barns, barter for his food, and return after a week with a pocketful of change. A room on the second floor of the farmhouse was always full of cases marked in the trade name of a cough syrup or a tonic. Everyone in the family sniffed up drops of Quaker Oil to stop sneezing, or ate a few drops on a lump of sugar for coughing.

Washington worked hard at tending his trees and garden and animals, and when he was through with his chores he invented more work for himself. He spent considerable time and energy at what I could only call his hobby. He moved big rocks. His ingenuity, which was always providing him with the creation of new, usually trivial tools (tools which took him four days to make and which simplified a fifteen-minute job), invented a massive instrument of three tall pine logs and an arrangement of pulleys. It looked like the tripod of a camera, but the camera would have been as big as a Model A. By means of this engine, he was able to move huge rocks; I don't know how he moved the whole contraption after the rock was lifted, though when I was a boy I must have heard detailed descriptions of a hundred rock-moves. (I was another who learned to shut the door between his ears and his brain.) He moved any rock for whose displacement he could find an excuse: small boulders that obstructed his fields; rocks near the house whose appearance offended him; rocks beside the road into which a car might sometime, possibly, crash; rocks, even, in the way of other people's cows in other people's pastures. When he was old and couldn't use the machine any more, it weathered beside the front door of his shack, and when he died someone took it away for the pine.

It was the cows he was thinking of, not the farmers, when he moved rocks in a pasture. However seriously he meant it, he often indicated that, except for his family and one or two others, humanity was morally inferior to animals; at least to the animals which were, like his family, his own creatures. He had developed a gorgeous line of cattle, out of a combination of devotion and shrewd trading. It was when I knew him that he had Phoebe, the last beast that he truly loved. Phoebe was a Holstein, a prodigy among milkers and the only cow in the world who thought she was a collie dog. Treated like a house pet from birth, she acted like one with Washington. She came frisking to him when he called her, romped with him, and all but whined when she couldn't follow him into the shack and curl her great bulk at his feet. Washington fed her apples and peas in the pod while he ate stale bread. She slept on the other side of a plank wall from him, so that he could hear any irregularity in her breathing. He washed her every day. When she was old and lame, Washington invented a rig like his rock-mover to help her stand or lie down. He nursed her when she was sick, and he was caressing her when she died.

My grandfather told me about an earlier pet, Old Duke the ox. Washington taught Old Duke to shake hands and roll over. He made a cart and a sled which Old Duke could pull, and it would take him a whole forenoon to drive the two and a half miles from his shack to the farmhouse. The only time Washington ever showed romantic interest in a woman was when a young girl named Esther Dodge helped out at the farm one harvest. Washington paid court by asking Esther, a pretty red-cheeked country girl as my mother remembers her, to go for a ride behind Old Duke. Esther would only go if the girls, my ten-year-old mother and her younger sister Caroline, could come along, and they giggled all the way.

When Washington was seventy-eight, Anson Buck found him in a coma one morning when he came to deliver a package on his R.F.D. route. Anson carried him into the back seat and drove fourteen miles to

the hospital at Franklin, where they operated. When he recovered, he went back to his shack. One day the following December, my grandmother made some mince pies and decided to send one to Wash. She flagged down a young lumberman as he passed by in his blue 1934 Chevrolet and asked him to leave it off on his way up New Canada to work. He was back almost as soon as he left, saying, "He's looney. Old Wash is looney." After Great-Aunt Nannie, no such announcement was liable to surprise my grandmother. She called "Yoo-hoo" to the barn and told my grandfather what had happened. The lumberman drove them to the shack.

They found Washington sitting on the floor of his cabin between his sleeping chair and his cold stove, which my grandfather said hadn't been lit all night. Washington didn't seem to notice that they were there but kept on talking as they had heard him talk before they entered. What he said was incoherent at first, but they could tell that it was about building a road, about white hogs and about two ladies. He allowed himself to be helped over the thick snow into the Model A and driven back to the house.

Washington told his story for many days, over and over, until my grandparents finally understood its sequence. My grandfather told me all about it the next summer. The night before he was found, Wash said, he took a walk to look at a timber lot of my grandfather's north of his shack. (His legs were so bad that he never walked any farther than his well that winter; the timber was three-quarters of a mile away.) When he got there he saw a whole crowd of people working, though it was nearly dark, and they were cutting a big new road. They had bulldozers, which were white, and a big herd of white horses. He walked up to some of the people and tried to talk to them, but they acted as if they couldn't see him, and they were jabbering in a language he couldn't make out, but it wasn't Canuck. He walked away from the crowd and climbed a little rise, and when he looked down on the other side of the rise to a cleared field he saw about a hundred hogs, all pure white. In front of them were the biggest sow and the biggest boar he had ever seen, both pure white, and they were mating. Washington started to walk down the hill and he stubbed his boot on the nose of a horse that was sticking up through the snow. He and the horse fell in the snow, down and down, until the people lifted them up on the huge piece of chicken wire that was underneath the snow. Then two women among the people took him back to his cabin and stayed there all night with him. He

watched, all night long, the tips of their hats against the background of starlight from the cracks in the cabin walls. Though he asked them questions, they never answered.

The doctor came and listened to Washington and gave him morphine. When he woke up he seemed fine except that he kept on with his story. My grandfather told him that there was no road going into his timber lot, and Washington was only indignant. After a week he began to ask visitors about the road, and they all told him there wasn't any, and he stopped telling the story. In the spring he paid a boy with a flivver to drive him past the place so that he could see with his own eyes.

He never had delusions again. Perhaps he had left his cabin for water and had fallen in the snow when his legs failed him. Perhaps he had crawled for an hour in pain through all that whiteness back to his shack where he had talked to the boxes all night. By April he was back at his cabin again, and that summer he was eighty years old.

He died in a state nursing home. My grandfather and I went to see him a month before he died, and his cheeks were flushed above the white beard, and his eyes shone while he performed his monologue. He joked with us and showed us the sores on his legs. He displayed me to his nurses and to the silent old men in the room with him. It was a little like all the other times I had met him, yet seeing him ready to die I was all the more impressed by the waste of him — the energy, the ingenuity, the strength to do what he wanted — as he lay frail and bearded in a nightgown provided by the legislature. The waste that he hated, I thought, was through him like blood in his veins. He had saved nails and wasted life. He had lived alone, but if he was a hermit he was neither religious nor philosophical. His fanaticisms, which might have been creative, were as petulant as his break from the church. I felt that he was intelligent, or it would not have mattered, but I had no evidence to support my conviction. His only vision was a delusion of white hogs. He worked hard all his life at being himself, but there were no principles to examine when his life was over. It was as if there had been a moral skeleton which had lacked the flesh of the intellect and the blood of experience. The life that he could recall totally was not worth recalling; it was a box of string too short to be saved.

Standing beside him in the nursing home, I saw ahead for one moment into the residue, five years from then, of Washington Woodward's life: the shack has caved in and his straightened nails have rusted into

the dirt of Ragged Mountain; though the rocks stay where he moved them, no one knows how they got there; his animals are dead and their descendants have made bad connections; his apple trees produce small and sour fruits; the best built hayracks rot under rotting sheds; in New Hampshire the frost tumbles the cleverest wall; those who knew him best are dead or dying, and his gestures have assumed the final waste of irrelevance.

1963

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Birmingham City Jail
April 16, 1963

Bishop C.C.J. Carpenter, *Bishop* Joseph A. Durick,
Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, *Bishop* Paul Hardin,
Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, *The Rev.* George M. Murray,
The Rev. Edward V. Ramage, *The Rev.* Earl Stallings

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of gen-

There are essentially two versions of this historic response to eight white Alabama clergymen who published a newspaper letter earlier that January calling on King to end his policy of nonviolent resistance and allow the issue of integration to be handled in the courts. According to King, who was in jail for civil rights demonstrations, he began writing the letter "on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared" and continued it "on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty," and concluded it "on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me." King's open letter was first published in 1963 as a *pamphlet by the American Friends Committee and then in 1964 revised and collected by King for *Why We Can't Wait.* The first version, written spontaneously and under great pressure, better reflects the immediate occasion that inspired one of King's greatest persuasive efforts and was thus chosen for this volume.