

Families, Systems and Health Review July 2024

I found this to be a lovely poem. The tone is elegiac and poignant. This is not a poem raging against the dying of the light, but rather one that gently hopes for a new dawn. It is imbued with a quiet sense of loss and release. The natural imagery of the poem is peaceful - the dawn, a lake, a bird's song. The stillness of the morning contrasts with the movement of the dying person's breath, but only "modestly" because the "ripples" the breathing causes are carefully regulated, perhaps mechanically so. What allows the person to persist in making these ripples are only the lines that "tether" them to breath, suggesting the need for unleashing, for freedom. The patient's eyes are filled with "sparks," perhaps the glinting sun that the sparrow encounters in the next stanza, also hinting a movement from darkness to light.

In its final stanza, the poem skillfully returns to the analogy introduced in the first stanza. The tone is not despairing, but hopefully speculative, implying that, just as the bird must leave its nest to find the promise of "sanctuary" in the sun-filled morning, this failing body must leave its earthly home and surrender to whatever new dawn awaits. This is a death in harmony with the natural world. The final moments are "modest," without fanfare, the dying as instinctive as the bird's flight. Just as the swallow sings as it soars, so too the reader hopes this perishing figure will rejoice as their spirit ascends toward the sun.

My only small concern is that I struggled a bit with the second stanza. To me, it did not seem as strong as the rest of the poem. I liked the idea of the dying person shrouded in white, an appropriately funerary image. The room draped in white reminded me of a house being closed down, which fits with the death motif, but I could not understand it logically. A white sheet on the dying person, sure, but why on the chairs and floor? Further, although the reference to "strangers' hands" was intriguing, evoking the complex hands-on care required at end of life, here again I missed the significance of the various kinds of imprint on the linens. Did these suggest different levels of care? As a result of my puzzling about these images, I ended up feeling dissatisfied with this section of the poem. Perhaps the author can either rework the stanza so that it creates a single unified message, whether about the nature of care or the finality and blankness of death itself; or even consider eliminating it entirely.

Otherwise, I could only admire the craft, wordsmithing and emotion that went into creating this work. The poet has found an original and tender way of reminding us that death is a natural part of life.