

Wesley McNair

A GOVERNMENT OF TWO

Two or three years ago, something happened to my friends Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon that I'd never seen in the literary world before. Up to that time each was well known to poetry audiences—he as a senior American poet and recent recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award, she as a younger poet with a growing reputation. Then, their relationship itself became famous. Through their co-readings, their joint interviews in print and on the PBS show “Fresh Air,” and most importantly, their starring roles in the Bill Moyers special, “A Life Together,” millions of Americans came to know of the life in poetry the two shared as husband and wife in rural New Hampshire. Audiences also discovered the couple's sorrows: Kenyon's life-long struggle with depression, and Hall's colon cancer, which metastasized to the liver and despite a successful operation, seemed likely to return. Later on, of course, those who had followed the Hall-Kenyon story learned of its ironic and heart-rending conclusion: fearing the fatal recurrence of his disease, the couple discovered a cancer growing in her—the leukemia that, despite a bone-marrow transplant, finally killed her, and left him in a period of grieving that has lasted to this day.

The moving and ultimately tragic story of their life together has created a new interest in the poetry of Hall. It has created even more interest in Kenyon, whose death in mid-career has not only cast a spell upon many readers, but caused confusion about her work. I have heard readers attribute a variety of melancholy poems to her bout with leukemia, when in fact, only one poem, “The Sick Wife,” was written in the months of her fatal illness. Compounding the error, the review of her new and selected volume *Otherwise* in *Publishers Weekly* asserted that all of the book's new poems were about “her pending death.” Yet if the legendary story of Kenyon and Hall makes her verse and his harder to see and assess, that story also suggests a new way to examine their poetry. For the truth is, their life together was vital to their development as poets, influencing everything from work methods to the content of work produced. In fact, it made their best poems possible.

To say so is only to repeat what these poets have suggested themselves. In a joint interview by Marian Blue printed in the *AWP Chronicle* shortly before Kenyon's death, Hall remarked, "The great changes in my poetry, which my friends and the book reviewers find beginning in *Kicking the Leaves*, began after our marriage, while we were still in Ann Arbor; the move [to his family farmhouse] confirmed, enlarged, and extended those changes." And Kenyon declared: "whatever it is that I know about writing poems, I have learned most of it from being with Don, moving to his ancestral farm, keeping my ears open when his peers come to visit."

I became aware of their relationship when I myself visited that New Hampshire farm shortly after they moved in, drawn by hopes for my own poetry. Living nearby in New Hampshire, I knew that Hall had arrived at the place the year before, but I did not know much about Jane Kenyon, and neither did the friends who brought me there; it was the established poet and anthologist Donald Hall we had gone to see. However, Hall soon made it clear he was not the only writer living in the farmhouse. Inviting me back a couple of days later to discuss some poems I had left with him, he not only told me that Kenyon wrote poetry, but that she had her own assessment of my poems, which he, in her absence, passed on with obvious respect.

I should have sensed then how valuable she had become to him as a reader of his own work, but I thought mostly about how valuable he was to hers. The Jane Kenyon I became acquainted with at that time was, after all, very much like me—a young writer in formation who needed the kind of support an older writer like Hall, generous to a fault, offered—namely, the assurance that one had talent; the encouragement to use the talent; and honest, experienced appraisals of work in progress. Hall was helping both of us in these ways during the same period, and because he was supporting Kenyon financially, she had the additional luxury of free time.

Of course, Kenyon received help early and late in her career from other writers, as Hall himself did. In 1983 she began to attend regular workshop sessions with Joyce Peseroff and the poet and fiction writer Alice Mattison. Whereas the groups Hall worked with, assembled by correspondence, shifted membership over the years, Kenyon's, which she jokingly called "the Committee," never changed. According to

Mattison, meeting with her group in the early period demonstrated to Kenyon that Hall's was not the only approach to poetry and made it easier for her to disagree with his assessments of her poems, despite his seniority. "No poem is finished until it has been passed by the Committee," Kenyon often declared. Yet as useful as Peseroff and Mattison were to Kenyon throughout her career (and the influence they had on both her attitude as a poet and the development of particular poems was considerable), the range of Hall's assistance ultimately made him more useful to her than even the Committee was. Besides, Hall gave her early and late the model of extraordinary devotion to his art.

"I think," he wrote to me recently, "I helped her in one big way, always: the hard work, the dedication, the stubbornness, the ambition." It is clear to me from my experience that he is right. When I met her, several years before the Committee first convened, she kept no regular writing schedule, but she was already beginning to write more than she had before. There is no doubt her new application came from watching Hall spend ten or more hours every day on poetry and prose, rain or shine, in hope and disappointment. Through him, she came to know how the writing life worked, and how the poems got done. "Don has so many poems, he could easily give several readings and never read the same poem twice," she told me as she was counting up poems for her first book, nearly complete. "All I have is these," she said. I see now that even as she measured her small output against Hall's, she was pondering the challenge of gathering more poems in her future. And when her first volume was at last ready and she had trouble placing it with a publisher, I heard Hall assure her that "It will happen" in a tone which suggested her own career in poetry would happen, too.

As Kenyon herself remarked, Hall's influence included the "peers" he introduced her to at his farm. One of these was Robert Bly, who advised her in the late 1970s to work on translations of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova—probably the most important single piece of advice she ever received as a poet. Through Bly and another of Hall's friends, Louis Simpson, Kenyon located a translator, Vera Dunham, to help her with the project, publishing six Akhmatova poems in her first volume of poetry (1978), and more of them in *Twenty Poems of Anna*

Akhmatova two years later. As a result of her translations, Kenyon discovered the possibilities of the brief lyric, which she was to explore for the rest of her writing life.

In the introduction to *Twenty Poems* she describes not only Akhmatova's early poetry, but the verse she herself was now attempting. Interestingly, her description refers to John Keats, her other major influence at this time:

As we remember John Keats for the beauty and intensity of his shorter poems, especially the odes and the sonnets, so we may revere Akhmatova for her early lyrics—brief, perfectly-made verses of passion and feeling. Images build emotional pressure . . . I love the sudden twists these poems take, often in the last line.

The poem Kenyon uses for illustration is one I heard her recite at a reading the two of us did together, with Hall in attendance, perhaps four years after *Twenty Poems* appeared:

We walk along the hard crest of the snowdrift
toward my white, mysterious house,
both of us so quiet,
keeping the silence as we go along.
And sweeter even than the singing of songs
is this dream, now becoming real:
the swaying of branches brushed aside
and the faint ringing of your spurs.

I recall how, in the question-and-answer session that followed our reading, she went back to the poem, taking pleasure in the “sudden twist” of its conclusion, where simple images are charged with eroticism. And I remember that she asked Hall at the restaurant we went to afterward about the poems she read from her first book, *From Room to Room*, now several years old. He thought they had held up well, but Kenyon had her doubts. Of course, she had by that time experienced harrowing personal difficulties, including the death of her father and serious episodes of mania and depression—difficulties that changed her

as a poet and must have altered her view of the earlier work. But I see now her doubts came also from her encounter with Ahkmatova, who had changed the way she worked so much as to make some of her first poems seem foreign to her. I would discover the results of that encounter later on with the publication of her second book, *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, akin to Ahkmatova's early work not only in its method but its content: the allusive imagery drawn from nature or domestic life, the dreamy speech, the tone of anguish or melancholy.

Another thing I did not grasp at the time of our joint reading was the full meaning of Donald Hall's expression the whole time Jane read—a combination of the greatest pride and joy. It was the same expression I noticed at later readings when he sat in the audience; I took it then, as before, to be a sign of the pleasure her progress as a poet gave him, as it surely was. But reading this comment by Hall in the *AWP Chronicle's* interview makes me now suspect that the pleasure Hall took at her readings and in the letters he sent to me over the years praising her work, was more complicated than I initially thought, and related to his own progress as a poet:

I know I have been encouraged and thrilled to watch Jane's own poetry develop, mature, become better and better . . . Possibly in rivalry, possibly in mere joy, I think I have responded to her own increasing ambition and excellence by trying even harder myself, or perhaps with more energy.

In fact, as I return to the poetry Hall started with *Kicking the Leaves*, no longer focusing on the older poet who guided both Kenyon and me but on a writer with his own need to change and grow, I see the help his wife gave him as an artist was every bit as valuable as the assistance he gave her. Even as he was providing a model for her as an older writer with long-term experience, she was presenting him with the model of a young writer developing and thriving. And just as he helped her by the discipline he brought to his craft, she helped him, as he put it to me in a letter, "by her own stubbornness and by the example of her overcoming obstacles, personal and emotional ones, to make art"—also "by her stubborn and beautiful love of the art of poetry."

It is now clear to me, moreover, that whereas Hall's influence on the content of Kenyon's poetry was limited, Kenyon's influence on the content of his was profound. Only through his relationship with her in his ancestral farmhouse was he able to imagine the connection with Kate and Wesley Wells and their agrarian past that is essential to *Kicking the Leaves*. It is Kenyon, after all, with whom he dunks his finger into the quart of syrup in the central poem "Maple Syrup," the two of them bonding through that gesture with the grandfather and the past; and it is Kenyon he refers to in "Flies" when he says, "We live in the house left behind; we sleep in the bed where they whispered at night." That "we," linked in the book's last poem "Stone Walls" to a vision of family and community, nature, and religious belief, is what brings the sense of place Hall celebrates into being.

In their *AWP Chronicle* interview, Hall speaks of Kenyon's influence on the "Sister" poems of his next book, *The Happy Man*, as well: "my closeness to Jane," he says, "gave me the courage to try writing in a female voice." It seems likely that Kenyon's impact on *The Happy Man* was even more extensive, and began with certain poems in her first volume, *From Room to Room*. In this book Kenyon identifies—through verses like "The Thimble," "Finding a Long Gray Hair," and "Hanging Pictures in Granny's Room"—with the women who have lived on Hall's ancestral farm. Reading such poems one by one as Kenyon wrote them, Hall was no doubt better able to imagine an alternative, feminine view of his new place and of the world—the view that he presents in *The Happy Man*. Thus, there is an irony in the title of this volume which critics have not yet noticed: that his collection is not finally so much about a man or the masculine self as it is about woman and the power of femininity.

Hall's female principle in the book is associated with the idea of repose, a word which recurs in the poems of the last section, "Sisters," and which is defined in the section's epigraph (from Meister Eckhart) as "what the soul [looks] for" and "what all creatures [want], in all their natural efforts and motions." The male principle, on the other hand, as announced in the section titled "Men Driving Cars," has to do with compulsive motion and the submergence of the emotional and intuitive life. It is significant that men in this section, clearly the weaker sex, are disconnected from women; for the ideal the book advances in

spite of its darkneses is a linking of the masculine and feminine selves in poems about grandfather and grandmother, mother and father, uncle and niece, and couples engaged and married. It should be no surprise that among the volume's couples, those most often referred to are the author himself and Jane Kenyon, the wife and poet who initiated the collection's feminine themes. Making a first appearance in *Kicking the Leaves*, this "we" has played a crucial role in every Hall book since.

In Donald Hall's next volume, *The One Day*, a book-length poem about America's spiritual corruption, he casts his couple as exemplars bound so closely in their love and their work of writing that "the day is double" and their eyes "gaze not at each other but a third thing" they have created together: "work's paradise." The poem's recurrent scenes of himself and Kenyon in their farmhouse are the more moving for being placed in the context of the lovelessness and unfulfilling work of American society. Linking his life with Kenyon to the life of the nation in *The One Day*, Hall was never before so affirmative about their relationship or more encompassing in his poetic vision. And Kenyon, who had provided him with the real-life version of the poem's relationship, helped him bring the ambitious poem forth. As his first reader, she was the one who listened to him read the poem aloud in an early draft, and it was she too who supported him in his long struggle with the book, understanding its importance.

"Don has been working on a different kind of poetry now that shows all his wisdom," she told me shortly after the book was done. By that time I had moved from New Hampshire to the University of Maine at Farmington, where I had invited her to read her poems. Walking together to a class for discussion of her work before the reading, she and I made quite a pair: I was depressed about a long poem in progress that wasn't working out, and she, worse off, had undergone a period of depression. "I haven't been feeling well for a long time," she told me. "The poems of the book I've just finished are very melancholy, very dark," she added, shaking her head and pressing her lips together as she always did when she was distressed. "You'll see when I read them tonight."

At the reading some of the poems from the new book, *Let Evening Come*, seemed to have their own wisdom, suggesting that while her husband had been working on the poetry she praised for being wise,

she had been expanding the brief lyric to include a wisdom of her own. One of these was “The Pear”:

There is a moment in middle age
when you grow bored, angered
by your middling mind,
afraid.

That day the sun
burns hot and bright,
making you more desolate.

It happens subtly, as when a pear
spoils from the inside out,
and you may not be aware
until things have gone too far.

There were other new variations in the work of *Let Evening Come*, clearer to me as I read it now, six years later. The associations of certain poems—some imitating the form of notes and letters, others involving vignettes and thoughts about travel—were more complex. Moreover, in poems like “On the Aisle” and “At the Public Market Museum: Charleston, South Carolina,” Kenyon had begun to deal with concerns in the world outside of her inner struggles. Finally, there were hints in her handling of narration of the deepening influence of Chekhov, and a new, Bishop-like way of addressing the reader as a confidante.

Yet just as she had warned, the poems also had a great sorrow in them—a sorrow also evident in *The Boat of Quiet Hours* and her fourth collection, *Constance*. Notwithstanding their moments of lightness and their moving mysticism, all of these books contain themes of terminal illness and death, depression, detachment from the body, and alienation from social life. All reach back to a childhood troubled by psychological stress and the misunderstanding of others. Their narrators often speak with a child’s innocence, too, offering the disturbance they feel so calmly and simply, the poems are the more unsettling as we ponder them. A friend who knew Kenyon once told me that when she

asked the poet to describe her process of writing, Kenyon told her it was always “gut-wrenching.” Given the dark content of the poems and Kenyon’s attempt in many of them to deal with extreme personal difficulties, this description is not hard to believe. It seems likely to me that the enormous stability and understanding she found in her relationship with Hall helped her to persist with such difficult subject matter.

But she got even more help from her remarkable determination—what Hall termed her “example of overcoming obstacles, personal and emotional ones.” That determination is never more clearly seen than in *Constance*, where, in addition to returning to the subject of her father’s death, first taken up in *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, she confronted the most serious personal and emotional obstacles she ever experienced: her lifelong depression and her fear of Donald Hall’s cancer. The result was some of her most poignant poems—“Chrysanthemums,” the nine-part “Having It Out with Melancholy,” and “Pharoah.” One can only imagine how difficult it was for Kenyon to write the concluding stanza of “Pharoah,” conceding, as it does, the possibility of Hall’s death:

I woke in the night to see your
diminished bulk lying beside me—
you on your back, like a sarcophagus
as your feet held up the covers . . .
The things you might need in the next
life surrounded you—your comb and glasses,
water, a book and a pen.

In the meantime, Hall continued to write about Kenyon, this time in *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, which was released in the same year *Constance* was published. In some of the sections of Hall’s title poem, he attempts to quiet Kenyon’s anxiety about him, giving a reader of the two books the odd and moving impression of a dialogue taking place between the two poets, across volumes. The most affecting example is “Mount Kearsarge Shines,” where the speaker uses images of weather to discuss with “Camilla” (Kenyon’s name in the title poem) the possible recurrence of his cancer and to qualify its threat:

Storms stop when they stop, no sooner,
leaving the birches glossy

with ice and glittering to rimy ground.
We'll avoid the programmed weatherman grinning
from the box, cheerful with tempest,
and take the day as it comes,

one day at a time, the way everyone says.
These hours are the best because we hold them close
in our uxorious nation.
Soon we'll walk—when days turn fair

and frost stays off—over old roads, listening
for peepers as spring comes on, never to miss
the day's offering of pleasure
for the government of two.

As it was in *The One Day*, the relationship between Hall and Kenyon is extremely important to Hall's title poem in *The Museum of Clear Ideas*; for the stability of that relationship helps the poem's narrator to stand apart from the world in which he lives and to view it with distance and clarity. Yet our awareness of what his precarious health might do to the "government of two" threatens the equanimity of the speaker's vision, occasionally jiggling the lens. Thus, the same Camilla sections that help the narrator achieve his distance also suggest a vulnerability and humanity that temper his remoteness, making the view he offers easier to accept.

But alas, we live in a world where governments fail and nations disappear, sometimes in the least predictable ways; it was Jane Kenyon, not Donald Hall, who got the cancer, and she who died of it. I remember going to dinner with them just after Christmas in New Hampshire, where the three of us exchanged and signed volumes of poetry, each having published one earlier in the year. I recall, too, the apprehension just beneath our festivity about Hall's health. So when we received a note Hall sent us less than two months later, I was shocked to read its news of Kenyon's leukemia.

During her illness and their attempts to cure it through a bone-marrow transplant operation, Hall worked to complete another book, *The Old Life*, which bears more of Kenyon's influence than ever. Like every collection Hall ever wrote after his marriage to Kenyon, this one is dedicated to her and includes, among other poems, verse about their life together. But unlike the other volumes, *The Old Life*, a poem in eighty-odd parts, contains a series of brief lyrics that closely resemble Kenyon's in their form, the images and events of each gathering toward a concluding disclosure or epiphany. As in Kenyon, Hall's disclosure sometimes comes by surprise out of events that predicted it all along:

We walked in the white house
like ghosts among ghosts who cherished us.
Everything we looked at
exalted and raptured our spirits:—
full moon, pale blue
asters, swamp maples Chinese red, ghost birches,
stone walls, cellar holes,
and lopsided stretched farmhouses like ours.
The old tenants watched us
settle in, five years, and then the house
shifted on its two-hundred-
year-old sills, and became our house.

Sometimes the concluding disclosure is less predictable, as in this lyric about Kenyon's depressions:

Curled on the sofa
in the fetal position, Jane wept day
and night, night and day.
I could not touch her; I could do nothing.
Melancholia fell
like rain over Ireland for weeks
without end.
I never
belittled her sorrows or joshed at

her dreads and miseries.
How admirable I found myself.

However the conclusion is handled, though, the result is the sudden twist Kenyon admired in the poems of Akhmatova.

In the days just before Kenyon's death, the two worked to assemble her last volume *Otherwise*, a collection of new and selected verse. The book's new poems were among the best she had ever done, striking in their variety and their cohesion. Continuing to explore the short lyric (the majority of the poems were half a page long or less), she dealt with dark themes familiar from earlier books—her father's dying and Hall's cancer—adding poems about the death of her mother-in-law. Yet there was a new range of emotional tone, which included both sorrow and happiness, "Happiness" being, in fact, the title of one of the poems. Moreover, Kenyon was less tied to autobiographical detail, exercising a new freedom of invention, and using the third person to deal with events and issues in the world around her. Finally, there was a new integration of religious belief and poetic observation, showing us how strongly faith guided Kenyon and shaped her view of the world.

Of this last work, the only poem written during Kenyon's illness was "The Sick Wife," on which, as Hall says in his afterword to *Otherwise*, she "would have made more changes if she had lived." This poem features Kenyon and Hall, as many earlier ones do. Yet while the earlier pieces are often love poems, "The Sick Wife" speaks of love's absence. He has gone for groceries, and she, helpless in her illness, is left in the car to watch "even the old and relatively infirm" move outside in the parking lot and the cars alongside of her pull "away so briskly/ that it [makes] her sick at heart." Where the Kenyon of the earlier poems is at home in the place where love and work happens, the sick wife is in all ways displaced, neither at home, nor able to join the world's traffic. Choosing the third person to portray the wife in this poem, Kenyon stands eerily outside of herself, observing not only the verse's moment but her own finite history.

Yet in spite of "The Sick Wife" the love poems about Kenyon and Hall continue, because in his grief, Donald Hall goes on writing about his mate, and even—in a series of poems-in-progress called "Letters to No Address"—to her. In a recent segment of the PBS program "Fresh

Air," Hall declared that everything he had done as a poet seemed to him a preparation for the poetry he is now involved with. Then he read a sample of the new work, "Weeds and Peonies," one of his most beautiful elegies, where he paces between the weedy garden Kenyon left behind and her newly blossoming peonies by the porch of the ancestral farmhouse. Watching their petals blow across the abandoned garden, he imagines Kenyon vanishing into snowflakes; looking up at Mount Kearsarge, he thinks of the words he spoke when she went off for a day of climbing: "Hurry back"—words that are useless now. Hall's elegy is the more poignant for the way it interweaves words and images from Kenyon's poems, as if to illustrate the interdependency that sustained the two poets in their life together. There are references to Kenyon's walking with Gus, the dog that appears in her third and fourth volumes, and to snowflakes as particles, a metaphor used first in her poem "Winter Lambs." Describing the peonies, a favorite subject in Kenyon's work, Hall uses the words "prodigies," "heads," and "topple"—all found in earlier Kenyon poems and releasing a range of sorrowful meanings best appreciated by studying the original sources and the new context Hall's elegy has provided. In one of its lines "Weeds and Peonies" even refers to a poem Hall included in his first New Hampshire book, "Old Roses"—a love poem to Kenyon which spoke of the beauty of the old roses around the Wilmot farmhouse and, ironically, of how quickly they perish.

No doubt this allusive and moving poem, and the interview during which Donald Hall read it, will continue to spread the story of two poets, drawing readers to the work of Hall and Kenyon, and at the same time distorting that work and making it more difficult to assess. But there will be time in the future for such assessments. For now, we may simply be grateful for the abundance of poetry these two have written over the last twenty-five years—poems both local and universal in their subjects, which range from despair to celebration. And we may give thanks for the unique relationship that brought such poetry to us.