

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

A – Alternative Beginnings

My theme today, the one I've been thinking and writing about following the recent death of my old friend, Donald Hall, is the early years of my friendship with him and his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, beginning back in the 1970s in NH, where I lived then.

These were the years when all three of us were just starting out as poets of place. I include Don Hall as a place poet in formation during that period, because even though he was an established writer long before he and Jane came to New Hampshire as newlyweds in the 1970s, he began to focus on place at that time just as Jane and I did. So there the three of us were, living on the same small patch of ground in New Hampshire, just 10 miles away from each other, yet developing visions of New England from the experience that were very different. It's quite a story, I think – especially when you sample some of the poems we wrote then, which I intend to do today.

I met Don in the early winter of 1976, introduced to him by mutual acquaintances at his ancestral farmhouse in Wilmot the year after he and Jane moved in there. I would soon learn that Jane was a poet with her own gifts, and not only that, was an editor. In fact, she would soon publish poems of mine in her new literary magazine, called *Green House*. But for the moment it was Don who got my attention because unlike Jane and me, he already had a name as a poet.

Time stamp: A – 1:33

Don was 47 years old then, with several books to his credit. I, on the other hand, was 34, a poet who'd published no books at all, and with a family of four children, had little time even to be a poet. Besides all that, I walked funny, because I was trying not to drop a manuscript of poems I held under my coat and very much wanted Donald Hall to see. After our visit, I drew the manuscript from my folded coat and put it on his kitchen table, Could he please read these poems and tell me if I was any good?

How could I have done such a dumb thing? I asked myself when I got home that night. But two days later, an envelope from Don arrived in the mail, and when I opened it, I found these unpredicted and generous words: "I am dazzled by your poems." I carried that letter around with me for days afterward. I probably even took it to bed with me, and after all the back and forth, I lost it. But by then, those six words had become a permission I kept in my heart. And by then, Don had sent me a fat manila envelope containing his own poems. "Because I like your poetry," he wrote, "I hope you'll like mine, too."

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

The poems in the manila envelope turned out to be some of his first about place and all of them eventually appeared in his 1978 collection *Kicking the Leaves*. At the top of the group was a piece called "Maple Syrup." In it, to remind you, he and Jane have just landed at the farm, and they go on a search for his grandfather's grave. But they can't find it anywhere, so they turn back to the farmhouse to explore the root cellar, descending the cobwebby passageway with a flashlight to reach the dirt floor. And there on the shelves, among a few stray pints of tomatoes, they make a discovery. Don writes:

"...what

is this? – syrup, maple syrup
in a quart jar, syrup
my grandfather made twenty-five
years ago
for the last time.

I remember
coming to the farm in March
in sugaring time, as a small boy.
He carried the pails of sap, sixteen-quart
buckets, dangling from each end
of a wooden yoke
that lay across his shoulders, and emptied them
into a vat in the saphouse
where fire burned day and night
for a week.

...Today

we take my grandfather's last
quart of syrup
upstairs, holding it gingerly,
and we wash off twenty-five years
of dirt, and we pull
and pry the lid up, cutting the stiff
dried rubber gaskets, and dip our fingers
in, you and I both, and taste
the sweetness, you for the first time,
the sweetness preserved, of a dead man
in his own kitchen, giving us
from his lost grave the gift of sweetness.

Time stamp: A – 4:57

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

seemed content with her new situation. But once at a poetry reading I set up for the two of us at Colby-Sawyer College, where I taught then, she drew out a poem which showed that in spite of Don's image of her plunging her fingers into maple syrup to help bring his grandfather back to life, Jane had mixed feelings about being at the farm.

Here is that poem, later the title poem of her first collection, called "From Room to Room."

Here in this house, among photographs
of your ancestors, their hymnbooks and old shoes...

I move from room to room,
a little dazed, like the fly. I watch it
bump against each window.

I am clumsy here, thrusting
slabs of maple into the stove.
Out of my body for a while,
weightless in space...

Sometimes
the wind against the clapboard
sounds like a car driving up to the house.

My people are not here, my mother
and father, my brother. I talk
to the cats about weather.

"Blessed be the tie that binds..."
we sing at the church down the road.
And how does it go from there? The tie...

the tether, the hose carrying
oxygen to the astronaut,
turning, turning outside the hatch,
taking a look around.

Time stamp: A – 9:12

In spite of her mixed feelings, though, Jane found her way toward her own view of the farm. I read to you now one of her first place poems, called "The Thimble," also collected in her first book.

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

I found a silver thimble
on the humusy floor of the woodshed,
neither large nor small, the open end
bent oval by the wood's weight,
or because the woman who wore it
shaped it to fit her finger.

Its decorative border of leaves, graceful
and regular, like the edge of acanthus
on the tin ceiling at church...
repeating itself over our heads
while we speak in unison
words the wearer must have spoken.

The difference between how Jane writes about the farm's past and how Don writes about it is stark. While his poems feature the patriarch of the Wilmot farm, a colorful lover of poetry at the center of the farm's activities, Jane writes in "The Thimble" of an anonymous woman at the periphery, whose life can only be guessed by way of a lost thimble. In another early poem "Finding a Long Gray Hair," the nameless women from the farm's past multiply. It's a brief poem, only seven lines long. Jane used to call her poems "brief cries of the spirit."

I wash the long floorboards
in the kitchen, repeating
the motions of other women
who have lived in this house.
And when I find a long gray hair
floating in the pail,
I feel my life added to theirs.

Though Jane doesn't know who the former cleaners of floors are in this short poem, she nonetheless accepts them as lost sisters across generations.

Time stamp: A – 11:30

Which takes me to my own beginning as a poet of place. My start was as far as it could be from either Don's or Jane's. Don arrived in New Hampshire with the place he would write about already in his mind. For Jane, the path was less clear, though the farm influenced her place poetry as well, not only in the work I just read about anonymous women, but in other poems I'll tell you about up ahead. My own sense of place came from what I observed as a New

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

Hampshire native living among actual rural people in the state – not the higher-ups, who lived in the tony, restored houses of the town up the road from me, many of them retirees who came from New York or New Jersey, but people at the edges of the town, in the social margins, where it seemed to me the organic culture was. For instance, there was an old woman who lived with her son, who was himself old enough to have gray hair. And once a neighbor told me this odd fact about the two of them: that the mother washed the son's hair once a week on washday. That story became the source of a poem, which is called "Making Things Clean."

One would hardly recognize him like this,
the high-school shop teacher, glasses off,
bent over the kitchen sink. Nearby,
house-dresses and underpants flutter
in the window of the Maytag he bought
for his mother. Its groaning is the only
sound while she washes his hair,
lifting the trembling water in her hands
as she has always done, working foam up
from his gray locks like the lightest
batter she ever made. Soon enough,
glasses back on, he will stand
before students who mock his dullness;
soon, putting up clothes, she'll feel
the ache of a body surrendering to age.
A little longer let him close his eyes
against soap by her apron, let her move
her fingers slowly, slowly in this way
the two of them have found to be together,
this transfiguring moment in the world's
old work of making things clean.

Time stamp: A – 14:10

One of the earliest poems I sent to Don after we met was about a farmer on the roof of his farmhouse – not a happy farmer, like Don's grandfather but a man under duress. I got the idea for this poem from an article in a newspaper about a town historian who'd run across the story of a drunk man in the history of his town who was shingling his roof one afternoon with some others, and at a certain moment this drunk man abruptly stood up, and announced he was going out to fetch the cows for milking, and he walked off the roof, killing himself. A funny story – at least it was told as a funny story – you know, that grim Yankee

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

humor. Nobody knows anything else about this man – as a matter of fact, I had to give him his name in this poem which is titled “The Last Time Shorty Towers Fetched the Cows.”

In the only story we have
of Shorty Towers, it is five o'clock,
and he is dead drunk on his roof
deciding to fetch the cows. How
he got in this condition, shingling
all afternoon, is what the son-in-law,
the one who made the back pasture
into a golf course, can't figure out. So,
with an expression somewhere between shock
and recognition, he just watches Shorty
pull himself up to his not-so-
full height, square his shoulders,
and sigh that small sigh as if caught
once again in an invisible swarm
of bees. Let us imagine in that moment
just before he turns to the roof's edge
and the abrupt end of the joke
which is all anyone thought to remember
of his life, Shorty is listening
to what seems to be the voice
of a lost heifer, just breaking
upward. And let us think that when he walks
with such odd purpose down that hill
jagged with shingles, he suddenly feels it
open into the wide, incredibly green
meadow where all the cows are.

When I was a teenager, I worked for some of the last dairy farmers in the Connecticut River Valley region of New Hampshire, before their farms fell to development because of rising costs and falling milk prices. So the not-too-distant cousins of Shorty Towers were the farmers I met then, caught as they were in cultural change. At the time I worked on my poem, the cultural change was far more advanced; in fact, it was all around me. As it happened, I lived in a farmhouse, too, this one in the town of North Sutton, and it once belonged to the biggest dairy farm in the area. But the acreage of *this* farm, more typical of the region, had long since been sold off, and the farmhouse was now split into apartments. My wife Diane and I rented the bottom floor, and from our kitchen window, where there was once pasture and fields, we had a full view of a golf course, which as you'll recall, I included in my poem.

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

B – Three New England Voices

At the farmhouse in Wilmot, meanwhile, Jane Kenyon continued to find opportunities for her own poetry. I think the most important opportunity of all was the solitude she found there. Solitude was important to Don, too, but he was a gregarious man who thrived, early and late, at the public readings he gave in New Hampshire and elsewhere. Jane, on the other hand, was a private person right down to her toes. She says in a poem:

“At dinner I laughed with the rest,
but in truth I prefer the sound
of pages turning, and coals shifting
abruptly in the stove...

Why do people give dinner parties? Why did I
say I’d come?...”

By the way, that voice, of Jane taking us into her confidence with a personal disclosure, is typical of her poetry as she developed. And what attracts her again and again is not the world of people, but the quiet drama of the nature she finds around her in Wilmot. Here’s an example, a place poem titled simply “Ice Out.”

As late as yesterday the ice preoccupied
the pond – dark, half-melted, water-logged.
Then it sank in the night, one piece,
taking winter with it. And afterward
everything seems simple and good.

All afternoon I lifted oak leaves
from the flowerbeds, and greeted
like friends the green-white crowns
of perennials. They have the tender,
unnerving beauty of a baby’s head.

How I hated to come in! I’ve left
the windows open to hear the peepers’
wildly disproportionate cries.
Dinner is over, no one stirs. The dog
sighs, sneezes, and closes his eyes.

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

Time stamp: B – 2:25

I take that poem from Jane's third book, *Let Evening Come*, where it seems to me her voice as a poet achieves its full maturity. I hope you noticed as I read it how much her poem relies on images – the ice that sinks all at once, the baby's head, the “wildly disproportionate cries” of the peepers? Those images come from Jane's most important literary influence as a poet, namely, the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, whose early work she translated in the late 1970s with the help of Vera Dunham – poems whose *main device* was images. And there's something else she got from Akhmatova, which she herself described as “the sudden twist, often in the last line.” Listen to this example from a Kenyon poem titled “The Guest” – another intimate drama with no people in it, rendered with close-up images derived from her place, and, of course, with a sudden twist.

I had opened the draft on the stove
and my head was tending downward when
a portly housefly dropped on the page
in front of me. Confused by the woodstove's
heat, the fly, waking ill-tempered, lay
on its back, flailing its legs and wings.

Then it lurched onto the paper clips.
The morning passed, and I forgot about
my guest, except when the buzz rose
and quieted, rose and quieted – tires
spinning on ice, chainsaw far away,
someone carrying on alone....

Dot-dot-dot-dot. I want to give Jane equal time with the dots, which emphasize in this case the sudden twist in that last line in her poem.

In her second collection, *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, and the next one, *Let Evening Come*, Jane also became a religious poet, linking her sense of place with references to God and the bible, most notably in the title poem of *Let Evening Come*, which probably some of you already know. And as Jane was writing the first of her religious poems in the early 1980s, Don continued to give public readings about the grandfather's New Hampshire farm. New Hampshire noticed. In 1984, the state showed its appreciation by making him its poet laureate. I responded with a note of congratulations accompanied by a gift, which according to Jane, he loved and wore all around the house: a green sweatshirt with white letters on it that said, “New Hampshire Laureate of Poultry.”

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

Time stamp: B – 5:45

In the meantime, Don worked on two new books of his own, *The Happy Man* and *The One Day*. The title of *The Happy Man* is deceptive, because it's one of the darkest books Don ever wrote. In fact, many of its poems are about death and the death wish. But at the very beginning of the book he places a series of poems that celebrate the old farm and his grandfather Wesley Wells, and grandmother Kate, as if to test those entries against the darker ones. In his lead poem, "Great Day in the Cow's House," he makes the past the present, just as he did in *Kicking the Leaves*, imagining his grandfather's life, in all seasons, over years, in one continuous day. "They are long dead," he writes, but "they survive on the great day." In another poem, "New Animals," he tells of a joyful dream in which he suddenly discovers his grandparents, alive as anyone, and here I quote,

marching up the dirt
road from Andover –
excited, laughing, waving
to catch our attention
as they shepherd
new animals
home to the farm.
They traded Holsteins
and Rhode Island reds
for zebras, giraffes,
apes, and tigers. They lead
their parade back
to the barn, and the sheep-
dog ostrich
nips at the errant
elephant's heels
and goads the gaudy,
heroic lions
and peacocks that keen
AIEE AIEE.

Like his grandfather Wesley, who recited poems like "Casey at the Bat" while milking his cows, Don loved to perform his poems, and I can still hear him performing his own AIEE! Even more, I think of him performing "Great Day in the Cows' House," in particular this description of a cow:

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

“Now she stretches her wrinkly neck, her turnip eye
rolls in her skull, she sucks up breath,
and stretching her long mouth mid-chew she expels ---

– and then, on the page, in the language of the cow, comes the longest word in all of poetry, a word never before written in a poem, with 18 m’s in it, four h’s, two g’s, a w, an n, and a c – each one of which Don managed to enunciate at his readings and afterward, he invariably stopped to tell his audience that this moan or bellow or whatever it was, was what reviewers sometimes uttered when they read his poetry.

Time stamp: B – 8:52

There’s more of the farm, Don’s ongoing source of place, in *The One Day*. The title poem of that book is a different one for Don. It critiques the soulless greed and materialism of contemporary society with a mixture of autobiography and history and prophesy. But at the center of his poem he places the farmhouse as a counterforce for society’s failed values and unfulfillment – a peaceable counterforce. Here’s an excerpt from *The One Day* addressed to Jane about the work and love they share in their lives together, one of the poem’s most lyrical passages.

Smoke rises all day from two chimneys above us.
You stand by the stove looking south, through bare branches
of McIntosh, Spy, and Baldwin. You add oak logs
to the fire you built at six in the castiron stove.
At the opposite end of the same house, under another chimney,
I look toward the pond that flattens in the west
under the low sun of a January afternoon, from a notebook
busy with bushels and yields. All day in our opposite
rooms we carry wood to stoves, we pace up and down, we plan,
we set figures to paper – to converge at day’s end

for kisses, bread, and talk; then we read in silence,
sitting in opposite chairs; then we turn drowsy.
Dreaming of tomorrow only, we sleep in the painted bed
while the night’s frail twisting of woodsmoke assembles
overhead from two chimneys, to mingle and disperse
as our cells will disperse and mingle when they lapse
into graveyard dirt. Meantime the day is double
in the work, love, and solitude of eyes

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

that gaze not at each other but at a third thing:
a child, a ciderpress, a book – work's paradise.

Time stamp: B – 11:21

So now in this threesome we're tracing, it's over to yours truly, another New Hampshire Wesley. It's 1987, just before the publication of Don's book, *The One Day*. I've written two books of poetry myself, namely, *The Faces of Americans* and *The Town of No*, and I've just been hired as a teacher in the creative writing program at the University of Maine at Farmington. So in the late summer of 1987, I said my goodbyes to Don and Jane, and Diane and I moved northward, to the little Maine town of Mercer, population 592. In Mercer I found a very different New England from what I was used to. I mentioned earlier the town up the road from me in New Hampshire that had perfectly restored Colonial houses, with, for instance, matching six-over-six windows, and tidy clapboard, and dates over the doors -- all sure signs that the organic culture of New England no longer existed there. In my new town of Mercer, nothing quite matched; yet there was an intriguing authenticity that I wanted to explore in poetry.

I'll read now just one of my many explorations, a poem about the local Grange hall. A couple of winters after I arrived, a woman called me up and said that "hobby night" was coming up at the Grange, and some people in town were planning to demonstrate and talk about their hobbies. And she wanted to know if I'd like to come along and read some of my poems and talk about my hobby of poetry writing. As you can imagine, I had mixed feelings about this. But I went along anyway, and it turned out I was won over by the townspeople and their supper downstairs, and the Grange meeting upstairs afterward. And my poem will explain the rest. It's called "Reading Poems at the Grange Meeting in What Must Be Heaven."

How else to explain that odd,
perfect supper – the burnished
lasagna squares, thick
clusters of baked
beans, cole slaw pink

with beet juice? How else
to tell of fluorescent
lights touching their once familiar
faces, of pipes branching over
their heads from the warm

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

furnace tree, like no tree on earth –
or to define the not-quite
dizziness of going
up the enclosed, turning
stair afterward to find them

in the room of the low
ceiling, dressed as if for play?
Even Dolly Lee, talked into coming
to this town thirty
years ago from California,

wears a blue sash,
leaving each curse against winters
and the black fly far
behind, and beside her,
Francis, who once did the talking,

cranking his right hand
even then, no doubt, to jump-
start his idea, here uses his hand
to hold a staff, stone silent,
a different man. For the Grange

meeting has begun, their fun
of marching serious-faced together
down the hall to gather
stout Bertha, who bears the flag
carefully ahead of herself

like a full
dust-mop, then
marching back again
the old floor making long
cracking sounds

under their feet like late
pond ice that will not break,

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

though now the whole group stands
upon it, hands
over their hearts.

It does not matter that the two
mentally challenged men, who in the other
world attempted haying for Mrs. Carter,
stand here beside her
pledging allegiance in words

they themselves have never heard.
It does not matter
that the Worthy Master,
the Worthy Overseer,
and the Secretary, sit back

down at desks
donated by School District
#54 as if all three
were in fifth grade: everyone here
seems younger – the shiny, baldheaded
ones, the no longer old

ladies whose spectacles
fill with light as they
look up, and big Lenny
too, the trucker, holding the spoons
he will play soon,

and smiling at me, as if
the accident that left
the long cheek scar and mashed
his ear never happened. For I
am rising

with my worn folder
beside the table of potholders,
necklaces made from old newspaper

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

strips and rugs braided
from rags. It does not matter

that in some narrower time
and place, I did not want
to read to them on
Hobby Night. What matters is
that standing in – how else

to understand it – the heaven
of their wonderment,
I share the best
thing I can make – this stitching
together of memory

and heart scrap, this wish
to hold together Francis,
Dolly Lee, the Grange officers,
the mentally challenged men
and everybody else here levitating

ten feet
above the dark
and cold and regardless
world below them and me
and poetry.

C – From Darkness Into Art

As affirmative as that poem is, it didn't quite dispel a feeling of sorrow I carried deep down when I moved to Maine in the late 1980s, because something happened just before I left New Hampshire that shook me to the core, and I was working on a long place poem about it. I refer to my younger brother's fatal heart attack at age 43, which happened in January of 1986, at the same time, coincidentally, that the Challenger shuttle exploded, killing Christa McAuliffe and all the other astronauts on board. I can't read the long poem I wrote, titled "My Brother Running," because it's way *too* long. So as I did with Don Hall's long poem, "The One Day," I'll just tell you a bit about it.

My brother was a jogger, a runner, and for the last six months of his life, he ran, compulsively as it now seems to me, sometimes 9 and 10 miles a day, and his heart attack was related to his running. Anyway, during the period of his running, though the two of us had been estranged for years, we became brothers again, because he had some secrets he wanted to tell me. He was having an affair, for one thing, which nobody knew about – certainly his family didn't know about it. So when he ran, he was a happy and a very desperate man. And in the middle of all this, he died, leaving me with the secrets, and with his problems of the heart, which were more than physiological, and with whatever reasons I might be able to find for this compulsive running of his.

Time stamp: C – 1:45

So I wrote "My Brother Running" to explore what my brother thought he was running from, and what he was running to. But it turned out that before I wrote it, I had to write a short poem about the heart attack itself – a sort of precursor in its subject and feeling to "My Brother Running," which I *can* read here. So this is that poem, titled "The Abandonment."

Climbing on top of him and breathing
into his mouth this way she could be showing her
desire except that when she draws back
from him to make her little cries
she is turning to her young son just
coming into the room to find my brother
on the bed with his eyes closed and the slightest
smile on his lips as if when they
both beat on his chest as they do now
he will come back from the dream he is enjoying
so much he cannot hear her calling his name

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

louder and louder and the son saying get up
get up discovering both of them discovering
for the first time that all along
he has lived in this body this thing
with shut lids dangling its arms
that have nothing to do with him and everything
they can ever know the wife listening weeping
at his chest and the mute son who will never
forget how she takes the face into her hands now
as if there were nothing in the world
but the face and breathes oh
breathes into the mouth which does not breathe back.

Well, it's a grim poem, I do realize, but for me it was a hopeful one as well, because, as I say, it was a harbinger, which led me to my longer and more complex poem in an attempt to resolve what seemed unresolvable.

Time stamp: C – 3:49

Speaking of complex, you can perhaps sense at this point, as we enter the last chapter of my account, that the place poems Don, Jane and I wrote from the 70s to the early 90s gradually deepened in their complexity. So as I move toward the end of this talk, let me say a few words about the growing complexity in our work. Because it's convenient here, I'll start with me. It's no exaggeration to say that "My Brother Running" cracked me open as a poet, because to write it, I had to give testimony about my brother, and lay a full claim to the pronoun "I." Before I wrote it, I was mainly a third-person poet, writing about external events, but afterward, there were "I"'s in a great many personal poems, including some about growing up in a broken home with an underclass family. One more important thing I learned from "My Brother Running" came from the connection I made in the poem between my brother's running toward *his* failed dream, and the run-up to the explosion of the Challenger shuttle and the failure of an *American* dream, because that connection expanded my sense of place to include not only my region, but America, and this led to later poems about America and American popular culture.

As for Jane Kenyon, her place poems of the late 80s and into the 90s became more inward, and darker. No one was more aware of the increasing darkness of her work than she. Before a public reading I organized for her and Don in the early 90s at my college in Farmington, she told me about a long bout of depression she'd just suffered. "I haven't been feeling well for a long time," she said, "and the poems I've been writing are very sad." Then she shook her head, pressing her lips together as she always did when she was distressed. "You'll see when I read them tonight."

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

One of the poems she read became a staple at her readings afterward. Its title is “Having It Out with Melancholy.” Here’s the opening of that poem, in three sections.

Time stamp: C – 6:15

1. FROM THE NURSERY (in which she addresses her melancholy or her depression)

When I was born, you waited
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,
and when we were alone, you lay down
on top of me, pressing
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on
everything under the sun and moon
made me sad – even the yellow
wooden beads that slid and spun
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.
You ruined my manners toward God.
“We’re here simply to wait for death;
the pleasures of earth are overrated.”

I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps, among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.
I was already yours – the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls.

2 BOTTLES

Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin,
Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax,
Wellbutin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft.
The coated ones smell sweet or have
no smell; the powdery ones smell
like the chemistry lab at school

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

that made me hold my breath.

3 SUGGESTION FROM A FRIEND

You wouldn't be so depressed
if you really believed in God....

Time stamp: C – 8:20

“Having It Out with Melancholy,” is a hard poem, no question. But imagine the courage it took to have it out with her lifelong depression in the first place. And consider the poem’s unexpectedly hopeful ending, that I want to read to you now, in which Jane returns from her depression – typically, not through the efforts of other people but through the encouragement of nature, to be specific, the wood thrush singing outside her farmhouse window. The poem’s last section is titled simply “Wood Thrush.”

High on Nardil and June light
I wake at four,
waiting greedily for the first
note of the wood thrush. Easeful air
presses through the screen
with the wild, complex song
of the bird, and I am overcome

by ordinary contentment.
What hurt me so terribly
all my life until this moment?
How I love the small, swiftly
beating heart of the bird
singing in the great maples,
its bright, unequivocal eye.

Jane’s poem “Having It Out with Melancholy” finally appeared in her book *Constance*, published in 1993. *Constance* also includes a poem called “Pharoah,” one of her saddest and most beautiful, in which she speaks directly to Don about her fears that he will die of cancer. The cancer she refers to, colon cancer, was diagnosed in 1989, and after an operation, it metastasized to his liver, leading to still another operation, which doctors assumed was only temporary.

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

Time stamp: C – 10:29

In his 1993 collection, *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, Don speaks to Jane about his illness, as she had spoken to him in her book, trying to comfort her in her fears about him, and giving the impression that the two are engaged in a heartfelt conversation with each other, across volumes. One example is the place poem I want to read to you now, my final poem of the afternoon, in which he addresses Jane as Camilla, cheering her up by describing the best and happiest walk he can imagine, which is a walk the two of them take with their dog across the acreage of the Wilmot farm. The poem is called:

WHEN THE FINE DAYS

When the fine days migrate east from Ohio,
climbing Vermont's greenest mountains and fording
the Connecticut and White River
Junction; when our meadows take relief

from inversions and July's lamentable
heat, you and I take in fortuitous air
up-mountain on logging roads – our dog
Max leading us, bouncing, looking back

with mild impatience, making sure we follow –
and kneel taking joy of tiny red blossoms
in moss. Here are no snakes to beware;
Here, the shy bear conceals himself;

here glory of creation loosens our
spirits into appropriate surrender.
Looking past a clearing, we fill
with the fullness of the valley's throat,

where the slow cattle grind the abundant grass
and their laboring stomachs turn green to white;
where the fat sheep graze without budging,
like soft white boulders. Now Max settles

alert, his nostrils twitching to read calm air.
Let us descend, Camilla, to the long white

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

house that holds love and work together,
and play familiar music on each

other's skin. Today we won't worry about
weather, depression, or war; about bad luck
for our labors; about heart attacks
or metastasis of the liver.

Time stamp: C – 13:08

Don's uplifting description of the farm in this passage might have come from *Kicking the Leaves*, except for these last words, those brave, loving words he offers to Jane at the end of his poem. I've mentioned the complexity of Jane's and my work in the late 80s and early 90s. In Don's case, the complexity comes from his underlying doubts about the farm as a timeless Eden set apart from the mortal limitations he is now acutely aware of, in particular, Jane's depression and a cancer that doctors have said will soon kill him. In one passage from *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, Don accuses himself of praising his farm out of narcissism, willfully ignoring time and history. "I prophesy the country I invent by shutting the door," he writes. "I praise citizenship in the nation of myself." In his later books, Don's doubts would only continue.

But as I conclude, let me shift our attention to a celebratory dinner that took place in New Hampshire in December of 1993. Because all three of us had published books in that year, Don with *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, Jane with *Constance*, and I with *My Brother Running*, I wrote to my two friends in the late fall with a proposal: that we get together in December for dinner at Don's favorite restaurant, the Meridiana, in Wilmot, and sign new books for each other. Don's bout with cancer and Jane's anxiety about his future were very much on my mind. I hoped the celebration I suggested would help them forget their troubles, at least for a while. And as we sat together at the Meridiana wining and dining and toasting each other, Diane there with us, our celebration seemed to do just that.

Yet in the new year, their troubles got worse, and for reasons nobody had predicted. It was not Don who got cancer; his liver over time restored itself. Jane was the victim of cancer, a fatal cancer. I still remember how I got that news. A postcard from Don came in February bearing just one sentence: "Jane has leukemia."

We all know that sad story. But perhaps if we alter our perspective just a little, we can qualify the sadness, understanding that the deep concern and affection Don and Jane exchanged across their books in the early 1990s was really the final chapter of a great love story, in which two lovers shaped their heartbreak about each other into poetry.

Three Poets of Place: Wesley McNair Remembers Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon

As for the main story I've come here to tell today about the three of us, that's a story of the most amazing luck, concerning three poets who, in the randomness of human events, were thrown together to read each other's work and encourage each other. And the friendship they shared helped sustain them as they developed, poem by poem, their New England visions, giving their truest lives to art.