

## COMMENTARY

John Updike

(1932-2009)

“Leaves” (1964)

An invitation to choose one’s best makes an occasion to squirm. Contrary to popular impression, writers, unlike pole vaulters, do not know when they have done their best--there is no clatter of tipped bamboo to tell them they have failed, no statistic in tomorrow’s paper to tell them they succeeded. We do our best with each piece; as with children no two look up at us with an identical face, and each demands separate treatment. Preferential treatment, indeed; and having satisfied ourselves that each pet has marched off past the mailbox with its hair as combed and its knickers as lint free as caring can make them, we can only wave good-bye bravely and turn to the inspirations still waiting to be turned outdoors.

So a self-nominated anthology like this becomes an opportunity to rectify the slights of a harsh and hasty world and put forward a shy child. “Leaves” has never been, to my knowledge, included in any volume save my own collection *The Music School*. It is in a mode of mine, the abstract-personal, not a favorite with my critics. One of them, reviewing *The Music School*, expressed impatience with my lace-making, so-called. Well, if “Leaves” is lace, it is taut and symmetrical lace, with scarce a loose thread. It was written after long silence, swiftly, unerringly as a sleepwalker walks. No memory of any revision mars my backwards impression of it. The way the leaves become the pages, the way the bird becomes his description, the way the bright and multiform world of nature is felt rubbing against the dark world of the trapped ego--all strike me as beautiful, and of the order of artistic “happiness” that is given rather than attained. The last image, the final knot of lace, is an assertion of transcendental faith scaled, it seems to me, nicely to the mundane.

Enough of such. My clinching reason for selecting this story is its shortness, which I thought might offer, first to the editor and then to the readers of this anthology, a pleasant respite amid the no doubt extensive masterworks of my contemporaries.

John Updike  
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