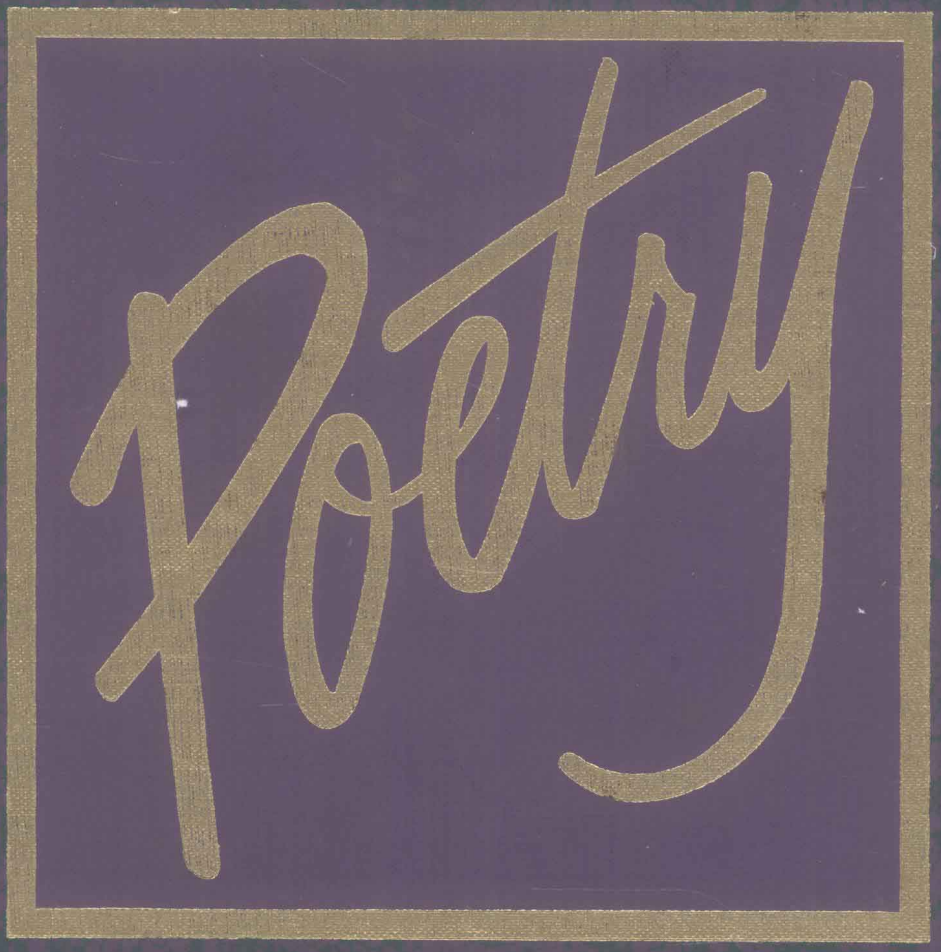

CRITICISM

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Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 57

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editor

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

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Jane Kenyon
1947-1995

American poet, translator, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

Kenyon was one of the most highly respected woman poets of the late twentieth century. She employed simple language and relied on understatement and imagery to convey the underlying emotional themes of her works. Her frequently short poems are introspective and observational, and are regarded as masterpieces of form, subtlety, and verbal skill and economy. Often compared with the works of John Keats, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, and Anna Akhmatova, Kenyon's poems contemplate mortality, God, and the joys, fears, and pains of human existence. In their essay on Kenyon's works, Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack suggest that in her poetry, "Kenyon discovers in our mortality a form of grace, a kind of redemption inherent in the inescapable movement toward death that may lead into the light, away from darkness."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Kenyon was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on May 23, 1947. She spent her childhood living in the countryside outside Ann Arbor, and attended her hometown university, the University of Michigan, where she earned the Avery and Julia Hopwood Award for poetry in 1969. She received her B.A. in English in 1970, and her M.A. in English in 1972. She married Donald Hall—a fellow poet and a teacher at the university, and in 1975, the two relocated to Eagle Pond Farm, a farm in New Hampshire that had been in Hall's family for several generations. At first Kenyon had a difficult transition to New England living, as evinced in her first collection of poetry, *From Room to Room* (1978). She acclimated to the change though, and her later poems are filled with her love for and wonder at the New England countryside. At a time when Kenyon was having trouble with her own poetry, Robert Bly, renowned author and family friend, suggested that she work on translating Anna Akhmatova's poetry from Russian into English. Kenyon published *Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (1985) and attributed her newly regained sense of poetic vision and form to her work on these translations. Throughout her life, Kenyon struggled with depression and many of the poems in *Constance* (1993) detail her thoughts on depression. She was the recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1992, and became New Hampshire's poet laureate in 1995. In 1994 Kenyon was diagnosed with leukemia. Although she underwent bone-marrow transplant treatments, efforts to cure the disease were unsuccessful. Kenyon died in her home at Eagle Pond Farm on April 23, 1995.

MAJOR WORKS

The title of Kenyon's first collection, *From Room to Room,* refers to her adjustment to New England and her husband's family home. In the poem "Here," she addresses her husband: "You always belonged here. / You were theirs, certain as a rock. / I'm the one who worries / if I fit in with the furniture / and the landscape." Although Kenyon shows her growing comfort with her new surroundings in the poems collected in *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (1986)—many of the pieces describe the beauty and serenity of rural New England—the poems in this collections illustrate Kenyon's battle with depression. In "Rain in January" she metaphorically likens depression with rainwater that completely envelops the house; in "Thinking of Madame Bovary" she purports: "the soul's bliss / and suffering are bound together / like the grasses." Kenyon's third collection, *Let Evening Come* (1990), illustrates Kenyon's quest to understand God and her growing acceptance of mortality. Repeated throughout the title poem are the words "let the evening come"; the final stanza bids: "Let it come, as it will, and don't / be afraid. God does not leave us / comfortless, so let evening come." In "Having it Out with Melancholy" from *Constance: Poems,* Kenyon discusses her history with depression and her attempts to overcome it. The poem has seven sections, each with a different aspect of her struggle. She encounters the empty feeling of depression in "August Rain, After Haying," and in "Pharaoh" she considers her husband's mortality during his battle with colon cancer. *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (1996) was compiled by Kenyon and her husband after she was diagnosed with leukemia. The majority of the poems were previously published, but the volume also contains twenty new poems such as "Happiness" and "Reading Aloud to My Father," a poem about her father's last days. The last poem in the collection is "The Sick Wife," Kenyon's unfinished, final poem.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critiques of Kenyon's body of work are largely favorable. Commentators applaud the quiet elegance of her poems about the commonplace, everyday aspects of life. Her poems are praised for their portrayal of raw emotional themes in a dispassionate, almost disassociated way, a technique that renders them fiercely moving without being melodramatic. She often explores themes of death and dying, yet observers emphasize that her poems often contain peaceful and optimistic views on these inevitable consequences of life. Kenyon's poetry is commended for both its finely controlled form and the author's adept selection of words and images to convey the wonder and the emotional weight of human existence. Critic Robert Richman observed with sorrow that "we should remember that while [Kenyon] was second to none in her love of the world, she made poems that are not so much a reflection of that world as bold and brilliant responses to it. She will be sorely missed."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

From Room to Room 1978
Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova [translator; with Vera Dunham] 1985
The Boat of Quiet Hours 1986
Let the Evening Come 1990
Constance: Poems 1993
Otherwise: New and Selected Poems 1996

Other Major Works

A Hundred White Daffodils: Essays, Interviews, the Akhmatova Translations, Newspaper Columns, and One Poem. (miscellany) 1999

CRITICISM

Adrian Oktenberg (review date spring 1982)

SOURCE: Oktenberg, Adrian. Review of *From Room to Room* by Jane Kenyon. *Ploughshares* 8, no. 1 (spring 1982): 168-71.

[*In the following review, Oktenberg expresses her approval of the simple, straightforward poems in Kenyon's* From Room to Room.]

Jane Kenyon is apparently translated to New England from Michigan; New England suits her well. Its depressive terrain and weather fit her gusty, solitary moods. Its Puritan heritage, still lived by in those towns, sparks her to spare meditations on the nature of the body, and on living this life. Her first book, ***From Room to Room,*** is the most ambitious of this group, conceived of as a body of work and not a collection of disparate poems; it is also the most fully realized.

Her subject is the situation, or the web of circumstances, in which she finds herself. Briefly, the story is this: A woman comes with the man she loves to live in his ancestral home. Although she loves him, she says, "I hated coming here." She has her doubts about how she will fare:

> You always belonged here.
> You were theirs, certain as a rock.
> I'm the one who worries
> if I fit in with the furniture
> and the landscape.
>
> **("Here")**

But the house itself is handsome:

> And when I come over the hill,
> I see the house, with its generous
> and firm proportions, smoke
> rising gaily from the chimney.
>
> **("Here")**

Gradually, despite herself, she begins to settle into it, and into the life of the new community:

> I feel my life start up again,
> like a cutting when it grows
> the first pale and tentative
> root hair in a glass of water.
>
> **("Here")**

"Life is so daily," Ben Belitt said. "Getting through the cotton wool day," Virginia Woolf said. "Sitting in the middle of perfect / possibility," Jane Kenyon said, transforming homespun into fine cloth.

Jane Kenyon's voice is her own, but there is an echo in it of Elizabeth Bishop's. The language is spare, straightforward, apparently flat. The sentences are declarative, without complicated syntax, and apparently ordinary. The tone is reserved (the man is always addressed "you," and we don't know much about him); the mood has a tendency to depression. The whole spectrum is compressed.

But what comes out is pure poetry, and of a sophisticated kind. Kenyon's powers of mind and passion are extraordinary. The passion is nearly always muted, the mind, never. The interplay between them is constant,

subtle, kept in balance, so that one feeds the other instead of interfering with it. To use a sexist phrase, Kenyon is what used to be called "a sensible girl"—not one to let her imagination run away with her by any means. One has the impression that she is not "a born poet," but a self-made one. She works until the exact words of description ("root *hair*" in the stanza previously quoted) or feeling ("I was a fist closed around a rock") are found. And then she gives you just that and no more, with an unerring sense of form.

This is a poet, flinty as all New Englanders, who has the courage of her convictions. It is a matter of astonishment to me that the following line could appear in a recent book by an American poet, but here it is: "And again I am struck with love for the Republic." She has just recalled voting for the first time—voting! But there it is, simple, direct, without self-righteousness.

Not only that, but Kenyon also takes up one of the oldest Christian themes, that of struggle with the flesh.

> And the body, what about the body?
> Sometimes it is my favorite child,
> uncivilized . . .
>
> And sometimes my body disgusts me.
> Filling and emptying it disgusts me. . . .
>
> This long struggle to be at home
> in the body, this difficult friendship.
>
> (From **"Cages"**)

Earlier in the same poem, she has mentioned the Pietá, with the following plea:

> some particle of comfort, some
> consolation for being in this life.

We hear nothing direct in these poems about the state of Kenyon's soul, and I have no idea whether Kenyon herself is a professing Christian or a Druid. But her use of this theme makes me want to hear more from her on it. It suggests that she could develop into something like the Emily Dickinson (cf. "Ruby Heaven") of our generation.

Kenyon's book ends with translations of six poems by Akhmatova, excellently chosen and, as far as I can tell (*sans* Russian), excellently done. Which is to say, they are lovely in English.

Linda Gregerson (review date February 1988)

SOURCE: Gregerson, Linda. Review of *The Boat of Quiet Hours* by Jane Kenyon. *Poetry* 151, no. 5 (February 1988): 421-23.

[*In the following review, Gregerson commends Kenyon's form and control in the poems contained in* The Boat of Quiet Hours.]

The beauty of repose is a beauty most of us may only fitfully emulate or wistfully, and from a distance, behold. It is the chief beauty of Jane Kenyon's poetry and the informing ground of her vocal and speculative range. She moves, in ***The Boat of Quiet Hours,*** through the articulate seasons of her New Hampshire home and through the many modulations of human affection, human grief, the ceremonies of loss and sustenance. She has a good ear: the interplay of syntactical and linear and stanzaic duration, which accounts for so much of the music in free verse, is consistently well-conceived in these poems; the economies that account for so much of form seem rather to be the natural products of mindfulness and equilibrium than the more agitated record of willful poesis. The poems turn a generous and just regard to the textures of common experience, but they make room too for the pressures of eschatology, as when, under the quotidian rubric of **"Drink, Eat, Sleep,"** the poet's drink of water from a blue tin cup prompts a figure of transubstantiation—

> The angel gave a little book
> to the prophet, telling him to eat—
> eat and tell of the end of time.
> Strange food, infinitely strange,
> but the pages were like honey
> to his tongue. . . .

—as also in these lines from **"Rain in January,"** which find in the local elements nature's transcription of failed prayer:

> Smoke from the chimney
> could not rise. It came down
> into the yard, and brooded there
> on the unlikelihood of reaching
>
> heaven.

As these passages testify, the other pacing in which these poems are expert is the pacing of imagination, those phrasings that are turns of mind.

Kenyon is self-reflective in the quiet of her contemplative book but never self-indulgent. Even when her perspectives are the recreated perspectives of childhood, her voice is unwaveringly the voice of an adult; it cultivates no false ingenuousness. The resourcefulness of achieved composure may be observed in the canny negotiations of **"Depression in Winter,"** where the abstraction and imperiousness of mood (depression) are outmaneuvered by the humble "little space" (depression) that comes "between the south / side of a boulder / and the snow that fills the woods around it." This space, though small, gives wit new foothold and a chance to rescue the self from self-absorption: nice use for a pun. When next the poet acts as amanuensis to depression and must write her way out of its claustrophobia, she most subtly resurrects the transfiguring space behind the boulder and finds there a biblical paradigm. Here is the second poem (**"Depression"**) in its entirety:

> . . . a mote. A little world. Dusty. Dusty.
> The universe is dust. Who can bear it?
> Christ comes. The women feed him, bathe his feet
> with tears, bring spices, find the empty tomb,
> burst out to tell the men, are not believed. . . .

Whatever the sexual politics here, the poem's special pleading is deftly submitted to correction by a longing for the impersonal. This reliable restraint, which is as much an ethical as an aesthetic habit and as much a matter of context as of local counterpoise, affords a useful lesson in the ways that poems may benefit from one another's company. I can think of books in which this poem would appear, and would be, small-minded. Kenyon's is no such book.

Oh, the imagination falters here and there: the self-chastening with which the poet concludes her autumn drive in **"Deer Season"** is too simply a scruple by rote, too like the scruple that ended the poem that came before, too flatly recorded, too little satisfactory to the mind. The unnameable longing in **"Ice Storm"** is at once too literally and too literarily annotated, the argument-by-allegory in **"The Bat"** a shade too tidily scripted. But these are minor failings and contained ones, no serious impediment to Kenyon's cumulative persuasiveness, to the sweet sobriety that fashions that rarest of things: pure song.

John Unterecker (essay date summer 1988)

SOURCE: Unterecker, John. "Shape-Changing in Contemporary Poetry." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 27, no. 3 (summer 1988): 490-92.

[*In the following excerpt, Unterecker notes the difference between Kenyon's first collection,* From Room to Room, *and her second,* The Boat of Quiet Hours, *concerning her feelings of belonging in her New England home and community. Unterecker also compares Kenyon's intellectual clarity with that of John Keats.*]

Jane Kenyon's second book, ***The Boat of Quiet Hours,*** is a significant development over ***From Room to Room*** (1978), itself a most eloquent statement of the uneasinesses and uncertainties of a woman who leaves the security of her own family ("My people are not here, my mother / and father, my brother. I talk / to the cats about weather.") for a house filled with "five generations" of a husband's family's memorabilia. (She feels clumsy ". . . among photographs / of your ancestors, their hymnbooks and old / shoes.")

The world of the first book persists into the second, of course: the house, the husband, the cats, and especially the rural landscape (not too far from town) that in ***From Room to Room*** had offered something like solace from bouts of depression. But in her new book, the house has changed—and dramatically. The first stanza of **"Back from the City"** makes that clear:

> After three days and nights of rich food
> and late talks in overheated rooms,
> of walks between mounds of garbage
> and human forms bedded down for the night
> under rags, I come back to my dooryard,
> to my own wooden step.

Now the house not only is hers, it has also grown friendly, as have the fields and the neighbors. **"At the Summer Solstice,"** for example, is ostensibly in celebration of the haying prowess of their neighbor's son who is "turning the hay—turning it with flourishes," but it is equally celebratory of the loved landscape itself: "the low clovery place / where melt from the mountain / comes down in the spring, and wild / lupine grows." It is a poem full of luxurious detail and of luxurious sensuality:

> So hot, so hot today. . . . I will stay in our room
> with the shades drawn, waiting for you
> to come with sleepy eyes, and pass your fingers
> lightly, lightly up my thighs.

The artistry is essentially one of concealments in a poem of this sort: inconspicuous repetitions (when you think of it, the purest form of rhyme) move through from top to bottom, but even in these last few lines we can feel their presence (hot/hot; lightly/lightly) along with the hidden internal rhymes and partial rhymes (today/stay/shades; room/you; eyes/my/thighs) that account for the most definable elements of its quiet, satisfying music.

The title of the book is an adaptation of a phrase from Keats's *Endymion,* and casual echoes of Keats and two direct references to him punctuate the poems. In **"Ice Storm"** Kenyon is aware of tree branches breaking—"For the hemlocks and broad-leafed evergreens / a beautiful and precarious state of being." But suddenly, a visitor in a sleeping household, she is swept by longing:

> The most painful longing comes over me.
> A longing not of the body . . .
>
> It could be for beauty—
> I mean what Keats was panting after,
> for which I love and honor him;
> it could be for the promises of God;
> or for oblivion, *nada*; or some condition even more
> extreme, which I intuit, but can't quite name.

The second mention of Keats is in the title and substance of a poem called **"Reading Late of the Death of Keats"** that is the first of five poems dealing with the death of her father, poems that are among the most memorable in the book.

The important thing to say, of course, is that where she herself resembles Keats is not in language or technique but rather in a shining awareness of the mortality of all things—and in a capacity to manipulate time to memorialize the discreet instants of life. (In one of her poems, she literally stops the clock: "Through time and space we come / to Main Street—three days before / Labor Day, 1984, 4:47 in the afternoon.") Like Keats, also, she is able to step back from the meticulously observed scene to make a grand generalization: "Everyone longs for love's tense joys and red delights" (**"Thinking of Madame Bovary"**); "the soul's bliss / and suffering are bound together / like the grasses" (**"Twilight: After Haying"**).

In **"Things,"** the last poem in her book, she speaks of the sound a hen makes as it tosses a small stone onto a red leaf, of a lichen-scarred juncture of twig and branch, of the mouse that chews a hole through the blue star of a hundred-year-old quilt. And then she offers the necessary statement that we need if we are to accept, mourn, and live with a world that changes but that does not end:

> Things: simply lasting, then
> failing to last: water, a blue heron's
> eye, and the light passing
> between them: into light all things
> must fall, glad at last to have fallen.

David Baker (essay date June 1991)

SOURCE: Baker, David. "Culture, Inclusion, Craft." *Poetry* 158, no. 3 (June 1991): 161-64.

[*In the following excerpt, Baker laments that, aside from a handful of quality poems, most of the verse in* Let Evening Come *is terse and redundant—which he finds disappointing, considering the quality of Kenyon's previously published poems.*]

If Goldbarth's multiverse is rapidly expanding, blasting outward, then the universe of Jane Kenyon's ***Let Evening Come*** is undergoing a severe contraction, a collapse, a falling inward toward density and gravity. It's a poetry common to the minimal, primitivist impulses of the past three decades. Even while I acclaim the noises of cultural inclusion in contemporary poetry, I want to continue also to find solace and beauty in plainness, in solitude. Unfortunately, Kenyon too seldom raises her private, spare utterances to the conditions that, I believe, the plain style aspires to—prayer, song, grace.

In her best poems, Kenyon documents the culture of the solitary—an impulse which, I admit, conflicts with the qualities I am generally praising here. It is of course possible and surely desirable, in a poetry as abundant and various as ours, to have it both ways. Here is Jane Kenyon having it her way quite well:

> August. My neighbor started cutting wood
> on cool Sabbath afternoons, the blue
> plume of the saw's exhaust wavering over
> his head. At first I didn't mind the noise
> but it came to seem like a species of pain.
>
> From time to time he let the saw idle,
> stepping back from the logs and aromatic
> dust, while his son kicked the billets
> down the sloping drive toward the shed.
> In the lull they sometimes talked.
>
> His back ached unrelentingly, he assumed
> from all the stooping. Sundays that fall
> they bent over the pile of beech and maple,
> intent on getting wood for winter, the last,
> as it happened, of their life together.

Restraint, melancholy, a watcher's whisper—these qualities mark **"Father and Son"** as they do most of Kenyon's poems. In poems of the plain style, the stance of simplicity, of natural observation, is a predominant rhetorical gesture. But the humility of this poem becomes more interesting, even ironic, when one notices how much more than mere reportage Kenyon employs. The narrator is in clear control, for it is she who turns the saw's sound into a "species of pain," and she who knows what the father "assumed" about his stooping, and she who suggests a deep, final awareness in the piercing touch of "as it happened." Each image bears both storyline and a deeper, suggestive resonance; even the "blue plume of the saw's exhaust wavering over" the father's head clarifies his action and prefigures his death with hovering ominousness. This poem's structure is simple, effectively unassuming. Each stanza is a closed chronology, a life shutting down.

Kenyon seldom strays from a style of observation, image, plain speech. Unfortunately, too many of the other poems fail to suggest the kind of quiet magic of **"Father and Son."** Too few of her details have the suggestive pitch necessary to resonate as emblems or archetypes. Simple details and plain speech remain merely, well, simple and plain. The point of the plain style—as I think of the work of James Wright, Mary Oliver, William Heyen—is to leap from the personal to the universal by a connection through archetype, and that finally is a deeply cultural connection. But Kenyon seems too seldom interested in such a leap or contact, and too many of her poems read more like merely private or mundane journals. Sometimes she is a downright grouch:

> At dinner I laughed with the rest,
> but in truth I prefer the sound
> of pages turning, and coals shifting
> abruptly in the stove. I left before ten

pleading a long drive home. . . .

Why do people give dinner parties? Why did I
say I'd come?

Lord knows, I want to say to **"Dinner Party."** The company she keeps in ***Let Evening Come*** is of five types: mostly herself, but also her husband, their fairly distant few neighbors, the things in her garden, and some famous figures from the art world. With this last category, for instance, I grow impatient with such presumption. In one poem she concludes, "Like Beethoven's / head [her geranium's] head had grown too large," and in another she begins "Like Varya in *The Cherry Orchard* / I keep the keys . . ." and in others we follow Keats and Severn yet again bravely straining over the Spanish Steps in Rome.

Days begin and end, the seasons change, nature follows its cycles—***Let Evening Come*** monitors the pulse of a rural life, but it often feels as if the presiding spirit is inherently suburban or nonagrarian, a passer-through. Not much happens, not much work gets done, and so the difficult life of the rural seems pastoral, even occasionally melodramatic:

The first snow fell—or should I say
it flew slantwise, so it seemed
to be the house
that moved so heedlessly through space.

Tears splashed and beaded on your sweater.
Then for long moments you did not speak.
No pleasure in the cups of tea I made
distractedly at four.

The sky grew dark. I heard the paper come
and went out. The moon looked down
between disintegrating clouds. I said
aloud: "You see, we have done harm."

"While We Were Arguing" is crisp, its pacing reserved and apt, but its whole presumption is grandiose, finally arrogant. This argument was so shattering and important that all of nature seemed to respond? I find no leap here, no connection with mystery or magic, nothing to turn the private into communal or cultural music—only ego and sentiment.

There are genuine pleasures here in **"The Letter," "After an Illness, Walking the Dog,"** and the especially fine **"At the Public Market Museum: Charleston, South Carolina,"** among others, and yet there are many more instances of mere happenstance and the mundane. I think of this as a slender book, so was surprised to count its fifty-seven poems; many of them just haven't stayed with me. Only eleven are longer than a page; none is longer than two. They are often interchangeable—short, stylistically repetitive, rhetorically flat. Given Kenyon's earlier work, I had hoped for a book sharing the mysteries of solitude and an essential involvement with the land. But too often the brevity of these songs also marks the duration of their pleasures.

Jane Kenyon and David Bradt (interview date March 1993)

SOURCE: Kenyon, Jane, and David Bradt. "Jane Kenyon: An Interview." *Plum Review,* no. 10 (winter 1995): 115-28.

[*In the following interview, which was conducted in March, 1993, Kenyon discusses art and politics, the necessity of the arts in the schools, poetry translations, and the importance of poetry and the poet in today's society.*]

A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, Jane Kenyon won the Avery and Jule Hopwood Award before completing her degrees at the University of Michigan. She has also won awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the New Hampshire Arts Commission, and the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN/Voelker Award, and the Frederick Bock Prize from *Poetry.* Her books of poetry are ***From Room to Room, Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova, The Boat of Quiet Hours, Let Evening Come,*** and ***Constance.*** The following exchange took place at Eagle Pond Farm in Wilmot, New Hampshire, in March of 1993. Jane Kenyon died at the age of 47 in April of 1995.

[*Bradt*]*: How did the Guggenheim fellowship you won last year affect your life?*

[Kenyon]: I was immensely heartened by it. I can't tell you what a thrill it was for me to look at the directory of Guggenheim fellows. To be listed with astrophysicists and dancers and mathematicians and novelists—every kind of human endeavor—was the biggest thrill. Winning has been such a support to me, more than financial, by far. What it says to me is that it matters whether I bother to work or not, whether I bother to build that fire in the stove and warm up the room and get going. It matters.

It came at a time just before Don knew that he was sick. We had three days of unalloyed happiness before we found that he was going to have to have more than half his liver out. While he was mending, I lived in the Upper Valley Hostel, a cooperative house where people stay who are in treatment or whose family members are in treatment. I spent all my time at the hospital, except when I was sleeping. The Guggenheim sustained me through all that. Then, starting in June, and running for seven months, I couldn't write. I don't know what happened. I was tired from all the stress. It wasn't just

Don's illness. His mother had a heart attack. We went to Connecticut while Don was still recuperating, and when she came home from the hospital, I took care of her. So I was taking care of Don and taking care of his mother. Then in early autumn, my mother had a bad fall, and I took care of her here for twelve days. All the time I was doing these other things, the thought that I had a Guggenheim kept me going. It said to me, "Okay, you're going to work again, and we hope you will go back to work when you can." It sustained me through terrible times.

In your "Proposal for New Hampshire Writers" you talk about these as lean times for writers in terms of the political climate. How do you see politics affecting the arts in general?

A governor or president who actively encourages the arts makes a difference—in the schools and in public gatherings such as the inaugural. A public official who thinks to include the arts is important to us as working artists. I think we have a good advocate in the White House now. Things are definitely looking up. We're hoping that Clinton's appointment to chair the National Endowment for the Arts will be a good person.

The Bush administration was not friendly to the arts. Bush's appointed chair at the Endowment was a disaster. By the end of her term she was vetoing anything with sexual content. Moderate Republicans were bullied by the conservative right—the born-agains and southern conservative legislators. There were a number of encounters between the Endowment and the conservative right. The Mapplethorpe incident was just one. People don't want to fund something that makes them uncomfortable. I guess I can understand that, but I don't agree with it. Art does challenge us, and sometimes makes us uncomfortable.

It should, shouldn't it?

Yes, it should. Obviously as an artist I want to see art funded, but I can see the other point of view. There are people who really don't want to confront the things that serious artists confront. I think of certain people in this town, taxpaying citizens, and I wonder, could I in good conscience ask Dot to pay for art that is on the edge? But art is the mirror of the soul, individual and national. It tells us who we are, where we're going, what's valuable and what isn't.

In light of recent political history, do you think writers and artists have an obligation to take political stands?

Yes. Politics, when it gets into art, may not make for the best art, but any thinking person in this nation has to be political. If you're going to complain, then you better vote. If you're going to vote, don't you have to inform yourself? It's part of living in a democracy.

What about the romantic notion of the artist as someone who lives in an ivory tower and is apolitical, concerned only with his or her small slice of the artistic world?

There are as many different kinds of poets as there are engineers or dentists. I'm trying to think if I know any poets who are not political. I can't think of a single poet who is not inclined to get into demonstrations, sign petitions. How can you be a reasonably intelligent person and not, in this time and place, be involved? You can't. The alternative is absolute despair.

In your "Proposal" you urge your fellow writers to give public readings and performances. Why is it important to make the arts public? How important is it that your work, say, gets to the public?

I want it to get to the public. Art isn't a luxury for the privileged few, and it isn't just private. It may begin in solitude, but it is communication with the reader or the listener. It *does* matter that my work be published, made public, go out into the world and work whatever effect it has. After the "Proposal" was in the newsletter, everybody called *me* and asked me to do a reading, so I was traipsing all over the place for months after that, doing readings for nothing as I had advocated in the article.

Every year I do a certain number of things for free. I just did an afternoon workshop for the Sullivan County teachers of adult literacy. I go into schools; I think it's important that artists get into the schools and other places where they will encounter people who have never heard a poetry reading, who have no occasion otherwise to encounter a writer. Lots of people think that the good writers are all dead!

We assume that poetry matters. Why does it matter?

It matters because it's beautiful. It matters because it tells the truth, the human truth about the complexity of life. As Akhmatova says, "It is joy and it is pain." It tells the entire truth about what it is to be alive, about the way of the world, about life and death. Art embodies that complexity and makes it more understandable, less frightening, less bewildering. It matters because it is consolation in times of trouble. Even when a poem addresses a painful subject, it still manages to be consoling, somehow, if it's a good poem. Poetry has an unearthly ability to turn suffering into beauty. When Don was recuperating I had Elizabeth Bishop's poems with me, and I would disappear into that book for minutes at a time, go into that world, and it was a safe place, and a very interesting place. Someone with a marvelous mind and spirit inhabits those poems.

You've been called a contemplative poet and compared to Emily Dickinson. How do you respond to those comments?