

Protest

There is a way to drop a body atop a hard mattress,
to scrub gentle parts too hard, to yank a gown
across withered flesh, to drag a weight smaller
than your own and slam it against a pillow.
There are ways to say the night is long
and there are twenty other beds to check.

There are ways to ignore chapping lips,
not to hear a rasping voice, to avoid the task
of filling a water pitcher. There are ways
to tell them, without using words, that you hate
the job, ways to leave them cold and shivering
and naked. There are ways to leave them alone.

But they had an answer, the ones we cleaned
and dressed and moved and fed and watched
over. On chair, bed, pillow, gown, on sheet,
diaper, floor, and shoe, writ repeatedly
in stinking letters: No, I am not dead.