

Padre *for Don*

It's a fossil-fueled Viking funeral,
choppers roaring,
chrome blinding in the desert glare,
honor guard all sunglasses, American flags,
and outlaw hair.

It wasn't the diabetes
that killed him or the liver
marinated in beer. It wasn't
another clogged artery
to his inconsistent heart,
or the familial penchant
for dementia, or a brain vein
finally incinerating
after seven decades' slow burn.

The autopsy report listed cause of death
as "blunt-force trauma". He *was*
wearing a helmet, not like most
of the guys he rode with, but 45 feet
of free fall to land right on your head,
well --

When they reached him
he was joking, making light
of damage done -- a family trait.
Unlike any other time I know of
taking responsibility for it, too:
the missed pavement, the over-correction,
the brief experience of flight,
the twisted machine,
his lady-friend's bruises.

He hit first, served as cushion
for her fall, a kind of
inadvertent heroism,
but most heroism's accidental,
isn't it? I should ask his
Legion buddies. Unlike him,
they're mostly vets -- Viet Nam,
the Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq.

Not that he wasn't a warrior.
Hand to hand combat
with every authority figure
that came down the pike,
and his own splintered self,
absent without leave.
Leaving,
now there's something he was good at,

just ask those he left. We're the ones
in dark civilian clothes. We're sitting
in the row reserved for family
in the packed Legion hall, with its
two bars and beer sign décor
and saturated smell of stale smoke.

Almost everyone else is in uniform:
do-rags, black T-shirts,
motorcycle boots, leather vests covered
with commemorative patches
worn like medals.

They all have nicknames: C. W.,
Tumbleweed, Doc. We don't.
Unless you count 'daughter', 'sister', 'son'.
His was 'Padre': licensed and ordained on-line.
'Father' to four hundred bikers. Marrying
and burying for this last in a series
of replacement families.

Respectful silence.
The traditional Eight Rings of the Bell
for a fallen comrade. Tough guys
wipe their eyes. The St. Sava
Serbian Orthodox choir, one of
the groups he sang with, chant
in dark four-part while weeping.
Two biker babes sing "The Rose"
and a slide show reminds the few of us
who knew him when,
that he was young once,
and thin,
and hopeful.

His son tells it straight,
a litany of contradiction --
approach, avoidance,
love given, love taken away,
astounding generosity, appalling selfishness,
the fourteen engineering patents,
the beautiful bass-baritone voice,
the fractured family
and as many lives
as the proverbial cat.

Another eulogist, Bob,
one of the vets --
soft-spoken, sad brown eyes,
short-term memory loss,

speech typed out word for word,
his love for my brother
so much simpler than mine.

He sticks to his notes
until the end. Then he looks up.
This part he remembers --

They were sitting on the mountain
my brother flew off of, after
they got the news, when
they saw a dove winging
west toward the sinking sun
through a cleft in the hills.

OK, that's nice, I think.
But he's not done.
Then there was a hawk, he says,
riding the thermals,
adding that my brother
was particularly fond
of birds of prey.

Oh, great, I think,
it's going to eat the dove.
But, no, the hawk swoops down, flies
through the cleft toward the sun, the dove
long gone.

Because these things come in threes
then there was a butterfly.
It departed
the same way.

Bob speaks into the room so full
you can hear a pin drop. He says
he knew right then: the dove,
the hawk, the butterfly?
They were a message
from my brother.

“Padre –
he was telling us
he was all right,
you know?”

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