

Pop's View of Mortality

That was my first experience with death up close — someone central to my existence. Now, 22 years later [1975], when Pop would be but 72 if he had lived, the pain of his death is still almost my only such experience.

I suppose it is appropriate that the next thing I remember about Pop was something he said about death a long time before he died, but I think after he had begun to realize that he would never be an old man. One afternoon, when we were working together silently, along the edge of a cornfield near a monster of an old honey locust tree, he said suddenly, and without explanation, "Lifetimes are not measured in years."

Long afterward I was stimulated to put those surprising words from Pop together with my own personal solution to the problem of mortality, and it came out this way:

Eternity for any man
Is not any more of it than
Years and thoughts of it
Can be crammed into a single lifetime
And lifetimes are not measured in years
Said the poet in my father
Before he died too young.

Only give me long enough to teach my children
To be good and right and happy
For reasons other than not knowing why
It would be possible to be bad and wrong and unhappy.