

## Christmas Mourning

En route, a sudden storm  
had scattered flurries in the way.  
Today—this eerie stillness  
in the frozen air presages gifts  
of snow and death for Christmas.

Oblivious, Buster the cat,  
with fur of silky cinnamon,  
plays willing jester  
to our willing disbelief.  
The eldest grandson pleads,  
“Why give up now, at 92?”

Words recognize the tune  
but cannot carry it  
as Margaret hangs  
upon the door of death  
like some macabre wreath.

The ventilator sounds an alien hiss  
as morphine drips into her blood.  
Wild heartbeats in the hush of night  
drum the final vigil,  
summon her descendants.

## Your 98<sup>th</sup> Birthday

Sie herbsten den Wein ihrer Augen.<sup>1</sup>  
—Paul Celan, *Die Winzer*

A heavy rain assails the awning  
here at Koenig's restaurant,  
bustling wind the only traffic in the street.  
Stepping out tonight demands a reason.

The waiter here does not remember me  
from last October's birthday meal.  
I settle on the Kassler Rippchen,  
too much food, and I without an appetite.

Not long before the end,  
your gastroenterologist insisted  
on a colonoscopy, one of many tests  
to solve the puzzle of your falling weight.

To me your eyes confided this—  
the final harvest of a widow's grief,  
tired fruit detaching from the vine,  
juices dripping from the grapes.

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<sup>1</sup> "They harvest the wine of their eyes."

## **To the House of Your Father**

Life is not so long, compared to death,  
which lingers through eternity.  
Living tempts us more,  
up to the point when death,  
enticing with its balmy respite,  
burgeons in appeal,  
compelling as azaleas at their peak,  
nearly smothering the green.

“I’m in my father’s house,”  
I heard you say, waking from a dream.  
Delicious death aroused your appetite  
like pastry from the oven. Soon—  
to mingle with bucolic forebears  
in easeful anonymity.  
If peace is good, then death is better.

Old age looks pensively beyond  
as from the cliffs on the Amalfi coast,  
finding only endless blue above, below.  
Yourself a particle of dust  
inviting any vagrant breeze  
to lift you through the sparkling air.

At last, a little gust obliged.  
Nature, sometimes tardy  
what with all its keen constituents,  
would nonetheless grant every wish.

My sorrow blisters  
not on your account, but mine.  
On sleepless nights, my eyes look up  
for one of your accepting nods.  
You are only half demised,  
it seems, for I still speak to you.

## The Lid

These are my people, gathered in whispers,  
a quiet cohort bending the arc  
of each other's lives to this reluctant point,  
drawn together in that shuddering unease  
between the futile agonies  
of looking back and looking forward.

They are here today, bent in capitulation,  
because the beckoning lid remains open  
in this mock Victorian parlor of velvet drapes,  
gold painted trim, and cut glass chandeliers.  
The lights above are dimmed except for one  
that spots the honored guest.

Tomorrow we will close the lid,  
declare an end but not achieve it, not yet.  
Till then we carry the gaze of each other's eyes,  
understanding too well our sorry purpose here.

And there are no words to calm this coiled grief,  
nothing adequate to say—hence bromide and ritual.  
Hence the nervous laugh, change of subject—  
anything to escape the quiet tension in this room,  
where the fragrance of flowers brings no delight,  
their pastels no glimpse into beauty  
at this sad altar of satin and mahogany.

## **Good Friday in the Sky**

Flight 7233 lifts off at three o'clock.  
Fulgent sunlight inundates  
the atmosphere, sparkling the sea.  
And, Jesus, here we are between,  
hanging in the air,  
wings and fuselage a cross  
upon this Calvary of azure sky.

Ascending in this way,  
scourges of the earth sink far below—  
a liberation much like death.  
With everything subtracted,  
emptiness overtakes the troubled mind.  
I sit in safety on the upper air:  
no danger where there is no fear.

Sister and brother wait  
on an island off the Carolina coast,  
our first attempt to celebrate  
since we shivered at the grave.  
Live oaks and Spanish moss,  
crab cakes, hush puppies,  
and a lance into the side.

