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These Final Things

Brian Volck

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.

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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.

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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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