

## Fortin Speech

This is a huge honor. Thank you so much. Thanks to the selection committee, to the speakers today, especially Chris, Niamh, and Kathrine for those fabulous introductions. I'm very touched. It's also a pleasure to meet and spend time with the Fortin family. Special thanks to the Michael Fortin for sponsoring this award in his father's honor. Roger has always been extraordinarily welcoming and encouraging to me in my time at Xavier. I respect him deeply, and it is a huge honor to be selected for an award bearing his name. I find that with each passing year the Fortin Award grows in prestige simply because anyone who stands at this podium not only wins a plaque with Roger's name on it (and a handsome check—definitely thanks for that!), but also gets to join the ranks of the amazing winners who came before. I admire Richard, Jose Maria, Rachel, and Chris so much. They are the kinds of professors we all set out to be when we got into this profession, so it's very gratifying to find myself in their company now as fellow Fortinators. I also want to thank my colleagues in the department for helping me make my home at Xavier, especially mentors like Ernie Fontana, John Getz, and Norman Finkelstein who showed me by example what it takes to be really good at this job. My deepest thanks go to my wife Cathy and our son Dylan. Without your love and support none of what I've done would have been possible. Thank you most of all.

I'd like to dedicate this award to my father, Charles Herren, who died a month ago. According to the timestamp on my voicemail, I received the call from Rachel to tell me I had won the Fortin Award at 2:08pm Eastern Time on February 28. At 1:20pm Central Time, which is to say 12 minutes later, I was beside my father as he drew his last breath. You won't be surprised to hear that it's been hard to process all of these conflicting emotions in such a short span of time. I'm reminded of Hamlet's response to the marriage celebrations of his mother only

a month after his father died. Still dressed in the black of mourning, he suggested that the thrifty thing to do would be to heat up leftovers from the funeral to serve at the wedding feast. Except he said it in iambic pentameter.

Now I don't want to hijack today's happy occasion with too much sadness. But since this award intends to honor my teaching and scholarship in the humanities, I thought it might be instructive to reflect on literature's role in helping me grapple with the death of my father over the last month. I've heard Paul Colella say that most students aren't going to fully appreciate Philosophy now as college students. It's only later when they will need it, when they face hardship, failure, and loss. I can now appreciate that the same holds true for literature.

My thoughts keep returning to several works about mortality and mourning. I wouldn't claim that these works have provided me answers; that's not the kind of literature I'm into. I'm not seeking understanding or redemption. Not now. The death of a parent is one of life's most important experiences, and I am braced for the full adult dose, straight no chaser. So I've been thinking mostly about works that stare steely-eyed into the abyss, without pretending that it's anything other than abyss, but also without being consumed or defeated by the experience.

As usual, I'm guided by the polestar of Samuel Beckett. There's no shortage of examples, but the one I've thought about most recently is his short letter to his American director, Alan Schneider, after the death of Schneider's father. Beckett had been badly broken up by the death of his own father, and the scars are still visible three decades later when he wrote this to Schneider: "I know your sorrow and I know that for the likes of us there is no ease for the heart to be had from words or reason and that in the very assurance of sorrow's fading there is more sorrow. So I offer you only my deeply affectionate and compassionate thoughts and wish for you only that the strange thing may never fail you, whatever it is, that gives us strength to live on and

on with our wounds.” That’s what I’m talking about: a sturdy mast for weathering the storm, not a search for silver linings in the clouds. Give me Beckett over “Footprints in the Sand” any day.

I could give you so many other examples of literary masts I’ve strapped myself to. But the best is one of my favorite poems of all time, Philip Larkin’s “Aubade.” Do you know it? It’s probably inappropriate for this occasion. It’s kind of long; a bit of a downer. It’s also sacrilegious at one point, which doesn’t seem very tactful with a priest on the front row. But since you’ve already given me the award, what the hell? You stand to learn more from Philip Larkin than from me anyway. I should preface my reading with a gloss on the title, “Aubade,” an archaic term for a poem written in celebration of the dawn. However, as you are about to see, this is a most unconventional aubade. It’s also a most unconventional elegy. You probably know that an elegy is a poem written in honor of someone who has died. In this case, the poet is anticipating his own death. In the process he systematically rejects every offer of consolation for death, which is traditionally the whole purpose of an elegy. Anyhow, here goes:

“Aubade” by Philip Larkin

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what’s really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.  
Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
—The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can’t escape,  
Yet can’t accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

I love this poem. Now to be fair, I should add that my father would have hated it. Since it's not in the Bible he would have never found good reason to read it in the first place. He was a devout fundamentalist Christian who never drank a drop of alcohol in his life. So this drunken dark night of the soulless would have been utterly alien to him. But for his prodigal son, ah, it rings so true. I love those last two lines: "Work has to be done. / Postmen like doctors go from house to house." From Larkin's perspective, after death, there's nothing and no one "to love or link with." But we can still do both in the world of the living, which must be why he equates postmen delivering letters with the healing powers of doctors. They keep humans connected while there is still time. Larkin's right. I received stacks of healing letters, cards, and emails in the days following my father's death. It's not just literature that helps heal fresh wounds at times like these. Those little gestures of caring and simple human kindness work like medicine, too.

Look: here's a card I got just this week. It's from Carol Winkelmann, and she had her whole Linguistics class sign it. How sweet is that? And look: it's got Bob Dylan circa 1965 on the front—I have such a schoolboy crush on Bob Dylan circa 1965! I swear, even in black and white, his eyes look bloodshot. And listen to this perfectly chosen quote from "Forever Young" handwritten on the inside: "May your hands always be busy / May your feet always be swift / May you have a strong foundation / When the winds of changes shift." Well, any of you who've seen me clumping around on crutches lately know that my feet haven't been too swift, but they've gotten better since I received the card, so hey! Maybe there is powerful medicine in the cocktail of collegial kindness mixed with Nobel-Prize-winning-Literature.

"May your hands always be busy" sounds a lot like Larkin's "Work must be done." There's also the work being done by the poem. Apparently Larkin faced many a 4am of fear and trembling. But he ultimately succeeded in transforming his crippling experiences into art.

Unconventional as it may be in certain respects, in other ways “Aubade” is capital-P poetry in the grand old style [count it off]: “I work all day, and get half-drunk at night. / Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare. / In time the curtain-edges will grow light. / Till then I see what’s really always there”—it’s iambic pentameter with a regular rhyme scheme. Shakespeare would be proud. Larkin finds, to borrow a phrase from Beckett, “a form to accommodate the mess.” So, despite the prevailing mood of the poem, there is something worth celebrating in the dawn which follows the poet’s dark night; there is the poem. It’s no cure for death, but it ain’t nothing. By the sobering light of day Larkin kept his hands busy and did his job well. And now, long after Larkin has died, his poem still makes the rounds like the postmen, delivering its message when the sun comes up and it’s time to get back to work.

The heart of my work is teaching and scholarship. As a teacher, I guess I have a pretty good knack for building easy rapport with my students. My secret is that it doesn’t require any effort at all for me to speak to students “on their level.” I’m already there. I never left. And if I’ve published a decent amount—not as much as my betters in this room right now, but still not too shabby—it’s certainly not because of my undeniable genius. Oh, it’s deniable alright! I’ve got stacks of rejection letters to prove it. It’s just that I’m persistent. I keep on writing, keep on sending things out, and when they get bounced back I bounce them off somewhere else. The alarm clock rings, dawn rises, and work must be done.

And I know I got that work ethic from Charles Herren, my father. He laid a strong foundation for when the winds of changes shift. And he would have been proud of this award. I appreciate you all for acknowledging my work as a teacher and scholar with the prestigious Fortin Award, and with this very touching ceremony. Thank you.