

TOM WAYMAN

*Kosovo*

My father died in Kosovo.  
The terrifying screech of a jet passing low overhead  
is gigantic, but if such an aircraft  
releases cannon fire into streets and buildings  
or sticks of bombs stream from other planes far above,  
even more frightening  
is the unrelenting concussive roar  
while houses and bridges and pavement  
erupt, then crumble into metal shards and  
mounds of splintered limbs. All this rage  
directed at you  
ignores your desire to keep breathing.  
How hard to be eighty-four and frail and dying  
when the young are determined to murder you.

My father died in Kosovo.  
The hospital he was in remained operational  
with full electric power  
and a competent staff to tend him  
where he lay intubated  
by a tangle of IVs, catheter, leads to monitors,  
and with pain searing down his legs,  
the skin of his lower back  
open in a raw sore, fecal material  
lodged in and ulcerating his rectum  
so his diaper was filled with blood  
each time it was changed.  
And the tonnage of high explosives expended  
doubled and tripled until

my father died in Kosovo. The televisions  
throughout the hospital explained many times

how regrettable but necessary this war was.  
My father did not pay attention.  
His hearing aid had been lost during a transfer  
to ICU one night, or to an operating room for a colonoscopy  
one afternoon, so he couldn't hear  
what the announcers uttered.  
Also, this was the tenth or maybe eleventh war  
in his lifetime so far  
during which electrical apparatuses had pronounced  
the same words. He had lost count,

yet he died in Kosovo.  
The hospital wanted to keep old men like my father  
alive, doctors kept puzzling in groups over his symptoms  
out by the nursing station,  
referring to charts and CAT scans,  
pumping drugs into him, insisting  
his body be turned and fed and that  
someone shave and sponge him.  
But on every side soldiers  
were ordered to operate devices designed  
to blow open human bodies of every age,  
to crush and sever  
heads, torsos, organs of the elderly.

My father told his doctors he wanted to die.  
He repeatedly said he no longer wanted to live. One physician  
decided my father must be crazy. Why would anyone  
not want to live  
while Kosovo was under siege, before somebody could learn  
the way this conflict would end?  
This man commanded my father be transferred  
to a psychiatric institution  
also still untouched by shells or mortar attack.  
My father never understood the reason  
he was moved there: the place was intended  
to have its inmates sit each day

on worn sofas and talk about their problems. My father  
could not change position in bed without assistance  
and spasms of convulsive pain.

How can a person become so weak  
he is unable to roll himself over?

My father was that feeble: to maneuver him erect,  
then off the mattress onto a wheelchair,  
into which he had to be strapped,  
also took great effort and dexterity  
on the part of a nurse or nurse's aide,  
accompanied by protests and yells of anguish  
from my father. Though the psychiatric facility  
was not equipped to offer such services, days were required  
to return my father to a hospital

and each transfer meant more suffering:  
the gurney hard as a plank to lie on,  
so my father shook with agony, gripping the rails  
and calling for relief  
from the piercing flames melting the flesh of his back.  
There was no relief. My father refused food,

they transferred him to a hospice ward,  
and he died in Kosovo  
as the missiles descended, people were burned alive  
in cities and villages  
and out on the roads; nearly all the men shot  
older than a certain age  
were fathers. They were not my father.  
My father died in Kosovo.