

## *Donald Hall*

### THE AFTER LIFE

During the eleven days  
it took to die, they lived  
past their anniversary:  
He gave her the lavender  
cotton summer dress  
from Neiman-Marcus  
she would never wear.  
It was pretty, she said,  
and told him where to look  
on the back stairs  
for the belt she ordered  
two weeks before  
by phone from L.L. Bean—  
four inches too big,  
to fit the belly he carried  
twenty-three years before  
into the judge's chambers.

★

On the fourth day  
he bundled her warmly  
into her wheelchair  
to drive her to the bank  
so that she could sign  
her FedEx'd will  
for the Notary Public.  
Two women who clerked  
at the Mini-Mart next door,  
who had joked with them  
when they picked up milk  
or juice, walked over

to witness her signature.  
She took five minutes  
to write "Jane Kenyon."

★

She concentrated her intent  
on letting go. Florists' vans  
pulled into the driveway four  
or five times a day. He covered  
the dining room table, kitchen  
counters, and two castiron  
Glenwoods with lilies  
and bouquets of spring blossoms.  
Jane wouldn't allow  
roses or daisies or tulips  
into the bedroom; flowers  
and music held her to life.  
He could not play her Messaien,  
nor Mendelssohn, nor *Black*  
*and Blue*, nor Benita Valente  
singing "Let Evening Come."

★

"I want," she said,  
"to tell you something  
important. I want . . .  
I want . . . spinach!"  
and she shook her head  
violently from side  
to side. Eyesight  
departed after speech.

★

It took two hours  
for the Visiting Nurse  
to arrive and certify  
that Jane was dead.  
It took another hour  
for Marion and Charlie  
to come from Chadwick's  
with the van, the canvas  
stretcher, and the gurney.  
When later he saw her  
walking Gussie on New  
Canada Road, or heard her  
voice calling "Perkins!"  
across a parking lot,  
he had confirmed  
her death with his eyes,  
his fingers, and his lips.

★

At three in the afternoon  
of the day Jane died,  
six-year-old Allison and he  
pushed through the toolshed  
as they strolled outside  
to look at the daffodils,  
but stopped short to see  
the crayoned cardboard  
tacked over the freezer  
with capital letters in blues,  
reds, and greens: WELCOME  
BACK JANE FROM SEATTLE!

★

As he started up-town  
to see her laid out  
in her white salwar kameez,  
he worried how she would look,  
made up. Half-way there,  
he u-turned; he had forgotten  
to wear his glasses.

★

Calling Hours: Chadwick's,  
where Jane and he saw  
the last of Kate, Lucy,  
Jack, and half the village.  
Their neighbors filed past  
what remained of Jane.  
Dick came inside  
while Nan sat propped  
in the car, and he went out  
to kiss Nan's nodding  
face that could not  
speak.

Andrew had brought  
Emily, six years old,  
who kept returning  
to look at Jane, so still  
in the silky coffin,  
and the next day confided  
to Alice Mattison,  
"We saw Jane's actual body."

★

When Alice Ling finished  
praying over Jane's coffin,  
three hundred neighbors  
and poets stood in spring

sunshine. Then Robert  
started them singing "Amazing  
Grace." Out of the silence  
that followed he heard  
his own voice saying,  
"We have to go, dear."

★

That night he turned  
his children out of the house  
with difficulty, and was  
alone again with her absence.  
Before bed he drove  
to the graveyard to say goodnight  
and at six a.m. dropped by  
as if he brought coffee.

★

Driving the highway, the day  
after the funeral,  
he felt suddenly overtaken  
by a weight of shame  
that reminded him of waking  
in Ann Arbor thirty years  
ago, knowing that the night  
before, drunk, he had done  
something irreparable.

★

It was true, what he thought,  
although pitiless. If he could say  
now, "Jane has leukemia,"  
he would feel such contentment.

★

In a nightmare that May,  
Jane had died in their house  
far in a sunless forest.  
The townspeople were sad  
because she had died  
and because the sheriff  
was coming to arrest him.  
He had put out everything  
of spirit and energy  
taking care of Jane  
and he had neglected  
the old women who starved  
in their wooden cottages.

★

Gussie kept checking out  
scent on visitors' boots  
for evidence that  
Jane was hiding somewhere.  
One thing that pleased him  
was sleeping all night  
on her side of the bed.  
Gus tried herding the widower  
to bed, and was patted:  
"All right, boy. All right.  
Come on, it's bedtime."

★

Saturday mornings he made  
the same error again  
and again. Writing Jane  
letters at his desk,  
he saw the clock at death's hour  
and fell into tears. Wiping  
his eyes he noted

that he mistook the time  
and in sixty minutes  
would need to howl again.

★

Every day he watched  
the young green snake  
on the granite step  
by the porch's end  
who sunned herself  
in desolate noontime  
and slipped like liquid  
into her hole  
when she lifted her head  
to see his face.

★

Belle telephoned to tell him,  
weeping, that Tony had left her.  
The next week he drove an hour  
to comfort her and listen,  
but when he saw her standing  
by the clock she was smiling:  
"Tony came *back*! He's changed!  
He couldn't bear it without us!  
Of course . . ."

That night  
he collapsed into rage and gin.

★

For half a year at least  
Jane's thick near-sighted  
glasses lay on the table  
by the bed, and the wristwatch

they bought at a jeweler's  
in Rome on their sixteenth  
anniversary—put there when  
she could still see, and when  
what time it was mattered.

★

After a year he tried  
to tell himself: Everyone  
dies. Some die at three  
days, and some at forty-  
seven years.  
How many have perished  
in this long house,  
or on the painted bed  
where Jane stopped breathing?  
His grandmother and mother  
were born in this place.  
Only Jane's death  
continues to prosper here.

★

Knowing he could not bring  
coffee to Jane, he brought it  
to himself and sipped it  
thinking ahead to his desk,  
to walking the dog,  
to shopping, to dismantling  
Jane's study with sorrow  
but without screaming.  
He sat on her swivel chair  
at her desk alongside  
her hooded Selectric II  
and read crossed-out stanzas  
of poems she will never write



and lists of things undone.  
They will reside in acid-free  
folders in a fireproof room,  
humidity and temperature  
controlled to impede decay.

★

Deep in her study's closet  
he found a red box  
with two dolls, looking  
untouched, wearing dresses  
delicately stitched  
by her mother the seamstress.  
When Special Collections  
took her papers away,  
he wept again, as she left  
the house for the last time.  
He keeps the rejected dolls  
in her closet's corner.