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Pat Onion

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For a Friend Dying Young

#1

I cannot say the words that might be said,
Nor move within the orbit of your pain.
I pull a seat beside your slanted bed
And start to speak, and stop, and start again.
You're irritated, ask for that goddamned thing—
The urinal. I give it to you and go,
Stand in the corridor, then walk the wing,
Then find a chair and point it toward your door,
Then turn it toward the nurses' stand, as if
I don't know which to give to you, my back
Or face, both, none or all, nor if the gift
Of me and my full heart, so imprecise,
Once missing, would be anything you'd lack.
But this I know, sure as I live and breathe:
Don't leave. Don't leave. Don't leave.

#2

I rise and make my list of things "to do,"
Write in my journal, contemplate my day,
Aware all this is luxury, while you
Can hope at most to keep the pain at bay.
I struggle to be honest—does your pain
Compound my pleasure, knowing, as I do,
It's all a disappearing mist, a gray,
A wisp of smoke. Reality is you,
Holding it together as you lie,
Cupping your strength to dedicate what's left,
Hoarding the vapor we call breath; and I
Engorged with all that you have been bereft.
But I am not a traitor, nor your foe.
Your face is now the frame for all I know.

#3

I want to send you something—will this do?
You make it all irrelevant, and yet
My head aches, full of images of you,
And thinking is abstract. One doesn't get
From here to there by thinking. One must act.

Prepare a solid parallel to thought.
 There's little time, no future, only now.
 My wishes aren't enough then. I have sought
 To send my thinking, and although it's bald,
 Approximation only, slack and partial,
 That's *all* there is. You're all about that all.
 If not now, never. Even my strong will
 Is not enough to fill the space now dense
 With pain, between us. I must use present tense.

#4

I wrote to you. The words came clear and whole.
 I told you of my love, beraged your pain.
 I think I said goodbye. But if you stay
 I don't know how to write to you again.
 Your pain is hard to live with, but it's life.
 You can endure longer than we can watch.
 The weight upon the heart so hard to bear—
 The gloom that fills the lungs with dampened air—
 It's we who can't go on. Perhaps you can.
 You always lead us, wiser, smarter, best.
 The mind whose clarity made all things bright.
 Now face to face with everlasting night.

#5

You're lounging round the doorway, like a shade.
 So unimaginative of you. Come in.
 Here's your old desk, your chair, your bulletin,
 Your phone, your files, all the notes you made
 For Monday, Wednesday, Friday—don't be dim,
 Give us a glimpse now, for the love of grief!
 I've asked you nicely—pretty soon I'll seize
 Your Brooks Brothers collar and drag you in.
 Still enigmatic? Yet I think I see
 No, feel, a smile—ah, the joke's on me
 As usual. I sense you looming near
 To answer me, in your old tone, "My dear,
 Your problem isn't that I've gone away,
 But that I haven't. Here I am, to stay."

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PAT ONION