

DALE ROBERTS

Here and Gone, 2016
Encaustic on panel, 45 x 45 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOHN MOIR

A Kindness While Dying

Embracing Compassion at the End of Life

At age ninety-seven my wife's mother suffered a major stroke that left her bedridden and in the care of a nursing home. Her condition was heart wrenching, and our doctors advised us that she had no hope of recovery. All we could do was to help her live out her final days as peacefully as possible. But we soon encountered an all-too-common challenge: a medical system that leaves many people at the end of life suffering needlessly and dying in ways they would not choose.

Despite her stroke, my mother-in-law's mental faculties were still intact, and she understood that the end was near. "I've had enough," she told us several times. "I'm done."

It wasn't long before she lost interest in eating, which for her was nothing short of extraordinary. My mother-in-law cherished food and cooked scrumptious meals. Throughout her life, eating comforted her and safeguarded her days. Her fixation with food was hard earned. Born in Brooklyn at the end of World War I to immigrant parents, her family struggled financially and the source of their next meal was sometimes uncertain. Her parents gave her a popular name of that era—Shirley—and did their best to adapt to a new culture, but it was not an easy life.

By the time I met her, Shirley was securely middle-class. Nevertheless, she always kept a well-stocked refrigerator and a kitchen drawer filled with Hershey's bars. I soon learned that food was the currency of her affection. When she heaped your dinner plate with brisket and mashed potatoes and coleslaw and insisted on bringing you second and third helpings, she was serving up love.

But all that changed as Shirley's life drew to a close. The hospice doctor told us that her loss of appetite was a normal part of the dying process and estimated that she had perhaps two weeks left. The nursing home, however, had other ideas. They persisted in bringing her meals and encouraging her to eat. Three times a day an aide bustled into her room with a full tray. Shirley was usually asleep.

"Wake up, Shirley, it's time to eat." The aide raised her hospital bed and tied a bib around her neck.

"Come on, Shirley, just a few bites. The custard is delicious." The aide put the food to her mouth. Shirley shook her head and clamped her lips tight. But if the aide persevered long enough, Shirley gave in. The aides meant well, but every bite she ate prolonged her misery. Food became her nemesis.