

Buddhist Death Poem

My mom taught me laughter—peals of it.
She laughed until breathless and hoarse,
unable to stand, laughed like a proverbial
fool, for instance, at Jack Lemmon
and Walter Matthau in *The Odd Couple*.

She taught me to die by opening her throat
to every breath and then letting go. And so
we let her go, my sister and I, after having sung
our childhood songs to her, prayed and keened
at her side, tracking each labored breath.

Late in the evening but sooner than, well,
you know, just sooner, the soul that animated
her aching body finally released from its shell,
and we walked away from the hospital, having
accompanied our mom as far as we were allowed.

We let go her hands, removed the oxygen,
smoothed her pretty hair for the last time.
My dad, hero/tyrant/poet of navy-blue suits
and tie clips, fancy cufflinks and mementos
of his dad, hero/tyrant/comedian, in a worn leather

keepsake box atop his dresser: a ring, a cap,
a watch, some old coins. I was absent
at my dad's dying, there among white coats
in the Los Alamitos ER—the heart monitor
crying out with piercing straight line—

piercing his truant son, big shot professor
teaching a summer class in Shakespeare.
The last time we spoke, through a cell phone
bounced from a satellite in space,
he told me of his pain as a plain fact.

I wanted to gush my love for him, but
two erstwhile friends were approaching,
the kind you neither like nor admire but
stupidly feel you must impress with a snarky
smile and a world-weary quip about nothing

nearly as crucial as your own father crying
out for help—across 400 horizontal miles and
who-knows-how-many vertical miles to space
and back—for help from his only helpless/hopeless
son, floating in the dark matter of oedipal anxiety.

Now that I feel mostly healthy and alive,
even somewhat renewed, I will sing
of my death—so far and yet, well, you know,
near—closer than the breath. Once I heard
a Zen poet say we must carry our death

in our hip pocket, give it a gentle pat now
and then to remind us. A yellow butterfly
flits nearby. I call him Romeo because
he flirts with my hand as I reach out and up.
I yearn for him to land on my finger

or my straw hat or even my silly too long
nose: Romeo, O Romeo, wherefore art thou
my summer neighbor, enchanted visitor,
delicate airborne lover, so close—closer than
my breath and, well, you know—untouchable,

a fluttering tease here among tall grass,
oak, and deep blue O blue California sky—
today I feel so goddamn good I think maybe
he will finally light on my shoulder the way
agrestal birds would light upon St. Francis.

There he floats, just beyond reach. And maybe
some small, whimsical part of me begins to grasp
the cosmic comedy of existence, and smiles,
somewhat beatifically, as he lifts me on those
beautiful, fragile wings, and carries me aloft.

—David Denny

