

The Lobster Quadrille

The night of April 28th, 1993 is the date of my twenty three year old son Philip's death in his sleep – due to damage done to his heart from teenage drug abuse. Sadly it happened at a time when he was emerging from the habit – looking good; we had just celebrated his birthday. Then came the news. Every once in a while I renew an essay I wrote then.

I didn't sleep for days after I received the news. A world had come to an end – a vast emptiness – even though he had become a problem child, a vast emptiness! - which I tried to fill with all the classic resources our human experience of death. For what does our religious and literary tradition attempt to do by way of *Job* and *Genesis*, *The Psalms* and *Gospels*, the writings of Paul and *Revelation* and Dante's *Paradiso* and poems like Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" but bridge the abyss of death to deposit us in a place of green fields and a city of emeralds and pearls. For example, Philip died during an Eastertide when the very name Philip occurred no less than six times during the Gospel readings - once in direct conversation with Jesus saying: "Lord, show me the Father and I shall want nothing more."

I took up Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Rilke's poem "Death Experienced" . . . *when you went, a streak of reality / broke in upon this stage through that fissure / where you left . . .* anything whereby I might benefit from humanity's age old poetic (not morbid) experience of death. And then I came up with Lewis Carroll and his classic *Alice in Wonderland*, which breaks beyond the deadpan features of everyday logic. He does this by taking Alice out of our everyday world into a realm where rabbits and mice and a Mad Hatter and disappearing Cat introduce her to dimensions of reality that lie beyond the scope of our mortal eyes and assumptions. And among her tutors are a Gryphon and Mock Turtle who introduce her to a mystic dance called The Lobster Quadrille.

It's danced along the seashore (at the edge of that mysterious, oceanic realm that lies beyond the boundaries of life as we know it). And it requires that all the seals and other seaside creatures dance each with a lobster partner, forward, backward, roundabout and then throw the lobster as far out to sea as possible. And as they dance they sing a song in which a codfish invites a timid snail (symbolic of our own inclination to hide within our shells and never trust ourselves to realms unknown) to join them. The lyric goes: "*You really have no notion how delightful it will be / When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters out to sea!*" / *But the snail replied, "Too far, too far!" and gave a look askance. / Said he thanked the codfish kindly but he would not join the dance. // "What matters it how far we go?" his scaly friend replied. / "There is another shore, you know, upon the other side. / The further off from England the nearer is to France. / Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance."*

That song said to me: don't stand upon the shore of life brooding over the emptiness that seems to await us beyond its boundaries. "*What matters it how far we go? . . . There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.*" Since my son's death that's something I believe now more than ever before in my life.

See you in France, Phil.

Geoff Wood