

Donald Hall Honored At White House Ceremony

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For poet Donald Hall, the meteor showers in his mind no longer occur, but the awards keep coming.

The latest honor comes from President Obama, who will drape the National Medal of Arts around Hall's neck this morning at the White House.

The medal, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, is the highest award given to artists – writers, musicians, actors, sculptors, painters, architects – by the US government. Clint Eastwood and Bob Dylan were among last year's winners.

Hall, 82, left for Washington on Saturday with his companion, Linda Kunhardt, who pushes his wheelchair, shops for him, cares for him. Hall tires easily these days.

A former poet laureate, much of Hall's work derives from his memories, many tied to the family farm in Wilmot, at Eagle Pond. Hall spent summers

there as a kid and moved to the farm with his late wife, poet Jane Kenyon, in 1975.

He's written about searching for escaped heifers with his grandfather 70 years ago and about watching Kenyon die from leukemia more than 50 years later.

Hall used meteor showers as a metaphor one day last week, saying the flying space rocks once bombarded his mind regularly, pushing his subconscious down a poetic path with an unknown destination. He continues to write prose, but his final book of poems is due out in September.

The inspirational storms, Hall says, are no more.

"I don't know exactly when, but they seem to have totally gone now," Hall said by phone, shortly before leaving for Washington. "If a poem comes at me now, I won't send it away. I don't expect it, but I'm not forbidding it."

He spoke in a gravelly voice, sometimes funny, always reflective. Hall's friend, former *Concord Monitor* editor Mike Pride, wrote in an e-mail that "he is more at home in the past than the present."

His past is full of accolades, too numerous to list. He says being named poet laureate in 2006 and today's medal presented by Obama mean the most.

"Some of them are totally trivial, and I don't enjoy it when they get publicity, but others are important to me," Hall said. "When I became poet laureate, I was interviewed God knows how many times. As a whole I liked the attention, but some people were idiotic, and it was very tiring."

He'd rather his work speak for him. Work about train rides from his

childhood home in Connecticut to his grandparents' farm in Wilmot.

Work about plows being pulled by horses, and horses with broad shoulders that grow weak with age and must be put down.

His first book of prose, 1961's *String Too Short to be Saved*, brought a simple snapshot to life, the one about finding something from your past, something you didn't know you had.

In this case, it was little boxes, full of memories, up in the attic.

"It's a common story," Hall said. "After the book was published, four or five people wrote to me and said, 'That was my family.' I was remembering all these things, none of which were intrinsically important. Just why are they worth telling? Well, they are important to me."

Added Pride, "When I see a stone wall or a dying maple or a rose bush beside a driveway, I see it differently because of Don's poetry."

Hall and Kenyon were married for 23 years. He was 19 years older, but they spoke the same language. Hall watched her grow.

"It was wonderful just to be alone together, both of us pursuing the same thing, trying to write," Hall said. "Jane was writing poems that kept getting better and better and better, and I was watching it happen. It was absolutely thrilling."

Hall paused when asked what he loved most about Kenyon, then said, "Maybe I'd pick out her empathy, her going inward with other people, with her friends and people who were close to her. She was enormously in tune with the little pieces of feeling that many people would not gather or be able to assimilate or interpret."

They had pain. Kenyon suffered from depression, Hall from cancer, believing he'd die after half his liver had been removed.

But it was Kenyon, diagnosed with leukemia in 1994 at age 46, who succumbed to the disease a year later.

"The last days were a horror," Hall said. "To sit with your wife and write her funeral notice together, to talk about what she's going to wear when we bury her. We were not crying most of the time, neither of us, but we were facing real life in a loving way, hugging, kissing."

Hall's grief both wore him down and created one of the great meteor showers of his life. He wrote a collection of poems in 1998 called *Without*, a vivid description of Kenyon's final days at the farm, Hall by her side.

"He bent to kiss her pale cool lips again, and felt them one last time gather and purse and peck to kiss him

back." And later, "He watched her chest go still. With his thumb he closed her round brown eyes."

Hall was asked if his work prolonged his pain.

"I started my first poem 70 years ago," he said. "It's been a way of life and how I would handle anything that came up, sad or happy. The fact that I responded to Jane's illness by writing about it seems to be predictable."

He says he's written his last poem, about his loyalty and love for the farm, built in 1865.

It's about his fear of losing the farm

after his death, about burning it down before it's torn down.

The poem will be published in *The New Yorker*, date unknown. Then Hall is done.

"Every few months I would have a little meteor shower of these lines, very exciting," Hall said. "I didn't necessarily know where they were leading, but then they just stopped."

The timing seems perfect. Hall will be honored for a lifetime of work this morning in our nation's capital. The forecast calls for clear skies.

No showers, meteor or otherwise.
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