

Poems for Sixfold
January 2021

The Death of Father C

I.

I look up at the night,
black veil with its pinholes of light,
half-moon cringing in the southern sky,
and think of all the men who die,

think of all the souls you will not save,
think of the emptiness of the grave.
I see your face in the darkness,
hear your gentle voice in the wind,

the bitter wind biting the words
as they leak from my lips.
What could I say to a man in his prime?
We needed more time.

II.

Mender of souls,
weaving atonement like Mother Mary
spinning sheep hair into swaddling cloth.
Agent of the Almighty,

but seduced by an antichrist
cloaked in white paper,
the grimy gray smog of life
burning down to a butt end,

Hell's own scent sucking the breath
out of flaring nostrils, stealing light from
eyes that danced beneath a youthful brow.
Where is the laughter now?

III.

I look up at the night,
black veil with its pinholes of light,
half-moon cringing in the southern sky,
and think of how I could not say good-bye.

Cardiac Arrest

Crescending shadows
betray a milky dawn.
An insidious clock
measures out the seconds
as though each was a lead
ball dropping in a vacuum.
The room is stark, stoic,
screaming sterility, seeming to
forever echo the voices
of people long dead,
long removed from the mystery
of a life slipping away in
the orange translucency
of a new day whispering.

In the bed, the heart starts to
falter, to beat erratically, to stagger
like a wounded soldier from the
field of battle. And the game
begins. A cautious
young nurse is the first to play,
methodically probing for life
in the end of her stethoscope,
in the cold feel of blood
hungry skin, in the size of
an eyeball staring straight ahead.

Her skills exacerbate her panic.
She issues staccato bursts of sound,
but the body on the bed doesn't respond.
The cavalry rides to the rescue
with all the finesse of a buffalo
stampede, but the body doesn't
respond. Needles are jabbed
into age-hardened skin, a plastic
tube is rammed into a silent airway,
leads are pasted onto a sunken chest,
drugs are pumped into static blood,
but the body doesn't respond.

Doctors, nurses, therapists,
seeming to move at light speed,
embracing the excitement,

wearing the anxiety like a fur coat,
creating chaos out of the business
of death, but the body on the bed
doesn't ever respond.

And when fatigue finally
takes control of adrenaline
soaked brains, the game ends
and the players withdraw in silence.
Death wins again.
The debris is cleared away,
the lights turned out,
the victim's family called.

Sunlight scorches the window,
bleaching the peaceful room.
Life bristles outside.
The smell of coffee fills the air,
announcing the start of the day
like an old factory whistle.

Dying of Cancer
(Slowly)

In bits of dreams
the faces veer and vanish –
faces devoid of heads, nearly
unseen by bloodshot eyes feeding
false intel to anoxic brain cells.
And yet I feel alone in this room,
hugging the bed in which so many
before me have died.

So many –
I knew most of them,
watched them strain with the stress
of reasoning out this horror,
of seeing their loved ones turn away,
first one, then another and
another – traitors all;
watched them lose control of their bodies
one precious system at a time.
I listened to them scream in pain,
begging to be freed from the prison
of their disease, all the while
knowing I could not,
would not help them
secure that elusive release,
that impossible dream.

So now, seizing the irony
but harboring no hatred,
they become my only friends,
inviting me to strip away
the insidious trappings of hopeless
survival and join in their
quest, their crusade,
their therapeutic haunting.

But I am a coward,
certainly no martyr,
and so I, in turn, must strain,
must twist an anxious face toward
the empty ceiling, must gather
just enough breath, suck in
just enough oxygen

to beg for one more shot of morphine,
the only salvation left for a sinner.

Gunshot Wound

First the call:

8:50 on a hot summer night;
the insistent triple page,
the incessant beep, beep, beep,
coalescing collective anxiety through
frantic ubiquitous radio waves,
cool voices echoing the urgency.

Then the wait, the speculation,
the inevitable questions no one
can yet answer: "Where was he shot?"
"How was he shot?"
"Is he breathing on his own?"

And the players assemble
like a symphony orchestra,
each to the designated place,
each with the appropriate instrument
and the skill to use it.

At 9:01 the curtain goes up.
The victim arrives in a cyclone,
unaware of his own importance,
unaware of his own existence.
The overture begins, then
the show. The questions once asked
are now answered: twenty-one-year-old
male, shot twice in the chest
at close range with a small caliber
pistol; drugs were involved;
he was smoking crack.

They shake their heads as they crack
the chest. Embracing the chaos,
they massage the heart and tie knots
in bleeders as though they were bits of string.
But they know it's too late.

Like it's always too late.

Terminal Wean

The group gathers at the appointed hour – three daughters and their black sheep brother just in from California. Grandchildren begin to leak out into the hallway. All young adults now, they wait their turn to make peace, to say a tearful good-bye.

The decision to remove the life support had not been easy to make – feelings ran deep, too many sleepless nights, too many angry words. But the weak heart, the bloated lungs, the massive stroke had all worked to humble the old and frail body, lying so small and helpless in the high-tech bed. Now the family stands united. Some seem resigned; others fight back tears, seeking comfort from the strength of their memories buoyed by grainy photographs shared on smartphones passed back and forth.

The early spring day is cold and damp – some orphan snow flurries finding wings before melting away. A few caregivers move purposefully in and out of the crowded room, following routines that seem meaningless yet comforting. At the designated time, a hush falls over the room – the morphine is given, the ventilator removed, the silent vigil begun.

In ten minutes, it's over – no struggle, no pain, no regrets, just simple peace at last. The family members hug each other, thoughtfully thank the caregivers, then slip one-by-one from the building, becoming quickly lost

in the gray backdrop
of another early spring day.