

## *Something Like Jasmine* Meditates on Mortality

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Living with leukemia, I naturally meditate often on our human mortality. No, often is the wrong word: the meditation is a constant undercurrent of my consciousness.

We are all mortal, of course; yet (of course) we live most of our lives trying to distract ourselves from this undeniable, unpleasant fact. The gift of a life-threatening illness is that it trumps the desire for distraction.

Advancing age can bring this same gift. Murray Bodo, now in his mid-seventies, wraps the gift in perfectly crafted poems offered to us in his new collection, *Something Like Jasmine*.

[Fr. Murray Bodo](#) is a Franciscan priest and author of acclaimed books on St. Francis. He has been *Image Artist of the Month* and a chaplain at the Glen Workshop.

All of his writing—poetry and prose—exudes Franciscan joy. So even the opening poem of *Something Like Jasmine* imagines his own inevitable death in playful terms:

*Like the movies of your childhood  
when you didn't want them to end  
even if you knew the ending,  
you see your life and try to keep  
the reel from running out because  
you know it's not just a movie...*

The poems that follow pay tribute to some of his friends whose reel has run out. (And anyone in his eighth decade is bound to have many such friends.) Here's the start of "Sweet Man Dying":

*And he, knowing he was dying,  
said he didn't know he knew  
until, as the elevator  
door was closing, he heard someone  
whisper low, "He's dying, you know."  
Then he couldn't sleep for knowing,*

*couldn't think of anything but O!  
how it would be when it happened.*

The play with “knowing” keeps us circling through the dying man’s consciousness and our own. Yes, O!—how will it be when it happens?

For my part, I hope—I pray— that it will happen with a miracle of gentle grace. *Pace* (the Latin meaning, “with all due respect to”) Dylan Thomas, I want to go gentle into that good night. I want to go like the person Bodo writes about in the poem “Profile”:

*Like blown roses you didn't die  
but lost your petals quietly  
becoming asymmetrical—*

By no means are all the poems in *Something Like Jasmine* about death. There are clusters of poems on Francis and Clare (I’m in awe that Bodo never exhausts his creativity in writing about these two most formative figures in his life), on Bodo’s childhood in New Mexico, on Jesus, and prayer and the heart’s emptiness.

I said earlier that Bodo’s writing exudes Franciscan joy, but Francis’s joy was never facile, nor is Bodo’s. The poem “After” evokes the feeling of desolation that can overcome us:

*Like a Sunday afternoon  
hot and still with absence  
no one about, store faces  
veiled and streets empty  
the mind finds the heart vacant  
scans door fronts for “Open” signs*

Balancing this all-too-true evocation of the emptiness we can experience is the delight of “The Clack of Grackles”:

*Their bills are always clacking  
up and down like a cuckoo clock’s  
wooden bird or how Groucho Marx  
raised and dropped his eyebrows...*

Yet the theme of death and dying frames the poetry of *Something Like Jasmine*. Toward its close, the poems have Bodo visiting his parents' graves and paying tribute to a special friend who has recently died.

The volume ends with what acts as a summary of its major theme. "*Much here is about dying's / Underside...*" the poem ("Now and After") confesses, then moves into a series of questions:

*Is it that the shadowed form  
Of God may replace those who  
Brightly occupy his hours?  
The surrender of what's here  
For what one fears is not there?  
Or fear of pain and darkness?  
Or does he want to stay where  
Those who've died cling to him like  
Fragrant night-blooming jasmine?*

And, really, what except questions can we end with, as we face the mystery of death?