



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

July 2014

"The Fifth Box"

Donald Hall

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hall, Donald (2014) ""The Fifth Box"," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 55, Article 35.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol55/iss1/35>

For more information, please contact southern@usfca.edu.

The Fifth Box

DONALD HALL

"BE WITH ME when I die," Camille had told him, only two days earlier. From eleven at night until four in the morning David Bardo slept in brief spells beside her, waking every ten or twenty minutes to listen for her breathing. She had not spoken for twenty-four hours. Her eyes stayed open, wide and unblinking. Each time he woke, he heard the Cheyne-Stokes rhythm repeat itself: a long pause, a deep breath, three rapid shallow breaths, and a long pause. He looked past her to the bureau where the first of her boxes or assemblages rested. "A *real* one," Camille said when she finished it ten years ago. "It's not 'Cornell fucks Schwitters' anymore." The steady rhythm changed into rapid panting, David waited for her last breath, and knew it when it came. With his thumbs he pulled the lids down over her green eyes.

Because it was early, he decided not to telephone anyone. Everybody knew that Camille was dying. A week ago they had written her obituary together, and planned her cremation and memorial service: He would scatter her ashes in the meadow behind her studio. David sat looking at her white and whiter body. He needed to recognize and remember that Camille was dead. Died. She was *dead*, a skeletal body, a wasted bald woman fifty-five years old forever.

Dawn shaded into the room. He had been told to call the visiting nurse, when Camille died. She would ascertain death, and then the undertaker would arrive with gurney and hearse. At seven David dialed the number, and the machine gave him a menu. As he recorded his message a dim voice interrupted him. "I'll be there in half an hour, Mr. Bardo."

First there was something he needed to do. Two months ago, when she had been strong enough, Camille had worked half an hour a day in her studio. Each late morning, David would build a fire in her Jotul, and when the old shed was warm enough he would wrap Camille in coats and blankets, help her walk, and leave

her alone in a high chair at her workbench. She was making more boxes, tiny bizarre rooms furnished with bottle tops and broken glass and the world's debris.

One afternoon, four weeks ago, when he looked in on Camille after twenty minutes, she sat in her chair with her head on her bench. There would be no more boxes.

This morning he left her bedside and walked in cool dawn to open the shed, and turned on the glaring light that Camille had worked by. Here was her bench with its tubes of glue and paint, fragments of an eggshell and a goldfinch's feather. Against the wall were cubbyholes: a fishhook and pieces of yarn and a matchbook and rice and buttons and a toothpick and seashells and a thimble and pebbles.

On a long table across the room stood four finished boxes. They would be in the posthumous show. On her workbench stood the fifth unfinished box, with wallpaper striped on a wall, a wad of chewed gum, a seedpod, and a bird's egg among pencil marks where other objects would have gone. On the workbench, beside the box, he found an agate that looked like a glass eye, a battered doll, and the skull of a mouse. Camille had spoken of the new box six weeks ago, her pale face luminous. "You can't look at it now. Too far to go."

Now he looked. Although his hands trembled, he would do what Camille had asked him to do, when she could still speak. He lifted the hatchet—with which she had chopped wood to fit the narrow stove—and struck the fifth box and split it and split the splittings. Then he howled in a rage that woke the dog at the farm next door who howled and set other dogs howling. He took the ax to Camille's bench and cut deep wedges into it, the top too thick to split, smashed the tubes of paint and glue, chopped off a table leg, shattered the cubbyholes along the wall, and with the blunt head of the ax cracked the enameled iron of her stove.

He lapsed on the scrappy floor. The dog howled once more and fell silent.