JOHN FELSTINER

"Kicking the Leaves"
Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon at Eagle Pond Farm

> The sun goes in and out
> of the grand clouds, making the air alive
> with golden light, and then, as if heaven's
> spirits had fallen, everything's somber again.
>
> After music and poetry we walk to the car.
> I believe in the miracles of art, but what
> prodigy will keep you safe beside me...?

No coupled American poets, or European either, had such interlaced sympathies as Donald Hall (b. 1928) and Jane Kenyon (1947–1995). Here, as it happens, Kenyon speaking to her husband, who's fighting liver cancer, asks what wonder beyond poetry can save him. Soon after, she herself came down with leukemia and died fifteen months later.

> no snowdrop or crocus rose no yellow
> no red leaves of maple,

Hall wrote then,

> no spring no summer no autumn no winter
> no rain no peony thunder no woodthrush...

He called this poem "Without."

Three years into their marriage, in 1975, they settled where he'd always wanted to be, on a central New Hampshire farm his mother's grandparents bought in 1865. At first, Kenyon would "move from room to room, / a little dazed," but soon she "fit in with the furniture / and the landscape." On a shelf in the root cellar, after moving in, the poets found a quart of maple syrup made by Hall's grandfather decades before. They used it but poured the last drops

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into a store-bought gallon, then did the same next time and so on, sustaining the ancestral strain.

Eagle Pond Farm, within sight of Mount Kearsarge, for Hall meant "attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation." At eleven he began spending summers there, writing poems and reading in the morning, in the afternoon working with his grandparents at haying and other tasks. Since that early idyll, Hall has written again and again on the countryside's seasons and rhythms of work: chopping wood, cutting ice, tapping sap, milking cows, manuring, plowing, weeding, harvesting, mowing and gathering hay, canning fruits and vegetables, and always, keeping house. He remembers "watching my grandfather's practiced rhythm with the fork" in pitching hay: "plunge in, turn, heave, swing, shake loose, and back for more."

That rhythm runs through *Ox-Cart Man*, his much-loved children's story with Barbara Cooney's folk-art illustrations. Imagine a kindergarten teacher reading this slim book aloud, holding it up for kids to see and flipping the pages every few lines as a year comes round in the rhythms of its nouns and verbs:

> In October he backed his ox into his cart
> and he and his family filled it up
> with everything they made or grew all year long
> that was left over.
>
> He packed a bag of wool
> he sheared from the sheep in April.
>
> He packed a shawl his wife wove on a loom
> from yarn spun at the spinning wheel
> from sheep sheared in April.
>
> He packed five pairs of mittens
> his daughter knit
> from yarn spun at the spinning wheel
> from sheep sheared in April.
>
> He packed candles the family made.
> He packed linen made from flax they grew.

He packed shingles he split himself.
He packed birch brooms his son carved
with a borrowed kitchen knife.

He packed potatoes they dug from their garden
—but first he counted out potatoes enough to eat all winter
and potatoes for seed next spring.

He packed a barrel of apples
honey and honeycombs
turnips and cabbages
a wooden box of maple sugar
from the maples they tapped in March
when they boiled and boiled the sap away.

He packed a bag of goose feathers that his children collected
from the barnyard geese.

When his cart was full, he waved good-bye to his wife,
his daughter, and his son
and he walked at his ox's head ten days
over hills, through valleys, by streams
past farms and villages

until he came to Portsmouth
and Portsmouth Market.

There, in the same cadence each thing had being made, he sold it—with one moment not in the original poem: "Then he sold his ox, and kissed him good-bye on his nose."

In the market he bought essentials for his household, wife, daughter, and son, plus something else in the children's book: two pounds of wintergreen peppermint candies. "Then he walked home," past the same farms and villages, over the same hills, to his waiting family, who took up their implements and went back to work,

and that night the ox-cart man sat in front of his fire
stitching new harness
for the young ox in the barn

and he carved a new yoke
and sawed planks for a new cart
and split shingles all winter,

while his wife made flax into linen all winter,
and his daughter embroidered linen all winter,
and his son carved Indian brooms from birch all winter,
and everybody made candles,

and in March they tapped the sugar maple trees
and boiled the sap down,

and in April they sheared the sheep,
spun yarn,
and wove and knitted,

and in May they planted potatoes, turnips, and cabbages,
while apple blossoms bloomed and fell,
while bees woke up, starting to make new honey,

and geese squawked in the barnyard,
dropping feathers as soft as clouds.

This story started as a short poem, whose early drafts say "I pack wool...I sell the ox." In changing tense and standpoint—"He packed...He sold"—in distancing that world, Hall wants us still in touch with a way of life that used to be.

Rural New England around 1800 comes alive in these cadences. The seamless round of family and work and earth and weather, the seasons' cycle outdoors and in, where nature's yield prompts a family's tasks—all this evolves in the simple trends, the economies and concreteness of Hall's verse: "In October...He packed...When his cart was full...he walked...until he came...He sold...Then he sold...He bought...Then he walked home...until he came... and his daughter...and his son...and he carved...and...and...and ...while his wife...and in March...and in April...and in May..." "But how come he didn't sell the linen?" a schoolchild noticed and asked the author. "The ox got hungry on the way to Portsmouth," Hall said, "so the man fed it to him."

Generation and regeneration, in nature and livelihood alike, drives *Ox-Cart Man*. When Hall's elderly cousin Paul was a boy, "an old man told him this tale, and the old man told Paul that he had heard it from an old man when *he* was a boy." For the working poet, "It's a tale of work, work, work, of total dispersal and starting again": like human life, the ox-cart man "is a perennial plant." Hall tells things plainly, though music turns up now and then: "yarn spun at the spinning wheel" yields "a shawl... from sheep sheared in April." Frugal like what's depicted, and lovingly attentive, he does without figures of speech until the closing line, when geese are "dropping feathers as soft as clouds." And why not, since the page shows light clouds above rolling hills, the fairest of spring days.

Of course *Ox-Cart Man* purifies the scenario, a pastoral minus crushing cold, sucking mud, wasting heat, draining weariness, grinding poverty. What's more, this holistic life and much of its landscape were gone or going by the time Hall came to Eagle Pond Farm as a child in World War II. And what if you're not fortunate like the boy in Hall's storybook *The Farm Summer 1942*, whose "great-great-great-grandfather... fought in the American Revolution against the King of England!"? Or like the author, whose grandmother "played the organ seventy-eight years" in the nearby church?

Ox-Cart Man, like *Ishi, the Last of His Tribe*, has something to teach us. Back then, Hall says, "Work was holy." In this day and age perhaps it still can be. Various people or events "connect us to the past." Even without long-dwelling ancestors, we might "connect, joyously, with a place and a culture." Almost anywhere, almost anyone can catch "the gorgeous cacophony of autumn."

Seasons: the Fall from Eden's eternal spring brought toil into the world "by the sweat of thy brow," brought the seasons, and death. "In October" our hero packs his cart with fruits of nature and of work. Then winter, spring, and summer all the family brings them forth again. The year pivots on fall, a harvest tending toward winter. Not spring but fall animates Hall's poetry, written "in defiance of death." Thus *Ox-Cart Man*: "It's a tale of... starting again."

No surprise, then, that when "Wesley Wells, old man I loved," died in March 1953, the poet saw his grandfather's half-century of work in light of how fall might strike Eagle Pond Farm:

When next October's frosts harden the ground
And fasten in the year's catastrophe,
The farm will come undone—
The farmer dead, and deep in his ploughed earth.

Decades later Hall again calls up the hard season:

Late in October after the grass freezes
and cattle remain in their stalls, twice a day loosed
to walk stiff-legged to the watering trough
from which the old man lifts a white lid of ice....

Robert Frost's New Hampshire apple-picking comes to mind, and the "pane of glass / I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough." But Hall keeps his humor. Spelling out a swelling moo, *mm-mmm-mmmmm-mmmmmmmm-ugghwanchhh,* his voice stays limber.

His years have been a horn of plenty: poetry, stories, essays, criticism, memoirs, and honors—the poetry coming in all forms modern and classical. Since settling at Eagle Pond Farm with Kenyon, Hall's imaginative core, his physical, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic touchstone, remains that ecosystem binding humankind to nature. In "Maple Syrup,"

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 gasket, 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 the kitchen he left
when his body slid
like anyone's into the ground.

This homely ritual lets one startling line break trigger a conjugal sweetness, "dip our fingers / in, you and I both," a paradise regained on ancestral terrain.

Another durable presence, crossing New England pastures long since overgrown to woods, crops up in "Stone Walls," an anthem to what emerges in late fall:

> everything gray and brown, against the dark evergreen,
> everything rock and silver, lichen and moss on stone,
> strong bones of stone walls showing at last...

Hall's vocal music owes to the "joy of leaves falling":

> In October the leaves turn...
> purples, greens, reds, grays, oranges, weaving together
> this joyful fabric,
> and I walk in the afternoon sun, kicking the leaves

as he had in the same place forty years before.

"Kicking the Leaves," title poem of a 1978 volume, finds Hall in Michigan walking with his new wife in October "as the leaves swirl upward from my boot." He fetches back to the boy he was in Connecticut "wearing corduroy knickers that swished / with a sound like leaves," then to a cider stand in New Hampshire and college in Massachusetts. Even if wilderness and animal wildness at the heart of things, as for Lawrence, Jeffers, Haines, Hughes, Snyder, don't mark the work of Donald Hall, still a wildness in words can surprise us. One Saturday noon before the war his father came home from work

> and tumbled in the leaves with me,
> laughing, and carried me, laughing, my hair full of leaves...

Now, years later,

> Now I fall, now I leap and fall
> to feel the leaves crush under my body, to feel my body
> buoyant in the ocean of leaves, the night of them,
> night heaving with death and leaves, rocking like the ocean.

Oh, this delicious falling into the arms of leaves,
into the soft laps of leaves!
Face down, I swim into the leaves...

Exuberance worthy of Whitman stirs the verbs here, and the leaves. Before this poem ceases we'll have heard that tocsin word thirty-five times.

The dying perennial season returns in a poem by Jane Kenyon, bringing her husband home from his operation.

He dozed in the car,
woke, and looked with astonishment
at the hills, gold and quince
under October sun, a sight so
overwhelming that we began to cry,
he first, and then I.

He recovers, only to see her struck by leukemia in 1994. *Without*, four years later, chronicles her dying in an exact, reserved voice that testifies all the more poignantly to her medical ravages:

Daybreak until nightfall,
he sat by his wife at the hospital
while chemotherapy dripped
through the catheter into her heart.

This poem closes,

They pushed the IV pump
which she called Igor
slowly past the nurses' pods, as far
as the outside door
so that she could smell the snowy air.

Through forty-five indoor clinical pages, that will be the last opening to nature until her death in April over a year later.

Only then comes *Without*'s title poem, devoid of punctuation: "no snowdrop or crocus rose no yellow / no red leaves of maple with-

out October." At this moment the wounded distancing of "he" and "she" dissolves, and earth returns:

> Your daffodils rose up
> and collapsed in their yellow
> bodies on the hillside
> garden above the birches
> you laid out in sand...

Letter poems follow the seasons, bringing her news of Eagle Pond Farm,

> here where I sat each fall
> watching you pull your summer's
> garden up.

"Letter in the New Year" reports the weather, as

> I walk over packed snow
> at zero, my heart quick
> with joy in the visible world.

As they both know, the Bible promises we are not left comfortless.

"Weeds and Peonies," ending *Without*, finds this world mixed. Before Jane's illness her peonies were "whiter than the idea of white as big as basketballs." Now there's another simile, "Your peonies burst out, white as snow squalls," so that

> Your peonies lean their vast heads westward
> as if they might topple. Some topple.

In Hall's reading (as on the CD issued with his new *White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems 1946-2006*), a deep pause happens before the last brief sentence.

Several years later another book dwells on Kenyon and loss. *The Painted Bed* (where his forebears slept, she died, and he still sleeps) brings back humor. "'What will become of Perkins?' / Jane asked" (for some reason she called him that). Now

I miss her teasing voice
that razzed my grandiloquence:
"Perkins, dim your lights."
"Somebody cover Perkins's cage."

Hall's gift to her comes as homage to Thomas Hardy, whose wife's death released a spate of laments. One of these begins, "Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost." In another, Hardy speaks of "Leaves around me falling,... / And the woman calling." So Hall's "The Wish" begins, "I keep her weary ghost inside me," and echoes Hardy's falling rhymes with his own: "crying...dying," "colder... hold her." Hardy: "We stood by a pond that winter day." Hall: "We spent green afternoons / ...Beside dark Eagle Pond." Greater love hath no man for a woman than to give her his favorite poet!

"Ordinary days were best," Hall writes, "when we worked over poems / in our separate rooms." Even more closely than his, Jane Kenyon's poems get their bearings from the world around her. In "Depression in Winter," a sun-heated stone renders her "chastened and calm." "Twilight: After Haying" finds "dusty stubble" and "long shadows," but "soul's bliss / and suffering are bound together / like the grasses," so

The last, sweet exhalations
of timothy and vetch
go out with the song of the bird;
the ravaged field
grows wet with dew.

In the vein of Psalms, "The grass resolves to grow again, / ...but my disordered soul thirsts / after something it cannot name." "Gettysburg: July 1, 1863" gets inside a dying soldier—"How good the earth smelled, / as it had when he was a boy."

Whether nature's everpresence lifts her heart or brings on depression, Kenyon mints one perception after another: "the low clovery place / where melt from the mountain / comes down in the spring, and wild / lupine grows"; a wood thrush "singing in the great maples; its bright, unequivocal eye." How is it such tact for language lifts the heart no matter what? "At the Winter Solstice" gives

that longest night a breathtaking, breathgiving turn of thought: "While we slept an inch of new snow / simplified the field."

"Let Evening Come," as fine as it gets in our time and often set to music, turns closest to prayer in turning close to nature. That first quiet modulation, "Let...light...late," Kenyon's recurring eight-syllable line, and the mystery of afternoon light "moving / up the bales as the sun moves down," let us this once at least "believe in the miracles of art." She times her phrasings so that we weigh mortality in the scales with sunlight, crickets, stars, wind. A litany builds—"Let the light...Let dew...Let the fox..."—until new verb forms assure us: "don't / be afraid. God does not leave us," bringing her title home forever.

Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.