The after Life

Donald Hall

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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.