

# The New Criterion

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## Merle Slocum's .22

by Donald Hall

"I was twelve when my father gave me this .22 Mossberg carbine—hand-made, with a short octagonal barrel, stylish as an Indianfighter posing for a photograph. We ripped up Bokar coffeecans set into the sandbank by the track—competitive and companionable. He was a good shot, although his hands already trembled. Or I walked with my friend Paul who loved airplanes and wanted to be a pilot, and carried my rifle loosely, pointing it downward; I aimed at squirrels and missed. Later I shot woodchucks that ate my widowed mother's peas and Kentucky Wonders when I visited on weekends from college, or drove up from my Boston suburb, finding the gun in its closet behind the woodstove. Ten years ago my mother died; I sold up, and moved here with my work and my second wife, gladly taking my tenancy in the farmhouse where I intended to live and die. I was happy to come home; I used my .22 on another generation of woodchucks that ate cabbage, zucchini, and beans. One autumn an old friend from college stayed with us after a nervous breakdown: trembling from electroshock, depressed, suicidal. I wrapped the octagonal Mossberg in a burlap bag and concealed it under boards in the old grainshed. In our quiet house he strengthened and stopped shaking. When he went home I neglected to retrieve my gun, and the next summer woodchucks took over the garden. I let them. Our lives fitted mountain, creek, and hayfield.

Long days like minnows in the pond quickened and were still.  
When I looked up from Plutarch another year had passed.  
One Sunday the choir at our church sang Whittier's hymn  
ending with 'the still small voice of calm.' Idly I thought,  
'I must ask them to sing that one at my funeral.'  
Soon after, I looked for the .22 in the shed,  
half-expecting it to have vanished, but finding it  
wrapped intact where I left it, hardly rusted. I spent  
a long evening taking it apart and cleaning it,  
oiling it, loving the elegant rifle again;  
I thought of my father's hands shaking as he aimed it.  
Then I restored the Mossberg to its accustomed place  
in the closet behind the stove. At about this time  
I learned that my daughter-in-law was two months pregnant:  
It would be the first grandchild. One day I was walking  
alone and imagined a granddaughter visiting:  
She loved the old place; she swam in the summer pond with us;  
she walked with us in red October; she grew older, she fell  
in love with a neighbor, she married .... As I daydreamed,  
suddenly I was seized by a fit of revulsion:  
I thought: 'Must I go through all that again? Must I live  
another twenty years?' It was as if a body  
rose from a hole where I had buried it years ago  
while my first marriage was bleeding and thrashing to death.  
One night I was drunk and lost control of my Beetle  
off 128 near my ranchhouse. I missed a curve  
at seventy miles an hour and careened toward a stone wall.  
In a hundredth of a second I knew I would die;  
and, as joy fired through my body, I knew something else.  
But the car slowed itself on rocks and settled to rest  
between an elm and a maple; I sat breathing,  
feeling the joy leech out, leaving behind the torment  
and terror of my desire. Decades later, abruptly,  
in the house of contentment, I felt this affliction  
descend again and metastasize through my body.  
Today I drove ninety miles, slowly, seatbelt fastened,  
to North Andover and Paul's house where he lives flying  
out of Logan for United. I asked him to hide  
the firing pin of an octagonal .22.  
He nodded and took it from my hands without speaking.  
I cannot throw it away; it was my father's gift."

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**Donald Hall** was named Poet Laureate of the United States in 2006.

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