

## *Elegy for Everyone*

It's best to read the obituaries first.  
Wonderful people die most every day,  
people you may only know in passing  
but that was always true of everyone.  
I read today of Sister Joan Margaret,  
whose heart gave out. She is so lovely  
in her photograph, although it's jagged,  
probably a download from the Web,  
which makes it seem ephemeral and frail  
and easily compared to life itself,  
unless you think of everlasting life.  
She wasn't one to have her picture taken;  
they used the one they had, in which she's not  
alone, which is itself remarkable.  
They usually crop the others from the photo.  
But she is with a girl who's nine or ten.  
It is a joy to see—although to say  
that she is lovely gives the wrong impression:  
"Short and square," is how she is described.  
What's more, there is a tooth that shows itself  
too prominently in her aged mouth  
when she is smiling, as she is smiling here.  
That's what made me look again, to see  
the perfect match they made, the pretty girl  
in Haiti mischievously grinning back  
missing that very tooth in her own smile.  
They clearly take delight in one another—  
What is it makes the self one goes around in  
such a complement to other selves?

A hurricane has flooded the main road.  
There is an infant floating on a table,  
and here comes Sister Joan—driving a jeep!  
She hikes up her nun's habit and wades out  
to rescue Gertie Gay, orphaned in the storm,  
whom she will raise, and who will speak today  
in Roxbury at her memorial.  
The happy ending makes it comedy,  
as even death is rendered comic  
by the Resurrection. No wonder they can laugh.  
That is a cross of black enameled wood  
she's wearing on her chest. It's not an "S."

It's best to read the obituaries first,  
before the news and sports. They're better written.  
It comes of knowing rules of composition,  
especially Beginning Middle End.  
Sister Joan was ninety-nine years old.  
Her story's got a lot of middle to it.  
There is a man called Jo-Jo, a fine artist.  
She had him fitted with limbs, years ago;  
he had been just a torso of a boy.  
With her it's literal that the self should find  
completion in the other. She knew herself.  
She'd been adopted when her mother died  
shortly after giving birth to her.  
She knew first hand before she learned to speak  
the stranger's palm cradling her infant head,  
and knew by heart a thing the Bible taught,  
having felt its truth before she read  
*religion undefiled before the Father*  
*is this: to visit the fatherless.*

Odd phrasing—

almost as if the Father is the father  
who is missing and who will be pleased  
if we should visit his abandoned children.

Sister Joan built a school for the disabled,  
which started in a crèche beneath a tree.  
At first there were three children gathered there,  
one blind, one deaf, the other someday crippled.  
She must have borrowed blindness from the child,  
tried on the other's deafness not to hear  
how greatly overmatched she'd always be;  
she learned the cripple's way of going forward;  
she studied where to lean.

Today three-hundred-sixty handicapped  
attend St. Vincent's School in Port-au-Prince.  
I think of all the hundreds unenrolled,  
the endless repetition of mistakes  
the Maker makes, from which you'd think he'd learn.  
Unless we are to think he's only human;  
and so she drives a Jeep around the country  
in his service, picking up what's fallen,  
laughing with the broken ones. No,  
her god I think is wholly one of us  
but something more—a vital something more.

Only human doesn't get things done,  
not the things that matter. Only human  
sends a check and gets a calendar.  
Only human gets enthusiastic  
now and then. It never lasts. So what.  
The things that matter always take forever.  
Only human hasn't time for that.

*Notes for "Elegy for Everyone"*

**"as even death is rendered comic / by the Resurrection"**

"The name 'comedy' comes from Comus, a Greek fertility god. In ancient Greece 'comedy' also named a ritual springtime procession presumed to celebrate cyclical rebirth, resurrection, and perpetual rejuvenation."

—The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 224

**"Only human doesn't get things done, / not the things that matter."**

"For the beginning of culture is cult. Apart from the worship of God, human beings can- not in practice (whatever may be said in theory) transcend themselves—not, at least, in the large numbers needed to sustain a civilization. Unless human beings have a vision of something larger than their own natures, and beyond the bounds of their own natures, they cannot be pulled out of themselves; they cannot be inspired, and they will not *aspire*, in the way that Gothic steeples aspire."

—"Troubled Continent," by Michael Novak (The National Review Feb. 13, 2006)