Ruminations by John McGlynn:

And Death Grows More Intimate

Growing up in a close-knit community where kinship lines often overlapped; attending a Catholic primary school where Mass was a daily requirement; and serving as an altar boy following my First Communion in 1959, makes it likely that I attended almost every funeral mass that was held at St. Anthony de Padua Church in Germantown, Wisconsin, between 1957, the year I entered grade school, and 1966, when I graduated and went on to a public high school where God appeared only in the Pledge of Allegiance at roll time. “Death” was as familiar to me as “Life,” the latter of which was symbolized by christenings, weddings, and other celebratory coming-of-age rituals. Even so, in 1957, when I was five, “death” was an abstraction, whose real meaning I could not comprehend until he came to call close to home and took with him, upon departure, my first cousin, Little Joe.

Just as I was called “Little John” because my father’s name was also John, “Little Joe” was given that moniker so as not to be confused with our uncle by the same name. Joe was born in December 1951. My sister, Jane, was born earlier that year, in February. Joe’s brother, Jerry, was born in August 1952, thus making them “Irish twins,” siblings born less than twelve months apart (a term I did not know to be derogatory until later in life).
As I was born in October 1952, the four of us—Jane, Joe, Jerry, and I—were of similar age and at family picnics and gatherings we often played together with Jane, in a prim little apron, acting the role of beleaguered mommy to three sons.

Jane had a hard time controlling Jerry and me but not so, Little Joe, who was not just obedient but almost docile. As he was older than Jerry and I, I could not understand why this was so. None of us knew, maybe not even Little Joe, that he had leukemia.

I remember becoming jealous of Little Joe in May of 1957 when he, for reasons as yet unexplained, was honored to receive First Communion at the same time as my sister, Mary, and his brother, Tad, who were born in 1949. Comprehension of the situation continued to escape me until October of that year when, one night midweek, after milking the cows, my parents bundled their children into their car and took us to Edgewood, the home of Uncle Tom and Aunt Dimp. Visiting was for Sundays, not during the week.

The living room at Edgewood was dark, illuminated only by a dim standing lamp and candles on the bureau. On the worn sofa were Tom and Dimp, shoulders hunched and heads bowed, while inside what I first thought to be a large and fancy wooden box was Little Joe, hands crossed on his chest with a rosary in his fingers and dressed in the same crisp shirt and trousers I had coveted at his First Communion five months previously. As Mother nudged me forward and told me to say goodbye to Joe, awareness finally dawned that we would never play together again and the following day, when that fancy box in which Little Joe was sleeping, was lowered into the ground at Saint Bridget’s Cemetery and Aunt Dimp collapsed in Uncle Tom’s arms, death became more intimate for me.

One of the two common denominators that link every living organism is the inescapable eventuality of death. The other is genesis. Not surprising, therefore, that death is a favorite motif in every creative field. Literature is no exception to this rule and Western poets from Dante Alighieri to Robert Frost and beyond have, through the ages, explored this mystery.

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I first got to know “Pak Bagio” in 1986 when Goenawan Mohamad and Sapardi Djoko Damono invited him to join us in establishing a foundation devoted to literary translation. As he was a well regarded author and respected translator, I was very pleased when he agreed to become a co-founders in this venture. Over the years, I gained innumerable insights into life from these august men but it was Pak Bagio whose poetry became a crucial assist for me in future encounters with death.

In the following poems, lines from which I transcribe in prose-form, Pak Bagio shows us different ways of dealing with death. In “Battlefield Prayer (Doa di Medan Laga),” for instance, he indicates the need for strength and, if necessary, reliance on God: “Grant unto me patience as immense as the universe to overcome this torture and to forget this
suffering.” In “Eulogy (Pidato di Kubur Orang),” he speaks of acquiescence: “When the thugs burnt his house, and shot him in the head, he did nothing, expressed no regret; he was too good for this world.” In “At the Foot of the Bed (Di Ujung Ranjang),” he offers a similar view but also but implies that death is not something that should be feared: “Asleep, there is no guarantee, that you will wake again. Sleep is preparation for a deeper sleep. At the foot of the bed, an angel watches, and coos a lullaby.” Finally, in “And Death Grows More Intimate (Dan Kematian Makin Akrab),” he suggests that we view death as a “convivial friend,” one who will connect us with the loved ones we have lost. As the deceased speaker in the poem declares, “You see, there is no barrier between us. I am still tied to the world by promises and memories, while death is only a veil, a concept whose threshold is easily crossed.”

I knew nothing of poetry in 1957, the year that Little Joe died, but now, 63 years later, a period during Death appeared time and again—And far too often, it seems of late!—whenever he does show his intimate face, I remind him, through Pak Bagio’s verse, of the friend that he is supposed to be and tell him that when he finally comes for me to not delay but to take me directly to Little Joe, Pak Bagio, and all other relatives and who are there, waiting for me.

John McGlynn

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PS: This one is for Jamie James (24 June 1951 – 9 February 2020).
January Activities

The Lontar Foundation Board of Trustees and Supervisors held its first meeting of the year along with the Foundation’s managers and executives. From left to right: Toeti Herat, Kestity Pringgoharjono, Yuli Ismartono, Tuti Zairati, Hani Hasanah, John McGlynn, Arief T. Surowidjojo, Eugene Galbraith, Douglas Ramage and Amir Abadi Jusuf.

A creative writing workshop titled “Papua Panggil, ko tulis ko pu kisah” (Papua is calling you to write your story) was held on February 28-29 in Papua’s provincial capital of Jayapura and attended by 20 participants who were pre-selected for their short-story submissions. The event was opened by Yuli Ismartono of Yayasan Lontar and Cenderawasih University officials as the co-organizers, with the generous support of PT Freeport Indonesia.

Wikilatih Workshop in Papua, on how to write articles in Indonesian Wikipedia language, held on February 26-27, at Jayapura, the provincial capital of Papua. The event was a collaboration between Lontar, Wikimedia Indonesia and Cenderawasih University and supported by PT Freeport Indonesia.

Yuli Ismartono, Lontar Executive Director at Cenderawasih University in Jayapura on Feb 28, presenting copies of Lontar publications: the Modern Library of Indonesia series, the Anthologies of Drama, Poetry and Short Stories and By the Way series, to the University Rector Apollo Safanpo, witnessed by Riza Pratama, PT Freeport Indonesia’s VP of Corporate Communications.
Upcoming Activities

You are invited to a show and sale of recent works by Robert Pearce at the Lontar Foundation, a percentage of proceeds from which will go to Lontar. In addition to works by Robert Pearce, we will also be selling other art work and assorted objects such as a Chinese scholar’s table, a Central Javanese chest, Batak priest canes, and an Asmat canoe!
Click the following link for a preview of Pearce’s work: https://youtu.be/Nv88KcTVaGw

On April 4-5 the Bali Purnati Foundation, in association with Ciputra Artrepreneur, will present “Under the Volcano,” a dance-theater performance inspired by the classical Malay poem, Syair Lampung Karam, which was published by Lontar, in English and Malay, under the title, Krakatau.
For additional information, go to https://bit.ly/3awaQXn
Tickets may be purchased through LOKET.Com or GOTIX.