

JOSEF
KAPLAN
POEM
WITHOUT
SUFFERING

To have it happen,
but to have it not
be considered
tragedy, at least not
in the traditional
sense, the way in
which one senses
form in drama
as human suffering.
It's not that.
It's not that
because suffering
is irrelevant
to the act itself.
That is, it creates
no suffering, at least
not in the moment

that it happens,
and at least not
for the children.
They don't suffer.
Not unless we
imagine suffering
to exist beyond our
ability to perceive it,
as with the fear that
we might, after our
expiration, appear
dead in every way
to friends, family,
and medical
professionals, when
we are in fact not dead,
but living, in a sense,
conscious underneath
that appearance, left
with all senses intact,
but simultaneously
lacking the will and
motor control necessary
to express their
presence—to move

a hand, or open
our mouth and
exclaim or signal
our distress at having
been washed and shaved,
our eyes closed, our jaw
sewn into some
natural-seeming shape,
slightly cocked
like an incision,
one made just below
our belly button,
a cut just wide
enough to
accommodate
an instrument
inserted to drain
us of our fluids
and replace them
with formaldehyde,
phenol, glutaraldehyde,
methanol, ethanol,
and water, arresting us
with this solution, as if
it were an argument,

an answer to the problem
of what to do with
an empty body,
or any emptiness at all,
like a grave is empty
and so calls to be filled,
and calls our body down
into it, in silence.
And worse, that
this sense persists
past the resolutions
of our body, so that
our senses carry us
through, in utter
horror, the steady
annihilation
of our corpse
as it is worn down
and away by
the onset of
moisture, by
the weight
of gravity, time,
and insects, whose
small bodies and

mindless purpose
grant them access
to any material
thing eventually.
But this is not death.
Death, as we imagine it,
is an end to suffering,
an edge across which
the fine caul of pain
that passes always
over the touch and
whisper of life
suddenly
disintegrates
and is gone,
like in this moment,
when a jacketed
hollow-point bullet,
sized approximately
0.224 inches (or
5.7 millimeters)
at its diameter
and housed in a
5.56 millimeter
by 45 millimeter

cartridge (the same specified dimensions of a NATO military cartridge, but not actually itself a NATO military cartridge, instead a .223 Remington cartridge, pronounced either “two-two-three” or “two-twenty-three Remington cartridge”), weighing between 40 and 90 grains (or, if you prefer, 2.6 to 5.8 grams), though most likely weighing 55 grains (the most common loading, by far), slides easily past hair, skin, and muscle, before shattering one or more of

the eight cranial
bones encasing
the brain. The
bone, grown of
calcium, sodium,
phosphorous, and
collagen, is too
fragile to deter
the momentum
of the lead cone
traveling at,
or even faster
than, 3,200 feet
per second,
this awesome
speed making
the force of
the projectile
devastating, even
at its miniscule
size, so that the
bone, resistant
until now against
events as various
as a tumble

from the top bunk
of a two-tiered
bed, or the impact
of a baseball
or a stone, or
a collision with
the sidewalk
or with the edge
of a wooden coffee
table, comes apart
and caves into
the connective
tissue and fibrous
membranes
that cushion the
brain, and then
deeper into
the brain's
cerebrospinal
fluid, the brain's
shock absorber
that protects
against the
kind of injury
conceivably

caused by the rate
at which the
head is now
flipping forward
from the shock
of the impact of
the bullet,
the bullet
that is still,
at this moment,
traveling so fast
that its speed exceeds
the speed at which
the tissues that
bind together the
child's head tear,
so that the bullet
is actually not
even ripping the
tissues, but simply
pushing them
out of its way,
as if engaged
in an unstudied
pantomime