The manner of your leaving

So much is known, and is beyond us still:
leave we must, beloved, until

we are gone from here, and the tree hangs
its empty nests for longer than it takes

to fill them, the dusk empty of birdsong
and the city committed to the ground of its unforgetting.

We cannot say how, so that some
are gone already, beloved, even one

I played with as a boy, a man I loved
in my unthinking way; I admired

his skill, overlooked too much his gentleness.
And these memories (this poem, dear reader!) also

must take their leave, be left by the minds
that cling to them unrelieved; but exactly how,

in what sheet-winding procedure,
body and spirit come unstuck

is too much for simple time to reveal,
except in the unsticking, the winding. Dust

is a dead metaphor; and the theme repeats
its variations, of which this is one: what suspense

remains is the manner of your leaving—is that it?
That is not it. And we don’t have a choice

in the matter! When all is said and done,
stand weeping outside the tomb,

beside the rolling stone, see
the God-forsaken winding sheets,

in the manner of your leaving.
Author's note:

I started writing while an undergraduate BA student at Victoria, and more seriously since 2007. Poetry is like any of the other arts—either you know yourself to be answerable or not; as Dylan says, you gotta serve somebody. So it’s a matter of asking and waiting for words, of learning to trust the language gifted to us, of learning to pitch a beautiful phrase with emotional acuity; above all, it’s a matter of fidelity and answering love.

This poem stands in a long tradition of meditations on death and creaturely finitude. A childhood friend about my age had recently died of cancer, and it gave me pause for thought, drew me towards the Easter story of Christ’s forsakenness, and the hope of the God-forsaken tomb.

John Dennison