

The Final Death

*Lord of all to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise*

*A*utumn takes its time marching to the grave, but eventually it gets there. All while we're parading and applauding, snapping photos in corn fields and pumpkin patches, and while we rake the leaves to jump, autumn is humming a quiet dirge to the end.

The end of the season.

The end of the harvest.

The end of the color and the warmth.

The end of the light. The fading of green.

Here, the newly opened bud will not last. Here, the last rose that bloomed will turn black.

Here, the realization of all we did, all we worked for, all we planned—ends.

Winter

I suppose I knew it all along. The geese fly south and the grass fades, and I'm reminded that the things of this earth do not last. Will not last. Creation is established and moves in a certain cadence of hope mixed with longing, repeating itself over and over again.

And death repeats itself over and over and over again. As though creation grieves its own loss year after year. Another year of creation groaning, waiting for redemption. Another year of humanity exhausting the land we were made to steward. Another year of tired dirt giving up more for us to consume, ready now for a long winter's nap.

All summer long the trees of the field clapped their hands, and now the leaves fade into a copper song of praise before they fall to the ground. The garden gives us one final burst of vegetation and flora. One final bouquet, filled mostly with strawflower and zinnia. The last jalapeno harvest. With one last dig for carrots into the cold soil, and with a handful of winter greens and dirt-covered root vegetables, I take a quiet walk through before we say "goodnight" and close the gate. The cold has come on faster than I anticipated, and I'm not wearing a coat heavy enough to guard me from the way it wants to crawl inside my bones. My son, Callan, decides he's had enough and runs to the porch door, calling for me to follow him into the warm glow of our house. The gate lock slides like ice under my fingertips. It's a gentle kindness to know this death is coming, but it still pulls heavy on my heart. It drags at my feet through the decay. I know we must walk here. I know it's necessary

and just as beautiful and sacred as every other day of wonder I've walked through.

Today's wonder, however, is locked on the sky—the sun has moved farther south, the clouds swirl like snow, the moon's glow feels colder than I remember. The garden glistens under the frost, a kiss of death to all that remained. It's over now.

Death always cuts with a cold knife. It stills the blood in the roots, in the leaves, in our own hearts as it steals away life. Even though we know resurrection will come, we're still faced with the emptiness that winter carves out of us, leaving us more hollow than we were before. More hollow, sometimes, than we even realized we could be. Even when you see it coming, even when the winds whip around the beds, the final exhale is just that—final.

A dear friend of mine died somewhat unexpectedly last winter. She had fallen ill and was hospitalized for further care. Because of local Covid restrictions, I wasn't able to see her. I got hospital updates from her family members. I texted her, but her energy was low and her responses were brief. Few details. One afternoon, in the middle of a typical homeschool day, my phone lit up with her name. I answered only to hear her raspy breath.

"Andrea?" she said in between short breaths. "Please," she took a breath, "... pray." And so I did, without hesitation. I prayed and listened to her labored sounds. She couldn't even form a full sentence. I prayed a prayer that I cannot even remember. It was short and before I hung up, she managed to repeat, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Winter

A few days later she called again, a bit easier this time. She told me she was tired. She wanted to go home. She wanted to be back in her house. She wanted out of the hospital. “But even if he doesn’t bring me home, we know he’s sovereign. We’ll be together again someday,” she reminded me.

She went home to be with Jesus just a few days later.

Even though I could see it coming—the leaves, the sky, the moon, her breathing, her voice—it still did not take away the sharp edge of the end.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I feel this at the end of all things. The end of the garden. The end of autumn. The end of life. Here we can still see how love persists in-between labored breaths.

I love you. I love you. I love you. This repeated song from creation to its Creator, even as it bends low to submit to the way of the earth.

I love you. I love you. I love you. The song I know my Savior sings to all his people, even as we face grief, the decay, and the end.

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades

when the breath of the LORD blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

but the word of our God will stand forever.

(Isaiah 40:6b–8)

Cultivate

English poet George Herbert writes about death in his poem “Time”:

For where thou onely wert before
An executioner at best;
Thou art a gard’ner now, and more.

Pray this:

Inhale: *The grass withers*

Exhale: *Your word is forever*

Lord, I know that all flesh is like grass.
All our beauty will wither and fade.
Just like your creation, I too must look to you when death draws near.
Help me to abide in Your word while I still have breath.
Quicken my cold heart by your Spirit to pray.
Teach me to number my days
so I might gain a heart of wisdom.
Show me how to love like you loved,
even in my fading moments, even in the brevity of life.
You who loved, even as you died on the cross.
You, the Word, remained.
Help me to see you as Paul does in Colossians 1:

Winter

The image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
In you all things were created:
things in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
all things have been created through you and for you.
You are before all things, and in you all things hold together.

Even me. You love me, you love me, you love me.