

Waiting

He had spent a lot of his life waiting. He recalled waiting for his first-grade classroom door to open, proud to enter and take his seat, instantly in love with Miss Milam with her blond hair and intoxicated by the fragrance of her talcum powder.

He waited four months for his report card in seventh grade, and even though it had a D on it, he took it home dutifully. At least he passed.

Each morning, he waited for the nickel bus to take him to school and while waiting, memorized Elizabeth Barrett Browning's valentine to her husband: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."

In cap and gown, he had waited four times to hear his name called--to march across a stage, to receive four pieces of paper which he still had somewhere. He waited in lines in a gymnasium where professors of the small college sat behind tables, enrolling students for the opening term. He waited in line for the dining hall to open, but not because the food was gourmet. On spaghetti night, Bill, who became an astronaut, dished out spaghetti to those inching through the line. "Get your live fish bait right here!" Presentation was not a priority in the men's food service.

He had waited in the anteroom till the usher said, "It's time." The wedding march began. She floated down the aisle like an angel and became his savior in ways he had never imagined.

Staring at Pacific waves dashing on the rocks beneath a gigantic picture window, he waited five hours, beginning at 2:30 A.M., till the birth pangs were over, and he had another love in his life.

When his mother died, he had waited in the viewing room. Friends and acquaintances came to pay their respects. He wondered where her friends were. Then he realized she had outlived most of them. Her heart embraced the world, but she was not a public person. No one was going to come by representing some club or church.

Waiting with colleagues, marching in heavy rain, he struck for smaller classes; others struck for money. They got neither. They lost, but they stood up to power. They possessed a dignity they never felt before.

I'm in #103, he thought, but we don't check out according to room number. Leonard was in #104 and younger than me. One day he was here, the next he was gone, and Franklin is in 104, waiting along with the rest of us.

Aggie went suddenly. She loved to play Bingo, and she could keep three cards going at the same time. She was lucky, and the prizes were not bad—a candy bar, a small stuffed toy, or a

knitted hand warmer someone had donated. They gurney past my door last night, and even with the sheet pulled over her face, I knew who it was.

What's next? The leap is next. The move to the head of the line—leap—into what? He wondered where the idea came from there's something beyond death.

He recalled the funeral of his Hmong student who had gone home ill. The next day Lao Moua had jumped to the head of the line. Unattended, he had an epileptic seizure, fell off his bed, struck his head on the metal frame, and bled to death.

The one indisputable fact is: we go. We might wait 100 years, or much less, but ultimately we go, in war, by accident, or in the quiet of our home, extracted and hidden from view by a medic.

He finally conceded notions of an afterlife—resurrection, heaven, Purgatory—were guesses that sprang from hope. The culture declares saints reach heaven; sinners enter hell, and wee sinners pass through Purgatory, where their souls do a turnaround. Perhaps none of it is real.

Over the years, he had gradually laid aside ideas about life after death. Why think about it when the answers never rise above the level of speculation? Even priests and ministers, specialists, disagree because they, too, are mere speculators.

Whatever happens after death, he was content to leave in the hands of the Other, his designation for divinity. But he found comfort in the fact that people who have died live on—in our memories. People we loved or feared, or people we might have only known casually, all live inside our minds.

He still conjured up memories of his mother and father, like the smell of his father's aftershave. His mother, queen of the kitchen, waiting for the third table, the women's table after the men and children had filled themselves with the holiday feast. He still heard the sweet voice of his blind Granny calling from her dark world, "Who's there? I know it's someone," when all along, she knew who it was. He closed his eyes, wondering if tonight might be his turn. If it is, then so be it. Waiting.