

Telling Suffering: A Brief Interview with Donald Hall

Marcia Day Childress

*Poet Donald Hall was teaching at the University of Michigan in 1969 when he met Jane Kenyon, a student nearly twenty years his junior. They married and, after a few years, left Ann Arbor and academic life for Hall's ancestors' farm in rural New Hampshire. There, they made a life centered on poetry—Hall wrote and published prolifically, and Kenyon came into her own as a poet, producing several books. In the early 1990s, Hall was treated successfully for cancer and recovered. Not long after, early in 1994, Kenyon was diagnosed with leukemia. Despite undergoing arduous treatment, including a bone-marrow transplant, she died on 22 April 1995 at home at Eagle Pond Farm; she was 47 years old. During her last days, Jane Kenyon chose the poems for her celebrated book *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (1996).*

*In work that grounds the idea of “telling suffering” in particular life circumstances, Hall has written movingly of Kenyon's illness and death and his grief in two volumes of poetry, *Without* (1998) and *The Painted Bed* (2002), and in a prose memoir, *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon* (2005). He continues to live and work at Eagle Pond Farm. He has recently published his fifteenth volume of poetry, *White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems, 1946–2006*. *Jane Kenyon's Collected Poems* appeared in 2005.*

Hall is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His many awards include the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, a Caldecott Award for children's literature, the 1990 Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize.

In June 2006 Donald Hall was named Poet Laureate of the United States.

Marcia Day Childress is Associate Professor of Medical Education and Associate Director of the University of Virginia School of Medicine's Center for Humanism in Medicine. A literary scholar, she teaches and writes about literature, narrative, and medicine and uses the humanities and arts in preparing physicians for professional life.

The epigraph you chose for *The Painted Bed*, from the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, says, “All poetry is about the death of the beloved.” What for you is the relationship between poetry and loss and suffering?

Poetry typically deals with intense feeling. Suffering and loss—suffering leading to loss—are the most intense of human feelings. Many great poems in the English language are elegiac, dealing especially with the ultimate loss of death.

The poems of *Without* and *The Painted Bed* are remarkable for the way in which they put your responses to what was happening to Jane and to you out there for all of us to see, feel, and think about. Presenting experiences that are hard to witness, hard to bear, these poems show us things from which, even in our own lives, we’d like to avert our eyes. You’ve built a little distance into some of the poems by referring to the couple as “he” and “she,” but would you comment on your sense of the risks you took in writing so openly of what was happening and how you and Jane were suffering?

Those poems originally used “I” instead of “he.” When I first finished a draft of *Without*, I sent it to ten friends. One of them suggested that I substitute “he” for “I.” I took the suggestion, and showed the next manuscript of *Without* to ten more people, entirely different. No one objected to the third person. I think that the first person called attention to itself, seeming egotistical—and the change liberated me into a small distance, when I worked over these poems again, with “he” substituted. With “I,” the poems were more of a shriek. Perhaps it also solved the problem of sentimentality, or the too-overt insistence on the merely personal.

The poems that chronicle Jane’s illness and her dying, especially “Her Long Illness” and “Last Days”—when did you write them, and where? What did Jane know of these poems, and did she ever participate in their composition? What did your making of poems out of this experience mean to the two of you, and to you on your own?

I wrote many of the poems of “Her Long Illness” and “Last Days” by Jane’s side, as I sat with her in the hospital or at the house. Originally, I wrote many, many more poems than I wound up printing. Occasionally, I read one of them aloud to Jane—often, as I remember, at her request. “What are you writing, Perkins?” I don’t remember her suggesting changes, but she may have done so. I believe that Jane liked it, me writing these poems. Poetry was after all the tremendous commonness between us. At least one of us was writing poems, I writing the poems that she could not write—about what she was going through.

Without is a memorial book of love poems even more than it’s a poetic record of Jane’s illness and dying and your grieving. In complicated illnesses involving protracted hospital stays, the patient as a person can sometimes get lost amid the relentless business of medical routines (as you describe memorably in “The Ship Pounding”). Jane’s treatment required prolonged, intensive attention from scores of health professionals,

but your poems mention doctors, nurses, and other caregivers quite sparingly. For the reader, one effect of your having edited out these persons and their practices is to restore you and Jane to each other and make the two of you the heart of this narrative. Could you comment on this?

I was aware that I was writing a narrative of two people, the sufferer and the caregiver. I was grateful to doctors and nurses around us, but they were not the center of the story.

The title poem of *Without* looks and sounds unlike any other poem in the book. Its dense, block-like stanzas recount in abbreviated form and telegraphic phrases the whole story of Jane's illness and death and how this affected you. The poem challenges us with its verbal representation of a shattered world. Yet if we attend to it with more than just intellect, and especially if we hear it read aloud, "Without" yields its sense, including its considerable emotional power. How did "Without" come to be, and how did it come to have its distinctive shape and sound?

I wrote the drafts of "Without" while Jane was alive, first writing it in the late summer of 1994, before we flew to Seattle for the bone-marrow transplant. I remember reading it aloud to Jane, in its early version, and Jane telling me, "You've got it, Perkins. That's how it is." It was how it was for me as well as for her. I wrote it without punctuation because the year was without punctuation.... I looked out the window and saw that the leaves were beginning to turn, and I had not registered it when the leaves first came to the trees, months before. Lacking punctuation, the poem imitated the hurl and the bustle of the disease and its treatment. After Jane died, and I was assembling the poems of *Without*, it occurred to me to place "Without" at the moment of her death. I had continued to alter the poem, and now I changed its tense from present to past. The poem was actually published in *Poetry* while Jane was still alive, in its earlier version.

You've mentioned that Jane didn't finish many poems of her own while she was ill. Do you think your poems written during and about her illness somehow helped give her a voice through this most difficult time?

Jane finished only one poem during her illness, during a brief patch when she felt relatively well. It was a poem about my mother's death, "Eating the Cookies." I do think that my poems, voicing what was happening to her, gave her some pleasure.

What was writing like for you after Jane died, especially since the two of you were so accustomed to working—and living—together in the same place? How has this changed over time?

In the year after Jane died, I howled a lot, and wept, and grieved—and the only time in the day when I felt anything like happiness was when I was working on the miserable poems of *Without*. Poetry had been a bond between us. When I wrote poems about

her illness and my grief, it was a continuing bond. By now, I no longer write poems of grief or of Jane's suffering. She died in 1995, and my poems of grieving extended into the twenty-first century...but they are no longer coming.

It was a few years after *Without* that you wrote *The Best Day the Worst Day*, your prose memoir of Jane's illness and death. How would you compare these two accounts? Is there any significance to the fact that the poems came before the prose?

Without is about half poems of grief and mourning after her death. *The Best Day the Worst Day* hardly touches on grief or mourning. It is an account of our happy life together before leukemia, and an account of the leukemia itself and the last days of her life. In part, it resembles or repeats the facts of *Without*—only with more detail. I wanted to say everything.

You're no longer in the place of mourning that the poems of *Without* and *The Painted Bed* describe. Indeed, you've developed new relationships since Jane died. Yet you're so well known for your poems about Jane's illness and death that I wonder how you feel when what people know about you—and wish to interview you about—sometimes keeps you so occupied with things that are now ten or more years gone.

I am still perfectly happy to talk about Jane, the good years and the bad fifteen months ending in her death. I have no reluctance to revisit it or speak about it.

How is it for you, continuing to live at Eagle Pond Farm, a place you've known so long and so fully and shared with Jane?

I still feel close to Jane here. Her handwriting still labels the bottles of herbs and spices. Her handwriting lists friends in the telephone list. Photographs of her occupy a wall in my study. I have no wish to expunge her from this house! But my grieving is no longer full-time.

Your private suffering made public in your poems is powerfully instructive to others. You once suggested in a poem that each generation, in turn, must learn to die. As a book, *Without* does a lot of teaching—I use it in medical school classes and know surviving spouses who have found in its poems confirmation and solace. You also give readings from *Without* for health professionals, talks to cancer patients, presentations like the one you did for our Medical Center Hour at the University of Virginia in 2003, and now readings as Poet Laureate. How might these poems—and some of Jane's too—be helping us, this next generation, to learn to die?

I don't really find myself with a useful answer to this one. It is for someone else to say, I suppose.

We've focused on the poetry of *Without* and *The Painted Bed*, but looking back on your work—the impressive catalogue of poems that makes up *White Apples and the Taste of Stone*—I'm struck by how an acute awareness of time, memory, and mortality pervades all your writing. Also, your poetry, like Jane's, has long had about it a sense of both the fragility and the sturdy holiness of the everyday, a sense that seems to have been heightened by the experiences, first, of your own cancer and, then, of Jane's illness and death. Like Jane's poem "Otherwise," your poetry too talks about how the good life consists in part of "the bliss of routine / —coffee, love, pond afternoons, poems— / we feel we will live / forever, until we know we feel it." Might these poems be teaching us how to live?

Yes. These poems try to teach us—or teach me—how to live.

Without

*we lived in a small island stone nation
without color under gray clouds and wind
distant the unlimited ocean acute
lymphoblastic leukemia without seagulls
or palm trees without vegetation
or animal life only barnacles and lead
colored moss that darkened when months did*

*hours days weeks months weeks days hours
the year endured without punctuation
february without ice winter sleet
snow melted recovered but nothing
without thaw although cold streams hurtled
no snowdrop or crocus rose no yellow
no red leaves of maple without october*

*no spring no summer no autumn no winter
no rain no peony thunder no woodthrush
the book was a thousand pages without commas
without mice oak leaves windstorms
no castles no plazas no flags no parrots
without carnival or the procession of relics
intolerable without brackets or colons*

*silence without color sound without smell
without apples without pork to rupture gnash
unpunctuated without churches uninterrupted
no orioles ginger noses no opera no
without fingers daffodils cheekbones
the body was a nation a tribe dug into stone
assaulted white blood broken to shards*

*provinces invaded bombed shot shelled
artillery sniper fire helicopter gunship
grenade burning murder landmine starvation
the ceasefire lasted forty-eight hours
then a shell exploded in a market
pain vomit neuropathy morphine nightmare
confusion the rack terror the vise*

*vincristine ara-c cytoxan vp-16
loss of memory loss of language losses
pneumocystis carinii pneumonia bactrim
foamless unmitigated sea without sea
delirium whipmarks of petechiae
multiple blisters of herpes zoster
and how are you doing today I am doing*

*one afternoon say the sun came out
moss took on greenishness leaves fell
the market opened a loaf of bread a sparrow
a bony dog wandered back sniffing a lath
it might be possible to take up a pencil
unwritten stanzas taken up and touched
beautiful terrible sentences unuttered*

*the sea unrelenting wave gray the sea
flotsam without islands broken crates
block after block the same house the mall
no cathedral no hobo jungle the same women
and men they longed to drink hayfields no
without dog or semicolon or village square
without monkey or lily without garlic*

Donald Hall, "Without"

White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems 1946–2006

New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006