Final verses: John Updike's last words

by John Buchanan in the November 3, 2009 issue

John Updike's death in January left a giant hole in my reading life. He chronicled American culture during my lifetime in a way that I always found lucid and smart. He seemed to know about everything, from Søren Kierkegaard to Ted Williams. And I simply loved the way he wrote.

Updike was so productive that it seemed like there was always a new book of his to add to one's reading list. When the *New Yorker* arrived, I immediately scanned the contents to see if Updike had contributed an essay or review. His literary criticism was consistently sharp and more often than not polite. Updike was a gentleman.

I came to love his poetry, too, when I discovered *Facing Nature*, which includes a poem written when he turned 50 and confronted reminders of his own mortality. Hurtling down a ski slope on the last day of his 49th year, Updike notes his "knees a-tremble" and remembers how he used to amaze his little children with his skiing. "Now, my heavy body swings to face the valley / and feels the gut pull of steep maturity."

The passing of time was a consistent theme for Updike, voiced in ways that are reminiscent of Psalm 90, with its reminder that our days are "like grass that is renewed in the morning—in the evening it fades and withers." In "Long Shadow," Updike asks, "Why do we love them, these last days of something / Like summer . . . though frost has flattened the morning grass? / They tell us we shall live forever."

The poems he wrote in his last years are extraordinary reflections on aging and death. "Age I must, but die I would rather not." In November 2008, when he was diagnosed with cancer, he wrote: "A wake-up call? It seems that death had found the portals it will enter by, my lungs."

Updike continued to write poetry until a few weeks before his death—poems about deceased friends, CAT scans, needle biopsies, the city outside the hospital window, and visitors. "A clergyman—those comical purveyors / of what makes sense to just the terrified— / has phoned me, and I loved him, bless his hide."

In “Fine Points”—a poem included in *Endpoint and Other Poems*—Updike remembers going to Sunday school and not believing the stories about desert shepherds in scratchy robes, Israel’s defeats, the Temple. “Yet Jews kept faith / and passed the prayers.” The poem’s last words express, I think, his credo: “The tongue reposes in papyrus pleas, / saying, *Surely*—magnificent, that ‘surely’— / *goodness and mercy shall follow me all* / *the days of my life*, my life, forever.”