

Half-Mast

by Joanne Butler Henry

We are living at half-mast.

In Thousand Oaks, California

in Pittsburgh at The Tree of Life

Annapolis at the Capital Gazette

Santa Fe, Texas at a school,

In Las Vegas where a festival reigned,

until blood filled the streets.

In Parkland, they are mourning their young,

at Columbine and Sandy Hook, the same.

From sea to raging sea,

we're at half-mast.

Does it hurt less

to hear only the places that they died,

and not a person's name,

how far from where we are right now--

What made it happen there?

Reports come in to us as sums:

Las Vegas, 58. At Thousand Oaks, it's 12.

Orlando, 59. 53 injured.

A sickening score

in a deadly game

where the players don't go home.

They'll haunt us, though, these lives.

A boy named Noah, 6; Alaina, just 18,

two children, much beloved.

Cecil and David in Pittsburgh, two brothers close in life,
and death.

Richard, smart and funny--
quick to laugh;
and Jenny, grade-school teacher,
mother, wife.

Sonny, a caring nurse
whose smile could fill a room.

We are witnesses.

We came and saw;

We heard.

If only witnessed from a distance,
their names now written on our foreheads,
in blood not red, but black.

Spare us from
these records that we see:
"Most in a place of worship,"
The highest count for school, a city, state.
Screw your records; only gunmen and reporters care.
Perhaps a city mayor?
To the families of the dead,
your numbers are meaningless.

Report instead through tears
of those who no one can console.
And hold the grieving sister 'til she sleeps.
Look into eyes of parents, friends
and say to them that we will not forget.

For the futures that will never be lived,
tell stories of when they were still here,
tell them with spirit; tell them one by one.

Tell them again.

For even one of these
should be enough to break our hearts,
and bring us to our feet.

Wake us from comas,
and show us again
the mother whose young son
escaped the bullets of Las Vegas,
carried wounded from those streets,
the son now slain--
a shooter loose again,
this time in Thousand Oaks.

And listen when this mother says,
"Don't send me any prayers!"
"I - don't - want - prayers!" she cries,
"I -- want -- gun control."
She will not wave the flag,
not even half way up its spindly stem,
or lower her voice,
she will not be set aside,
(there is a private room for loved ones of the victims),
She shouts instead at anyone who will listen,
shouts until her voice gives out.
She shouts into the wind.

My lighted phone
shows one new post; a thread on Thousand Oaks.
This is the place that mother's son was killed.
An emoji and then two short lines of text.
"Prayers to the family," someone writes.
Two hands that fold together.
"Prayers," it says, "for peace."