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Parkinson's / What I Miss Most About Dying / These Final Things

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Parkinson's

I watched my grandfather's midbrain die
in one long litany of loss:
piano, laughter, stride, voice, self,
falling in drops like blood from a wrist.

He became the tottering man,
the sagging face, a stiffened hand
telegraphing monotonous
urgencies on a wooden chair's arm.

I watched my mother defeated by
buttons, learned fingers forgetting
Bach, once elegant cursive now crabbed,
limpid alto a crystal vase crushed.

Hollowed out, a dry gourd, she took her
seat apart from the walking world,
jaw quivering under leaden cheeks
as evening surrendered to night.



I watched my thumb tremble of its own,
knew it then for what it would become,
leapt ahead in the mind to an end
contrived from memories and grief,

betraying with imagined futures
the fullness of my forebears' lives. Even
in lament, they took the given
as faithfully as their medicines.

Do not, then, blight our time with forethought
of ruin nor beguile me with
fantasies of reprieve. Help me live
into this brokenness as you live

into yours. Death, that common door, mocks
our tools and plans, allying you, me,
and those whose witness, though my right hand
lose its cunning, I shall not forget.

* * *

What I Miss Most About Dying

Afternoon sunlight
slanting, in turn,
on the doorsill,
cut jonquils,
IV pole,
ceiling.

Awakening to the cry
of nestling sparrows
hidden in the soffit.

The wind at play
in maple limbs

past my window.
The hand of a friend
proven constant.

Letting go before
the turning,
grateful
at last

for
all the
beautiful
unnecessaries.

* * *

These Final Things

The call came after midnight, with us
five thousand miles away, constrained
to do no more than ask *Should we
come now?* to which the answer was *Not
yet. Best see how much he recovers.*

But there would be no recovering,
his stroke having finished what
dementia had begun. When we,
in time, arrived, no task remained save
to witness the body's surrender.

A stubborn man, he breathed ten days more
with us at bedside, my wife and I
both doctors used to action, now
useless, uncertain of our roles
in this strange ballet of valediction,

dancing a clumsy pas de deux
between family and physician:

interpreters of therapies,
assassins of false hope, keepers
of unanswerable questions.

It fell hardest on her, the daughter
I'd married—for whom serving others
proved joy, meaning, life—now rendered
powerless by his slow dying;
talents and credentials moot. So,

when he took, at last, his silent leave,
her thoughts turned to families, mourners,
remembrances, all rites properly
observed, and said through her tears,
Now I have something to do.

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