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The Long White House That Holds Love and Work Together: An Interview with Donald Hall at Eagle Pond Farm

What is it like to live in the private half of a public life? How does the spouse of an artist—whether that artist be poet, novelist, musician, painter—accept their role as Muse and how do they fit into the life of their public partner? What if that spouse is himself also a poet? In *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes* Donald Hall wrote that "people married to anyone famous learn quickly to loathe the followers" and that "Typical of the marriages of artists is the intensely creative woman who loves the neurotic, possibly psychotic man; she cannot live or work without him. He is her secret Muse, bringing her poetry and at the same time tearing her life apart. Roles reverse when the artist is male." For the first in a series of interviews/essays tentatively entitled *Wives of the Poets,* Donald Hall has consented to discuss his life with the late poet, Jane Kenyon—to talk about his life as the spouse of an emerging writer, how his life as a writer was different before and after Kenyon, to talk about Kenyon's life as not only the wife of a poet but as a poet living with a more well-known poet, to talk about his own differing roles as husband and poet.—JSC

You have called this farmhouse "the long white house / that holds love and work together." Was Eagle Pond Farm, the house and the land, an integral part of your marriage?

It certainly was. Jane and I were married three years before we came here, and we were doing all right, but in some ways our lives began when we came here. The second smartest thing we

did in our lives was coming here. The first smartest thing was getting married. And Jane really brought me here—this is my old family place—but I was sensible: I had tenure and I had children in college. Jane said she would lock herself, chain herself rather, into the root cellar rather than go back to the academic world, and I followed her. I really wanted to do what she was suggesting, and we came here, and she absolutely flowered.

She came from a town where her family lived and she had friends. She didn't want to party very much, but there were people around, and she had a job. She came here and she was alone. She had her garden. She had poetry and she began to read it more thoroughly and more seriously and to write it every day, to work on it every single day. Well, there were times of depression when she couldn't, but mostly she threw herself into it.

When I came out a few years ago with an *Old & New Poems*, it got a lot of reviews. (Some of my books had *two* reviews.) There was one characteristic sentence in all the reviews that said, "Hall has been around for a long time, published for twenty years, but he really started to get good when he and his second wife moved from the academic world to New Hampshire and settled down." One thing that's tragic is that I was forty-seven when we moved here; Jane was forty-seven when she died. She didn't have the chance. She made the most of her years.

So when you were in Michigan, Jane wasn't writing that much?

She wasn't writing so much and, when we were first married, we had the problem of her getting over me having been her teacher. At first she wrote a poem only when I was out of the house. I would go off to a poetry reading for a couple of days and I'd come back and she would have a draft. I was obviously inhibiting and I worried about that. I'm sure that she did, too. Then we began to workshop with Gregory Orr who was out

there at the same time. As long as there was a third person there, she could talk about my poetry and I could talk about hers. By the time we moved here we could help each other. We didn't do this every day, you know. We kept things close to ourselves until we'd revised them a lot and were ready to show them to somebody else. Virtually always the other was the first reader. It might happen every two or three months. I'd say, "I left two or three things on your footstool," and wait for her response.

You said Jane led you back to Eagle Pond, yet you had once written, "I will not rock on this porch / When I am old."

Right, right.

What was it that allowed you to be led back?

First of all, I was pushed by Jane's absolute love of this place and desire to live here. Secondly, I had recently published a textbook for freshman English called *Writing Well*, which was doing well and allowed me to make a down payment on a mortgage and allowed me to think that there was a little money coming in ahead. I became a freelancer. I had to buy my own medical insurance and provide for my own retirement. I'd get panicked every now and then. I wrote prose like crazy as well as writing poems as much as I possibly could. I wrote textbooks, children's books, magazine articles, and collected magazines articles into books. This is how I supported the family. Jane contributed but I brought in most of it.

There must be many examples of women who were married to authors who gave up their writing careers because of their husbands. Was there ever—

I worried about that. I worried that I'd be a living reproach because I work so much. Her first book came out the year my sixth book came out, but Jane was stubborn, and I think that

being isolated with me, and doing a lot of reading, helped her. People say, "Were you competitive?" Well, we weren't in any petty way that bothered us and let us get mad at each other, but I think that we were both stimulated by the presence of the other doing work, and there was a point when—well, Jane moved ahead gradually, as any writer would—and there was a point, I think sometime in the early '80s when she brought me a bunch of poems that knocked me on my rear, because she made a great move—toward the end of her second book, really. I wanted to write poems that were that good. If that's competition, it's great.

Could you tell me what your daily routines were like with Jane?

Yes, absolutely. We lived by routine. I would get up about five or so, a little before Jane, and I would start the coffee, go get the *Boston Globe,* come back, and take a cup of coffee to Jane. I am the type who leaps out of bed and is wide-awake. Jane was a morning person, and she liked to get up early, but she was slower than me. To have the odor of coffee beside her was bliss. I would read the paper, have my breakfast and get to work. Again, Jane was a little slower: she would walk the dog up the hill—she would be gone half an hour—and then she would be ready to get to her study. She got to her study a little later than I did but we both worked in the morning. We never interrupted each other. Once a year we had to knock on each other's door but we were very polite about it. We would have lunch together and take a nap together perhaps. In summer Jane did a lot of gardening. I did a lot of work on children's books or essays for the rest of the day.

What are your routines like now?

I have had something strange happen to me: I can still write poetry—I work on poetry every day—but I cannot do anything good in prose. I have written a lot because I want to, I like to. It

helps me to . . . nothing is so distracting. I am lonely now. I miss her terribly, and if I could throw myself into work, well, I would be happier. The happiest time of the day for me is when I am working on poems and you can't do that all day.

I have worked on fiction. I have worked on essays. I have worked on a prose book about Jane and her illness. I have done a great deal of work. I wrote that book about Jane three times longhand but the prose never started to be prose. I know when the rhythm comes and the syntax works and you flow with it. This is just "blah, blah," sentence after sentence. It's not satisfactory. Jane died three-and-a-quarter years ago and I really have not, with minor exceptions, been able to write prose since. So my day is working on poetry, trying to work on some of the prose.

I have been trying to straighten out the clutter of this house. I have given away many books in order not to drown under them. My mother died while Jane was ill and boxes came up from her house in Connecticut, which I never opened until this spring and summer. After I get things in order—well, things will never be in order—then I will be on my uppers again.

In Life Work you made reference to what you called "best days." You said, "The best day depends partly on other people. Jane's presence, working in her study on her poems, enables me to concentrate on my own." And again you said, "On this best day Jane is home and I have no errands." What makes a best day now? Are there best days now?

Probably the best day now is one that begins with more work than usual, poetry, and ends with a visit with someone I particularly want to see. It's not just that I want company. I don't want to go to parties or go to meetings or whatever. There are friends who come calling, rarely. Wendell and Tanya Berry were here last Monday, a week ago yesterday, and that was probably a "best day."

You told Michael Scharf that you and Jane "had to make boundaries in order to live together and do the same thing." What kind of boundaries did you have to make?

I mentioned not interrupting each other. It was also true that both of us knew that if the other found a piece of paper written by the other we would not read it until we were asked to. We were scrupulous about that privacy. I didn't want anybody reading a poem until I was ready to have them read it, even Jane, and she felt the same way.

We read aloud together the last five years. When two poets read together we read A-B-A-B, the first one is always the warm-up man. Because I was older and male, unthinking people would sometimes ask me to conclude the reading. We had a rule that we would switch each time, that if I was A one week then I would be B the next week and so on. This may sound rigid, but it saved problems.

What was your first reading with Jane like?

That was at the beginning our marriage. I guess it was not until we'd come to New Hampshire. There were several people who knew Jane's poetry—practically nobody did—who asked us to read together, but then nobody else in the audience knew her. One time someone introduced her saying "Joan," and another time some idiot in an English department asked her if she did not feel dwarfed. She got her feelings hurt, which was to be avoided, and she—she called me Perkins—she said to me one day, "Perkins, let's not read together anymore. We are not going to read together anymore." Ten years later, when she had published two or three books and people were getting to know her, one time we read two days in a row, me one day and her another day. There was a question period for the two of us in between, and she got three times as many questions as I did. Jane said, "Perkins, I think we can read together now."

Where did the name Perkins come from?

It's not terribly interesting but it has something to do with what we are talking about. We happened to be driving in Perkins Cove and there was Perkins Drug Store, and Lawyer Perkins, and so on. Janie laughed and said, "This Perkins must be quite a fellow." She began to call me Perkins. I think behind it is the fact that I was her teacher and I was an institution at the University of Michigan and "Donald Hall" was not the name of your husband. It was the name of a statue in a park somewhere. That's where Perkins came from.

In "Letter in the New Year," you wrote of your first year in Eagle Pond: "We sat reading or writing / in our two big chairs, either / side of the Glenwood." Did you often literally write side by side?

No, that was relatively rare. We had studies that were as far apart as possible. Mine was on the ground floor in the northwestern corner; hers was the second floor in the southeastern corner. We were in the same house and we wanted to be, but as far apart as possible. I'm always talking about our double solitude. We were rather reclusive. We had a wonderful time together but we spent the day in the same house without a great deal of contact. Sometimes we would meet in the morning, coming in the middle from our two studies far apart, and get a cup of coffee. We wouldn't even speak. I would pat her on the butt and we'd get back to work.

That first winter when it was thirty below for a week in a row, by necessity—we only had one woodstove and no storm windows, no insulation—we needed to be on either side of the stove. We got through it all right but the next year we made sure that we had greater space: a wood stove in my study and a wood stove in Jane's study.

Jane had said, "I think we're well aware of what is happening to each other in terms of whether the work is going well and whether the results are very exciting.

We're aware of each other's rhythms. I think Don understands me when work is very absorbing and I just want to be absent-minded and not very present." Do you agree with Jane's assessment that you were well aware of what was going on?

Sure. We were aware of each other's moods and sometimes we would talk about them, but if we didn't talk about them we knew them pretty well anyway. We lived together twenty-three years much of the time in the same house. She was enormously alert to the feelings of others, more so than me, but I think I was quite alert to her.

Jane talked about sometimes just wanting confirmation from you. Were there times you wanted confirmation from Jane rather than criticism?

Oh, I wanted confirmation all the time, and I was always a little dissatisfied. She could never quite tell me what I wanted to hear. She was tough, not at all given to holding back of criticism. One night she was reading the manuscript of a whole book of mine. It's a book that a lot of people like, and I like, but Jane didn't like it, and half way through—she had seen parts of it all along but she was reading right through it—she was sitting on the sofa over there and I was sitting here and she looked up weeping, and saying, "Perkins, I don't really like it," and I wept and said, "That's all right, that's all right."

Can I ask what book this was?

The Museum of Clear Ideas. In some ways since Jane died I have tried to write for two. I have summoned her, but when I look at *The Museum of Clear Ideas* and *Constance*, say, or *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, it almost seems as if I was trying to write as unlike Jane as possible. It's possible.

With some young poets you said that you sensed "that they may be frightened, or deferential, or counterdeferential, which is just as bad—acting nastier than they feel, in order to show that they're not cowed." When you were showing poems to

Jane in Michigan before you were married, when there would have been more of a sense of older poet/younger poet, or teacher/student, when did you realize there was honesty in her responses? When did you feel you could trust what she was offering you?

I never doubted it for a minute. I felt enormously friendly toward her within the first week or so of knowing her. It was a wonderful class where people were friendly to each other and frank with each other, but she was particularly funny and sharp altogether. I remember her coming to my office hours one time after the class was over and we talked about one of her poems, and I suddenly thought of a poem of mine that reminded me of hers. There happened to be a copy of it there, and I picked it up and looked at it and saw something I could revise. I began revising my poem in front of her and then trying it on her, and I never felt—oh, she was aware of the disparity between my years and my experience and hers, of course—but she never felt deferential in any icky way at all. There was something stubborn in her, and something that needed to defy authority, but I didn't feel the counter-movement either. I think she was very straight and very honest.

You had written that your marriage to Jane supplied over twenty years of instruction. Can you elaborate on some of the ways you have been instructed by living with Jane and observing her?

I think the most important thing for me was watching the progress of Jane, watching her learn to be a poet by such assiduous work. She read in a way different from me. I was an extensive reader. I wanted to add more books to my life list. There was much English literature that she never read. She would spend two years reading nothing but Keats—his poems, his letters, biographies—and learn enormously from Keats. I watched that. I think I did some more intensive reading because of her. It was that daily work, that stubborn struggle

that came from inside, and she took all the help she could get from outside.

Working with Akhmatova, the translations of Akhmatova, was to her mind the most important thing in her life as a poet. She did not have Russian but she worked with a very intelligent, very literary teacher named Vera Sandomirsky Dunham who would talk about individual words in great length. Jane felt she got to know how Akhmatova made her moves. That was intensive reading and study even though it was not her language. I watched all this and it made me want to work harder. It made me want to try harder.

Now I remember, when I was an undergraduate, saying a silly thing to John Ashbery. I was a little younger. I said, "Doesn't it make you mad when a friend of yours writes a good poem?" And John said, sensibly, "No. I just want to write a better one." I don't know that I was particularly trying to write a better poem than Jane, but I was trying to keep up with her. People assumed that she would learn more from me than I would from her for natural reasons, and also for chauvinistic reasons. I'm nineteen years older. I started when I was young. We used to argue about who helped the other more, each naming the other, but now she can't answer me. I think she led me more than I led her. At least as much.

You had a poem which in draft included the phrase "exhalations of timothy," which you borrowed from Jane. I am sure there may have been times when Jane caught herself borrowing from you or you both used the same sources. Did this happen often?

We wrote on the same subject, the same dog, the same mountain. One time we each wrote poems about the Gulf War without knowing that the other was working on it, and we were amused at the contrasts between us. I don't remember that she ever used a phrase of mine or told me that she had in a draft, but I know that at one point that she found that she had picked

something up from Geoffrey Hill and she felt totally chagrinned. I am not sure that poem was published or not. I'm sure that it wasn't in *Otherwise*. I think it may have been in a draft. When I told her that I had in my working draft, not the copy she saw but an earlier copy, "exhalations of timothy," she said, "Watch your ass, Perkins."

It must have been uncomfortable when magazines printed one of you and rejected the other. How did you deal with this?

Nobody was getting mad at anybody, but it happened a few times on the same day. One of us would get an acceptance from one magazine and the other a rejection. It just meant that the one who was accepted couldn't be quite so happy as he/she would have been otherwise. We handled it all right. Nobody quarreled.

You had said that being of different generations was a help because it kept you from being head-on-head in rivalry. Do you think it was strictly the generational difference or did gender play a role?

Jane's family was artistic but scared of putting all its eggs in one basket. She had that inheritance to overcome. She did put all her eggs in one basket. Also, women were not, are not, supposed to be so aggressive as men. When she published her first poem in a quarterly she cried for a whole day. She had been aggressive in public.

I saw her with the help of the women's movement get stronger. Also with the help of two other women. The fact that they were all women was important: Joyce Peseroff and Alice Mattison. They would workshop here sometimes and I would be very careful to stay away. A couple of times we all met down at the Lord Jeff[rey Inn] in Amherst. I stayed out of their room when they were workshopping. They gave each other courage as women, I think, simply the courage to be ambi-

tious, the courage to take on the work. They genuinely helped each other that way.

Jane met Adrienne Rich when Jane was young and again from time to time. I think just before we were married Adrienne came and stayed in my house for a week. She was not approving of marriage at that time and Adrienne said, "Couldn't you just live together?" But we did get married. The example of Adrienne Rich, who was in my class in college, was stimulating to her: not the language of the poetry but the toughness, the endurance, the strength of the woman.

The workshop you talked about is what I understand Jane refers to as "the committee?"

Yes.

And Alice Mattison had said that it made it easier for Jane to disagree with your assessments of her poetry?

Probably. Yeah. When I had insisted that some word was wrong, she'd say, "Well, Perkins says . . ." and they would overrule me sometimes. It wasn't automatic. These are my friends, too, Joyce and Alice.

Since you brought up Adrienne Rich—there was a conversation you had in which you and she talked about the sex roles from the 1950s. How would you define the sex roles from the '50s?

Adrienne and I, when she was pregnant with her first child and I was taking care of my son, my then-wife went back to school. I took care of him from about eight until one, which meant finishing up breakfast, a bath, a morning nap, and lunch. Once a week Adrienne would come over at eight and would stay with me there until one o'clock. We weren't talking to the baby, who wasn't talking yet—he was six months old—but as

I handled him we would talk about poetry all the time. When Adrienne made that visit many years later, as Jane and I were about to get married, we talked about the years of casserole cookery. All the Radcliffe girls, if you met them and said, "What are you going to do?" would say, "I'm going to have three children." This was the '50s. I said to Adrienne, "I don't think I was as bad as I might have been," and Adrienne said, "Don, you taught me how to bathe a baby." That pleased me to no end.

You talk in various places about the shame you felt after reading The One Day *to Jane. I was wondering if the shame would have still been there or as much if the person who had read it was another poet but not your wife?*

I wouldn't have read it to anybody but Jane, and I don't think it was the fact that she was my wife. My shame was—it is hard to separate and determine—but my shame was in the sense that the poetry was no good, for one thing. The other shame was the parts of my own life that came out, sometimes in fictionalized form. Jane knew about it entirely, but having another person to whom I was reading it, even though I wasn't revealing anything new, made me feel the shame of the revelation. Many of those revelations are in the final poem, but the final poem is formally better. I hadn't felt ashamed for it until I read it to Jane that time, but I felt devastated by reading it and had to put it away for a while. Then I got back to it.

According to Jane she had resisted suggestions you made when you first gave them, needing a short space of time before she could look at them objectively. Did you have the same pattern?

Oh, sure, I did the same thing, with other people, too. I can never say, "Yes, you're right." Rarely did I see suddenly that something is right. I can sometimes and so could she. Often I'd say, "I'll write that down," or "I'll give it a try," and then discover that, in fact, I wanted it that way. Yes, Jane said that

she used to mutter, going up the stairs, "Perkins just doesn't get it." Then she said, "I'd go and do everything he said." Well, I don't think she went and did everything I said, nor I everything she said. Sometimes I read her poems aloud and I see one word that I remember objecting to.

Bill Moyers had suggested to Jane that her depression may have been a gift, "a kind of garden in which ideas grow and in which experiences take root." You had written that if we cherish Eliot's poetry we must be grateful to the marriage and to Vivienne. Does the poetry ever validate the suffering of an artist or their family?

That's a question I have been thinking about recently. I know that many people say "yes," and I would have said "yes" many times, but, a year after Jane died, I became as bipolar as she was. Freud said that this happened thirty percent of the time in the essay called "Mourning and Melancholy." Not in the last few weeks but from sometime in June until sometime in August I had moments of agony and depression that were so extreme that it makes me wonder. We don't have the choice, mind you. We all suffer. We must suffer in this life, and a bipolar person does not have a choice except by seeking chemical help, and I do seek it as she sought it. She got depressed anyway, despite her chemical help, and frequently wrote her best poems while she was coming out of depression. The medication never made her a flat line, like the brain dead line on the monitor. She still had her ups and downs, as I do now. I would say that you don't have a choice in the matter. That invalidates the question, but I'm dodging the question. Therefore my answer right now is, "I am not sure."

Why does bipolarity exist? What is the Darwinian explanation of it, if there need be one? Stephen [Jay] Gould would say there doesn't have to be a Darwinian explanation for everything. Look at this: if mania includes finding the wheel—was it Archimedes in the tub who sang "Eureka?"—there are manic mathematicians, scientists, poets—then mania

benefits not only the poet and the writer and his family, but humanity. Depression typically only affects the poet and the poet's family. From the point of view of the generality of the DNA, or the generality of society and the species, there would be a function to bipolarity or at least to the manic part.

Why are people drawn toward sad poetry, sad music? People seem to enjoy reading about depression or sadness.

We all have depression and sadness. It's about us. Poetry, writing about it, makes it into something, makes suffering beautiful because the language is beautiful. Now this is a contradiction. I think energy comes from contradiction. There's a poem by Thomas Hardy that I say all the time called "During Wind and Rain." If you paraphrase it, or if some person reads it who has no feeling for poetry, it's all depressing. I read it and I am exhilarated. I love it. The dance on my tongue, in my mouth, is so happy. Now when a poem is a happy poem and beautifully done, it's perfectly fine, but there's not much energy. The energy comes from the conflict, I say, between the sensual delight of the body of the poem and the true facing of sad reality in the paraphraseable content.

During your relationship with Jane you said you had to do less for Jane than you would have for another poet, so that it would not seem as if you were promoting her. Was it difficult for you to hold back?

It was, especially at the beginning. She kept an eye on me. Alice Mattison says that if some editor took Jane's poem, Jane would think it was because that editor had had lunch with me once sixteen years before. Alice did a wonderful speech about Jane at *The First Jane Kenyon Conference* (in Kentucky) which will eventually be published. It has good information on The Committee.

Jane worried that maybe she should discount her success because somebody was just trying to please Don. It was a

burden for her. Living with the poet who is older than you and has had some success may help you some but you have to doubt the help. In a way it is like being rich: "Do they love me or my money?"

For years, we would never mention each other in our biographical notes. We come from the same house. One poet out on the West Coast wrote Jane saying, "Umm, are you, umm, close umm to Donald Hall?" We were living together, we kept two different names, but we kept our marriage a secret, not a secret but we didn't advertise it.

Do you think there were times when she was published to please you by an editor?

I can't identify any time when she was. When people came to know that we were married, and they had already liked my poems, maybe they saved reading her for a time when they were wide awake. It could be something like that. I was never aware of it. Certainly late along, when she hit her stride, there were—she was publishing many more poems in *The New Yorker* than I was, which is often a poet's measure of success because more people read it.

In our brief correspondence about this interview you had written that you want to give Jane more credit than she would allow when she was alive. What kinds of credit would like to give her now?

Well, as I have been speaking to you: credit for stimulating me, letting me go. I can speak of that in public more easily now. And I read her poems aloud every time I read my poems and I praise her all night long. I correspond—I get a lot of mail about Jane—I correspond with admirers of her poems. She can't stop me now and I don't see any reason why I should stop.

Wendell Berry wrote of his wife, Tanya: "She is my best critic because she is the one most familiar with my habitual errors & weaknesses. She also understands,

sometimes better than I do, what ought *to be said." You had said that when you repeated words close to each other, Jane was always going to object, and that you always took out all of Jane's participles. That's one of your "tics." Isn't there a danger in this level of familiarity that almost negates criticism? How do you avoid merely adopting the other person's tics?*

Jane would be writing and she would think "Perkins is not going like this" but, because it was automatic, she would think about it, but, if she decided to go ahead with it, she had made her decision. I think the trick of repeating words in close order was something I picked up from Yeats who could do it so gorgeously. I think I was doing it, without a brogue. When I did that, I had to examine myself. I knew Jane wasn't going to like it. Is she going to be right or would I do better to change? The two lines that are on Jane's tombstone are from her poem "Afternoon at MacDowell." They say, "I believe in the miracles of art but what / prodigy will keep you safe beside me?" I might have said miracle twice. Jane used a thesaurus and if you look up miracle the first word is prodigy. I like it that she changed things.

Do you find yourself thinking about how Jane would object to what you are writing now?

I find myself saying more "How would Jane do it?" I don't think *Without* or subsequent poems resemble her closely. I don't think they are plagiarism. I don't think they are simply imitation Jane Kenyon poems, but I do think they're a little closer, the later poems, like the last one in *Without*, "Weeds and Peonies." After all, *Without* was finished two years ago and I have been writing poetry every day, or working on it. I'm not about to think about another book for a while. I certainly have enough poems for another book but I will keep them around. They weed out or they get better. I hope.

Your output is prolific; Jane's was less so. When assembling poetry for her first book, From Room to Room, *she told Wesley McNair, "Don has so many*

poems, he could easily give several readings and never read the same poem twice . . . .All I have is these." I would think such comparisons could be devastating to either a career or a marriage. Were you aware that Jane was making comparisons and was there anything you did, or could do, to lessen the impact of comparing?

At the point Jane was speaking of, it's perfectly true. I could do several readings without repeating. Actually about the time she had written all the poems in *Otherwise*, she could have done it, too. *From Room to Room* was her first book and it's rather slender. She knew the difference in our ages. I don't think that it was profoundly discouraging for her.

Let's go back to the beginning: could you tell me how you and Jane met?

In 1969, a low point of my life, Jane took a course of mine in the spring of 1969. There were 120 to 140 students in the class and I didn't know her. She got to know me without me knowing her. Every autumn I taught a poetry writing class, ten or twelve kids. I put a notice on my office door saying, "If you would like to be in this class by August 1, leave me a selection of . . ."—I don't know what I said, five or ten poems. One of the envelopes that year was from Jane Kenyon, the first time I remember seeing her name. I remember one particular poem there, which is in *From Room to Room*, and in *Otherwise*, called "The Needle." Strangely enough there are many things in it that are characteristic of her later work, although she wrote it originally perhaps when she was nineteen or twenty. In between she wrote a lot of poems, some of which are in *From Room to Room*, which were not characteristic of her later work. They were this school of being a goofy grown-up. "Light surrealism" is what [Robert] Bly called it, and she fell into it as I did for awhile. There was that poem, and there may have been others in that manuscript that I admired a lot, but I don't remember them. Maybe that poem got her in the class. Thank God. The whole class first met in a classroom, but really it met in my living room one night a week for three hours or so. We would get together in the classroom and find a night when we could all

meet and I'd tell them how to get to where I lived.

Last summer I finally went through Jane's papers and notebooks and in one notebook, a college notebook, I found: "When I discovered that I lived not three doors from Donald Hall it was as when I learned that Dublin was a Viking stronghold or when I wanted to take the goldfish out of the bowl but found that the water was too cold to sustain life." That had to be at the very beginning, because in 1969 everybody called me Don, not Donald Hall. That's why Perkins. Reading this note amused me to no end, but I knew she didn't feel that way after a month or so. We were familiar, the whole class. I just became one of the class, not a leader. At the beginning I would lead because they didn't know each other and I would establish vocabulary. Then I had to put up my hand to be allowed to speak. (I exaggerate.) This class met as the workshop without me for two-and-a-half years after the class was over. They were really good. She was by far the best poet, to date, out of it, and probably will be. There are several others who have published and done books.

At what point did you realize your relationship was changing?

Oh, it was a long time after the class. My original interest in her was not remotely romantic. I was in between marriages, shortly after my divorce, two years after my separation, and I was petrified of marriage, of committing myself to one person. I had lots of girlfriends, a prophylactic promiscuity. I saw different people all the time, daytime or nighttime.

Jane was twenty-two then, and not particularly attractive. By the time she turned forty she'd become beautiful. It's extraordinary that she went in that direction. But I wasn't attracted to her physically. I liked her personally. She wasn't giving out sexy vibes or anything. After that class we saw each other when she'd come to office hours with a poem.

I knew when she went to live with a guy, her boyfriend, the following June, and then the following October or

November I heard from mutual friends that they weren't getting on and that she was going to move out. She had been skeptical about this relationship anyway. He wanted to get married, and moving in was a compromise, but she felt miserable about the breakup—there is no contradiction there—and felt like a failure. I was told she was depressed.

So I called her up, maybe in December of 1970, and said "Come on over and I will cook supper," or "I'll take you out to dinner." She spent the entire time talking about this guy, so I came up with an inventory of disasters of my own. We talked about other people. This went on for awhile. We saw each other about once a week and then I noticed that my other girlfriends were dropping off. They'd move away and I didn't replace them. I had to go out to California that summer and Jane was the last person I saw before I went out and the first person that I saw when I got back.

I began to get worried that this was getting serious. After all, I was nineteen years older than her and she would be a widow for twenty-five years. But we kept coming closer and closer together. When we first mentioned marriage we decided the age difference was too great. We dismissed it, but then it came back again, and finally around Christmas or New Year's '71/'72 we decided to get married. We got married in April of '72.

You had said in—

I'm leaving out the sex.

I assumed it was there somewhere. You said in Their Ancient Glittering Eyes *that people who married anyone famous learned quickly to loathe the followers. Did Jane ever have a period of loathing your followers in the beginning?*

Yes. People do sometimes drive into the driveway and want to see Donald Hall. I remember her one time going out and say-

ing, "My husband has things to do. He's busy. He has to write." (These were people I got to know later.) When you start writing books, and people who don't know you really admire you, they become deferential. When they meet you they are scared and so on. She got so pissed off when people did that with her. Then I took her to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and introduced her to John Updike and she was just like that. I tried to point this out to her. You get used to it. Often people will approach you like that at first, and if you see more of them you get to be normal people together. You have to get used to that. Yes, she chased people away sometimes. She felt the same way about people who were groveling before her.

When I watch the Bill Moyers' interview and compare the two of you reading: your reading is so much more exuberant—you seem to have a love of the performance—and Jane seems much more reticent in the performance part of it.

When I read my favorite poems of hers, I sing them in a way that she would never do, dwelling on the vowels. I know that but I can't imitate her way of doing it. Her way was much more understated. My way comes partly from the fact that when I was a kid I didn't know whether I wanted to be an actor or a poet, and it comes from listening to Dylan Thomas and admiring that extravagance of performance. Some people I'm very fond of are low-keyed like Jane, and I'm fond of their reading: Galway Kinnell. Some people find me too extravagant and that's all right. That's the way that I am. I can't really read like Jane. When she read a poem of mine aloud—she used to read a poem I wrote when she was ten years old called "The Long River"—she would tend to get more into the vowels in that poem than she would normally do, but it is a poem that invites that.

Did she ever imitate your style of reading?

I don't think so. I am told several people do good imitations. I haven't seen many. I wrote a book about Dock Ellis, the baseball pitcher, and he could imitate, saying poems, not my poems but in teaching a class. It was very funny.

In Their Ancient Glittering Eyes *you wrote that many poets fear or feel that they have harmed or messed up the lives of others. In what ways might poets harm the lives of others, particularly their spouses?*

I remember Carl Yastrzemski saying something that moved me so much: that he was so intent upon his being the best and leading the Red Sox and getting hits that he didn't notice his children growing up. This was said in profound regret and guilt. My children and I are close. They are much better parents than I was and they don't seem to hold it against me, but I don't feel that I paid enough attention to them because it was so important to me to get off in a corner and work on my poems. I feel vain and silly to have felt that way. I could've have written poems anyway. I'm not regretting writing poetry for a minute, but I do regret not being there for my children as much as I might have been.

Would you be willing to talk about the spouses of other poets you have known in the past?

I think that many people presume that a poet should marry someone not connected with poetry. In my own experience, I can say this: that it didn't turn out to be true. With Jane poetry was part of the intimacy. The problem with poets marrying each other is the difficult problem of being in the same contest and one winning and one losing. This would happen with us with magazines occasionally, but because of the age difference, it seldom bothered us and we handled what we had to handle very well. But in love the lovers cannot spend their whole time looking into each other's eyes. I have written about

the doctrine of the third thing. Lovers' eyes join, as it were (in the old notion of vision coming out from the eyes) in the third thing, which is the baby they have together (which Jane and I didn't do), the dog that we had, the Boston Red Sox, the South Danbury Church. But poetry, of course, was the biggest thing of all. We didn't only talk about poetry. We talked about the weather, we talked about whether our feet hurt, but we could, driving in the car or in the evening at supper, talk about poetry, not our own poetry but other people's and, of course, on occasion each other's poems. This was an enormous third thing between us.

Given what you know of the wives of other poets how would you comment on this statement by Annie Dillard: "One would rather read these people, or lead their lives, than be their wives."

Well, I look at the lives of many of the poets whom I have known, or known about, generations before me. I think of Berryman. Have you read Eileen Simpson's *Poets in Their Youth?*

No.

That's a good book to read sometime—for you, for now, for this. *Poets in Their Youth* by Eileen Simpson. She was Berryman's first or second wife and she talks about other poets' marriages as well. Robert Lowell married Jean Stafford and then Elizabeth Hardwick and then the woman, Lady what's-her-name. I can't remember it now. There are many multiple marriages. There's much instability. Both Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke were Bipolar-I, which means that in a manic period you do things that get you locked up. There is a trail of destruction among many, many marriages of the poets. I am not at the moment thinking of many who had only one wife: William Stafford, I know. Robert Frost, I'm sure, was faithful to Elinor as long as she lived. I'm sure if we go back there would be many more examples. In the modern time it's, I would say,

probably the percentage of divorce is even greater than it is in the general population.

Wendell Berry is an exception.

Wendell is a great exception, a very happy exception. Dick and Charlee Wilbur stayed together.

As we conclude is there anything else you would like to tell me about your life with Jane?

My life with Jane was one of almost consistent happiness for me. When Jane was depressed, extremely depressed, in the absolute pits, I couldn't do anything for her. When she was mildly depressed there were many ways in which I could help and helping was a wonderful thing. It also makes you—there's something to be skeptical about there—it makes you important, but if you can genuinely help, that makes the secondly gain not terribly important.

She wasn't always depressed. We had a good time together. There were certain things, private things that we did: going down to the pond in the summer by ourselves, playing ping-pong in the cellar by ourselves, me reading aloud to her almost every day. Well, I would say two-thirds of the years we were together I read to her. I read her *The Ambassadors* aloud twice from beginning to end. There were so many pleasures. When Jane went manic, which was rare, she would lose sensitivity to the feelings of others. That is what happens when you are hypo-manic and Bipolar-II. I do the same thing now. I become careless of what I am saying and to whom I am talking, but mania happened rarely with Jane. For the most part she was tremendously alert, almost over alert, to the temperature of everybody in the room. My daughter and her husband used to tease her because she would come into a room and say, "Are you all right? Your color doesn't look good." She would be hypochondriacal for the dog and the automobile and whom-

ever she saw. She was so alert to others, one reason I think she was reclusive. People would call on me and she'd go hide in her study or in the bedroom. When she was with someone, she related so intensely. One phenomenon I've heard again and again after her death: "I only knew her for twenty minutes but I felt as if I knew her forever." Peter Kramer, who wrote *Listening to Prozac*, said that to my editor, Peter Davison. It was exhausting for her, and if she were even mildly depressed, she would avoid it. New Hampshire is not a cocktail party culture or a dinner party culture. She'd go to bed at eight-thirty and so on, wake up early, and get to work.

We meshed terribly well. She had a bad relationship with her boyfriend, and I had come out of a divorce, and we discovered a secret that practically nobody else has ever discovered because it so difficult to understand, so profound. We found that we could be kind to each other all the time. We had a fight every four years and therefore it was dreadful. We seldom got irritated or said anything snappy. We'd try to make the way easy for each other without, I think, the one deferring to the other.

I had seven years of Freudian therapy with an analyst. She had some Freudian therapy. Her depression was a chemical event but the intelligence can deal with these things, to a degree, and the talking cure can provide you ways of looking at things. Earlier in my life I would be with someone and I'd decide that person was angry, grumpy, and I'd think "why?"—and I'd get grumpy. I learned: if I thought Jane looked grumpy I would say, "What am I mad about?" and then I would find it was a letter I had read the night before. It didn't have anything to do with her. With training the brain can help.

We were determined to be happy in our relationship. We set out to do it, and when things came up that could hurt the relationship—like the initial double poetry reading, when somebody said "Don't you feel dwarfed?"—it made her a little person compared to me. So we avoided that situation in order to be happy. We decided that it was permitted to be happy.

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