

Excerpts from

The Voice That Calls You Home

I.

We stood in silence at his bed. His breath came in labored, uneven wheezes; the air smelled like death. I was aware of the gurgle in his chest, the “death rattle,” as it is commonly known. His head was turned toward his mother, and his eyes were slightly open. She has his hand in hers, but in spirit she had his whole body, cradling it like a child’s. The Pieta incarnated. I offered to read a few psalms, I offered a prayer—but mostly I offered another mother’s broken heart. Then I left the hospital, knowing that I would never see either of them again.

II.

It is a large breast we beat against—and we can pound and cry and curse and despair until our sobs subside and the ragged hiccups that tear at our breath finally rock us into exhausted sleep. Then, perhaps, in days to come, when we are least expecting it, the heavens will rend and bear a beam of light, and it will take the shape of hope and of the indescribable knowledge that we are loved

III.

The body bag is placed on one of the receiving tables. It is obvious that it contains a sizable human remain. I feel my chest tighten and my breath constrict. Oh dear God, I say to myself, please help me. But nothing can prepare us for this ritual. No matter how many bags are brought in, no matter how many bodies or fragments of bodies we see, the shock of opening that bag is always the same. How many times can the heart be broken? Just once more, you always think to yourself. I can do it one more time. We can do it. Steady now. Pass me the Vicks, brother. Pass me the Vicks.

IV.

I step outside and survey the site. The cool air reminds me of the first night I spent here, in early October; but what I see is very different. Instead of the seemingly insurmountable pile, smoldering against a backdrop of shattered buildings, there is an increasingly neat pit. For a while, I watch the firemen raking through the dirt. They are moving meticulously, steadily. It is mesmerizing to watch them. “Like a ballet” is how someone described it in the newspaper recently. Maybe, I think. But if it is, it is a strange and silent dance with death.

V.

To walk with the dying is to glimpse what it means to go Home. It is to listen for the Voice that seems to call them, the Voice we ourselves yearn to hear—a Voice of comfort, of love, of welcome. It is the Voice that leads to the open arms of the Mother who is always waiting for us, always loving us. It is the accelerated journey toward Mystery. Once we arrive, perhaps we will discover that we have, in fact, always been Home.

