

What Grades Do We Give The Dead

Today we teachers were allowed
back into the school for the first time
since the shooting.
Walking the halls –
no students: just numbered
yellow squares to emphasize
bullet holes – we are told that grades are due,
and I realize these kids
are gone: this will be their final grade.
Each of us has a different strategy
for determining what is right.
Some average the assignments
up to that day, but then
is that fair?
What about the work they started
but left in lockers or at home, unfinished?

Would their wounds make the difference?
Can we ascertain how
brave they were, or what
they would have grown up to do
by studying
the autopsy photos and crime scene markers?
How will I tell parents
their child's C is for this defensive wound,
this B because he shielded another with his body
or because he left
a handprint of his own blood on the back of my jacket
when I fell sprinting under fire
and he grabbed me and picked me up and said,
Run!
How should I grade myself?
I never went back to save him.

Out of guilt, do we give them all As—
should we do this
because it is the last kind thing we can do—
or because a poet said
we are all perfect in death.
The day drags on.
All that time bent behind the steel desk
dented by the bullet that broke the window next to the door,
or huddled with students behind bookshelves,
or alone in the dark office trying to track progress
purely by the crunch of broken glass, shouts and gunshots.

And then the shooter, what grade does he deserve?
He once drew the Pieta perfectly,
upside down and backwards.
Is that worth an A?
He murdered my students, my colleagues,
my friends.
Should I punish him
with an F?

There is not enough I can do.

The grades are still due today.