

Over a long and rich career, Robert Cording—indifferent to and transcendent of any vogue—has persisted in addressing what I can only and inadequately label matters of the spirit. He'd surely be the last earthly soul to celebrate the death of a beloved son, "who is both not here, and not not here," as occasion for his most powerful work to date. And yet it is that. And it is spiritual. To read *In the Unwalled City* is to have our hearts broken, poem after poem, even as *we* celebrate the deeper-than-deep humanity of its testimony. I'm simply aware of no recent poetry that matches it for mournful eloquence.

—**Sydney Lea,**

Author of *Here*, former Poet Laureate of Vermont

In a grieving father's voice, both vulnerable and steeled, the poet writes, "My son is dead and done with me." He talks to himself through hybrid prose and poetry and to himself while talking to his son and, almost as afterthought, to us. He avails himself (and his off-camera readers) of centuries of wisdom, but, mercifully, offers us no moral *summas* gleaned from his devastating experience. Cording's bracing metaphors and sudden shifts of perspective distinguish *In the Walled City* from many memoirs of grief and loss. We come to poetry for just this: intimacy and awakening.

—**Martha Serpas,**

Author of *Double Effect*

Throughout Robert Cording's *In the Unwalled City*, one is immersed in the essence of duality—first, in a mingling of memoir and lyric—where language itself is an incantatory talisman against incredible loss yet unable to offer lasting solace. The title essay and collection of linked poems concerning the poet's late son impart a gorgeous grief which simultaneously embraces remembrance while also seeking some means of forgetfulness at “an altar where all rationality had to be sacrificed.”

—**Claude Wilkinson**,
Author of *World Without End*

Every loss is particular; each bereavement has its own indigenous flavor. In this book of prose memoir and poetry, Robert Cording offers us an especially open and personal chronicle of grieving, generous in its detail, unsparing in its honest accounting of his own helplessness and “not-knowing.” Grief is work in the dark, and it allows for no easy or even orthodox comfort. Because Cording accepts his new and stark vulnerability, the intimacy of the poems deepens as he labors to remain conversant with his son and not lose his “fatherhood.” By remaining present to what is no longer present, over time the grieving father uncovers gifts of mercy and gratitude. And if Cording captures, over and over, how the ordinary and daily can be harrowing in its impact, *In the Unwalled City* is essentially a gentle, probing book—an uneasy elegy, a tribute to abiding love.

—**Margaret Gibson**,
Author of *The Glass Globe*, Poet Laureate of Connecticut

Robert Cording's heartbreaking book, *In the Unwalled City*, explores a terrible loss—the death of his son Daniel from an accidental overdose of opioids—with uncommon tenderness and grace. “Lord, grant me this fatherhood of pain,” he writes, “do not let grief be finished with me, // if only because it gives birth to my dead son, / who is both not here, and not not here.” He gazes steadily into this void, discovering not only a language for his grief but the saving power of love, which shines forth on every page. This is a book for the ages.

—**Christopher Merrill**,
Author of *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*

IN THE
UNWALLED
CITY

Books by Robert Cording

Poetry

Life-list (1987)

What Binds Us to This World (1991)

Heavy Grace (1996)

Against Consolation (2001)

Common Life (2006)

Walking With Ruskin (2010)

A Word in My Mouth: Selected Spiritual Poems (2013)

Only So Far (2015)

Without My Asking (2019)

Prose

Finding the World's Fullness (2019)

Edited

In My Life: Encounters with the Beatles (1998)

(eds: Cording, Jankowski-Smith, Miller-Laino)

IN THE
UNWALLED
CITY

ROBERT CORDING

S L / . N T
B O O K S

IN THE UNWALLED CITY

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For Daniel

*If I did not believe in the comfort of the spirit;
if your presence, which I cannot locate anywhere
other than myself, did not still console,
I might have no reason for talking to you
as if you were alive,
for constantly going out to you in these words
as if you could receive them.*

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The sorrow for the dead is the only sorrow from which we refuse to be divorced. Every other wound we seek to heal, every other affliction to forget; but this wound we consider it a duty to keep open; this affliction we cherish and brood over in solitude.

—Washington Irving

. . . you *must* continue his life inside of yours insofar as it has been unfinished; his life has now passed onto yours.

—Rilke, *Letter to Sidonie Nádherná von Borutín*

IN THE UNWALLED CITY (1)

Against other things it is possible to obtain security, but when it comes to death, we human beings all live in an unwalled city.

—Epicurus

IN THE EARLY HOURS of October 14, 2017, my wife's cell phone rang. The call was from my son Daniel's wife, Leisl, who could hardly speak, but managed "I need you and Bob to come home right now." My wife—not in response to Leisl, but to what she already knew as death's sudden assault, cried out, "No, no, no, no." Then I was talking—to the EMT, Peter, whom I knew from ushering at church. The emergency squad, he told me, was administering CPR to my son, but it "didn't look good."

We were in the Adirondacks. Daniel and Leisl lived in Woodstock, Connecticut, where my wife and I also live. Halfway across the Massachusetts Turnpike, I realized what Peter meant: that my son was already dead when he arrived. Two hours later, no one had called back to say Daniel had been taken to a hospital. I asked my wife if she thought our son was dead. She said yes.

I begin here. I have written at least four other beginnings. But there is no beginning. I say to myself, Daniel died. Daniel is dead. But his death goes on living, goes on requiring some response.

With grief one day becomes another. Every tomorrow repeats today, every day repeats itself. Grief can also be a sudden assault—images of Daniel cuddling the cats that seemed to occupy our house for years; Daniel, maybe eight years old, climbing out his window and walking around the scaffolding we had erected to clapboard our house and knocking on our bedroom window; or later (I must grieve it seems every aspect of my son's life, from child to adult), Daniel as a surly teenager who smoked too much pot and fought with me about everything; who sprawled in the back seat of the car, pushing his two brothers into one another; or most recently, Daniel, completely at home at the top of a forty foot ladder or pushing snow from a condo unit's high roof by sliding down its steep incline and letting the snow build up before him to bring him to a stop; Daniel who could focus on the job at hand so well, all else simply vanished. I wander, round and round, my days punctuated only by these sudden stabs of memory.

Daniel was thirty-one when he died. Writing about one's child is like writing about one's parents—it cannot help but be bewildering and fraudulent. It is a task that inevitably smooths out all the unknown and unknowable jagged edges.

I knew my son well. I didn't know him at all. Every parent can say the same. Since Daniel died, I have often

wondered if his death would be more bearable if we really knew each other, if there wasn't the always unfinished business of coming-to-know.

Thankfully, Daniel was my Shakespearean fool: when it seemed to him that I was simplifying his life or life in general, or entertaining some impossible yearning as I just did in the paragraph above, he would usually sing out, *La, la . . . la, la*—kindly but mockingly, his nonsense for my nonsense.

I'd like to say: "I am writing now to make my son live again." That's true, of course, in the sense that all writing is an act of resurrection, or simply a means in my case of preventing Daniel from vanishing as if he had never been. But I am also writing, in part, to get back my real life. Grief involves a double loss—first, my loved son; and then my own life, at least as I knew it.

I have difficulty remembering what my life was like before Daniel died. I don't feel those constant memories of all that has been taken away. "Before" for me doesn't involve some loss of what I was or had. But I do feel that sense of everything suddenly being entirely and surreally different.

After Daniel died, I placed a photograph of him on my desk. In it, we are sitting in beach chairs parallel to one another on the Woodstock town beach. We are both in sunglasses looking at the water. I am in my forties. Daniel is seven or eight. When I put this photograph on my desk, I could only bear photographs of Daniel as a child. They

consoled, not because they expressed the innocent joys of childhood, but because they were already-lived moments, finished moments of his life. This was Daniel at eight. This was him at twelve. At fourteen. They helped me believe, as I wanted to believe, that every life, no matter how shortened, is a complete life.

When I was in graduate school, I felt the immense gulf between the consolations of religion and the actual grief of a father in Ben Jonson's poem, "On My First Son." Jonson begins with a stoic "Farewell, thou child of my right hand" and reminds the reader that our children's lives are not ours to keep, but gifts that are lent to us by God. Jonson's "sin" is "too much hope of thee, lov'd boy," a hope that fostered his illusion that his son's life was guaranteed to go on longer than his own. And then the poet offers up all the usual consolations: that his son has escaped the "world's and flesh's rage," and even escaped the indignities and sufferings of growing old.

But at the poem's center is Jonson's inescapable grief that arrives, as if involuntarily, in this outburst: "O, could I lose all father now!" That "could" announces what cannot be escaped—the flesh and blood of fatherhood, the lost flesh and blood of one's child.

I have been reading Dante lately, and I have thought about his *Paradiso* and imagined how, if I came upon my son, he'd be a ray or orb of light, but he wouldn't be in his body. I know, from Dante's perspective, the resurrection of the

body has yet to take place. But, forgive me, what I want is what Jonson wanted—my son in his body, still full of the “flesh’s rage.”

The medieval Jewish rabbi Nachmanides said, when “a man’s child dies, it is fitting that he, and those that love him, grieve and mourn—but their mourning must be such that it is in service of the Lord.” Though each day my son dies over and over, I turn and turn to the idea that gratitude is necessary for what was, even in the midst of the pain of what is. I turn to the Jewish prayer known as “kaddish”—which is, as Leon Wieseltier says, “not so much a praise of God as a prayer for the praise of God.”

I pray for praise against all those *nevers* of death: Daniel will never drive up the driveway again in his red truck; Daniel will never again move in that easy athletic gait of his, in clothes that always seemed too large or impossibly ruffled; his wife, his mother, his brothers, and I will never see his charmed smile, which transformed his entire face and made everyone around him a participant in his happiness.

He will never.

I will never.

He and I are talking.

Then I am writing this down.

I

LAMENTATIONS (1)

I.

Grief is the *art*
(can it ever be called that?)
of starting over. Every morning
the same morning.

Every evening the same.
The light tipping above
the horizon, dipping below.

A day. Another day
of second thoughts. Another night
of *if only, what if, what else*
could we have done?

II.

Days, weeks, months, years,
all unpunctuated,
an endless run-on sentence
devoid of verbs, actions, time

and without any of
those little logic words—
although, just as, similarly, but—
that connect one thought to another,

grief's preference the childlike
and then, and then, and then,
as in my six-year-old son's journal
in which every day, every event,

that summer in New Hampshire
had exactly the same worth
and felt to him like one
endlessly repeating summer day

which he loved, but which now,
as I read through it,
as if involuntarily,
day-by-day-by-day coldly numbs.

III.

If language is fossil poetry,
as Emerson believed,
each word shuddering to life
in the instant it spoke

reality to its speaker,
the word I bore into being

(if only because I'd never fully
experienced it) was *heartsore*,

from the Old English,
heortsarnes—meaning “grief,”
meaning exactly what
it sounds like it means,

a soreness which is
not a metaphor for some ache
that can be cured
or will go away in time,

but a soreness always present,
the *what is now*
and now will always be
that returns you, involuntarily

or by choice, to the *what is not*.
A word that is almost a sentence
in itself, waiting for each
of us to complete it:

he is heartsore, she is heartsore,
I am heartsore.
Heortsarnes—that deep bruise
of sound born into word.

WALKING WITH DANIEL

I don't know why, other than to be
somewhere else, I walked and walked
after his death. I took him with me,

his name always in my mouth,
and always said three times,
Daniel, Daniel, Daniel—

sometimes with the exasperation of
how could you be gone, sometimes
with the horror of *where are you, Daniel*,

sometimes just a calling out to him,
as if, now that he was gone,
he could be anywhere.

All winter my voice
came out of my mouth involuntarily,
speaking to an empty road

that dipped and rose, speaking
as though he could hear me
or my words could stake a claim for him

in this world he'd left.
 I said, *the beeches have hung on
 to their leaves all winter long,*

*as if to declare that,
 until something new arrives,
 the past will not be let go.*

Or: *there's a fox on the hillside,
 the kinetic flow of its body
 matching the curve of the hill.*

I couldn't say how it recalled
 his once limber gait.
 I said, *the pond's iced-over*

*and full of scratches,
 February's gray days are piling up
 like a car crash, the last dirty patches*

*of snow appear like
 the chalked outlines of victims
 in the woods.* For months I talked

to him as if he were
 beside me. I noted each thing
 I saw, my mad attending

IN THE UNWALLED CITY

a kind of ritual to bring back
what had been lost.

Each day I walked to no end

but the day's, the dark darkest
at road's edge where I plodded
along under the trees, car horns

sounding their drivers' surprise
when their headlights found me,
a dark figure disoriented and alone.