



Elegy and emergence

Amidst the bells and rushes of air in the ICU
A bag of saline hangs silently at the peak of an IV pole
The sinewy line of salt water descends and merges with the man

Standing outside his room is the chaplain of this hospital
His hands resting on the pages of the sacrament of the sick
He will not let this man die with the agony of being alone

He has worn the vestments of this place
The gown, the mask and the shield
And enters with his phone, his rosary, and his prayers

He calls the man's children across thousands of miles
Who can now see the face of their father in his last moments
The chaplain holds his hand and begins to speak of mercy and love and grace

As he finishes, he closes his eyes for a moment
And listens to the family sing a hymn
This man's daughter tells him that his stories and strength remain with her

Past this departure and within his grandchildren
She tells him that he can go in peace, and it comforts her to see his face
The sinewy line of her tears merging with her mouth

The chaplain remains by the bedside until the moment has passed
He sings softly until the last breath has been exhaled
He leaves in silence and with gratitude for the passage of suffering

I speak to him later and we bear witness to our universal suffering
Facing this plague of loneliness and loss
Our collective tears have flown into all of the great rivers of the earth

From the Yangtze to the Mississippi
Sinewy rivers merging with the oceans
Veins returning to the vena cava

Our grief pooling as salt returns to salt
Where life first emerged from that first incandescent cell
It is proper for our grief to be buried there

For the memories of the dead to return where life began
For memories of this time to remind us in the days to come
Of the value of presence, the necessity of touch, and the grace of a smile that is seen

Unhidden behind fabric, untethered by grief,
And wild in its wideness

— Gauri Agarwal, MD, FACP