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# A Letter to Robert

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## Essay/Personal Reflection

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A letter, written posthumously, to a wonderful person, patient, and friend.

Dear Robert,

You were asleep, in bed, in the middle of the living room, which had become the dying room. You were sitting up, hunched over, snoring a labored snore, as if each breath caught on a rib. Your mouth was curled in a thin, slobbered grimace, drool dropping to your chest.

The bed covers were tossed aside; it was August, the southern heat thick as a wool blanket. Your arms and legs were skin and skeleton, draped with curtains of yellowed flesh, your belly a pregnant paunch of liquid cancer. I remember you telling me, "Cancer's laid eggs all over my body," and it had. I also remember you telling me, "My body doesn't belong to me anymore," and it didn't.

An old framed photo of a young man—hair slicked back with Brylcreem, shirt sleeves rolled tight on bulging biceps, belly flat and toned—leaned crooked on the bedside stand. It was you, 50 years earlier. Time, and disease, had had its say.

Ginny, your wife, left a note that she'd return in five minutes, so I opened the door, walked to your bed, and nudged your shoulder. You didn't respond. I leaned to your right ear. "Robert?" Nothing. Then louder. "Robert?" Still nothing. Perhaps morphine and Ativan had dulled your wakefulness; their bottles sat bedside. I bent to listen to the slight slap of your heart and the pant of your lung. You still didn't respond.

I stood next to your bed, thinking.

"I'll wait for Ginny," I whispered, "her voice will wake you."

Then I noticed. Silence. Not reverent silence, just silence. A dense, gloomy silence, like I had slipped underwater. I was standing with death. You were now a shriveled husk of decomposing pulp, life wafting upwards.

You, a poet, a man of few words, would have beamed at the brevity of your obituary. It was short and economic, the epitome of the mechanics of poetry. Ginny wrote it. She included one of your hand-scribbled, unpublished poems. It read:

*Before you can feel*
*The comfort of night*
*And the cool of winter,*
*Tomorrow must not be—*
*Your heart must run*
*And your breath must*
*Go, you must tire*
*Chasing daylight,*
*And the dead bird*
*Must make you stop.*
*This all must happen*
*Before you fall*
*To the ground, wash away,*
*And settle in dust.*

I wonder if the canto, *Before you fall/To the ground, wash away,/And settle in dust,* alludes to stardust. I wonder because, as a secular, you believed that life began from a primordial broth of churning oceans and interstellar stardust bug-splatting our planet. You also believed that with the lapse of life, to stardust we return. And though you weren't a Christian, you took note of the writing of Genesis 3:19, "…for dust you are and to dust you will return." "It's scientific realism, and at worse, a defendable hypothesis," you said. Thus, I'll leave you with my hope that you're now a wondrous glob of nomadic stardust scurrying about the heavens, forever free from the sickness that held you so tightly bound to this speck of dust called Earth.

So, until we meet on the far side of Saturn (or was it the near side of Neptune?), I'll say goodbye.

Paul

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