

Following a Father's Death

by
Lenny Koff



To the dead, one owes only the truth.

— Voltaire

Helping my father again,
seating him on the toilet,
waiting in the other room,

half listening around the corner . . .

Then he slipped onto the tile floor
so easily I thought his descent natural.

He couldn't help himself,
though he moved each limb,
as if he were climbing

out of the sea. The paramedics
had to hoist him into bed,
and when they took his pulse,

they were astonished that he had
suddenly the heartbeat of a teenager.
What was happening?

When he held my arm
that night, I could feel him
digging his nails

into me, pulling himself up
again and again, practicing
his ascent like a child on a jungle gym.

1.

Suddenly. The emergency room.
One hand at a time, one after another,
trying to get hold of me

and when I caught each hand,
he caught mine . . .
then unaccountably let me go.

He was tilted back on the gurney
to stop anything internal,
reaching up for something he saw.

I saw nothing.
The air didn't grip back.
Hours later, when the doctor said

he was stable, he took my finger
carefully, rolling each of his fingers
around it, making a ring,

eyes closed, feeling what he wanted
to know, telling me something
about being on his own.

*

It seemed as if we were lugging
his dead weight around for eternity,
from the wheelchair at home,

from which he couldn't lift himself,
to his hospital room, flat,
where we had to roll him

from his back to one side,
then the other,
stretching each leg

so he lay tall,
because his fetal position
was too frightening.

What we feared most was having him die
slowly, and we imagined the worst:
a stroke, paralysis, a coma.

Without moving we listened to stories
about parents who lived for years
in nursing homes,

their only care the care of children
who stood there repeating
how much they loved them.

But he died suddenly of cardiac arrest
floors above the emergency room,
days later, having finished lunch.

He was rolled to one side,
his fetal position,
and was gone.

He passed away
after a meal,
almost weightless.

*

He had been connected from his bed
to intravenous tubes,
raised just enough

to catch the day's coordinates
settling him into white space,
his eyes opening,

his fingers moving involuntarily
less and less,
beginning to extend normally.

When I said I'd see him again
in the afternoon, he simply waved good-bye.
He must have meant

something else because he died
after he lay comfortably
before his tray.

No one expected it. Not the doctor
nor the nurse who wheeled in
applesauce for his pills.

The day before he had pulled me close —
I thought that now I'd hear the secret
reserved for father and son.

But all he wanted
was a sandwich made of bread.
I wanted more.

Only later when I ate at home
standing at the microwave did I understand
that meals should be delicious,

that a father and son should watch each other
wolf them down.

I should have defied regulations,

overturned the tray
that fixed him in position, run to the deli
to get a pastrami pureed.

I could have fed him
spoonfuls so that only we would know
what he was eating.

*

From his own hospital room
he was able to watch himself
until it ended,

lower systems failing,
going off on their own, shutting down
with a mind of their own.

He was becoming parts,
for each night I'd find him in bed
rubbing his legs,

disappearing into the care of himself.

I always thought
he was head of state,

because he could legislate his needs
with time cards and overtime.
I envied his enterprise.

But his body, from behind trees,
from slopes out of sight,
continued to open fire on himself.

It was revolution, and his field was slowly littered
with body parts.
From his bed, he was busy chasing down casualties,

making them shout his name,
making them return to him —
behave . . .

*

I don't know
how it was a shock.
I saw it coming,

his growing weaker, more agitated.
I saw more clearly
than my sister.

She couldn't get
to thinning legs.
I saw what he'd become.

But no amount of noticing
could make her see . . .

He was indestructible.

He would live.

So she refused him

anything connected to his death.

He isn't sick.

So how then could he die?

No hospital bed,
even when he cried for one
to stop his slipping.

He knew that
what was here was true.
But she knew what he must have

still wanted somewhere.
And the two of them,
dancing, left me out,

and all my pointing out was pointless.
The two of them remained behind
as I walked to his end.

*

When will this be over?

Whenever you want it over.

Like an oxygen mask,
desire keeps us alive.

We reason with it, rising to the top,
going the distance.

And when I saw him dead,
I felt the quiet.

Not peace.
But the flailing was over.

He had done it himself,
at last,

taking on, lying there,
his own proportions,

coming forward
from the back of the crowd

with one voice,
whose word was good.

It is done.
And then he died.

*

Dead. I was afraid
to reach for him
in case he'd lift his arm,

open his palm
to stop me from getting closer.
I saw his integrity,

desperate for solitude,
the circle of care still in his control.
I could only wait with the body

in the off-white room
until the person I called
to make the next move

brought the blue bag,
zipped him up so that
nothing would snag him

hoisted
on the four-wheeled cart
and moved along the corridor

out to the open.
Everyone said nothing,
as if this were unexceptional.

The nurses remained seated,
and I stood against the wall,
feet away,

holding the guard rail
against which I rested
the hollow of my back.

*

I wasn't sure what would be missing
immediately after.
I thought about it

when I drove away.
My cousin thought I'd feel like an orphan.
But I remember thinking

when I saw his final body
welcome the calm,
welcome not seeing his hand grasping for air,

my hand trying to pull it back.
I remember thinking he was calm,
that we were still connected.

What is missing now
is the rope binding me to hopes
he had for himself.

These were my hopes.
Now I feel the slack
on my own weight.

I am not grasping air.
Whatever air I have is constant,
surrounding me like a case.

*

There were times
days after
I forgot him,

and that panicked me.

I wanted my time taken up
with his panic

because all he could do
was refuse to sleep
and he knew that sleep was death coming.

But when I'd take his hand,
at the bedside, he fell asleep
before I could say anything,

and all I did was stand there
by his deaf body.
And when he slept, I fell away, too.

*

I was a shut book.
I put myself away and went away.

He would have to knock
with fists to come back,

and even if I knew he were there,
pounding to get in,

I'd keep the door closed.
I wouldn't have to wall the hole

in my stomach.
I'd merely have to turn away,

partly out of independence,
which he prized so much,

partly out of desire
in case he was only kidding.

*

I hide from him
because he wanted to know too much.
I was always too busy,

always late
for outings to the mountains,
the places of his high imagination.

I was an aristocratic
hiding out. I was Bodo,
the silenced peasant,

short-legged, bulbous,
who wasn't martyred,
only executed

by an impatient overlord
who wanted to know too much
and had every right to know it.

*

Behind the walls I built
and repaired, I found myself
as obvious as I could be,

having no one but him
to show how I stacked personal things
to the ceiling,

making a roof of them.
So many times I wanted to kill him.
But I couldn't stop his death.

*

So much that intervenes
is full of life
that now I can't remember

that I don't remember.
Unable to maneuver,
I have to travel distances

back to shallow water
and wait, waiting
for the memory of confinement,

the loss at sea,
the ungrounding at the shore.
The return of loss

sustains so naturally,
dismembering.
And then I forget.

*

I never know when he'll intrude
like something pushing down
against the ceiling,

into something that used to be
the real world, and I was a child in it.
When this comes over me,

all I know is that I haven't called it back.
Were I a child again
I'd have more control than this.

I'd watch everything below,
know everything beforehand,
because glass lets nothing through.

*

I couldn't be whoever I was
in his presence,

and didn't know for a long time
that that's what happened,

or if I knew, I forgot
the moment I was with him.

He was corrosive, metal
scraping against metal,

exposing first premises
I thought I'd settled.

*

Now I wonder, of course,
what dying is like, drifting off
where you can't find an idea
to thrust yourself into,

where you fall back
to certain indifference,
where air, as temperate as the body,
equals everything.

*

Sometimes I imagine other deaths
in a family grown small,
everyone waiting on that side of the water.

I'm sorting documents here, writing letters
to associations that will keep sending bills
until the record's closed,

until the sums in one column add up
to the declarations in the other,
until all things have dried.

*

Before,
being in bed felt like home.
Now, I'm afraid to stay in a bed because he died there.

So I get up,
imitating the flight that's impossible,
digging up what's planted in the garden,

shaking myself loose,
for I can't get away from what's overgrown
fast enough.

Does it work, this unnatural gardening,
where the roots of plants are offered to the sun?
Does it work, this troweling?

*

It is their blindness, their reaching
up and out of the soil,
for the light that is the other half

of their fervent biochemistry
that made me notice them,
watch their yearning.

If they're alive,
it's at the roots I cannot see,
their buried independence

for which I had,
before my father's death,
no tenderness.

*

I've divided myself from him,
divided the estate,
half going to my sister,

who'll put her half in the other room,
close the door with his belongings,
keep them from me

because she wants all of him.
But he was only half with me
when he was alive,

always somewhere else,
always in the other room.
Now I know where half of him,

halved, is. And my half?
Put aside for the moment
so I can imagine I have all of him, too.

*

Then I dreamed that he was still alive,
naked on the floor.

He sat there laughing,
and I stood above him, looking below.

I saw the top of his head
and his baby's belly,

and I picked him up
and held him against my shoulder,

terrified by the way
he pressed me,

hovering
like spirit released.

Standing in the middle,
I only wished my face in a corner.

*

Who will remember those
who only remember, who shut the door,
who keep light inside,
standing and swaying,

then sit,
seeing space they cannot measure,
who roll up against a wall,
because it, too, is rolling over?

*

When I opened the book of poems
memorializing death, a critical edition
that sets of editors pressed,

I never expected to cry.
I thought that distance and skill
would let me get the gist of it:

lapidary lines; some musical and,
 because they rhymed, eternal.
 Some so personal that a single phrase said it all:

He turned his head —
 resting it on stone, I added.
 How would he turn back?

He died and still said nothing,
 a tube in his mouth to keep his tongue
 where it was.

He'd never spoken the single hard line
 I wanted from him,
 something I could rest my head on.

At night, when I put the book on the bed stand,
 I imagined how, in a year,
 I would stand above ground

before the bronze that would be his memorial,
 reading something lapidary
 from a folded piece of paper,

a phrase I was milling now from the book inside,
 grinding bones from the beginning
 into white power.

*

I made arrangements for the funeral
 several weeks before,
 flipping through the catalogue of coffins
in the comfort of my home.

That's what she said at the dining room table,
 and I wanted to believe her:
 single pictures, smooth and glaring, laminated, flat.
 This gave the color of the wood a break-proof finish

that, the more I looked at it,
 became its own anxiety.
The color will be slightly different in real life.
 Not so bright, I hoped.

But when he died, I had to do it all again.
 I upped the model to a deeper tone,
 then left the room for a moment,
 wanting now to touch the coffin,

to permit my hand
 real wood. But all I had was
 the same impenetrable catalogue . . .

At first we said no flowers,
 but my sister wanted yellow roses.
Would they clash?
 Joyce said no and she was right,

except when we confined him to the box.
 His skin was flawless —
 white because he was so close to life,
 his head surrounded perfectly

by folds of linen, freshly ironed and billowy.
 And when we shut the lid,
 the room recovered other tones,
 as if a light went out.

Yellow roses took the coffin's color.
Mourners entered of a piece,
in black,
and sat on wooden benches, dimmed.

*

Were I to take the fragment
placed on his mouth —
for lips that will not speak —

were I to take it,
opening his coffin,
disturbing nothing of his rest,

I, who stood beside his body,
would he answer me
or reach for the fragment,

put it back,
letting it speak for his lips, he,
who had no voice when he had one?

*

He left me exhausted.
And as the lid on the coffin
closed,

my work went there.
I straightened the four disconnected pieces
of the shroud,

open at the back, that lay on top
and on each side,
secured the pottery

close to him
on lips and eyes,
turned from light,

out there, the coffin closed,
under the sun,
There was nothing left to do,

and for hours at a time,
I couldn't even help myself sit up.
I was left without destination,

without a thread of desire.
I wanted clothes with a back,
in any color but white,

a garment others could read
and know that I was done,
done with looking in.

2.

I dreamed a blue coffin
shallow like a baking tin,

filling with water
from a spigot at the top.

The water splashed into
continuously stilling pools.

Between his death
and his burial, each day,

a shomer sat with him.
I wanted this for tears.

*

The only place for water to collect
was inside,
where I kneel,

where I have power to decide
who is close and who should be.
No one sees how judiciously

I tend the pool,
giving some ordinary things
the liquid they need,

withholding life from others.
He knew nothing about rains forests
that breed species,

whirling color with color,
with voices that tear away flesh
so that something else has a place to stand.

*

Now alone with him
in his room, I approach the bed,
his body, washed and white,

covered with a new gown,
his mouth wedged open
with a prong that keeps his tongue secure,

silent. All I hear are shallow,
suffocating sounds, my voice,
and all I do is reach down

and kiss him on the shoulder
to let him go the way generations
have gone.

Since then, his body's been unavailable
to truth, first dressed for his coffin,
then in it,

the rest of the family,
first staring at his linen folds,
hands folded in front,

then watching it close.
I would have had to shake his head,
make bits of pottery

fall from his eyes,
pull back linen
he'd been washed for

to kiss him on the cheek,
to reach his old impatience,
to take my case to him again.

*

Last evening I drove past the cemetery
on my way somewhere else,
not meaning to,

but there it was
on my right,
the light withdrawing inevitably

from the rising lawn,
patches of dark green left
to make their own way.

What surprised me,
when I turned my head,
was that I saw my mother's body,

bones now,
collapsing slowly on themselves,
yet somehow still her,

saw, for the first time,
his seeing his wife after thirty years,
amazed and comforted.

We can only imagine
on our way home, when the moon,
rising in the distance

makes distinctions indistinct,
what we become.
We can only hope

that we arrive safely,
remain whatever we were
when they saw us last,

lids closed, head sunk back
unable to see who's waiting for us
on our right.

*

My sister couldn't bear to think of him
this way. She insisted we return
the wheelchair and the diapers

to those who have his room
now at the hospital.
They went as living gifts.

A year before, she remembers now
how he recovered from pneumonia
at the convalescent home,

then went home to her house,
where he lived, buoying us to think
he'd be rolled

to the table for months on end,
 feet at rest on the platform
 so we could move him easily over rugs.

But he never took to it,
 nor to the breeze we created
 getting him to lunch.

My sister never forgot how much she tried
 to bring the outside in, how much
 the wheelchair meant.

*

Before I left the convalescent home
 I walked down corridors
 to the middle bed where he had been,

a reduced thing,
 with Leo his caretaker
 in the fold-out chair next to him,

the light bulb overhead
 always on.
 TV on.

Every afternoon, my sister'd
 wake him up with ice cream —
 elevate his spirit, roll him free —

two spoons of which he ate.
 His place is empty now,
 covers smoothed,

corners hospitalized,
and in the bed next to the window
a new man lies, his face to the wall.

*

I remember him sitting in the wheelchair
at his convalescence— *it'd be over soon*—

And I wanted to say I understood.
But I waited too long

because he turned his head to watch TV.
He was alone, impatient,

always wanting everything in his time,
and I came like an unexpected gift.

*

It returned again, coming over me
like a chrysalis,
pinning my wings against each side,

not letting me feed on leaves.
Even if I'd wait in the wings
to see him,

it took so long
just to turn his face.

I thought I was nourished

on nectar,
given the world's wing.
I thought I'd flown

from where he died.
But I was curling up
like a child

in hands that wing me
back and forth, old features emerging,
old migratory patterns.

*

The mirrors gone,
I took each painting down.

Let rooms remember me.
I hung there once,

surrounding myself with what
I thought I was.

The furniture goes next
so the wind can move freely

around corners.
and I can stand to one side,

watching myself get the room I need.
I'm surprised how easily

this happens.
Anyone can venture in

because they see what's here,
clear-eyed.

*

A hundred times she walks into my office
with assignments and gray revisions,
and I can't find where I've put anything.

Under piles of paper
are the words I was beginning to use
to put my voice on top,

telling what happened,
what deserves to be opened.
Now I'm buried under work

and have to answer questions
that only have temporary consequences.
I hope she can wait

because I've been taken away.
Sand is the best I can do.
The rake cuts lines.

I'll never see what he becomes
because the top is closed
and he can't be distinguished.

*

At first the masseur
placed my head down,
pressing my shoulders flat.

I peered through the hole in the table,
counted squares in the floor
to help me relax.

But when I tried to turn over,
I was unable to move
without his help.

I was suddenly
without effort, weak with trust.
Only panic set me free,

and I began to cry.
My father couldn't move
without trusting,

and for that second I knew
how divided he was, his body divided,
his mind running to a terrible unknown,

not filled with Muzak, where I am,
and thickly scented petals
meant to comfort.

*

Lemons, the tokens of condolence?
What an odd thing to bring after a funeral
when there was so much cake!

From a tree in the backyard,
I suppose,
where they were picked or picked up.

I hide my surprise
because this gift marked her
a fool, an outsider.

Now what touches me,
after finding lemons moldy in the fridge,
was their obvious wit,

their wish for healing, practical,
ordinary: get up from your low chair,
the pull of ends,

slake your thirst for comfort
by your own hands, tend trees
on which fragrance forms.

*

We've lost him and he's lost.
And all I did was listen:

My sister felt as if her reach
was severed, limbs reduced

rocking when she tried to move.
She waited for a sign,

a blue light, a presence.
The next day, at home,

I stood at the sink
in white light

when inexplicably
the high oven door opened and I turned,

rocked on my heels.
It was a tap on the shoulder.

He had found me, and I returned
unguarded joy to my sister who wasn't there:

*Had he gone to the Goodman's
on the third floor, he'd be lost.*

*

Once I thought I saw him two rows up.
I insisted he was there,
lifted by his belt,

standing when the ark was opened,
braced against the bench in front,
Leo next to him,

each within the other's embrace,
father and caretaker at the last gate.
I was two rows back,

hoping that he'd turn, his white shawl
draped around his shoulders
to a frail waist,

and when the old man looked
for someone to follow him to the open ark,
I saw he was a father,

I, a son,
and what I wanted to see
was seen for a moment,

would be seen
whenever I saw the white head
of an old man

slowing standing.
I would stand beside him,
coming to the front row

through the last gate,
standing before the ark,
at distances approaching an eternal distance.

3.

On Tuesday night, we saw the blue prints
for the memorial plaque,
rubbed from my mother's grave.

We'd have a ceremony in the spring
when there is hope, just before
the first anniversary of his death.

I imagine now how final it will be,
like putting the last lid on a jar.
Then anyone seeing his grave

from the top would pause to read
what his life had been —
husband, father—

and also know the unexpected memory
of his second wife, her children's continuity,
his other line — *grandfather.*

*

He must be separating now,
flesh loosening from bone,

the remaining white of his skin
getting whiter,

the blotches on his forearm breaking up,
blood draining to the bottom of the box,

weighing down part of him,
the lighter part floating up.

Does the light he yields to
move through wood to get him,

move as if between particles, quickly,
darting to a million places at once, like desire?

This light separated darkness
from the light on the first day,

and only he knows now
if it still exists, the light that made the sun visible.

We are blind to it
at the moment.

Were I to open his tomb,
I would see only part of him.

The rest would reach me from outside,
even as I imagine him in his grave.

*

Days of inconsolable tears
in which the present disappears.

I never expected him back
like this, so long after he'd gone,

sending me back to mistakes I made.
Tears only make it worse

because I loved in the worst way,
refusing to believe he'd return.

Now everyone's implicated
in unaccountable presence,

in his consuming withholding,
making me want

and not want anything
from everyone.

*

When we brought him home
from convalescence, where my sister lived,
he lived with her

until he slipped to the floor.
We could do nothing for him
where my sister lived.

He just slowed down
and we stood by, moved,
helpless, with shades drawn.

Every day was evening.
Caretakers, helping Leo out,
who came with us,

slept, one after the other,
on cots nearby,
listening to him breathe,

watching as close as possible
the heavy emptying.
I heard it, too,

and was happy
when he was quiet,
the picture of health.

*

Afraid of falling asleep,
of relaxing into something else,
he kept us up with orders:

pudding, cookies,
filling up the bedroom
with himself,

and in the end my sister
was dead tired,
and Leo —

every time he sat
down, dozing off, dreaming
of anywhere else,

I heard that voice that brooked no opposition,
Leo — he'd sit up,
I stood there

as long as I could,
sometimes shifting my weight,
wanting to be an upright object, too.

*

Thinking back, what else could we have done?

We held his hand so that he'd not
withhold his grip. We sat behind his body
resting into ours so that
we both could sleep, holding nothing back.

We changed the bulb on the low table
and let him move into his own place.
He didn't rise to another occasion.
We did all this, but did it help him pass away?
He did it on his own somewhere else.

We even made the postman wait outside,
opened letters in another room,
assured him that the world outside
remembered, tied the blinds
so light resembled shadows, anticipating ends.

We did all this and didn't know
what else to do. We thought that mirroring
the end of life would comfort him
because he'd know where he was bound,
because we'd know our separation.

In the end, we only found ourselves
alone in disengagement,
in light that made the bedroom indistinct,
pulling him up to the top of the bed
whenever he slipped to the bottom.

*

I turned the corner accidentally, found myself
apart; the house in front of which
I parked our family's home
where I was once a child.

The room in front along the driveway,
mine, some time ago,
ending at the door of the garage,
wide open like a mouth.

Things were piled on the lawn
around my parents' bed,
the headboard standing free
for all the neighborhood.

Suddenly, my sister,
dressed in black, came running
from the house
whose shades were drawn —

we're robbed;
the furniture's gone.
The house could only echo
the wailing confined inside.

She couldn't break the lock
on that enclosure.
I backed away, awake.
I saw the tomb

and then myself
beating on an air-tight lid
with a spoon. The top, under tears,
held fast, like it should.

*

Joyce dreamed that everyone
in heaven lived with just enough space
so no one
reached into anyone else.
Her grandmother cooked.
Her grandfather read
uninterrupted by fragrance.

When I looked up, I saw each passenger
on the airplane with headphones.
In my seat only I
heard fiery chords, the sounds of heaven.
Next to me someone
whose voice I didn't know
was seated in her own music.

We smiled as if from a tiny,
eternal distance.
Two seats ahead in my same section
my father, full of desire to be amused,
his silent, white laughter
switching TV channels, one after another,
altogether absorbed.

*

It's impossible to know
the curve of a life,

the gestures of it,
until the bow's strung

and silences brake at the last minute.
But his silences just left me,

I, who am not a father. Then
what did his life mean?

He knew where the bread was
for his butter.

He'd have moved away if he could,
driven his second wife

to the house in the mountains
that my mother bought,

a house they once shared.
I stood there in the parking lot

and saw how fast he drove off.
I wanted to think

he was still thinking of me.
I knew better,

but I still wanted to think it,
and so I made anger a mask for crying.

*

I hesitated before his closet,
things secured where he had left them,
or had us put them.

From his bed, he once surveyed
the arc of his life, end to end,
a collection gathered and hung

on the inside of a closed door.
He meant what he left behind.
He meant everything.

I stood here, my hand on the door,
knowing how difficult he was to read,
wanting to peer at each suit

lined up against the next
like expectations.
He was an optimist, big.

Were I to try his jackets on,
I'd swim in them,
ticket stubs still in the pockets.

I wish I'd gone
to sit by him
there. *Be quiet.*

What would he say
were I to open the door
just slightly,

letting just enough light in
to pick out something to wear,
something to have?

Who could resist that?
Who would say anything?
Be quiet and it's done

because love is a thief.
Whatever it takes —
it deserves what it gets.

And when the tailor saw
that the sleeves were short,
the pockets filled with Kleenex,

I knew he'd bought the jacket
as an old man, stooped before a mirror,
smaller than his size,

and I knew I was next.
Who can fool a mirror?
So I stood up to fool it,

so the suit could be tailored
to fill up sudden height,
a borrowed inheritance,

a gift,
a jacket made from eternal fabric,
the best.

*

I opened the locker
at Easy Storage, where my mother's paintings rested,
only after he died.

That tomb was miraculously dust-free,
with lights on automatic timers,
giving me the comfort of intervals.

I removed each painting from the row in which it was aligned,
resting each along the bare walls
of the corridor and began my catalog.

It would bring her into light,
the arc of her life
that waited for the archeologist to understand.

Her years would be spread out,
be moved in understandable sequences
she had no knowledge of.

She worked, like everyone, in the dark.
driven only to finish what she saw,
each picture a discrete garment, a truth.

She had caught the male line:
my great grandfather standing in a black coat,
thin, nimble, with an open book before him;

a painting of my father, silent, hulking
in a chair, his torso to one side in a sweater
that contained his indomitable flesh.

I was next: a boy, a cellist, a student
in short sleeves with a book.

But these I left at Easy Storage

under her eye,
troubling nothing.

I took my father home,

lugging his painting to the elevator,
carrying it from the first floor,
lumbering to my car,

where it just fit.

I wanted to sit next to him
until, out of sequence, one of us spoke.

I wanted to think he was always waiting for me,
the uneasy storage that the heart could open,
the weight of desire seeing light.

*

Uncanny how the dead continue to appear,
not full faced so that we doubt our history,
but round and backed against a bench,

just in front, a head tilting to one side,
just like his, white haired, clear rimmed,
with hands adjusting his glasses

just the way he sometimes did.

What made me know that he was gone
was not his double in the man

immediately in front.

But my not wanting now to tap his double
on the shoulder.

This time I wanted not to see him
full face, not wake his self-sufficiency,
his alabaster,

his not knowing I was there all the time.
So all I did was stare
as if he sat across from me.

I could have reached the bench in front.
But if he turned his head I would have seen
he was someone else

and plunge into missing him,
to imagining he was someone else.
This time I left him well enough alone,

staring at his back and shoulders,
staring at his not knowing
I was there all the time.

*

The picture of him that I carry now
is the photo on his driver's license,
one in which his family does not figure.

The DMV has caught a glimpse of him,
looking at the world, believing in the camera,
a glimpse I never saw.

But there it is, an unmistakable openness
as if he wanted to be understood,
as if he were inviting us to judge him tenderly,

as if he could be known.

He posed for everyone who wasn't there
because he was himself in public.

That was hard for me
who wanted something of him
all to myself.

Now, of course, he is completely public,
released from obligations,
from all ties

and so I see him now, like everyone,
from this side,
seeing what the camera caught.

*

Today I got the call. The memorial plaque's
in place,

and all my feelings can be left
underground.

I've a place to leave him,
to put soul and body together,

to redeem memory,
to stare at the raised bronze,

the signature of a life —
husband, father, grandfather —

so tenuous now
I don't know what to believe about them.

That's who he was.
That's what he said he was,

and I have only his word for it,
words I have inscribed over the grass.

There's so much more underground
to anyone walking by,

though nothing the bronze says
so continuously

will seem in the least deep.
And to the gardeners

who tend the plot that seems never to grow,
everything reads the same.

*

There was always somebody better,
and always as I sat at the table
the sons of other fathers
lined up to be with him.

He embraced them one by one,
a glutton for more,
and all I could do was sit there,
my head lowered,

flesh completely paper thin,
the color of my skin a slow red
like the memory of rushing canals
writ large on a planet.

This was settled in the coffin
with him, even though, from where I sit,
I see my empty face having to witness
motionless displacements of a life.

*

Finally my wife said what I'd often
heard myself saying,
an idea just the other side of the door,

whispered, piercing, from another register,
the words to another connection.

It was time for him to die,

for the weight of my thoughts to be lifted
opening door after door
until the frame collapses

and I can stand outside in the current.
I knew she was right,
and although she backed away

the moment she spoke,
wanting to take her words back,
she saw I saw myself in them,

that I'd crossed the current
and looked back at what had fallen away,
at what was falling,

and getting lighter,
tinier,
at what had been so close.

*

I know he rests in there,
and I have come to see him,
standing foursquare on the wet grass
above his immovable place.

What does he see of that?
What did he see when he was dying?
At the convalescent home, I remember
how I watched him sleep, how

I wanted to sleep in the bed next to his,
pull the bed wings up,
his passing companion,
my weight repeating his own disappearance.

I was powerless to stop it,
but I wanted him to know that I
among the sons he knew
would accompany him elsewhere.

*

These words are now his tomb —
and mine, too.

He rests in them,
one part story, one part misunderstanding.

And when their bindings are too close,
whoever reads this book can stop

and make them wait, which they could never do
when they were living —

half the truth was at the other's throat,
when truth was at the other's heart.

Three Codas

1.

She never saw him on the afternoon he died.
She was at home preparing weeks of food,
pyramids of packages,

her triumph over jello and teaspoons.
They called her after lunch
that he'd failed . . .

And when I passed the turn at the nurses' station —
I'd gone home — she burst from the waiting room —
he's gone — her waiting unsustainable,

replaced by cracking panic, voltages of flesh,
disturbing now because it didn't take me
by surprise.

I knew what had to happen.
I'd already cried out from my sealed car,
windows rolled up on my way to the hospital,

that they not use the paddles,
asking again and again for his soft entrance elsewhere
when they rolled him on his side.

2.

Scientists have found a dinosaur,
unearthed after 130 million years,
a perfectly preserved species that shows
how a prehistoric creature slept.

He was curled up with its head
tucked under his forearm, as if secure,
the way a tiny bird sleeps,
burrowing in its down, perhaps dreaming.

But of what?
The creature's calm is monumental,
fossilized near Beijing.
He must have gone to sleep

and died like that — in his sleep,
so soft one wants to cradle him
which he has done to himself . . .

Unlike other dinosaurs,
his neck was not extended back
in a classic pose of death.
He was seemingly tranquil after a long day.

He could have been starved
of oxygen and never opened his eyes,
or been buried under volcanic ash
when the roof suddenly collapsed,

just sleeping in a cave — who knows?
But his death, immediate, peaceful
extended accidentally to me
when I saw his picture on the internet:

millenniums of care,
a circle as holy as the place
I imagine for myself
and for those I want to love.

3.

I waited for a clear day
before I went to the cemetery again —
windless in the House of Life,
the court of David.

There I stood above him,
then I paced, sitting one by one
on each white marble bench
along the wall of names.

He stayed where he was,
completely within reach
from a grass plot,
his years and hers forever fixed.

I never saw my mother
in her coffin — I couldn't look.
Now it contains
only fragments of bone,

threads of what she wore to the hospital.
She died on the operating table,
and the grave she chose by the olive tree
only marks her separation.

She disappeared wordlessly,
as we stood in the corridor,
her spirit taking unexpected flight.
We remained where we were, disembodied.

But I saw my father in his white shroud
with shards on his eyes,
and one on his mouth,
very real and very still.

They're next to each other now,
but how different, dying years apart.
They aren't really in the same spot,
though I see the two of them,

who shared a life,
alone on a clear day
come back to each other, like me.
I'm their son who can watch over them,

not quite free to come and go,
though I can stand in one corner
of the pure marble court
and watch the clear day.