**ABSTRACT:** This poem contains no lies. The speaker, a bioethicist, recounts their experience with their father's decline due to a degenerative neurological disease and related dementia, and family medical decision-making on his behalf. None of us are getting out of here alive, but some of us will outlive each other. What are the limits of what people who love someone can do for, or to, each other? And whose suffering should be taken into account?

**KEYWORDS: end of life; surrogate decision-making; advance directives; hospice; death and dying**

**No one who loves anyone**

When my father was dying

 he wasn’t

 and he was

 more than we always already are

 but less than you think when someone says

 “when my father was dying”

A tremor in the hands became

 t-shirt and sweatpants

A shuffle became

 dirty laundry

A fall became

 never being alone

A conversation became

 call

 response

He forgot his life’s work

 but remembered four years of college on the lake, by turns sun-swept and ice-locked

He forgot my mother

 but remembered his wife, met at a conference long after I was grown, talking politics at dawn

He forgot sentences

 but remembered words, yes, fine, hello, stop, thank you, thirsty, democracy, no

He forgot how to chew and swallow

 but remembered he loved to eat, cakes, pickled herring, liverwurst, meatloaf

And then he choked on cookies and milk in the middle of the night

Falling to my step-mother’s kitchen floor

 too long

laying

 until she found him

 A fish

 No water

 Breathing food

 No air

Bronchial sacs are not fond of chocolate chips

Alveoli are no lovers of milk

And my father was no lover of the vent

 He clocked out

 No language

 Then no eye contact

 Blank wall focus

 Hand squeezes disappear

He fails

 every trial of vent withdrawal

 and so he continues to fail

Do we know, my stepmother and I, what he would have wanted?

Yes

He had said, of his mother’s death

 in hospice

 as cancer ate her belly and grew it at the same time

He said, yes,

 pain relief and a quicker end

 and he said

No one

 who loves anyone

 should make them die longer

 should make them live like that

We decided to let him go

And yet

 the day came to pull the vent

 he breathed

 remained a shell

 two minutes maybe three minutes

 out of each whole day’s one thousand four hundred and forty minutes

 he surfaced for eye contact

 and the most basic of call-and-response

 “Hello”

 “Hi”

 all the rest was vacant

I reminded her

We knew what he wanted

Not this

She could not stop feeding him

Food is love

But no one

 who loves anyone

 should make them die longer

 should make them live like that

I said, all my years of bioethics behind my speech: without hospice, his end will be

 harder

 longer

 worse in every way

But she could not stop feeding him

Food is love

A month later, a call, from her, at the long-term care facility

 “It’s over”

 She is quiet

 “It got very bad”

It sounds like regret

 like an apology

 without the words

Who are these decisions for

 when the dying person is barely there?

If she had sent him to hospice, then what?

 As he failed

 from lack of food

 *how* could she have lived with herself?

How much would it hurt her?

How long?

*Could* she have lived with herself?

Only she and I were going to live

Perhaps

 no one

 who loves anyone

 should make them live like that