

My discarded insulin needles fill up the designated “sharps” container, this one an old, washed out mayonnaise jar, like me. They are my Prufrock spoons, four or five per day, which measure the passage of time in the days of Covid because the pages of the wall mounted paper calendar are not being torn off in an orderly manner. There is no need. From the wall, days disappear in clumps of three to five when Patricia or I realize we have forgotten to remove them. They are blank pages anyway, with events like doctors’ appointments and video classes so random and rare that they would be overlooked, were it not for alarms on our cell phones. A red fox spotted in the backyard, the squadron of wintering robins which attacked the ripe berries on the holly bush, these are the highlights of our day, if not our week, brief diversion from our set routine.

This is a time of gratitude and death. Gratitude that I am not just starting out, trying to find an entry job and a place in the world. Gratitude that my last two crucial years of high school were not quarantined away. Gratitude that my late working career was allowed to follow the course I chose and premature retirement not imposed upon me by circumstance. Gratitude for a full belly, a loving partner, a warm and dry home and the assets to see it all through, however long the time of Covid persists. I find it ironic that the very time I was given to acquire these comforts has also made me the most vulnerable to the ravages of the disease. Thus, the time of death.

If you allow it, death can consume you these days. It is consuming me. Initially the daily death counts were the first piece of news I focused on each morning. But as the count waxed and waned and went on and mounted into the hundreds of thousands I became inured to it. The souls with faces became numbers on an adding machine. In the week after 9/11/01 Pat and I lived this same hermitic existence for a brief time in our townhouse along the Hudson where, for a week, speeding gunboats and screaming war planes flying low broke the funereal silence. Our spirits and the spirits of all who lived around us were as crushed as if those walls had collapsed on them. Each day the New York Times published pages of headshots and tributes to each of the three thousand, until every person who died that day was honored. I couldn’t dwell on them, but Pat, as an act of contrition for living, as an obsessive obligation to the dead, read every single tribute, all three thousand. On some days recently, as many people died from Covid in this nation as died on 9/11. And the next day, as many people died. And the next. They keep dying. No discordant sound breaks the funereal silence of my neighborhood by the sea. No odor of dust and God knows what else rides on the breezes flowing from the south. Quickly the Covid deaths became too many to properly eulogize and, now, each week a handful of the dead are remembered on some television news shows and in some newspapers, but not all. The victims robbed of a chance for a full life, pictured playing with their children, elicit from me a sob of sadness every time.

Beyond these multitudes which have become for me a background dirge from a farther room, there are other deaths to draw my attention. Many celebrities and sports figures seem to be dying, people whose work has given me pleasure for decades. It’s not that, given their ages, their time should not have come; it’s as if they have succumbed in this moment to the stress

and anxiety engulfing our nation, economically and politically as well as health-wise. No longer capable of diverting us, they choose to pass on.

Because Pat and I are of a certain age, our friends are beginning to thin out, not from Covid but from cancer, Parkinson's, liver failure. Several have died in the last twelve months or are about to. Just two days ago her husband Mark informed me that Linda, once my protégé and to whom I spoke three weeks ago about her impending chemotherapy, has entered hospice. Unable to speak but weakly or write at all, she nonetheless asked that I text her a message. What does one write to a person who has chosen to die because there is no hope of recovery from a painful and fast spreading rot? I chose reminiscence and stayed away from false wishes and miracles. I hope it was well received.

This is a time of gratitude and death. A time without measure.

* Linda died the morning of February 11.