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AT HOME WITH DONALD HALL

For a Poet, the Farmhouse as Muse

By JEN BANBURY

Wilmot, N.H.

THERE is a small part of Donald Hall — a very small part — that wishes this business about him being the new poet laureate of the United States wasn't happening. Since June 14, the phone hasn't stopped ringing, or the fax scrolling with requests for interviews. It's a little much for Mr. Hall, who is 77 and tends to live quietly, writing and reading, and watching evening baseball games on television in the company of his cats, Thelma and Louise.

Mr. Hall has lived in this small [New Hampshire](#) town since 1975 in a white clapboard farmhouse known as Eagle Pond Farm, which sits hard up along Route 4. Until the middle of June, the main interruption to his day might be a 14-wheel truck downshifting too loudly as it passed just outside his window.

Mr. Hall has a deep and intense connection to this house, a large, worn-in place with the low ceilings and small rooms of many pre-electricity New England homes. If a place can act as a poet's muse, this house surely does that for Donald Hall.

Mr. Hall's great-grandfather, Benjamin Keneston, bought the farmhouse in 1865, adding rooms to the original house, which dates to 1803. Mr. Hall didn't grow up here; he spent his childhood in Hamden, Conn., which he thought of as a socially monochromatic suburb, but this is the house that brought him to poetry, or rather brought poetry to him.

As a boy, he would spend summers here with his maternal grandparents. Mr. Hall's grandfather, Wesley Wells, was a great storyteller and performer of "pieces," sentimental poetry like "Casey at the Bat." Today, in the living room at Eagle Pond Farm, he acts the part of his grandfather, showing the way the old man would throw back his head and round his mouth into a great O shape to begin a recitation, like Olivier gathering himself for a Hamlet soliloquy.

During those summers, Mr. Hall began writing his own poetry, at a little desk in the first-floor room where he slept. Now, 60-some years later, he still writes in that room — a shed-size space with gray-painted plank floors. The featherbed is long gone, and a heavyweight roll-top desk has replaced the little one.

Every wall but one has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled completely and exclusively with poetry books. Mr. Hall's fax machine looks wholly out of place on a white spindle-legged table in the middle of the room. He doesn't own a computer — or even a typewriter, for that matter — and dislikes making decisions over the phone. And so the fax machine, which creates an instant printed page of correspondence.

On the one bookless wall of his office, Mr. Hall has mounted photos of his late wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, who died of leukemia in 1995. Ms. Kenyon ("Janey," he calls her) remains a tangible presence in the house and in Mr. Hall's work.

They met in 1969 when she was his student at the [University of Michigan](#). A few years after they got married, they decided to spend a year at the farm, away from Mr. Hall's tenured life in Ann Arbor. Ms. Kenyon fell deeply in love with the farm — so much so that she vowed to chain herself to the root cellar rather than leave — and they made plans to live there permanently.

"Jane was a talented kid with some good stuff" before moving to the farm, Mr. Hall said. "Then we moved here and she became a poet." On a late June day of fickle weather, he sat by the living room window in a blue armchair with an extra seat-cushion filched from the chair's mate across the room.

Mr. Hall smokes Kent cigarettes — a pack a day since he was 40 and thought he could win back an ex-girlfriend by using her brand — and he tapped one occasionally into a Michelin Tire ashtray. He has curly, poodlish (though receding) hair and a slightly wild beard, and still looks the part of a professor in rumpled chinos and a button-down shirt.

When Mr. Hall and Ms. Kenyon moved to Wilmot, their lives changed completely. They went from being fairly social university fixtures to living what Mr. Hall describes as a life of "double solitudes." ("Cocktail parties are against the state constitution up here," he said.) With a happily abbreviated social life, they focused on work. Ms. Kenyon's office remains almost exactly as it was when she died; there is even a full basket of wood waiting to burn in her little wood stove.

The two rescued that stove, like many other household items, from the storage space tucked away on the second floor, which Mr. Hall calls the house's "back chamber." On this day, the chamber's naked bulb had burned out, so he carried a large blue plastic flashlight.

The overworn floorboards creaked loudly and the space smelled like dust and mouse droppings, yet as the flashlight illuminated piles of broken furniture and old clocks and mysterious implements, it was easy to understand why Mr. Hall is so drawn to this space. The back chamber comes up frequently in his work. It is a defining trope for a writer obsessed with the tricky relationship the present has with the recent and more distant past.

In his essay collection, "Here at Eagle Pond," he wrote, "This back chamber is like the parlor walls covered with family portraits, like the graveyard with its Vermont slate and New Hampshire granite; it keeps the dead." If he looks, he said, he can still find plenty of things here that he's never seen before.

Any fan of Mr. Hall might feel strangely familiar with this home, as so many details show up in his work: the giant Glenwood stove in the kitchen, the small brick patio beyond the dining room, the television room where he watches baseball beneath the gaze of a clutch of ancestors looking out from old daguerreotypes.

And then there is the painted bed, which gave name to a 2002 book of poetry. It is black with delicate gold birds and flourishes, and the words "Sleep, Balmy Sleep" sweetly scripted across the headboard. After Ms. Kenyon's death, in the poem "Letter in Autumn," Mr. Hall wrote:

*I sleep where we lived and died
in the painted Victorian bed
under the tiny lights
you strung on the headboard.*

The house rambles, courtesy of Mr. Hall's great-grandfather's additions and an addition Mr. Hall and Ms. Kenyon made by building a master bedroom and a full bathroom onto the first floor.

Back then, Mr. Hall was making a modest living writing for magazines like Yankee and Sports Illustrated. He wrote a children's book illustrated by Barbara Cooney called "Ox-Cart Man," based on a New Hampshire yarn told to him by an older cousin. When the book won a Caldecott Medal, the publisher ordered a new printing of 80,000 copies, generating a fat check that bought the once-unaffordable additions. And so, above the bathroom door, a solemn bronze plaque proclaims the house's bathroom as the "Caldecott Room."

Eagle Pond Farm contains many such visual whimsies. If poetry finds truths by giving equal weight to large and small moments in life, then this house is filled with visual poetry. Everywhere you look are juxtapositions of the likely and unlikely, grand paintings and personal minutiae.

A Henry Moore sculpture shares a coffee table with an old carved-bone serving spoon. In an upstairs hall, oval-framed ancestral photos with carefully hand-darkened eyes and vest buttons share wall space with a life-size poster of the former Celtics player Kevin McHale hawking milk. Near the kitchen sink, a breathtaking [Picasso](#) sketch overlooks a shelf of Durkee spices whose wet-sand color suggests they haven't been used since Ms. Kenyon's death. Mr. Hall confessed to eating mostly microwaved frozen meals — "widower's food," he called it with a rueful smile.

He doesn't particularly like leaving this house, and he is still trying to figure out what being poet laureate will actually mean. He has been talking to the former laureate, Ted Kooser, to get the lay of the land. He is excited about doing readings, but his health isn't good enough to do the 200-some a year that Mr. Kooser managed.

Every six weeks, Mr. Hall figures, he'll spend time in his office at the [Library of Congress](#) in Washington. His cousin will look after the cats while he suspends his quiet rituals and leaves the farm behind. But as he must have known somehow as a boy, when he and Eagle Pond Farm first began their near lifelong embrace, he will always return.

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