

Student Research
Honors Program Theses

University of Puget Sound

Year 2012

Some Comfort to the Order of Things: A
Journey Through the Terrain of Silence,
Grief, and Nature

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*Some Comfort to the Order of Things: A Journey
Through the Terrain of Silence, Grief, and Nature*

An Honors Senior Thesis by Laura Derr

*I dedicate this project, truly a process of many years, to my father, Rusty Derr.
Though he is gone, his memory and his beautiful words continue to inspire me--and our
whole family--each and every day.*

dad

my barefoot soul
wanders often through
the lush st. augustine
and sticker grass
of a childhood you
and mom composed
longing just
to hear your farmer's laugh
or smell again the earth
clinging to your hand

-Rusty Derr

Background:

This is a thesis of a different nature than others one might be accustomed to reading through the honors program: it has a very personal component, which is what I intended. I realized a few years ago that my existence within the academic is much more fulfilling when I can relate what I have learned to my own experiences, and, hopefully, extend those connections to a broader audience. My journey through college has been one of searching to find balance between what is going on in my family life, the development of my personal values and the academic and social aspects of being a student. If a thesis is to be the culmination of one's work in a particular phase of education, than this is a most accurate representation of my growth as an undergraduate, which was mixed with some very real world challenges.

Introduction:

With this project, I will engage my personal narrative surrounding the death of my father, who passed away of lymphoma in October, 2010, with a text presenting a close relationship with the natural world as an avenue through which it is possible to face grief and loss in a more healthy, calm and even spiritual way-- a way that is not traditionally presented in our highly medicalized society and was starkly absent from my father's final days, despite his life-long identity as a man of nature and as a poet. I will place my story in close conversation with Terry Tempest Williams' autobiographical memoir, *Refuge*, as it was the text that first inspired me to delve into my own experience with a critical eye for the paradox between nature and medicine as it existed in my father's relationship with

his doctor as well as the lack of discussion we had as a family about the undeniable fact that he was dying. In her book, Williams places death within a larger natural cycle and is able to have beautiful conversations with her dying mother that represent, for me, all of the words I imagined would be exchanged between my father and our family, but never were.

We were left to navigate the unpredictable world of loss and questioning, as we sifted through all that was never said, searching for a way to reconstruct, to recreate our own storyline. For us, aching to unearth something natural from the wreckage of a death that was far from nature and marked by suffering, was the work of grieving.

I first read *Refuge* about a month before my dad passed away. I remember reading Williams' account of the profound conversations she had with her dying mother and feeling a sense of jealousy that death could possibly be so open and peaceful when my dad wouldn't speak of it. It was then that I first began to think about a re-examination of my own experience. My main draw to *Refuge* was that it was a reminder of all of the interactions, the understanding doctor and the connection to nature that were so absent from my father's death. As my conversation with the text began to develop, I wanted to look back at the possible reasons why these same moments didn't take place between my dad and our family when he had always been a man who lived in nature as much as possible.

I will be examining three key elements of Williams' narrative that differed greatly from our family's journey and yet in which I found connection and inspiration: these elements are conversation, experience within the medical world, and profound moments in nature.

For this project, along with placing my own story in conversation with *Refuge*, I will also be looking at poems written by my father and responding to those poems as they are representative of this central paradox between the natural and the medical, between the ideas represented in the poems themselves and the circumstances under which my dad actually left this world. He used these poems to navigate the loss he felt when other loved ones passed and to muse about days gone by, but when it came to his own death, there was only silence. I feel an obligation to continue where my dad left off as a poet, to write about the past in an attempt to find a sense of beauty in death through creativity.

It is my sincere hope that this personal piece will present my situation within the framework of *Refuge* in a way that may be relatable on a more universal level and encourage discussion about the stories, the silences that exist in our lives. Perhaps, as I make further peace with my father's death by examining the absence of communication from his final days, by writing about the unspoken, I might help others who have experienced similar loss to do the same, even in a society that so often chooses not to discuss issues of grief and dying. It is my ultimate goal to create something of inspiration and poignancy, as the literary work I will be examining has served to inspire me.

Silence vs. Conversation:

Terry Tempest Williams draws throughout her memoir on the powerful exchanges she shares with her mother as her mother's final days draw near. Perhaps their open discussion is, in part, a result of their connection as women, but it is also clear that the two of them are able to have these interactions because of the mother's willingness to express her deepest feelings with regards to her failing body. She even becomes the one who is holding the family together as they struggle to accept her fate. "It doesn't matter how much time I have left," she explains to them, "All we have is now. I wish you could all accept that and let go of your projections. Just let me live so I can die"(161). She is strong in her communication of her wishes, not just to her daughter, but to the entire family. She has chosen to refuse treatment after a certain point and she is tired of others trying to fight for her when she sees it as her own personal journey. Her family wants to feel more control, hoping that more treatment will be tried, but her mother won't accept, requesting: "The cancer is very much a part of me...I need you to help me through my death" (156). "You learn to relinquish," she muses, "you learn to be an open vessel and let life flow through you" (165).

Just to hear such insightful words, or any semblance of recognition come from my father would have been a great source of comfort to us. But this was not his chosen path of coping. Just to know, as Williams does, that her "mother is frightened [and] wondering what her life will be like from this point forward" (173) would have been enough. Of course we knew this must have been true, but all we ever heard was how we should continue on with our lives as best we could. My dad wanted us to keep on with school,

with life, with work, no matter what was happening to him, but how were we supposed to accept this as his only true wish?

These powerful scenes of dialogue in *Refuge* are somehow reassuring to me, and yet they seem idealized, especially the following part, when the author's mother is already on a morphine drip. Her mother says once her hospice nurses have begun the drip: "Something extraordinary is happening to me. The only way I can describe it to you is that I am moving into a realm of pure feeling. Pure color" (217). Perhaps Tempest Williams was reconstructing her story as I am, in a way, doing with mine. This romanticizing of death through conversation and the sense of longing it evoked in me that I might have had these same sort of interactions, only serve to prove that literature, and all art, can create beauty and light in those elements of life that society deems most tragic and dismal.

While I found a sense of calm reading about such an openness, a peacefulness in the process of dying as it exists as a stage of life, I also longed to go back in time, to step up and say what wasn't being said. But since we don't yet have some technology that will allow that, I must work through it in this way. Williams starts her book by saying: "Perhaps, I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know, to create a path for myself with the idea that memory is the only way home" (4). I feel this way exactly as I set about telling my own story--I am re-writing the past for myself so that I might find my way, as well as for my family and in order to share my experience. And I have found I cannot write in anything that didn't actually happen, unless qualifying it by admitting that it was only a dream—I feel a strong sense of

emotional and literary fidelity to my narrative. So here are my realities as I try to make some sense of what I do not know.

Williams' mom says the cancer is a part of her, sees herself as an open vessel. But what if a loved one who is dying doesn't acknowledge this process out loud? That is where we were left—my mother, sister and I—on the outside, staring at my father as he struggled to walk, struggled to swallow, struggled to be. We hadn't a clue what he was thinking—for once, this man of so many words, who had almost notoriously always had a piece of advice for everything, was rendered speechless by his battle to live. He had handed over his fate to his doctor, with whom he had brief, early morning chats, but towards us, he was stoic in his suffering.

The disease came back a year before everything started to speed up. He had been sick and then he got better. And then, suddenly, his vision became blurry in his left eye. From the tone in my mom's voice on the phone when she told me, I already knew when I arrived home at the end of my sophomore year that his life would soon be over, it was just a matter of when. But whether he knew or not at that moment, we will never be able to say. He seemed to have poured all of his energy into the mentality that he was fighting a solitary war, clinging to what he held so dear on this earth—his family, his yard, his mountains. But he never said this to anyone—it seemed he had no energy left for that.

The moment I stepped foot in my house that summer, I was over-taken by what I can say now was an early stage of grief. And by that I don't mean it was stage one, denial, of the classic five stages of grief that one can google—I think those stages are a most un-universal oversimplification. No, this was a grief that hovered about me, lay

thick over our family like a heavy fog all summer long as we watched and waited, feeling him slip away.

Just three days after I arrived home, my dad was admitted to the hospital because he was losing feeling in his left leg. One night turned into two weeks and still no words came from him about his thoughts, his feelings, his fears. Two weeks of spinal taps, MRIs, blood tests, as my dad lost more and more weight, becoming weaker by the hour. It all became depressingly monotonous: the drive in rush hour traffic, parking in the underground structure, climbing the stairs to the main lobby, taking the elevator to the sixth floor oncology ward, and each time being somehow less and less prepared for what I would see. And then, finding him there trying to choke down a glob of sticky mashed potatoes or chocolate pudding, as if he didn't realize that his throat wasn't working.

I gave him a letter one day, telling him about a dream I'd had. In this dream, I was pitting cherries that were actually cancer cells and the pits were the poisonous parts and I was taking them out. I'd hoped this letter might spark some longer conversation, but the next day he simply thanked me for the thoughtful card, told me he loved me and said he was feeling a bit better than the day before. I started to feel stifled by the suffering that was being ignored. I was frustrated. We all were. I began to resent the hospital as we made twice-daily trips to watch my father waste away as the doctors kept coming up empty.

Two weeks had gone by and my dad's doctor had figured out nothing except that there was no cancer in the spine. This was determined by doing diagnostic chemo straight into the spinal chord, meaning they put chemo in his spine and since he didn't improve, they concluded that that must not have been where the cancer was. Finally, they sent him

home. This proved to be even more disheartening than seeing him in the hospital, which I somehow hadn't expected. Of course, it was better to have him out of that sterile environment, but watching him try to navigate the home he loved without any of his previous strength was heartbreaking. My dad had always loved to eat and to be active, but now without the proper use of his legs or his throat, he could make only sad attempts at either. It was suffering unlike anything I ever could have imagined, and an unjust and cruel trial inflicted on the most kind-hearted man I knew. And all we could do was to try to help him walk when he would accept it and just sit and watch it all happen. Where did he see himself going? Did he think about the future? Was he afraid? What did he want to tell us? Only silence.

The night before he died, my dad called me. I think he had finally realized that he should acknowledge his final moments. But it was too late. He could no longer speak. His vocal chords and his throat were destroyed and I felt shattered to a million pieces as he tried to talk. "I'm so sorry dad," I kept repeating, "I'm so very sorry but I can't understand you." But he kept trying—he had at last decided that it was time to say goodbye, but all I could hear were raspy noises coming through the phone. The next day when my mom called me, I knew before I picked up. I knew, but that didn't make it any less jarring. As my heart sunk into a pit of my stomach reserved, I am certain, for the most acute form of grief, I felt grateful for that final phone call—what I saw as an attempt on his part to break the silence. But it was still an open end, a narrative waiting to be told.

I've heard it said that the hardest part of watching a loved one die is letting them make all of the decisions that they see fit. For Tempest Williams and her family, the struggle was to allow the mother to give up treatment and give over to nature. For our

family, it was just the opposite. We had to watch as my father went along with each seemingly absurd suggestion his doctor picked. We had to let him fight until the end, until the morning of the day he died when the doctor finally recognized that the end was near. Then his battle was over and just like that, he was gone.

Medical:

In *Refuge*, the family has a unique relationship with a doctor who is a friend and who is understanding about the mother's decision to discontinue treatment after she begins to feel it goes against her nature. Once the mother has decided to die at home, the doctor himself comes by to install the morphine the first time and the mother is relieved to see him, as is the whole family, as he is seen as a source of relief. His openness to accepting the mother's wishes enables the entire family to experience her passing together in the familiarity of their own home: "In the privacy of one another's company, we openly celebrated and grieved mother's passing. A flock of sanderlings wheeling over the waves of grief" (231). Williams draws a parallel between their family in this moment and a family of birds, as she and her mother have spent much time together observing birds in their natural habitat of Great Salt Lake near their home in Utah. From our experience, I can say that the ability to have a powerfully peaceful passing, felt together as a family, and the chance to see something natural right at the end of life is truly not possible if a doctor is unwilling to see anything beyond his own stubborn agenda to avoid what he sees as the ultimate enemy—death.

For my dad's doctor, it was like a game—a sneaky, unjust game of roulette. Or battle ship. Let's throw this number out there and see where the ball lands. Maybe a hit, maybe a miss. Different drugs, blood transfusions, spinal taps—a desperate attempt to find where the cancer was hidden this time. My father's body had become the playing board and his organs and blood were the pawns manipulated by the doctor and his need to win. This man, whom I never met in the ten years he was my father's doctor, was too concerned with his own track record, it seemed, to even consider what might be the most

comfortable or appropriate way for my dad to die. As I mentioned before, he didn't even admit defeat and throw down his weapons until the very day my dad passed away. Of course, I cannot ignore that my father had his own free will in all of this and could have refused treatment and opted to go home at some point. But I could never say that his doctor wasn't implicated in the stoic battle he was waging against his own body. If a doctor had at least suggested an ending with less suffering, an ending with a bit of time to be in nature, how could a man like my dad not have given that some thought?

But as it stands, contemporary Western society seems often to ignore an interaction with the natural world and an acknowledgement of natural cycles as a proposed tool for navigating grief. At least in my father's case, his doctor certainly didn't seem to be encouraging any tie to the natural world or the option of a more natural passing. Where did that leave a person like my father who had always turned to nature in times of confusion and disillusionment? With all of the avenues of remedies and poisons available to doctors, where is the room for peace and comfort?

Seeking some evidence that our family's interaction with this doctor was not simply a singular incident of a lack of compassion, but rather an experience suggesting a larger trend among a medicalized society towards an impersonal, battle-like take on death, I turned to articles on medical ethics. I found particular truth in an article entitled *Proper Care for the Dying: A critical Public Issue* as it spoke of the fear that has developed towards death as a result of medicine's power over it. It was noted that, a hundred years ago, "Death was accepted without fear, as being part of the natural progression of life. Death was neither hastened nor delayed. This situation existed for a millennium. Dying was a public event and death took place in the presence of family,

friends, neighbours and children...Children learned to view death as a part of life, not threatening or unusual, but simply a part of reality”(76). This article is from 25 years ago and thus, from my personal experience, even more relevant today as advances in medicine continue to develop, presenting doctors with new power.

I relate specifically to this argument and medicine’s disruption of natural life cycles because the overarching feeling I could pick up on during my time spent in the hospital was one of desperation—desperation to hunt down and kill whatever was plaguing the bodies of patients. And it works for a while. I can’t deny that. The fact that my dad was first diagnosed in 2001 is proof. He might have died 10 years ago. But what happens when the battlefield approach isn’t working anymore and the doctor can’t admit this to a family because of a fear of death? For us, this meant that my father’s doctor put up a wall behind which he seemed to be hidden at all moments, as if he were ashamed that with all the tools at his disposal, he wasn’t able to trick the natural cycle of life.

The barriers put in place by the doctor’s attitude and the muddle of different medical processes being thrown our way each day put strain on our family, there is no doubt. Silence isn’t easy. It eats away slowly, much like a disease. There was tension as we struggled to push our way through sadness and confusion. I am proud to say that, in the end, working through grief together has made us stronger and closer today than ever before, but it was tough for a few months. And all of this was in conjunction with the tension between each of us and the doctor. This situation was especially difficult for my mother, since she would have to plan to be at the hospital at five in the morning if she had any questions for his doctor or any concerns, since he would come that early each day. It seemed to all of us that he was trying to avoid any comments on our part, which was

absurd--we were a very caring, close family of a dying man, and he made talking to him into a game of hide and seek.

Perhaps the strangest part of my father being so deeply entrenched in the medical world and at the whim of the doctors, was the fact that my sister and I did not witness the end of his life. I'm not sure I will ever know how this makes me feel. He insisted all along that he did not want to disrupt my life or my sister's—after we had spent all summer at home, he wanted us to continue forging forward with our own journeys. I think maybe he just didn't want us to see him in those final days—emaciated and nearly orange with liver failure. My mom wonders if she should have sent for us anyway. Then she says she's glad we didn't have to see it. But I still can hardly believe that she has to forever bear the memory of his final hours all by herself. I know it will haunt her in one way, as my sister and I will be haunted by our absence from his final breaths; we stand at two ends of the spectrum of regret and pain.

I maintain that a change in the doctor's attitude might have given us a final moment more like that of *Refuge*, where the mother has been made comfortable at home and the entire family is gathered to celebrate her life in that instant. We did celebrate my father's life at his memorial service. After we had six weeks worth of distance from that sterile hospital, we brought together music, family, friends, and powerful words, both his and our own, to create the sort of ending we saw fit for a man like him. This service was the most transcending experience of my life and a testament to the man my father was before he had been silenced by his own internal battle to survive and his doctor's relentless pushing. Of course his doctor wasn't at the memorial. He didn't even send us a letter, no call, nothing whatsoever. I only wish he could have seen how we rose above the

unnatural ending he had facilitated to construct a most beautiful celebration that our family and friends still talk about to this day.

And so we must reconstruct. We try our best to block out the hospital gowns and the plastic trays, the needles and the machines and the metal and we choose instead to remember the beautiful words, the man who took to mountains any chance he got, the rides in the pick-up truck smelling of sawdust, the man who had an opinion about everything, or a story, the man who loved Irish music and tending his yard, and building the most artistic fences and decks, the man who touched the lives of our whole community with his knowledge, his passion for the natural world and his desire to share it with us all.

Moments in Nature:

Williams and her mother are most connected through their shared love of nature. Even when her mother is feeling weak, she is able to journey to Great Salt Lake and re-connect with the cycle of life. She speaks with Terry about the times she has spent alone in nature in the past and how she is using those moments to find peace in the present: “Desert light bathed my soul...gave me a perspective that will carry me through whatever I must face. Those days on the river were meditation, a renewal. I found my strength in solitude. It is with me now” (29). Because she continues to vocalize her deep connection with nature, her family is able to benefit from her insight and this allows for an ending to her life which is as peaceful and natural as it could have been, that is, unless she had died among the dunes at Great Salt Lake.

The way her mother explains her connection with nature is what I would have expected from my father in his final days. Maybe he just had no strength to speak what he was hopefully thinking. So I had to imagine what it might have been like to have seen him at home in nature, I had to remove him in my mind from the sixth floor of the hospital. It was shocking to me that he never asked to be taken to the mountains or that he didn't drive there himself when facing death so directly. One night that summer, before I had ever read *Refuge*, I brought him to the mountains in the only way I knew how—through the words in my imagination.

On this particular night, I lay awake in my bed at home. I didn't sleep well at all those days and this night was particularly difficult. My dad was in the hospital for the second of three times and my mom was spending the night there with him because he was beginning a sort of blood dialysis called plasmapheresis. I couldn't keep my mind from landing on that big machine pumping all of the blood out of his body, separating it and

replacing it with a synthetic alternative, just in case his plasma was poisoned. Not that they knew anything for sure. There was nothing they knew for sure.

Finally around midnight, I got out of bed and walked out into the street. I wanted to see Orion, my dad's favorite constellation, but since it was summer, and Orion is a winter hunter, I was out of luck. I settled for gazing at the big dipper, somehow hoping it would provide me with a sort of guidance, but all it did was make my stomach turn. All of the parts of nature that my dad couldn't see from within his hospital room and that he might never see again. Unless, perhaps, he could become a part of the earth, the sky, the trees, and could thus live on forever as his poetry had explored as a suggestion of an after life.

In this moment of uncertainty, all I knew was that his impending death would be much less difficult to face if I could know that his suffering would be over and that he could ease quietly into some new adventure among the trees and the mountains he held so dear. So I went back inside that night and I wrote. And in writing, I imagined the natural passing that I knew would never be, I described how I thought it should end. I wished he would drive up into the mountains and fly away. I felt I could try to see death as a phase of life, if only I could release my father's withering frame from within the confines of the doctor's orders.

I imagined that we would go to the hospital the next day and the doctor would quit playing games and give my dad a month to live. Then we all sit down and decide that it cannot end in a hospital and it will have to end in our own way. We pack his favorite backpack full of all his favorite foods, everything he can't possibly eat in this moment—chocolate, ice cream, pasta, peaches, pie. Next, my father pulls on his oldest and most

worn out pair of pants and methodically laces up his hiking boots. He buttons up a flannel shirt and puts on his favorite hat. As he waits by the door, leaning on his walking stick, we put together pictures of the happiest times.

Then, I imagined we were ready to go. We all pile into the Subaru and begin the ascent in silence up to the place we have coined “Grandpa’s Grove”. I am driving. He taught me to drive on these mountain roads some days after school when he would pick me up with the dog in the backseat for a spontaneous trip. An hour later, we reach the trail head and begin the climb to the spot where Dad has come to contemplate life so many times before. Taking turns helping him, we finally reach the grove of pines next to the dam and we know it was our time to say goodbye. After we bid tearful, bittersweet farewells, Dad hobbles into the grove and sits down under his favorite tree, thinking about the countless times we have picnicked in this very spot.

I imagined he would take out the food we have packed and unbutton his shirt. Then he looks down at the feeding tube protruding from his stomach and with one fell swoop of his one strong hand, he rips it out of his body, removing the last trace of the doctor’s failed attempts. He then begins tasting everything he has missed—a final feast. Suddenly he has such a strong appetite. He pays no mind to his coughing and sputtering as he memorizes all the beautiful tastes of a lifetime. When his taste buds are sated, and the remnants of his feast lay scattered at his feet, he leans back against the pine, feeling its strength comforting, reassuring him. He smiles weakly and pulls out the pictures. After looking intently at each, he tucks the memories in his shirt pocket and buttons them in place.

I imagined he would stand, leaving his walking stick behind and using the trees for support. He makes his way to the edge of the dam and waits for a strong wind to blow his way. And then, he is finally free, soaring above the mountains that were his second home, rid of his pain, through with his suffering. As he flies above the trees, he can just make out three figures climbing back into the car. Dad smiles down on his family, and, as if they know, they all look to the sky, as they dry their tears.

Then he allows himself to fall back among the clouds, feeling completely free of strife. Next, he hears his father's voice in the distance, sounding so similar to his own, calling him home to the pine forests of the deep south.

Nature of grief:

One always imagines that grief will eventually fade. How else could we keep on living? But there truly is no way to know just how and when grief might work itself into the inner most framework of one's being. Right now, it has been one year and nearly six months since my dad passed away—since he slipped in one instant from this world into a place unknown. To stop and acknowledge his absence is still strange and yet it has now become not so unfamiliar. It is less persistent, and has given me strength in its presence, and yet still has the power to subtly sneak up and feel as shocking and new as October 13, 2010. Because I did not see my dear father leave our world, I cannot say exactly how my grief changed on that day. It had really begun so much earlier, affecting me for months, even years, and though it has morphed since his passing, I have no doubt that it will continue to change me for the rest of my life.

During the summer days of watching my father suffer in the way that he did, I sometimes couldn't tell what it was exactly that I was grieving for: was I grieving for what I had to see, for the end of my childhood, for the way my summer was panning out, for my father's pain, or for a world that would allow this fate to fall upon such a genuinely good person? But whatever my grief was and has come to be, I also began to realize that grief has the ability to shift the priorities in our lives in the most essential way, and to illuminate those things that remain beautiful and joyful in this life. Throughout that summer, I would experience moments of pure, hopeless sadness, and also times where I noticed the pink of the mountains at sunset or the morning light in our front yard almost in Technicolor, and certainly in ways I never had before. This is where I relate most to Tempest Williams' narrative. She says at first that "a person with cancer

dies in increments and a part of you slowly dies with them (173). But then she qualifies this by recognizing the rebirth that occurs after a part of you dies: “I am slowly, painfully discovering that my refuge” she writes, “...exists in my capacity to love. If I can learn to love death than I can begin to find refuge in change”(178).

This dual nature of grief continues in me today. I feel I am more prone to intense emotion of any kind than others who haven't experienced such grief. I have also grown out of certain trivial insecurities I carried with me throughout adolescence and I know who I am and what I value more acutely than I think I would right now had I not gone through the work of grieving. Life, for me, is profound, painful and jubilant all at once. Facing this loss is something I could never have imagined having to do at my age, but at the same time, it is something without which I cannot imagine my current identity. I am also finding more and more that I am following my dad's advice in my everyday life now without realizing it. I guess he did know what he was talking about in all of those lectures growing up and through that advice, he stays with me. In the words he left our family, he did leave a road map, a compass, a navigation system for the inexplicable in life. And that is certainly some comfort to the order of things.

Epilogue:

My father wrote poetry—for 40 years he had been writing with a voice deeply imbedded in a relationship with nature. He wrote about life and loss through the lens of the natural world. And yet, the clash between his dying and modern medicine seemed to break apart the values he had previously held so strong. Many of his poems stand in stark contrast to the specific way in which he died, or question the workings of the universe, as our family now wonders each day, where he might be out there. As part of this project, I've written several response poems, putting his poems in contrast with the reality of the situation, as I search for answers. I want to share these, as an epilogue, because I feel they sum up this paradox between a man so rooted in the language of nature and his battle for his own life, as I expand on some of his own words.

Original poem:

Iowa requiem

a farmer returning
 once again to the richness
 of earth he's only
 briefly risen from and
 carefully tended must
 be some comfort
 to the order of things;
 seasons, sunrises, rain,

a bird's song over new corn..

all the common

mysteries

cultivated his long

and fruitful years

into the grain of life

My response:

fluorescence of hospital rooms

the buzz of the IV

like clockwork

the whirr of the

transfusion machine

preserving those

whose time was up

years before

you wrote of farmers

of rich soil

and fruitful years

you made peace with

those who had passed
into the grain of life

yet here you lay
for the last time
submitting to doctors'
choices to pump
a thousand kinds of
poison into your
frame

as your skin yellowed
and you faded away
amidst neatly tucked sheets
and sterilized plastic

how then will you be
cultivated into
seasons, sunrises, and rain?

Original poem:

remembrance

orion rises in
the night sky of our lives
sounding winter on his hunting horn and we
are frozen by
borealis lights
crackling back and forth
between the poles
of sadness, sweetness
crystallized together in
this incandescent atmosphere
of memory and longing

My response:

when orion sparkles
i think of winters past
coldest nights of the year
my eyes fixed on the sky

you, as fathers do,
attempting explanation—
we are frozen between
great lights
as we stand
awestruck
our feet rooted on
solid earth

but now
you must be part
of this light
can you reconcile
the sadness, sweetness
this ever-present
joyful and despairing
ache that is
life

I hope this project has made you think—think about how we might address this paradox between our place in the natural cycle of all living things and the power at our fingertips in an age of modern medicine, think about the implications of our medical system on individuals and their families who enter the hospitals and afterwards, as we grieve the loss of our loved ones, wondering how it all became so impersonal. I hope you will consider how you view death, disease and loss because they are, after all, steps of life that cannot be avoided, even as society seems to brush them under the rug. Let us remember that a close relationship with the natural environment, and a sense of our place as humans in the larger cycle of things might help us cope with death and grief: I have learned that if we can find this connection among the distractions of our world, we have a chance to craft our own stories, to break our own silence, and thus begin to break the silence fostered by medicalization.

Avila Beach

1995

Over wooden planks
 spaced too wide for
 five year old feet,
 flowered hat flopping,
 curls bouncing,
 neon pink jacket
 reflecting
 out across waves,
 mingling with sunset's
 palette,
 I stumble.
 Fear of plummeting
 into ocean's depths
 paralyzing.
 From behind,
 strong arms,
 safe, sturdy hands,
 sweep me up,
 tossed onto shoulders,
 I am above harms reach.
 Beaming at pelicans,
 we make our way
 to the end of
 the pier.

2011

On this once familiar
 expanse of dark timber
 crawling away
 from shore,
 I walk alone.
 My grownup steps
 easily span the gaps,
 worries of falling
 vanished with years.
 Yet
 future waits
 beyond the horizon,
 an artist's sky
 does not sooth,
 and I am afraid.
 Glancing behind,
 no smiling face,
 nor arms to lift me,
 nor words to guide my
 way.
 But I close my eyes,
 imagining that somehow,
 you will still pick me up
 and carry me home.

-Laura Derr

(response to the poem "dad", written by my father)

Works Cited

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