

DONALD HALL

To Eagle Pond

Three years after we married—we lived in Ann Arbor, where I taught at the University of Michigan—Jane Kenyon and I decided to spend a year at my old family farm in New Hampshire. I had spent my childhood summers there, and it was my place of all places. It was the poetry house, domain of old farmers who told stories and spoke pieces memorized when they were young, and it had been antithetical to the Connecticut suburbs where I spent the school year. Summers at the farm, with my mother's parents, I fed the chickens and hayed with my grandfather. Jane knew how I felt about the house, where I had thrived under the love of the old people in a countryside largely abandoned to cellar holes, squared out by stone walls that lacked animals to fence in. Years before Jane and I met, I wrote a book about those summers.

My grandfather had died at seventy-seven in 1953. When Jane and I drove to the farm, in August of 1975, my grandmother Kate was ninety-seven, captive to senile dementia in the Peabody Home. After she died, we would buy the place from her heirs, but for now we were taking a year's leave of absence from the university—TuTh 1–2:30, cocktail parties, office hours, dinner parties, term papers—to camp out in the white farmhouse, to enjoy the solitary quiet and work on poems. When we returned to Michigan, maybe we would have sampled our future. I was almost forty-seven—Jane was twenty-eight—and I was thinking of early retirement, perhaps in five or ten years. But when we arrived with a U-Haul, my grandmother's health took a plunge downward. The governing past died when she died, and our lives opened to improvisation. In a week's flurry we buried the house's daughter—Kate Keneston Wells was born in 1878 in the bedroom that became ours—and Jane and I began our double solitude in the clapboard 1803 Cape cottage across from Eagle Pond as the leaves were turning: first the swamp maples, in boggy patches by the side of the road, then the sugar maples branch by branch. These colors were the most outrageous, crimson and bright orange and Chinese red. The birches turned russet, and the oaks a deeper brown-red. We floated on the bliss of the natural world.

In September Jane first spoke of wanting to stay here forever, not going back to Michigan where I had my job and where she had grown up. While the colors were still brilliant, Jane's mother and father drove from Ann Arbor and visited, admiring the house and the landscape. They saw their daughter revel in place and people, floorboards and vistas. At the same time, although she didn't complain, Jane struggled with feelings of being alien. For the first time she was living apart from the familiar, from Ann Arbor, parents, brother, which was a liberation, but she lived in a house freighted with more than a century of another family, a house which kept the broken furniture and mothballed woolens of four generations. Over that first year, in her poems she recorded a gradual, tentative sense of acceptance, of connection. Day by day, I observed the burgeoning new Jane of Eagle Pond Farm, separated from her past and from the busy academy.

Danbury center is four miles north of our house in Wilmot. In Danbury after Labor Day we attended the Danbury Grange Harvest Festival Parade: a fife and drum corps from Plymouth, floats from our Sunday school and from local enterprises, the American Legion marching, antique cars in procession, children riding bicycles with tissue paper woven through the spokes, Willard Huntoon leading a brace of Holstein oxen, the Volunteer Fire Department with men tossing candy to children from fire engines. Buildings and sheds of the Grange and the American Legion contained a jumble sale, paintings by Danbury painters, prize Ball jars of beans, enormous pumpkins and squashes, pyramids of huge bright tomatoes. Originally, the parade and fair had celebrated harvest. Now it celebrated an autonomy of country pleasures: The summer people were gone.

We had the house and land to ourselves as the countryside emptied out and cool autumn started. I found old notepaper with Kate's father's name on it, B.C. Keneston. Under a photograph of Mt. Kearsarge, he called the house Eagle Pond Farm. I had not heard the phrase before. Understanding that many of my correspondents wouldn't believe "Danbury, New Hampshire" sufficient address, I appropriated B.C.K.'s invention and ordered letterhead for Eagle Pond Farm.

Bob Thornly, who owned the store four hundred yards away around a curve, dispersed not only gas and food and hardware and stovepipe and New Hampshire ashtrays, but also facilitations. I told him I needed a typist and he thought of Lois Fierro, half a mile far-

ther down the road, who handled my letters and manuscript for two decades. At the store I picked up the *Boston Globe* every morning. We shopped there for milk and sundries. Jane bought crockery there that sits in the pantry still. In November I found felt-lined boots for winter. We dropped in at Thornly's a couple of times a day, chatted with Bob, gossiped with neighbors, and heard new jokes. My cousin Ansel told us it got so cold he saw a fox putting jumper cables on a jackrabbit. Jane called Thornly's Store a continual party.

The first Sunday we were alone together, I said that maybe we ought to go to church; probably my cousins would expect us to. (In Ann Arbor, Sunday morning was devoted to recovering from Saturday night.) We went, and heard a sermon from a preacher who had helped to bury Kate, and who taught at Colby-Sawyer College twelve miles away in New London. Jack Jensen quoted "Rilke the German poet," which didn't diminish our attention. The next Sunday we went again. What most ensnared us was not references to Rilke nor theology, but the community of the church. Jane called our side of the building the gene pool, because it included my mother's first cousins Martha and Edna, and their husbands and their offspring. My mother's first cousin Audrey sat just across the aisle. Edna's daughter Bertha occupied a pew with her husband Launie Brown and their two young daughters. With her taciturn husband Ansel, Edna was the church's mammalian soul, a broad vessel of generosity and fierceness, her tenderness as bright as the fire of her Democratic politics. By community we slowly approached communion. Before the end of the year, we were reading scripture and commentary. Jack loaned us *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A year later we were both deacons—we who had never entered a church in Ann Arbor.

It was late October when Jane made the definitive announcement: She would chain herself to the walls of the root cellar rather than leave New Hampshire. I was terrified; I was joyous. When I was a child, I had wanted to live here, but I abandoned the notion by the time I was twenty because there was no way I could make a living. This land that I loved could no longer sustain a farm. Anyway, I had farmed with my grandfather as a boy, and I didn't want to farm. Now, at Jane's urging, I began to think of quitting my job, giving up tenure, and undertaking the freelance life. It was a thrilling idea, and frightening because I had two children from my first marriage; the elder was in college, the younger in high school with college two

years ahead. At the University of Michigan I had medical insurance, a retirement plan, and an annual income.

We explored back roads in our Plymouth and later in a beat-up Saab that we bought for four hundred dollars, so that Jane could drive to the supermarket when I went off on poetry readings. We explored the house's inside—root cellar, milk room, toolshed, woodshed, barn, closets upstairs and down, a frail attic holding two spinning wheels, and the back chamber or storeroom where everything broken or superfluous had accumulated over a century: chests full of clothing, a dozen double beds, a butter churn, a last for repairing shoes, thirty or forty chairs (straight-backed, Morris, rocking), tool chests, oil lamps, carpet bags, letters, old diaries, and documents with figures measured in pounds not in dollars. We lived among the things of the dead. Jane adored her mountain, her day, and her house—and fretted less about moving into someone else's world. My habitual love of mountain and house grew greater, stimulated by Jane's.

We worked on our poems, often in the same room. A year later we would have separate studies, but that first year we worked at close quarters because we had no heat except for the single wood stove—an elegant black cast-iron Glenwood, with chrome fittings, from 1910 or so. On the dining room table in the autumn, I had worked at a book about the Pittsburgh Pirate pitcher Dock Ellis. In November when it turned cold, I moved my work into the living room beside the stove, Jane and I occupying chairs on either side. When Jane needed to type a poem, she set up a bridge table beside the Glenwood. We had no storm windows and no insulation. We made love on the floor beside the stove with the drafts open, arranging blankets and pillows. When it was time for sleep, I dashed into the freezing bedroom to turn on the electric blankets, as in my mother's time the family stuffed hot water bottles under quilts. We undressed beside the wood stove. Jane was too cold to read in bed. For myself, I devised a strategy. Reading at bedtime, I used only paperbacks that I could read one-handed, switching the book from hand to hand so that I could keep one hand under the covers warming up.

Driving in the afternoon, we found villages we had never entered, hills we had never climbed, great stands of birches, intact stone walls built a hundred and fifty years ago. Jane decided she preferred

November's pallor to the earlier brightness, late autumn's shades of gray and tan, the palette of analytic cubism. As the days grew short, we lived mostly in the stove's proximity. Before bed I would make four trips to the woodshed with a canvas and leather carrier that Jane ordered from L.L. Bean. I filled the Glenwood and shut it tight, so that the fire would keep all night. I stacked maple and ash alongside the stove, to replenish it at midnight. (It was painful, taking a frozen journey to the shed wearing a nightshirt.) On a normal morning, well below zero, I rose at five and removed ashes to expose gold-red coals, then filled the dark cavity with big split logs, opened the drafts, and returned to bed for a nap while wood blasted to warm the living room and take the chill off the adjacent kitchen, dining room, and bathroom. By six it was comfortable. We rose, made coffee, and dressed beside the stove where we had piled our clothes the night before.

In December I wrote the University of Michigan resigning my professorship and tenure. The university spoiled my bravery by refusing my resignation, giving me another year's leave, allowing me liberty to change my mind. I never considered changing my mind. From time to time I panicked and took on literary chores that were disagreeable. A freelancer doesn't know the source of income that will provide support in six month's time. Where will the grocery money come from? Gradually, because something always turned up, I came to accept that something would turn up. Anxiety became less frequent. It was easier for Jane to accept the uncertainty; she had grown up in a house of self-employment.

Before Christmas I bought a chainsaw and cut a small balsam for a frail Christmas tree, inadequate and beautiful, a Charlie Brown tree. One morning when I tried to start the Plymouth, it barely turned over and wouldn't catch. I was puzzled until I checked the thermometer on the porch. It was minus twenty-one degrees—and I had not noticed: New Hampshire's cold is dryer than Michigan's, and less painful. Later that day, my cousin Clyde Currier, who owned the Mobil station in Andover, installed a block heater. A plug dangled from the grill of our green Valiant, and at night before bed I plugged it into an extension cord. A timer started heating the block at 4:30 a.m. No more trouble starting, even at negative thirty-eight.

In this portion of my life I was fat and bearded. Naturally, I was recruited to play Santa Claus at the Church's annual Christmas

party for children. (My gigs multiplied. A year later I was recruited for the Danbury Elementary School Christmas party, which took place at night in the Grange Hall, and for Danbury's private kindergarten, and for the Andover Lions' bingo night.) My beard was black. I whitened it imperfectly with a spray can purchased at a theatrical supply store in Concord. I needed no padding, only a Santa costume that my cousin Peter supplied me, happy to relinquish the role he had earlier played.

The Christmas pageant at the South Danbury Church was an annual excitement of my mother's childhood, and my grandmother's before her. It has changed and it has stayed the same. For my grandmother in the 1880s and my mother in the 1910s, it was each family's entire Christmas celebration and present-giving, except for peppermints or an orange in a stocking at home on Christmas morning. My mother and her two sisters each year received their presents at church: each year, for each girl, a big storybook and a new doll. (My grandmother obtained these extravagances with coupons issued by the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, that visited the farm each week by horse and wagon.) These days, we give each other few presents at the church pageant, family to family not within the family, as the big present-giving is reserved for Christmas morning at home, the way it is in the rest of the United States. At church, the children receive candy canes and bags of popcorn from Santa. Before the moment of gifts and Santa Claus, Sunday school children recite, perform, or sing the pieces they have rehearsed, Christmas poems or dialog or songs. In between, adults sing carols. Then the children dress up to perform the birth in the manger. There are shepherds dressed in cut-off old bathrobes, boys and girls both, and wise men, and someone elevates an aluminum foil star pasted to cardboard. There is Joseph, there is Mary, and a doll lies in a cradle set on straw—while narrators tell or read the story of the birth, and Instamatics flash, and video cameras record.

In 1975 Jane witnessed the pageant for the first time. I had not attended for twenty-five years. With my beard whitened and wearing red clothing, I could not watch the pageant from a pew. From the church's foyer, I peered through a crack in the door. When I heard my cue—something about reindeer—I shook the harness bells I carried and swung open the doors heaving out so-so ho-hos. After Jane and I drove home, still in costume I poured myself a

Scotch to calm myself down. Jane had watched the pageant in whole joy, more and more belonging to this tiny community of people who had been born here and never left. The rural Ann Arbor she had grown up in had become a suburb of activity, a settlement of unsettlement. In Ann Arbor, as in all university environments, there was a saying: "At every party, one-third of the people were not in town the year before; one third will not be in town next year." We had emigrated to the university's anti-world. Next year we would attend the Danbury Grange Harvest Festival Parade, and next year we would sit in our pew to watch the Christmas pageant. And the next year, and the next. . . .

After Christmas came the coldest January in a hundred years of recorded New Hampshire Januarys. My grandmother had just died at ninety-seven, and our first January in her house was colder than any she had known. Every morning for weeks it was at least twenty below. We burned cord after cord of Channing Sawyer's hardwood. We set electric heaters in the bathroom, to avoid frozen pipes. There were days when Jane sat on the frigid floor of the kitchen aiming her hairdryer at the icy plumbing that rose from the root cellar. It was a painful month, but exhilarating, and we passed the test. In this coldest January, four friends visited from Ann Arbor, one our lawyer, and we passed papers to buy the house. Other friends came for weekends, checking us out, and slept in unheated bedrooms for the first and only time in their lives. When I finished my book about Dock Ellis in February, Dock flew to stay with us as he checked over the manuscript. He had grown up in Los Angeles, and in the Pittsburgh winters—he pitched for the Pirates—kept his apartment thermostat at ninety degrees. As we drove down I-89 from the Lebanon airport, he marveled at the formations of ice, like frozen blue waterfalls, hanging down granite cuts at the sides of the highway. All the time he stayed in our house, he never took off his fur hat and gloves. When he emerged in the morning from a bed in the frozen parlor, he declared, with emphatic hilarity, "I'm *never*—going to *spend*—another *night*—in that *room*!" Dock and I went through the manuscript quickly.

Everything was exhilarating that year, and the next, and the next. We kept wondering: Will we ever take things for granted? Will it ever seem *normal* to live here? Mount Kearsarge changed color over the seasons, pink or green, white or blue or lavender. Eagle Pond

lay flat and white in winter, then in mud season turned livid with punky ice that disappeared one day, sinking to melt on the bottom, just before moss turned green and birches started uncurling frail leaves.

All the while I wallowed in the muddy freedom of freelancing. I began every day by working on poems, and then turned to prose. Finishing the Dock book, I started reminiscences of old poets I had known when I was young. I wrote periodical essays and short stories. An old Ann Arbor friend was editor at the *Ford Times*, and I sold him several things at five hundred dollars apiece. I wrote an essay on the Glenwood for *Yankee* and they turned it down; heaven knows how many pieces they had printed about wood stoves. I reviewed for the *New York Times Book Review*. I did magazine pieces about baseball. I flew away to do poetry readings. I reported on manuscripts for publishers and cashed one hundred dollar checks. I judged contests. Sales of a textbook, *Writing Well*, brought in regular royalties. An old student, now a children's book editor, commissioned me to do a riddle book for kids. Moving from one sort of writing to another, I stayed at the desk all day. In the next few years I took on a variety of commissions—further textbooks, magazine writing, editing poetry for two periodicals. Late in 1976, I finished a poem called "Ox-Cart Man," which the *New Yorker* published. Then I used the same story for a children's book called *Ox-Cart Man*, which won the Caldecott Medal for Barbara Cooney's illustrations. When Jane began to sell poems, and to give poetry readings, her income added itself to the pot.

"Love at the lips was touch/As sweet as I could bear." We lived alone in the old house heated by wood on Route 4 with the railroad running between us and Eagle Pond. March of 1976 was blizzard and melt, blizzard and melt, but in April we found snowdrops and residual daffodils and Jane began her work of twenty years, the garden in patches and strips around the house and in front of the barn. All winter in her mind she had planted her flowers. But this summer, instead of doing much gardening, we returned to Ann Arbor to pack up our books and furniture and move everything to New Hampshire. Before driving west, we arranged for changes in the house. My cousin Forrest was contractor and carpenter-in-chief—his grandfather Forrest was brother to my grandfather Wesley—with Joe Bouley and Bob Peters helping. In the kitchen we would remove the set tubs and the old low sink, putting in a sink high enough

to work at, space for a dishwasher, drawers and cabinets under a butcherblock counter. We would replace both chimneys, one from 1803 and the other from 1865, too old to be safe. Forrest saved two bricks for us from the oldest chimney, built for the original Cape: One brick had "1803" on it, the other the initials of the brickyard in Lebanon from which oxen had dragged the bricks. When Joe Bouley took apart this old chimney, he found places where the brick had fallen away to plaster and lath, which was scorched black. Joe felt sick to his stomach. All the previous frigid winter we had sent flame up that chimney.

Forrest installed storm windows. We began insulating. We bought a Jøtul wood stove which Forrest installed in my study. In the back chamber we had found a small beautiful iron stove—very old; my mother who was now eldest of the family had no notion of its provenance—which needed work, and while we were back in Ann Arbor, Les Ford, a farrier who lived down the road in Potter Place, tidied and soldered it, so that Forrest could drill a chimney hole in Jane's study and install the repaired antiquity. Les Ford also restored the cast-iron Glenwood kitchen range, removing the indignity of tubes supplying kerosene, and set it up ready for wood in the kitchen where it had taken its place when my mother was a girl. Mostly, Forrest and Bob and Joe put bookcases in: upstairs in Jane's study, downstairs in the parlor, on three sides of the living room, and all over the room in which I slept as a child next to my grandparents' bedroom, where I would now do my work. In my study, the bookshelves went from floor to ceiling, under and around windows. In one place, a stack jutted out from a wall, providing another forty feet of shelving for poetry.

While we were gone, my mother house-sat and culled some of the accumulation of more than a century. Late in August, I drove a rented truck full of books and manuscripts to a house with new bookshelves and chimneys. In September, again, we settled down. Not until next year would we spend July and August afternoons at Eagle Pond, swimming and sunning, reading and even working under tall white pines and oaks beside birch trees over dense moss with red berries among wild strawberry plants. By next year, we would live as we would live until we died, or one of us did.