

All souls

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

She died on Sunday, after a month of dateless days that began on Halloween and ended just short of Thanksgiving. We went from the hospice admitting office to a Halloween party in the family room, where volunteers offered us fruit punch, orange cupcakes and orange and black balloons. Three toddlers in identical ladybug suits were dancing on the faux-parquet ballroom floor to the electrically amplified folk songs of a long-haired balladeer. It was 1960s fare, all about ghosts, hauntings and the headless wives of Henry VIII. No one in the subdued, receptive audience seemed to find the music in questionable taste; and my mother, more taken with the ladybugs than the music, politely kept the beat with her index finger. The next day I went to the mass for All Saints Day and heard a young African priest tell the small congregation of staff and patients what saints are like: not paragons of virtue, but ordinary people whose deepest longing is to see God. *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*

The next day, All Souls Day, she was too weak to collaborate with the attendants who came to move her into a wheelchair, so they hoisted her up in a canvas sling in which she floated for some seconds before being lowered expertly into position. I wheeled her to the tropical aquarium in the family center and waited for her to make her usual remark upon seeing a beautiful or improbable creature: "It almost makes me think there is a God." *For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine.*

Later on the rabbi dropped by and said, "Hi! I'm the rabbi." She didn't have much to say, so I told him about our visit to the aquarium. "It is a marvelous aquarium," he said agreeably, "too bad there are no Gefilte fish." Of such visits the early days were made. A social worker and a doctor stopped by to "help her with her life review." It struck me that the life review is a distant echo of traditional practices of deathbed penance and stock-taking, such as one finds in Christian art-of-dying treatises and Jewish ethical wills. My mother tried to oblige by dredging up a few well-worn

anecdotes from the past, but what really concerned her was to make sure her affairs were in order. She spent several days shuffling with trembling hands through the bank and insurance cards in her wallet, as if all could be managed if only the right cards would stay in the right slots. *Truly no man can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of his life is costly, and can never suffice, that he should continue to live on forever, and never see the Pit.*

My trips to and from the hospice took me past a graffiti-covered railroad bridge; a bleak sequence of boarded-up luncheonettes, nail salons and check-cashing stores; an abandoned horse-riding lot with rusting trailers and five auto-body repair shops. By contrast the hospice radiated refreshment, light and peace, from its sun-drenched solarium to the bright brimming fish in the aquarium and the reserved sacrament burning in the tabernacle. *Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord: and let perpetual light shine unto them.*

Then came days of hard labor, and a week in which her soul seemed to come unstuck from her body—like Peter Pan and his shadow, except that it was her body that was becoming the shadow, and it could not be stitched back on. *Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not. And dost thou open thy eyes upon such a one and bring him into judgment with thee?*

A taxi driver whose mother and sister had died in the same hospice told me how his parents emigrated from Sicily, his father working in the deli trade and his mother creating marvels from the leavings he brought home. “Ya gotta be thtrong,” he said, lisping through the space where his front teeth used to be. When he deposited me at the train station, he gave me a hug. A turbaned Sikh cab driver told me about his mother, and an Egyptian cab driver, remembering his parents, said *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajiun* (we are from God and to God we return) and promised to pray for mine. A monastic friend whose mother recently died told me that he found it helpful to pray the psalms from the Office of the Dead. It’s as though one were eavesdropping on, and being made a party to, her conversation with her Lord, he said. I took his advice and was amazed by how quickly and economically the psalms and lessons of this ancient service draw one out of the depths toward the highest hope a human heart can endure. *For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent, he will set me high upon a rock.*

She died under the sign of Calvary and was cremated according to her wishes, under the mercy of God's unfathomable plan. *But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.*