

A Happy Death

Elizabeth Jennings

Written on hearing of the death of Osmund Lewry OP.

I

Death again but death in so friendly a fashion,
So courageous a guise that I should not weep but I do.
A man with cancer smiled at his dying for he
Knew that his spirit was moving out to whatever
Endurings there are. He wrote me a letter saying
Art was his joy, that Bach had made God his friend
And made him God's. His writing was straight and clear,
The syntax perfect, nothing at all to tell
He would die at any hour. I ought to have guessed, of course,
Since he said that doctors assured him there was no cure
But he wrote serenely that he was happier than
He had ever been before. In his letter he said
That 'Friends mean so much and I would dearly love
To see you before I die'. The letter came late
And I had been away. In the darkness I found
This white envelope with its message of friendship for me.
Early today I phoned his special number
And the line seemed to be engaged but it was not so
For when I rang the general number a kind
Voice told me that this priest had 'died last night'.
In shock I wept and all today I have been
Close to tears and I ought to be ashamed,
For this good man, a friar of fifty-seven years
Is out in the elements, one with the music of the spheres
Which God plays over and over in artists' minds
For the great ones to copy out in little fragments,
Angel messages putting this frightened world
At peace with itself. But still those words 'dearly love'
Move in all my thoughts, emotions and acts
Although I try to push this irony out,
What the cynic and sceptic would call this 'trick of fate',
But I don't believe in fate, I trust in purpose
And also in free-will. And I ask myself

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If pride is part of this grief, if what I feel
Is pity for self. The devils of doubt have come
Asking me 'Is there an after-life? Can you prove it?'
I cannot but as I read that letter again
And consider it many times, I begin to see
the only image that man has ever conjured
That makes a little sense of all our doings:
Another ship was launched only yesterday
And out on a calm sea this man sailed for ... is it
An island of the spirit? As a small child
I believed that God ruled from a throne of clouds
And what was literal then is useful now.
A breeze is up in this beautiful, ancient city
Where my friend died, a city where cogitation
Is commonplace. But I remember that art
And even some of the poems which I have written
Helped this noble soul beyond acceptance,
Took him to truth that only faith can anchor.
His anchor is up and he is far away
Where salty breezes carry him on green seas
And little waves turn over. The Hours he sang
Are the songs of Syrens or sea-winds. I'll let him go,
Be glad if I can, hold back the childish tears
Until I'm alone and I can let them flow,
For I live in this world of violent, cruel fears
Not the one my friend must know.

II

A Letter from the Dead

I have received a letter from the dead,
A happy letter came when the tulips stand
Like Easter candles and this letter said
Someone would 'dearly love to see me' and
'Before I die' I read.

A priest of fifty-seven and my friend
Although we had not spoken for perhaps
Half-a-dozen years came to his end
As he had wished at Easter. Tears are traps
But sometimes they can send

Absolving water down the cheeks. Here was
A death that this man saw as liberty
To be with God. I'm moved by so much grace
And in a tender sorrow I can see
That Christ brings living peace

To us when we are on the threshold of
Life and death. This man wrote he was now
Happy, but those words echo 'dearly love'.
The Easter post, alas, did not allow
Our meeting. Now I move

About lost in a sadness that is part
A lucid grief, an honest sorrow yet
Self is there too. Either in mind or heart,
Wherever our souls rest, I feel regret
For maybe that priest thought

I needed help since he'd been near me when
My first death happened suddenly abroad
Without a warning. This man shared my pain
Without a word. Now he rests with the Lord
Who sends down such fresh rain,

Who makes the cordial April evening sky
Go red, then pink and now it's pale indeed
And a small breeze moves blossoms to a sigh.
This brave man's gone but surely knows my need
For he lives where the high

Truths and little hopes are all at one.
I learn of death but as I do I feel
Love take me over. Sweet compassion's on
My world tonight. The dead, I think, can heal
When all time's fret has gone.

III

A Song for Death

Another music now, a song for death
Where the dying was so brave
That I need new instruments to praise it with.
It was a death you gave

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So joyfully. You were prepared to die
And happy in suffering as
You wrote a letter asking me if I
Could see you. So much grace

Sang its own music from the steady hand
Which wrote that I had been
Much in your mind this Easter. O my friend
If I could but begin

This week again and not have been away.
There was no fault I know
But what pain it had taken you to say
In that firm hand you'd so

Love—it was the word—to see me again
Before you died. There is
A music in the way you bore your pain,
Such hopeful harmonies.

Is there a music in the tears I shed
Now on this night when you
Have only left behind what we call dead?
Your spirit's in its true

Home at last. You said that Bach told you
God was your friend. Indeed
Your gracious going makes music that I too
Think of this night of need.

Need, I mean, to know there was no blame
But only chance that I
Was fifty miles away when your letter came.
Let it teach me how to die.

IV

Death of a Dominican Priest at Easter

There is no waking or sleeping, hearing or touching,
No taste, no scent and yet there must nonetheless be
Rich memories of these, deep thoughts alone at last,
Argument over and meditation only.
All at the end which delighted you now is pure,

Its own essence and nothing more. How fitting
That Bach's *Cantatas* carried you over the edge
Of living and dying to that state we in life
Come on only in prayer very rarely, in art more often, in love
That does not demand. You wrote me a graceful letter
In a scholarly hand. No-one could guess you were dying
Yet you knew you were and so did those about you.
They say you wanted to die at Easter and so
You did, my friend. You had brought God's Bread to me,
Consoled me fifteen years ago when my first
Death took place and all was darkness. You said
Few words but stayed beside me and saw all
My tears, you were the kindness of understanding
Moved by mercy. I felt the comfort in you
But something stronger also.
You wore no sign of your death but as men of God are,
Who give up their lives to becoming saints for others,
You were prepared indeed,
But you could not imagine that fifteen years on you would know
That you would be dying and utterly reconciled to it,
Totally happy. I had 'been much in your thoughts
At Easter' you wrote to me a week ago,
Said, though you had 'little voice, you would dearly love
To see me again before you died'. You told me
It was 'a privilege to have known a poet'.
I hardly understand what you meant for I still
Am much in grief, touched by your truth, absolved
By your sweet acceptance. I'd been away when your letter
Arrived and told me all this. I rang the next day
But you had died only twenty-four hours before,
Gone from our senses' reach but not from our wishes.
You are awareness now and comprehension,
One with the elements. Words are so literal and
So clumsy, falling, lying, rising again.
O you have risen as music rises, you died
When all were thinking of Resurrection, when spring
Was blithe and full and blossoms were everywhere.
Your death was beautiful, all your brothers around you.
O be my hope in your happiness. I have your letter
Full of assurance. I do not pray for you, no,
But to your spirit, one with the other saints,
O teach me how poetry must be selfless, let music
Be new in all that I write, O leave your mark,
Serene encouragement, hope in the purpose of dark.