



This Current Death Is Not the First

by Mary Kennan Herbert

As a seven-year-old I attended my first funeral,
not an unhappy event on a sunny summer afternoon.
Kith and kin gathered to share hymns and a meal,
hands reached to out to console and heal in June.
That was a person in the coffin, someone who died.
Impressive, judging by adult responses. "Too
sad for you?" they asked, kindly. "No," I replied.
Sunlight and shadow mingled, made it all true,
marking this event. Death in Tennessee was old-
and new. They remembered it from "The War."
I was initiated into ceremony, ritual made bold-
a young girl learning about tears and stars.



Death in the Family

by Mary Kennan Herbert

This casket does not sparkle in the candlelight,
no metal trim to catch the light, no gleam
to catch our line of vision as it moves smoothly
up the aisle to be blessed by Holy Water.
It's just a wooden box, almost old-fashioned
like a dead cowboy's final container, a coffin
worthy of a John Ford western. Inside,
no suit nor tie, just a winding sheet, Ancient
Egyptian style, ready for the soothing flames
to bear the body away. Pretty neat I'd say, to
dispense with so much contemporary nonsense,
a box will do. The brass should be recycled
for some other bed, or a ring next to the carousel
in the summer of dreams, a merry-go-round
of meanings, a ream of papers he might
inscribe if he were to join the staff of scribes.



Why not? He can now travel back, forward, up
and around if he wishes, and sing in some shower,
never again to fear admonitions to keep it quiet
or please shut up. No, like the mockingbird,
he can now sing all night with the box
bumping along in harmony, in a rhythm
even Mr. Death might nod to, who might clap,
intrigued by some hint of eternity, a promise.

More Dancing, More Death

by Mary Kennan Herbert

For a dance of the dead, a winding sheet
instead of a tuxedo. Casper the Ghost,
images from Poe and Mad Magazine
may suit many, rather than a chorus
line of top-hatted skeletons from
All Souls Day or Day of the Dead,
that jolly holiday. I own a little



bony scholar, from South of the Border,
at work at his desk, wee grinning cadaver
with three books at hand, a trinity of wit,
wisdom, and collected bones to pick
with you, dead guys. You deserted me.
We could resume dancing, but the winding
sheet trips me up. Suit and tie may be
a better choice for a farewell solo.
And a top hat proffers Astaire flair.

Mary Kennan Herbert, is an American poet originally from St. Louis, Missouri, and now lives in Brooklyn, NY, where she teaches literature and writing courses at Long Island University in Brooklyn. Her poems have appeared in many literary and theological journals as well as periodicals in the health care field, including *JAMA*, *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, *The Journal of Trauma and Loss*, and in a forthcoming issue of *The Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life and Palliative Care*. Several collections of her poetry have been published by Ginninderra Press in Australia.

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