

Postcards

Long before you died, you promised to send your friends postcards from beyond the grave that said: Having a wonderful time, wish you were here. You said you would choose a conventional photograph of American scenic grandeur--and you would pre-address and stamp the postcards yourself.

This was in the early stages of your illness. I appreciated the sharpness of your mind, and your quote, from Johnson, that "there's nothing like the anticipation of the noose to strengthen a man's wit." I laughed, and felt hopeful, and said you wouldn't need to send the postcards for a long time. But after you told me I worried that you would ask me to mail them, and whenever you came to visit I thought you were bringing the postcards. I could imagine scenes in which you asked me to mail them, and I said I wouldn't, and you got angry and eventually I said I would. But this never happened: All we ever did was sit around, make jokes and drink tea. Once you came over wearing a black top hat, black jeans and a black shirt and told me that your illness was about to get worse. I asked how you knew and you said that always, before entering a new stage, you had an impulse to change your hair, grow a moustache, buy offbeat clothes, use a cane--as though death might know your name but not your face.

As it turned out, the only thing you ever wanted from me was supreme restraint in leaving you alone when you began to die. You told most of your friends to go away and they did, and you also said no one could cry at your funeral, and we obeyed. You liked junk food, so your family served macaroni salad and salami and popcorn, and we all stood around pretending to have fun. I assumed you'd been too sick to remember the postcards, but a month after you died, I got one that said: Having a wonderful time, wish you were here. It was in your small, slanted writing and the words transmitted your voice. For a moment I could hear you speaking.

The postcard was a color photograph of American grandeur with mountains, sky, sea, and a meadow of flowers. When I look at it now, I remember what I use to imagine when I'd see you coming to my door: You asking me to mail the postcards. My saying no. A terrible explosion of anger. And then my saying yes. You offer me hundreds of postcards. They float from the palm of your hand.