

## TWO POEMS



### *Donald Justice*

#### RALPH: A LOVE STORY

In what had been a failing music store  
A man named Flowers opened the first cinema  
In Moultrie. Ralph was the projectionist,  
At seventeen the first projectionist.  
And there was an old upright from the store  
On which the wife accompanied the action  
With little bursts of von Suppe and Wagner.

Ralph liked the dark of the projection booth;  
He liked the flickering images of the screen.  
And yet because he liked it all so well,  
He feared expulsion from this little Eden,  
Not so much feared as knew the day must come,  
Given his luck, when it would all run out,  
Which made the days more paradisaical still.

Margot, the daughter, twenty and unmarried—  
To tell it all quickly—seduced Ralph.  
She let him think he was seducing her.  
They used to meet in the projection booth,  
Embracing wordlessly but laughing too,  
Unable to suppress their self-delight.  
Time after time they had almost been caught.  
Then, as in novels, Margot became pregnant.

Sundays the cinema was closed.  
Ralph packed  
And slipped off to the depot about dusk.  
That evening from the train he watched with a kind of nostalgia  
The sparse pale farm-lights passing from his life  
And he understood nothing, only that he was young.  
Before the week was out he joined the navy.

Not that he realized it at the time,  
But those quick laughing grapplings in the dark  
Would be the great romance his life would know,  
Though there would be more women, more than he wanted  
Really, before it was all finished for him.  
And even in the last few years, working  
His final job, night watchman at a warehouse,  
He would be resting on a stack of lumber  
Towards morning, say, and there would come to him  
The faces of the stars before the stars  
Had names, but only dark-painted eyes, and hands  
That spoke the sign-language of the silent heart.

She wrote him over the first months two letters  
In care of his parents in another town.  
The envelopes were decorated boldly  
With home-drawn hearts, some broken, pierced by arrows.  
And the mother guessed the truth somehow and thought  
To spare the son by holding back the letters  
Until the time seemed right for him to have them.  
And when his tour of duty ended finally  
He opened them and read them and was sorry.  
It had been the happiness of his life.  
But he could not go back to it. He could not.

So it was gone, the way a thing will go  
Yet keep a sort of phantom presence always.  
He might be drinking with some woman, lying  
Beside her on a tourist cabin bed,  
When something would come ghosting back to him,  
Some little thing. Such paradise it had been!

And when it was all finished for him, at the end,  
In the small bedroom of his sister's house,  
Surrounded by his shelves of paperbacks—  
Westerns mostly, and a few private-eyes—  
Lying there on the single bed, half gone  
On Echo Springs, he could not call it back.  
Or if it came back it was in the form  
Of images in the dark, shifting and flashing,  
Badly projected, spooling out crazily  
In darkness, in a little room, and he  
Could not control it. It was like dying.  
No, it was dying, and he let it go.

“SONYA SITS AT THE PIANO, PRACTICING”

I

Sonya sits at the piano, practicing.  
She yearns for what does not exist, it seems,  
Something beyond all music; and to her  
The whole pathos of chromaticism seems  
A purely mechanical exercise.  
And yet she sighs and does not know why she sighs.

II

So at reunions, recognizing the songs,  
We are moved by the ancient sadness of our class.  
The singing spreads, spreads and becomes general.  
O ineluctable blues of the middle class!  
Softly we sing, and the more forgetful hum.  
*Time the River, Time the Destroyer! Yes, ho hum.*

III

Glorious to be away from the mill at last!  
On such a day the sky looks strangely poetic  
With all the sad poetry of chimney and of gable.  
To the young poet, of course, everything seems poetic—  
The clouds, the vast white Saturday afternoon,  
Yes, even the dusty mill-men tavern-bent at noon.