



Matthew Caretti
Harvesting Stones



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To Dad, the Fighter, and to Mom, the Survivor

Harvesting Stones

After & Before

I ease into the chair where no one has sat for more than a year. Head of the table. So long closed off with a yellow ribbon. As eldest son, I suppose it is now my place. But a great unease. Too much has happened. The intent of my return from abroad was simply to help my parents retire. To aid the transition from the bustle of business to the calm of country living. From the small town where I grew up to a nice place in the mountains. A line on his bucket list. He was a hopeful man, eyes always on the future. Perhaps because the past was too painful. The present unsatisfactory.

long shadows
tiny birds perch
on the fence

My classes that first year back revisit some important life lessons. We study *The Razor's Edge*. The students collaborate. *What is the purpose of life?* Grumblings give way to thoughtfulness. *Know yourself (the good and the bad). Help others. Create a legacy of contributing to the greater good.* I recall those lessons now, sitting in this long-empty chair. Wonder at his knowing. His helping. His legacy now mine.

planting season
the stones where grass
will someday grow

Remainder

He learns that tenacity will define the remainder of his life. The tumor, it turns out, is inoperable. *Less than a year*, the doctor informs us. What is one to do with such information? Weep, certainly. Mom does plenty of that. Lament, too. Mostly, though, a stunned silence. Silence of the sort that permanently damages the senses. All fuzzy musings crammed into a mute void.

dark sun
how to subtract
from zero

Pods

He begins the treatment that offers no cure. Perhaps a few extra months. But he is determined and in high spirits. As usual, friendly to each oncologist and nurse. For they will save him. He believes that. Their eyes, though, betray their smiles and gentle words. They have repeated this hope too many times before. That magical presence sapped from their being. No room in this curtained pod for a miracle. But there among the scaffolding of drips and humming machines, he closes his eyes. Refuses to become tainted. Hope is all he has.

just outside
the closed window
birdsong

Short-cropped

His hair begins to come out in clumps. He knew it was just a matter of time before white tufts would clog the shower drain. Yet this marks some point of no return. The chemicals have been acting upon his body. Inside. But now an outer sign. I watch in helpless silence as this effect consumes him over breakfast. Again on the way to the local barbershop. But Claude is happy to see my father. And my father to see him. It has been some time. Yet the barber senses something is amiss. Dad's public face is, as always, unflinching. He speaks freely of diagnosis and treatment, of plans for the future. In response, a buzz of hopeful nods.

morning sun
the gentle arc
of a tonsor's blade

Moving

They settle. The house is for mom. He playfully names it *Overtime Estate*. The garage, though, is his. A place for his toys. A used convertible. A new riding mower. And peg board. Lots of it. My brother nails it to the bare framing. So many tools for my father to stow. To mount like sacred relics in a museum. This becomes his project. His latest diversion. Something to get him up and around. Movement, we have been told by a chorus of doctors and nurses, is good. But he sometimes falls asleep on the job. Slumps in his chair. Portable chemo flowing into him. The radio crackling. Always tuned to golden oldies. Doo-wop. His favorite. When he can't remember the lyrics, an improvised hum of half words. The dog and I rouse him. Lead him out the double doors. Along the road. The dog as always into the brush. We watch after her. He begins to hum again. Offers an impromptu shuffle of his feet and a grin as we move on.

cloudless sky
bees alight
on wild lilac

Le Tour

He puts down Lance Armstrong's autobiography, finding no respite in the campaigns won by others. He fights his own daily battles. Eating. Walking. Living. So we switch on the television instead. Watch a recap of the day's stage. The mammoth climb. The attack. Chase. Grimaces. Their struggles become his own. Yet he looks to me at odd moments. Indulges me with a loving smile. A quip. Or haunts me with sad eyes. Eyes that now reflect both hope and fear. Not yet fear. Its verge. Doubt.

steep descent
learning too late
how to brake

Tomorrow we will sit together in the height of the afternoon heat. The queen stage of Lance's comeback Tour. But he dozes often. Wakes just to ask of the hero. Of the day's stratagems and successes. But the former champion falters on the climbs. Finishes third. *Not good enough*, he says.

coming storm
dandelion heads
turn away

Breath

She confesses her own pain. All these months. The losses. The treatment. The silences. A friend advised, *Be patient. Take time for yourself.* But she can do neither. She lies awake at night. There beside him. Listening. For breath. For life. Sometimes too long between murmurs. So a nudge. A caress. He stirs, awake again with his thoughts. His pain. And hers. They embrace, sharing tears. Both pretend to nod off again. But even in her sleep, she listens.

in the wind
in the night
sigh of curtains

The Possible

He comes to the table late today. My plate has long been cleared. He asks for tea. Just tea. He likes the warmth in his belly, he says. I press the issue—*Eat something. Anything.* But not this morning. He is shaken. Smiles and the usual volley of encouraging words are withheld.

What's wrong, Dad?

I dreamt last night.

Of what?

Of dying.

Tears well up in his eyes. And mine.

I dreamt that I lose. That cancer has its way with me. That I leave your mother alone. That everyone forgets me. That death is possible.

scent of rain
knowing when
july will end

Wheelbarrows

He watches from the shadow of the porch. The dust clings to my sweat-drenched socks. Each stroke of the rake adding layers of grit. And height to the piles of stones about the property. This some sort of purgatory. Some absurd harvest. Daily toil as a penance for his wasting. As a desperate prayer for a miracle. He looks on, too spent to move about and too alive to sleep. A half life. There in the shade, he is safe from the glaring sun and soaring temperatures. But he is in his own hell. The chemotherapy accentuates and prolongs it. I pause. Watch him watching me. My diligence becomes his own plea. Testament to his legacy in this world. The piles grow, tumble and disappear. Hour after hour. Day after day. Now grown to months. The labor nears its end. Yet no reprieve.

tumble of
todays
old stones

Away

He does not answer. Now back at work, my daily check in by phone. But caller ID has become his gatekeeper. I am one of the few who rate a pick-up. But today Mom's voice greets me. I worry.

We just got back from our post-prandial stroll. Up the hill and back.

So where's Dad?

In the bathroom.

Is he OK?

Having a very good day. Week, actually.

So he's eating?

All his favorites. Even some chili dogs on our way home from the doctor.

No pain?

None that he's mentioned. Here he is. You can ask him yourself.

And so I do. Day after day. I am distracted in the classroom. Alone among the five hundred on campus. The summer was infernal. This may be worse.

dog-eared page
all of the character's flaws
exposed

Virgin Tufts

She runs her fingers through his hair. He glows. She calls the new white growth *virgin tufts*. *Like the hair of a newborn*, she says. *Just in time for the fall weather*. Temporary remission. *Remission* becomes the focus. A sign of continued hope when taken alone. When *temporary* is ignored.

starlings tilt
and tumble
autumn fields

A Gift

He smiles. Hands me a bottle of wine. One selected carefully just for me during a trip to the Finger Lakes. A label of water and sky. *For all you've done*, he pronounces. *For all that raking and shoveling and carting off. For everything. From our last vacation.* Her face releases the smile. Caves to the reality of his transience.

from the north
geese in great Vs
her frown lines

Yet they have returned in good spirits. Perhaps the happiest I have ever seen them. Their shared joy suppresses that which looms. I oblige them. Re-enter their home. Their world. Pop the cork.

november geese
swim in pairs
where ice yet isn't

The Playoffs

He receives a letter from the coach. He writes of hard battles won. Of determination. Of effort and attitude. Coach speak. Something for the locker room. Yet it somehow resonates here. Now. His Eagles are again in the playoffs. And with the letter a pair of tickets. This his first time to see them at the new stadium. The crowd is feverish. But the cold overcomes his frail body. Cellphone photos show a drawn face. Weary. A body emboldened only by layers. Many warm layers of green and silver. The colors of his team. His passion all these years. The coach's lessons have been well learned. He fights along with the team for every yard. For every day. Offers me a high five from his wheelchair.

new moon
wild cheers fade
into black

The Mirror

He looks at his reflection. Truly sees it this time. Studies the ravages of the disease. He is matter-of-fact in his assessment. *Not much left. All skin and bones.* He forgets heart. Still lots of that. He stares at me from across the table. His eyes are clear. Distilled into a lovely blue. Placid. They draw me in. He knows what is coming. He understands. On he battles. But perhaps with less determination about winning. It is now about grace in defeat. A return to the fundamentals. Getting up. Drinking tea. Eating what he can. And loving his family. As best he can.

morning ice
reflecting the trace
of each step

Tears

We weep. All of us. It starts with a simple gift. A sweatshirt. One with the logo of his favorite college team. *Why is PopPop crying?* His granddaughters are confused. Christmas is a time for smiles. For joy. But Mom, too, wants to be dumbfounded. We all prefer it this morning. No one answers them. That he will not live to see the team's next season. Their next birthdays. One more year in this world. So they move on to their next toy. We to our next sorrow.

heads bowed
for dinner grace
how to begin?

Complications

He gives in. Not to death. But to pain. The holidays have passed. A new year returns family to distant homes. To work. Mom now relegated to visiting hours. He is surrounded mostly by strangers. And if these many doctors and nurses cannot help him, he must help himself.

resolutions
a list
without hope

She is woken from a troubled sleep. Called to come in now. He sobs to her details of the incident . . . *extreme pain in his legs . . . the screams . . . an attempt to throw himself from the bed . . . repeated blows to his head with the remote control.* He wanted only the peace of unconsciousness. Using the spectrum provided him these past weeks, he tells her his pain was *13 on a scale of 1-to-10*. He cannot cope. His veneer of toughness has finally shattered. This his one last fight. A battle cry. An attempt to batter his body into submission. But all has failed. His anatomy broken. Morphine now stills the pain. Warms his heart. Tenderness like she has never seen. Vulnerability. He becomes his tears. His gratitude.

bitter cold
of the parking lot
dashboard glow

A Stray

He stops living. And dying. His last words to my mother, *Forever and always*. A response to *I love you*. A nod. A heave. And life leaves his body. Energy transforms. Passes. Away again, the call comes to me. But I already know. I've just returned from the shelter. A stray, cold and weary, has kept me from him. From this moment. The night instead spent on my favorite sofa. With the mutt. Warm. Content. Wanting to be kept. And I wanting to keep. Some surreal exchange. But the owner is found. I weep. To leave behind. And to be left.

tiny lump
of his ID chip
going home

Last Words

Heroes are not made in one act. Their deeds manifest like petals on a spring blossom. But this is winter. His granddaughters bundled in warm overcoats. Holding plastic poppies. A gift from the honor guard. Here to mark his time in Vietnam. The lead officer steps forward. Addresses those gathered. Shares a poem. *In Flanders Fields*. Perhaps standard practice for this troop. But the words strike hard before dissolving on bitter winds. *Between the crosses, row on row. A short time since he lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved.* While we here move toward dusk. Prepare for the dark. Place stiff flowers in an old mason jar frozen to the earth.

three volleys
of seven shots
into the void

He is their comrade. Our hero. But *my* father. Alone behind the hearse, I move off. Survey the headstones. Lives relegated to a name. Some dates. Perhaps a loving tribute. Then beyond. The nearby farms of my ancestors. The close presence of their descendants. Fallow fields brushed with snow.

passing by
each grassy plot
yet to be filled

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