

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.