

Dying Is Ugly

Category: Poems

written by Henry Schneiderman | February 4, 2022



Bang my shins, my temple on the gritty wall
Of Charlie's deathbed
Where we do not wrest the truth
But beg him *Let us change the (piss-stenched) sheets.*
He will not go for tests, insists, denial overarching
Undimmed intellect,
This grapefruit lump's a muscle tear,
And I a palli doc deprived of all my tools,
My *contrapasso* for those failings that I cannot recognize.

One night he could not rise
From toilet seat, we 911'ed the firemen.
Best friend for all these years, for forty-six,
From med school where the boy
A dorm room over, cook superb, who then became
Nephrologist renowned,
A teacher of such skill, such substance, style,
That they crossed a continent to honor his retiring;
Raconteur superb, and
We his steadfast visitors when no one else
Would make the long drive West.

So willful that he did not call
From hospital, but only when, no services arranged—
Perhaps his sabotage—as heading
Home from rehab, "Please come now."

We scrambled, told him, "Don't pull this again."
He rallied several months
With us back home lest COVID ride on us to him,

Then called, "Move up the date."
We found the tatterhouse,
A desiccated corpse of mouse in trap,
Car wouldn't start, disused for all these months;
"I lack the strength to stand and cook."
Expired food in hanging-open fridge
Where all was spoilt.
Cin and I restore, she cooks, cajoles, he eats.
He lets us cut the scraggle hair and shave his feral beard,
Sits in shower, then we watch old films.
We hope recovery if even partial, brief.
And then he cannot stand, grows furious despond,
And then the slide, four more weeks to dying by the painful inch.

So much he never said, not now,
Not all these years. Some first-time stories must be delirium,
Confabulation, must they not? This man I loved
The most in all the world.
Now I'm awake at night, obit and service of remembering
Completed properly, with dignity, inclusive:
Who were you and what were we to you?