

They Took Him in Pieces

Watching a loved one struggle with major health complications is difficult, but it often highlights their strengths and sheer force of will. In the aftermath, we might find ourselves retracing our steps and our (or their) choices to see if anything could have been changed. In this case, coming up on the anniversary of a friend's passing, I found myself revisiting his slow, seven-year-long deterioration, searching for lessons so that others can avoid his fate, and reminding myself not to procrastinate on the little things; they can become so big after death.

I. The end

They took him in pieces
Maybe peace, too, but how likely
would that have been
alone in the early light
with everyone within reach
dying, too—just slower?

II. The taking

It started with something small: a sore, a cut, a bruise
ignored until it grew
and purpled
and blackened
with infection clawing up the veins
until only one option remained to save you.
They take half your leg.

Recovery begins in stuttered stops
and a rush of operations.
Finally, stabilization, then the discovery
of a mass on your kidney;
so they take that, too.

The amputation tries to seal
but chronic diabetes interferes
and you pass long months
in a hospital bed.
One day they find MRSA.
“That's a death sentence,” you curse,
but you hold off your fate.
In expectation of a prosthesis,
they take more of your bone.

The upswing: your triumphant return
learned and different

but appreciative of life all the same.
We move homes, combine lives
and end up with two sets of
bed frames, pots and pans, TVs.
Your wheelchair scrapes the thin hallway's walls
(to this day, the rubber marks remain).
A nurse visits several times a week
and appointments are plentiful.
Each time, they take more blood.

The downfall: a confident ego and company
combine and lead to a prolonged relapse.
You mix nightly acidic drinks
unthinkingly with morning ibuprofen
Your tightrope body unravels
Organs fail in tandem
You retch black blood
from the holes in your stomach,
your liver falters, you fill with fluid,
and your lingering kidney gives out.
You make it another two years
only because they keep draining your belly
and cycling your kidneys with machines
and because you insist on living.

They try.
When your veins give up nourishing your feet,
they pry away a toe to lighten the load.
You spend hours in a glum oxygen chamber
humming to Tom Petty
but they still have to take another.
You're down to three toes
two hundred pounds (if that)
one ailing kidney
a disfigured liver
a hospice room
and stubbornness.
They speak starkly of your darkening reality,
but they cannot take your hope.

Despite their best efforts
and all those cuttings,
you could not heal;
the rest of us keep trying.

III. The effect

I understand your going.
How tired might any of us be
if every misdeed
was counted up and stripped away:
for each transgression
a toe, an organ;
for each mortal sin
a year?

But now I see the seed of your ending
in the bottomed-out bottles she swills
despite the genetic specters howling,
I kill, I kill, I kill.
Should I show her your hollows
the ones in your cheeks
the great one below your knee
the ones where your jokes should be
sparking gallows humor?

Your absence appears in sudden aches
and realized mistakes: Postponed promises
(a letter never posted)
that can't be undone.

But I hope
somehow you know
about the silly wooden owl
purchased with you in mind;
it was meant to make you laugh.