What is the essence of caregiving? Donald Hall—a former New Hampshire and U.S. poet laureate—found out when his beloved wife, fellow poet Jane Kenyon, was dying of leukemia. He drew inspiration from his memories of the way his mother had cared for elderly relatives. From the tenderness of Kenyon’s nurses at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. And from poetry.

P oets are not practical souls, so the standard wisdom goes. But those who fall for that shibboleth have clearly never met Donald Hall. Few people have faced the death of a loved one—surely as practical a matter as life metes out—with Hall’s tender thoroughness. In 1995, his beloved wife of 23 years, fellow poet Jane Kenyon, died of leukemia. She was 47.

Thirteen years later, it remains a great solace to Hall, the immediate past U.S. poet laureate, that he was able to spend so much time caring for Kenyon while she was dying. “I could be with her all the time,” Hall says, “from 6:00 a.m. until 7:00 or 8:00 at night.”

Kenyon got much of her treatment at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, an hour’s drive

Nursing her I felt alive in the animal moment, scenting the predator.

— Donald Hall
From “Ardor”

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Text by Susan Salter Reynolds • Photographs by Jon Gilbert Fox

The Poetry of Caregiving

Both the rolltop desk that poet Donald Hall writes at (in longhand) and the house that he lives in (bought by his great-grandfather in 1865) evidence the patina of age.
from Eagle Pond Farm in Wilton, N.H.—home for the couple since 1976 and for members of Hall’s family since 1865. Her cancer was diagnosed in January of 1994, she was an inpatient at DHMC for a month of chemotherapy and returned home for an all-too-brief month of remission. Then, in March of 1994, the leukemia came back. A bone marrow transplant was her only treatment option. Hitchcock at that time did just autologous bone marrow transplants (using a patient’s own marrow after it’s been purged of cancer cells), but because Kenyon had acute lymphoblastic leukemia, her own marrow would not work. At the suggestion of Dr. Letha Mills, their Dartmouth oncologist, Kenyon got on the waiting list for a donor transplant at the Fred Durst marchant, nurse practitioner Diane Stearns, he explains Kenyon became very close to Mills and her assis-
sant, nurse practitioner Diane Stearns, he explains Kenyon became very close to Mills and her assistant, nurse practitioner Diane Stearns, he explains in his 2005 book, The Best Day, The Worst Day. Hall was touched by the fact that Mills made a house call while Kenyon was on her deathbed. And that both of her primary oncologists, Mills from Hitchcock and Dr. Kris Doney from Hutchinson, came to Kenyon’s memorial service.

At last a donor was identified in October of 1994, and the couple flew westward. Hall found an apartment in Seattle but spent all day, every day at the hospital with Kenyon, returning to the apartment only to sleep. When Kenyon entered the sterile cocoon of a laminar air flow room, she was separated from Hall by a thick curtain of plastic. Hall could touch her only by inserting his hands into heavy gloves built into the curtain. Even conversa-
tion was difficult because of noise from the fans that kept sterile air from entering Kenyon’s room.

Hall and her caregivers were worried that this isolation would be difficult for Kenyon, who had suffered from manic depression for many years. “The nurses in Seattle were also worried about me,” Hall admits. “They tried to make me go away for a few days. There was a magical thought I had that if I did everything right, I could keep her.”

But it was not to be. Nevertheless, in the process of trying, Hall—who admits to be-
ing a total technophobe (“I can’t even han-
dle a cell phone,” he says)—learned how to run the medical machinery she would need at home and to administer her medications (which at one point amounted to 55 pills a day). “I actually infused her,” Hall says proudly, “and I learned how to hydrate her and handle the pumps. After she died, I had lots of dreams that she had died because I had for-
gotten her medication.”

Hall was truly grateful then and is still amazed now by the quality of care they received at both hospitals, particularly from the oncology nurses at Dartmouth-Hitchcock. In the journal Kenyon kept during her 15-month illness, she wrote: “The nurses remind me of Special Collections librarians the way they guard me.” In The Best Day, The Worst Day, Hall wrote: “No one medical ever minced words with us; no one condescended or minimized danger.”

“They were an extraordinary bunch,” Hall says, “the best I’ve ever known. They were extremely close to the patients and inventive in thinking up new ways to help. They burn out, you know. They become attached to particular patients and again and again watch them die.” Hall was aware that the nurses talked among themselves about the couple—having noticed the way he looked at her and how much in love they were.

Their love was almost as famous as their poetry. In 1993, Bill Moyers made an Emmy Award-win-
ing documentary about the couple called A Life Together. Kenyon was 19 years younger than Hall; the two had met when she was a student of Hall’s at the University of Michigan. The irony of her untimely death—despite the fact that she was so much younger than he; despite the fact that he’d had colon cancer which, in 1992, had metastasized to his liver; despite the fact that he’d been told then that he had only a one-in-three chance of living three years—does not escape him to this day.

Kenyon could not talk much in the final stages of her illness, he says, so he would simply sit beside her, writing. But then she’d pipe up from her bed. “Perkins!” she would say (that being Kenyon’s pet name for her husband). “What are you writing?” “I read the poem ‘Without’ to her at her bed-
side,” Hall remembers, “and she said, ‘You’ve got it, Perkins!’ In the final weeks before Kenyon’s death, the two spent hours each day discussing and choos-
ing and editing poems by Kenyon that would be published in a posthumous collection titled Other-
wise. (When she died, Kenyon was the poet laure-
ate of New Hampshire—a role that Hall had held from 1984 to 1989.)

What made Hall such a good caregiver? Was it something in his childhood? He recalls that while he was growing up, ill family members would be brought home to Eagle Pond Farm. Hall watched...
his mother care for her mother, as her ancestors be-
fore her had cared for their parents. And Hall and
Kenyon later cared together for their own aging
mothers. He was an only child who received the
“total attention” of his parents. “I learned,” he says,
“how to be mother-like.”
Hall also used writing to get through Kenyon’s
dying. He calls himself an elegiac poet, and in a
sense this has always been the case—even before
Kenyon fell ill. From the time he began writing po-
etry, at age 12, he has written about the family
homestead in Wilmot, where his great-grandfather
settled in 1865. He calls it the “poetry house,” be-
cause it was there, as a boy, that he listened avidly
to his grandfather’s stories and first came to believe
in the evocative power of words. He has always, as
a poet and essayist and storyteller, been fascinated
with the passage of time—with the march of gen-
erations and with the particular understanding of
death that comes to those who watch the seasons
change this has always been the case—even before
the year endured without punctuation
without color under gray clouds and wind
without ice winter sleet
without seagulls
without seagulls
without color under gray clouds and wind
we lived in a small island stone nation
february without ice winter sleet
the unlimited ocean acute
the unlimited ocean acute
we lived in a small island stone nation

D uring that year, Hall talked and talked and
talked about Kenyon to everyone he en-
countered. Writing, too, was a salve for
his grief. “The impulse to talk and to write are sim-
ilar,” he tells me, “but writing is more helpful.
I could revise my grief, go over it.” The attempt to
understand death, or at least come to terms with
it, is, he suggests, one of the main ingredients in
all writing.
Soon after Kenyon died, Hall began speaking at
hospitals and has continued to do so. He even gave
a talk at Medical Grand Rounds at Dartmouth-
Hitchcock Medical Center—a setting usually re-
served for lectures about the latest diagnostic or
treatment innovations. “I talk about emotions and
the many expressions of grief, including the emo-
tions that poetry can carry, in the hopes that it will
be useful to other people,” he says.

As he explains this, we—interviewer and inter-
viewer—are sitting in his living room, surrounded by
his remarkable art collection. It includes a Hen-
ry Moore sculpture, several Andy Warhol prints, a
signed de Kooning, and a Picasso etching. He has
just returned from a week in London, where he did
a reading with the British poet laureate, Andrew
Morton. Hall looks tired after a year as the U.S.
poet laureate—a year of running around the coun-
try, sitting for countless interviews, appearing on
numerous radio and television shows.
Now, he says, “I come back to this house, in
which I have felt so much emptiness since her
death, and because I can’t work, I find myself with
nothing to do.” After 12 years of writing primarily
about Kenyon, Hall found himself, in 2007, for the
first time in his life, unable to write. “For so many
years I was writing poems about Jane. I’ve become
more and more naked as a poet, particularly after
Jane’s death. Then I came to the end of that. Some-
ting has changed, and language doesn’t come to
me anymore.”
He holds his hands out, palms up, and shakes
his head. “I’ve had more attacks of grief this spring.
She would have been 60 this year. When I turned
60, she had a big party for me.” It’s clear from hear-
ing Hall talk, from seeing the emotions that flick-
er across his face, that the assumption that grief dis-
sipates with time is only partially true. Certainly
the simplistic notion of “closure,” when one is talk-
ing about the death of a soul mate, is ridiculous.
Could it be that Hall’s duties as U.S. poet laure-
ate are what made writing impossible? Hall shakes
his head no. “I’ve always been hypomanic,” he says.

Among the modern works of art that Hall lives in the midst of are this original Andy Warhol silkscreen of Elizabeth Taylor. He also owns a Picasso etching.
Time is never the issue." Indeed, since graduating from Harvard and then Oxford in the early 1950s, Hall has never stopped. He has written 15 books of poetry, 12 collections of essays, two children’s books (including the 1979 Caldecott Medal-winner, Ox-Cart Man), several plays, and countless introductions, magazine articles, and critical reviews. He has won many, many prizes for his work, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 1986 and two Guggenheim Fellowships.

What we did: love.

In his 1992 book, Their Ancient Glittering Eyes, Hall wrote about old poets he had known, and writers in general, getting old. He recently reread the book in preparation for a speaking engagement. "When writers are young," he says, "they are driven by dissatisfaction, by a desire to get it right. They are ambitious. But when death is imminent, they lose that ambition and then their desire to write. They may, as Thomas Hardy wrote, lapse into doggerel, or, like Wordsworth, write more and more about despondency and madness.

Listening to Hall talk about depression and the inability to write, one wonders if he ever contemplates his own death.

I am afraid of death? "I am," he admits, "afraid of the act of death. I am not afraid of the page—afraid of death." He adds, "afraid of the deaths of others.”

It saddens Hall to think that he will die, as he puts it, "without a wife." It’s a phrase that sounds at once old-fashioned and timeless, almost biblical, as though he means the word "wife" in its most expansive sense—friend, helpmeet, partner, lover.

As though he is caring for her still.

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Spring pieces for magazines and other essays in the morning; She’d work on poems first thing, or her translations was on the second floor in the northeast corner. My study was in the northwest corner of the house, hers to keep as separate as possible while working. We lived in this house together all day long, though we tried not to chain herself in the root cellar if necessary, move to Eagle Pond Farm, and support himself alone felt like another blow. "In the first year, I’d catch a glimpse of her somewhere. Then that changes. The magical thinking ends. For the most part, . . . since she died, I’ve done all the things that were Kenyon’s—a box of abandoned poems, an old phone list in her handwriting, a row of herbs in the kitchen with her lettering on the labels. Each such discovery tugs him back to her absence.

Hall and Kenyon—who had not been religious before their move to New Hampshire—attended a local church together after they settled in Wilton. So has faith been a consolation for Hall? "Her faith," he says, "was stronger than mine." He attends church more for the community than the communion. Art, he feels, has been more the important source of succor for him.

On the black marble monument that guards Kenyon’s grave, in a cemetery just five miles from Eagle Pond Farm, Hall inscribed some lines from one of her own poems. They are from a poem that she wrote in 1992—when it was Hall whose body was in cancer’s grip, when she believed that he was one of her own poems. They are from a poem that she wrote in 1992—when it was Hall whose body was in cancer’s grip, when she believed that he was going to die.

I believe in the miracles of art, but what prodigy will keep you safe beside me?

— Jane Kenyon

From “Afternoon at MacDowell”