

A Review of the Poem “Rolling Thunder”: For Whom the Thunder Tolls

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Abstract:

“Rolling Thunder” is a poignant poem that employs rich metaphor and vivid imagery to explore themes of anxiety, human fragility, and mortality within a hospital setting. The poem juxtaposes the uncontrollable forces of nature—symbolized by thunder, wind, and rain—with the emotional and physical suffering of patients and their loved ones. Through striking comparisons, such as people waiting outside the ICU to ants sensing a storm, the poem conveys silent dread and helplessness. The hospital’s glass walls act as a “widescreen”, projecting the stark contrast between the indifferent outside world and the life-altering struggles within. The imagery of “frosted-glass lungs” and tears falling like rain underscores the visceral reality of illness, while the burden of medical payments adds another layer of distress. Structured in free verse, the poem’s fragmented flow mirrors the tension and uncertainty of hospital life. Ultimately, “Rolling Thunder” serves as a meditation on human vulnerability, the inevitability of suffering, and the isolating confrontation with mortality.

Keywords: “Rolling Thunder”; hospital anxiety; mortality metaphor; human fragility; free-verse elegy

Rolling Thunder

Lin Funa¹

April’s winds grind, rain chisels away,
At the entrance of the intensive care unit,
People gather like ants before a storm,
Silently anxious.
The floor-to-ceiling glass of the ninth-floor elevator hallway,
Like a widescreen,
Projects another side of human existence.
The fierce wind rips away the giant billboard from the opposite building,

¹ Lin Funa (林馥娜) is a famous Chinese poetess who has many poetry works published and now lives in Guangzhou.

Cars race along the overpass, each on its own path.
Thunder rolls, crushing the heavens and earth,
Rain falls from the eyes
Of a woman who has just heard the doctor's words.
Sweat from those lining up at the payment window
Increases the salinity of the air,
And those with frosted-glass lungs,
Cough the dryness and itchiness in their throats.

Original Chinese poem:

雷声滚滚

林馥娜

四月风磨雨凿
重症室门口的人们
如雨前蚂蚁
络绎着寂静的焦灼
九楼电梯廊的落地玻璃
以宽屏幕，放映着
人世的另一面
狂风扯下对面楼幢的巨幅广告
汽车在高架桥上下各自奔跑
雷声滚滚，碾过天地
雨从一个
听完医生答复的女人眼里
落下来
收费窗口排队的汗水
拉升了空气盐碱度
肺部有磨玻璃的人
咳着喉咙的干痒(Lin, n.d.)

“Rolling Thunder” is a poem rich in metaphor and imagery, depicting the anxiety, tension, and human fragility that unfold within a hospital setting, likely in the context of a serious or life-threatening illness. The “thunder” that rolls across the sky becomes a metaphor for the uncontrollable forces affecting the lives of people within the hospital, suggesting both literal and metaphorical storms. This thunder evokes a sense of foreboding, helplessness, and deep concern for human vulnerability in the face of mortality.

The poem captures not just the physical environment but the emotional atmosphere of people waiting for news, dealing with illness, and confronting the stark realities of life and death. The poem opens with a vivid description of the harshness of nature, as the wind and rain “grind” and “chisel”. This evokes an image of slow erosion, of relentless external forces gradually wearing down whatever stands in their way. The choice of the month of April might symbolize a season of transition, often associated with unpredictability (rain showers, winds), adding to the sense of instability and tension. The natural world, in this case, mirrors the emotional and physical wear experienced by the people in the hospital.

The comparison of people to ants before a storm is striking. Ants are known to sense impending danger and prepare by scurrying in frantic, organized chaos. The same behavior is seen in people outside the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), who are filled with “silent anxiety”. This phrase captures the juxtaposition of frantic internal tension and outward calm, as they wait for answers or outcomes. The “storm” could symbolize the looming confrontation with death, disease, or loss.

“The floor-to-ceiling glass of the ninth-floor elevator hallway / like a widescreen, / projects another side of human life.” This is one of the most poignant images in the poem. The glass

acts like a movie screen, projecting life from a detached, removed perspective. From within the sterile hospital environment, life on the outside continues, indifferent to the internal suffering and drama of those inside. It highlights the separation between the world of the healthy and the world of the ill, the ongoing life outside and the slow, uncertain reality inside the hospital. This contrast could reflect the poet's existential concern with human isolation in times of crisis.

The poem captures external chaos—a fierce wind tearing down a billboard—as a visual representation of the turbulent emotions within the hospital. The cars rushing along the overpass emphasize the indifferent rush of daily life outside. This chaotic and fast-paced external world contrasts with the slow, agonizing experience of those awaiting medical news. The detached movements of the cars suggest that life outside moves on, even as people within the hospital experience life-altering moments.

The thunder becomes a powerful symbol, almost as if it is grinding the heavens and earth together. This line evokes a sense of overpowering, uncontrollable forces that bear down on the characters in the poem. It symbolizes the weight of fate or destiny, the looming presence of death, or the crushing burden of illness. The “rolling thunder” embodies an unstoppable force, much like the reality of illness and mortality in the hospital setting. The sound of thunder also carries with it the sense of an impending climax, as though something decisive is about to happen.

“Rain falls from the eyes / Of a woman who has just heard the doctor's words.” This is one of the most emotionally charged moments in the poem. The “rain” falling from the woman’s eyes, after hearing the doctor’s words, represents tears of sorrow, grief, or possibly

resignation. The doctor's response may have been bad news, confirming a diagnosis or prognosis, which triggers the emotional release in the form of tears. By describing the tears as "rain", the poet connects the personal grief to the natural world, emphasizing the universality of suffering.

"Sweat from those lining up at the payment window / increases the salinity of the air." This line brings into focus the practical and bureaucratic side of illness—paying medical bills. The sweat of those in line reflects the stress and anxiety that comes with financial burdens in the face of serious illness. The "salinity of the air" rising suggests that the environment becomes heavier, more oppressive due to this additional pressure. The sweat could also symbolize the physical toll that waiting and worrying have on the people, indicating how deeply the experience weighs on their bodies.

The "frosted-glass lungs" is a medical term used to describe a pattern seen in lung scans, often associated with serious respiratory conditions such as interstitial lung disease, pulmonary fibrosis, or even COVID-19. The imagery here of people coughing with "dry, itchy throats" vividly conveys the discomfort and physical suffering of the patients. The specificity of the term "frosted-glass lungs" suggests that the poem may be referencing a very contemporary or specific medical condition, likely pointing to modern health crises. The coughing and discomfort reflect the vulnerability and helplessness of those who suffer from these conditions.

The tone of the poem is somber, reflective, and emotionally intense. The language used is direct yet filled with vivid metaphor and imagery, allowing the reader to feel the emotional weight of the hospital setting. The poet skillfully juxtaposes the external chaos of nature and the bustling world outside with the quiet, intense internal world of the hospital, creating a

contrast that deepens the emotional resonance of the poem. The pacing is measured, much like the waiting and tension within the ICU, and the rolling thunder that provides the central metaphor of the poem mirrors the slow, heavy build-up of anxiety and grief.

The poem unfolds in a free verse style, without a strict rhyme scheme or metrical pattern, which allows the ideas and emotions to flow organically. The structure is fragmented, much like the fragmented emotions and events in the hospital, with short, declarative statements that mirror the brevity and starkness of life-and-death situations. The poem progresses from descriptions of the external world to the internal emotions of the characters, building up to the final images of physical suffering and illness. This structural flow from the external to the internal reinforces the theme of separation between the ordinary world and the world of those facing illness.

“Rolling Thunder” is a profound meditation on human vulnerability in the face of illness and mortality. Through its vivid imagery, emotional resonance, and powerful use of metaphor, the poem captures the intense anxiety, isolation, and suffering experienced by people in a hospital setting. The thunder rolling through the poem serves as both a literal and metaphorical presence, symbolizing the unstoppable forces that govern life, illness, and death. Through its careful balance of external and internal worlds, the poem invites readers to reflect on the fragility of life and the deep emotional toll of confronting the realities of illness.

References

Lin, F. N. (n.d.). 雷声滚滚 [Rolling Thunder] [Poem].