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AN EPISTLE TO LEOPARDI

for Professor M.W. Ukas

I am reading your poems, Giacomo:
you pondered the problem of death,
so I am pondering it too.
The problem of death.
Nothing comes to mind.

“Oh, death! Dark tunnel . . . steep abyss . . .
annihilation. . . .” I say to myself,
for I’d like to tremble
and break out in goose-pimples
and hear my teeth clatter,
or at least have shivers go up and down my spine,
but I feel nothing.

“Oh, death! Eternal peace . . . tranquillity . . .
pleasant rest after the turmoil
of a laborious life . . .
how glad I would be. . . .”
I try to rejoice, so I imagine
how much longer death’s holiday would be
than the coming long weekend,
but I can’t rejoice over it.

“Death must be either a horror
or a harmony for the poet!”
(I reproach myself as if I were my own stern father),
I still don’t feel remorse
(as if I were my own naughty child).
Perhaps I’m not a poet? . . . I don’t care.
Who knows what a poet is, anyway?

Death.
I wouldn't exist.
I wouldn't be unhappy,
if I wasn't.
So what's there to worry about if there's nothing there?

Death.
I'd go on existing.
I'd wake up and see life's all a dream.
All right then.
If there's an afterlife, there's no death.
So what's there to think about if there's no such thing?

Summing up: I don't know what death is all about.
If there is death, it's nothing,
so it's meaningless.
If there is no death, it's meaningless,
so it's nothing.
Both ways it's nothing.
What annoys me, though, is that I don't know
which one of the two possibilities is true;
in other words, that I don't understand death.
But this happens to be another problem:
there are a lot of things I don't understand,
they all annoy me —
so what's so special about this one?

I have to write an essay tonight.
Tomorrow I have to write some letters.
The day after I have to take the kid
to the planetarium.
On Sunday I have to take some pictures.
Next week I have to translate some poems.
Sometime in the future I would like to build
a table with an interchangeable top
so that by pushing various buttons,
it could become a chess-board, a scrabble-board,
a tic-tac-toe board, a backgammon-board,
or any other board demanded by the game. . . .

I'll always occupy
my days and weeks and years somehow,
because if I don't do something,
I am bored,
therefore I'll always perform fascinating
activities to stave off boredom:
I'll issue blue lines on white paper —
I'll discuss interesting things with boring people,
or boring things with interesting people —
I'll doodle — play the piano — fake love to women
go to concerts or galleries — or just drive around . . .
Existence alone is not enough.

Yes, Giacomo, my dear dead friend,
Italian count, poet, philosopher and misfit,
whom I know so well, though you don't know me at all,
you see,
your problem was not death, but existence,
sheer Existence
against which we have but one weapon: Life.

Death is no problem. Everything dies.
Even the Moon will die, although you spoke of it
as being eternal. By now we know
that even the Sun is mortal as are all the giant
celestial bodies. The Universe itself
was born, lives, will die. But the larger things are,
the longer they last. At least this is the way
it seems to us.

Compared with the miniscule Quark, this short-lived
subatomic particle recently discovered,
even we are immortal.

And the Quark is wrong when it thinks (if it thinks) us eternal —
as we are wrong when we think the Universe eternal —
as you were wrong when you thought the Moon eternal:
Nothing is eternal.

Units or individuals are but occasional
comings-together of matter. They unite. They disperse.
Then they take on a new shape for a while. And so on.

Everything's like this. We are too. Against this, rebellion is ridiculous. These are the rules of the game. We are just not exceptions, that's all.

I must end this letter, my friend,
my much older friend (considering how old matter is:
almost two hundred years ago somewhere something composed
itself
to become you, and later on me, here and now),
my much younger friend too (since mankind when you lived
was two centuries younger), our real age
— usually counted in years — doesn't really matter,
a year here, a year there, when we're talking about Eons . . .
I must end this letter to you, my friend,
in order to finish my essay about you.

We'll meet again soon,
I hope,
If I've the time, I may even write you again
(although I hate writing to friends
who never answer,
and you are one of those,
although — and I say this to excuse you —
sometimes even when you were alive and ill,
it was hard for you to write,
and since you died
it became even harder.
However,
even if I won't have time to write,
we still might meet:
if there's an afterlife — there;
if there isn't — there too,
in which case it may well be that we've already met,
and that one of your former atoms now resides somewhere
in one of my ear-lobes, fulfilling an important role.
(Forgive me this assumption,
I don't intend to degrade you:
it may even be the other way around
so that one of the molecules in my brain

was part of the white of your big toenail
I hope there's no misunderstanding.)

All in all I — unlike you —
am comforted by the thought
that what we call by two names
“exciting activities” and “boredom of life”
are phases of one illness
and death is the cure for both.

Isn't it true, my Giacomo?
Since June the 15th of 1837
you haven't been suffering, have you?
You haven't been excited;
you haven't been bored. . .
and still, you see, there's no trouble,
everything's going smoothly, everything's in running order,
life is no more a problem,
nor is death. . . .

This incidental notion, in itself, proves
that death can't be at all the greatest problem,
for in death death is no problem,
for death solves the problem of death, thus proving
that life is in error
when it believes death to be the greatest problem,
thus life is the problem, for life is in error . . .
but then, this problem of life too
is solved by death.

Until then
we just have to pull through somehow.

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