

Glamour

Don't look at her walk now,
her tiny, sidling flat steps,
neither crablike nor direct, falling
her permanent companion, between rooms,
on the bottom stair, even from her hospital bed.
Rather remember how she swept into a room,
fifty years ago, beautiful and engaging, her lovely
son and daughter, her husband,
and Max her Great Dane in tow. Perfect
is how you saw them.

Don't think about her hand trembling,
her mind, though analytic and astute as ever, now crippled
by forgetfulness, the passion still there
quelled by despair. Remember how
Boorfield her Basset would come skittering around
as she effortlessly called to mind
decades of actors and performances,
Dusty and Bobby and George Scott,
whom she read scripts for, and weigh each one
with savvy and irony.

Keep her at the center of engaged
conversation, and remember
Pompey her Jack Russell and her "ah"
when recollecting exquisite performances or beauties,
so clear and generous, it was as if
you had been there
or certainly would have felt exactly as she does
if you had. Keep her
in her pleasure in company,
her roast legs of lamb, her grace.
Her glamour.

June 19. Against Transformation

She lay there in her own bedroom in a hospital bed,
diminished, barely responding to word or touch,
occasional instants of lucidity scattered on her silence,
the visiting hospice nurse having recognized
and announced that this is a “new stage,” a “crash,”
and that the son in England should come right away.

Masked, we stand at the foot of the bed,
you touching her foot as the daughter, all patience,
cajoles a sip or two of water. The image is recalcitrant.
It simply will not budge. Frail as she is,
all the forces of remembrance are impotent
to produce and sustain even a translucent superposition

of how she once was, say, lifting a whole leg of lamb
from oven to serving plate on Passover
and hauling it to the kitchen table to be carved,

that image from long ago bursting into flames
in the mind before being consumed from the outside in,
like a piece of movie film projected onto a screen,
curling up, melting, dissolving,
revealing beneath it the powerful and frail body,
thin limbs moving listlessly,
the shallowest of breaths.

June 25. Litany

Whether you woke at 6:00 am, somehow tuned to the last breath of our friend, as Ann woke across the continent at 3:00, I don't know. Whether the dying woman heard any of us, husband, daughter, son, friends of fifty years, speaking tenderly, inches from her ear, of first meetings and plays, fiascos and dinners and Entenmann's, during what we now know was her last day, I don't know. Whether the haphazard motion of her arms and legs and whispered no's the day before that were signs of discomfort, pain, despair, or something else entirely, I have no idea. I still have a hankering for the notion that there is some connection between how a life is lived and how it ends, a drop of meaning perhaps, even revelation or virtue, despite the lesson of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or Covid-19, that there is no connection at all unless it's to teach us the folly and horror of dragging our most intimate private needs and passions, Lear-like, into the arenas of public life, and I remember six months ago. We were walking with our friend in a park by the water, when suddenly her legs were giving way and it took all the strength the two of us could muster to keep her from falling again. That was the moment our bodies first registered the seriousness of her decline, which we did know.

August 20. Mattresses

Today is the day of the hauling of the mattresses,
our eldest and youngest daughters and youngest granddaughter
having departed for Brooklyn and Tel-Aviv
after a month's visit: the futon up one bending flight
onto its slats on the third floor; the pair of lumpy
single mattresses up a different flight
to the ancient stiff-sprunged sofa bed
in your office. By the third cumbersome object,
our middle daughter, just in from a year in Austria,
and I have it down, the lifting, the twisting
in the staircases, the care not to knock down
paintings, the sliding, dusting, the lifting again and
and the lowering: There's something ceremonial
about it all, as the two of us working together, mostly silent,
barely mention the three now departed for their homes,
after the permanent stain of masks, quarantine,
the hollow mortal in the white house,
and one hundred seventy thousand of us—
and those they love and those who love them—
subjected to the cataclysm of dying alone
has managed to derange the everyday joy of family
we've always tried hard not to take for granted.

September 10. The Danish

(in commemoration of my father's 36th Yahrzeit)

In my brother's poem (if he were someone who wrote poems)
it would be a 10 pm visit to our father in the nursing home
thirty-seven years ago. He would have established in his poem
the comprehensive annihilation of language

that was our father's circumstance and ours,
and that caring for our father at home had, only then,
after six steadfast years, become too much for our mother,
like him, seventy-five years old. My brother would describe

the elevator door opening on the third floor
to our father right there in his wheelchair, shouting
his terrible, "Tra ra tra tra" at the top of his lungs
and he yelling back, "Shut up! There are people asleep.

Do you want the nurses to put you to bed?" Which worked
for once. Then my brother would describe the blaze of anger
in our father's pale blue eyes, fierce, as he started to count
the fingers of his lost right hand by flipping them up,

one by one. Pinky, ring, middle, pointer. Pinky, ring,
middle, pointer. Pinky, ring, middle, pointer. "No,"
my brother said, "It is not four days since I last visited. I was here
yesterday. Remember? I brought a Danish. Split. Half for you, half for me."

Immediately, the whole body of our father softened, his eyes sweetened
in a rare shred of understanding, and, sagging into the wheelchair,
he bent his head, took my brother's right in his good left,
and kissed it, as everything changes and tears roll down our faces.