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The after Life

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Donald Hall

THE AFTER LIFE

During the eleven days
it took to die, they lived
past their anniversary:
He gave her the lavender
cotton summer dress
from Neiman-Marcus
she would never wear.
It was pretty, she said,
and told him where to look
on the back stairs
for the belt she ordered
two weeks before
by phone from L.L. Bean—
four inches too big,
to fit the belly he carried
twenty-three years before
into the judge's chambers.

★

On the fourth day
he bundled her warmly
into her wheelchair
to drive her to the bank
so that she could sign
her FedEx'd will
for the Notary Public.
Two women who clerked
at the Mini-Mart next door,
who had joked with them
when they picked up milk
or juice, walked over

to witness her signature.
She took five minutes
to write "Jane Kenyon."

★

She concentrated her intent
on letting go. Florists' vans
pulled into the driveway four
or five times a day. He covered
the dining room table, kitchen
counters, and two castiron
Glenwoods with lilies
and bouquets of spring blossoms.
Jane wouldn't allow
roses or daisies or tulips
into the bedroom; flowers
and music held her to life.
He could not play her Messaien,
nor Mendelssohn, nor *Black
and Blue*, nor Benita Valente
singing "Let Evening Come."

★

"I want," she said,
"to tell you something
important. I want . . .
I want . . . spinach!"
and she shook her head
violently from side
to side. Eyesight
departed after speech.

★

It took two hours
for the Visiting Nurse
to arrive and certify
that Jane was dead.
It took another hour
for Marion and Charlie
to come from Chadwick's
with the van, the canvas
stretcher, and the gurney.
When later he saw her
walking Gussie on New
Canada Road, or heard her
voice calling "Perkins!"
across a parking lot,
he had confirmed
her death with his eyes,
his fingers, and his lips.

★

At three in the afternoon
of the day Jane died,
six-year-old Allison and he
pushed through the toolshed
as they strolled outside
to look at the daffodils,
but stopped short to see
the crayoned cardboard
tacked over the freezer
with capital letters in blues,
reds, and greens: WELCOME
BACK JANE FROM SEATTLE!

★

As he started up-town
to see her laid out
in her white salwar kameez,
he worried how she would look,
made up. Half-way there,
he u-turned; he had forgotten
to wear his glasses.

★

Calling Hours: Chadwick's,
where Jane and he saw
the last of Kate, Lucy,
Jack, and half the village.
Their neighbors filed past
what remained of Jane.
Dick came inside
while Nan sat propped
in the car, and he went out
to kiss Nan's nodding
face that could not
speak.

Andrew had brought
Emily, six years old,
who kept returning
to look at Jane, so still
in the silky coffin,
and the next day confided
to Alice Mattison,
"We saw Jane's actual body."

★

When Alice Ling finished
praying over Jane's coffin,
three hundred neighbors
and poets stood in spring

sunshine. Then Robert
started them singing “Amazing
Grace.” Out of the silence
that followed he heard
his own voice saying,
“We have to go, dear.”

★

That night he turned
his children out of the house
with difficulty, and was
alone again with her absence.
Before bed he drove
to the graveyard to say goodnight
and at six a.m. dropped by
as if he brought coffee.

★

Driving the highway, the day
after the funeral,
he felt suddenly overtaken
by a weight of shame
that reminded him of waking
in Ann Arbor thirty years
ago, knowing that the night
before, drunk, he had done
something irreparable.

★

It was true, what he thought,
although pitiless. If he could say
now, “Jane has leukemia,”
he would feel such contentment.

★

In a nightmare that May,
Jane had died in their house
far in a sunless forest.
The townspeople were sad
because she had died
and because the sheriff
was coming to arrest him.
He had put out everything
of spirit and energy
taking care of Jane
and he had neglected
the old women who starved
in their wooden cottages.

★

Gussie kept checking out
scent on visitors' boots
for evidence that
Jane was hiding somewhere.
One thing that pleased him
was sleeping all night
on her side of the bed.
Gus tried herding the widower
to bed, and was patted:
"All right, boy. All right.
Come on, it's deadtime."

★

Saturday mornings he made
the same error again
and again. Writing Jane
letters at his desk,
he saw the clock at death's hour
and fell into tears. Wiping
his eyes he noted

that he mistook the time
and in sixty minutes
would need to howl again.

★

Every day he watched
the young green snake
on the granite step
by the porch's end
who sunned herself
in desolate noontime
and slipped like liquid
into her hole
when she lifted her head
to see his face.

★

Belle telephoned to tell him,
weeping, that Tony had left her.
The next week he drove an hour
to comfort her and listen,
but when he saw her standing
by the clock she was smiling:
"Tony came *back!* He's changed!
He couldn't bear it without us!
Of course . . ."

That night
he collapsed into rage and gin.

★

For half a year at least
Jane's thick near-sighted
glasses lay on the table
by the bed, and the wristwatch

they bought at a jeweler's
in Rome on their sixteenth
anniversary—put there when
she could still see, and when
what time it was mattered.

★

After a year he tried
to tell himself: Everyone
dies. Some die at three
days, and some at forty-
seven years.
How many have perished
in this long house,
or on the painted bed
where Jane stopped breathing?
His grandmother and mother
were born in this place.
Only Jane's death
continues to prosper here.

★

Knowing he could not bring
coffee to Jane, he brought it
to himself and sipped it
thinking ahead to his desk,
to walking the dog,
to shopping, to dismantling
Jane's study with sorrow
but without screaming.
He sat on her swivel chair
at her desk alongside
her hooded Selectric II
and read crossed-out stanzas
of poems she will never write

and lists of things undone.
They will reside in acid-free
folders in a fireproof room,
humidity and temperature
controlled to impede decay.

★

Deep in her study's closet
he found a red box
with two dolls, looking
untouched, wearing dresses
delicately stitched
by her mother the seamstress.
When Special Collections
took her papers away,
he wept again, as she left
the house for the last time.
He keeps the rejected dolls
in her closet's corner.