

Franco  
Arminio

Postcards  
from the Dead  
2007-2017

otata's bookshelf

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*(Cartoline dai morti 2007-2017)*

translated by  
*John Martone*

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*www.edizioninotttempo.it*

*notttempo@edizioninotttempo.it*

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<https://otatablog.wordpress.com/>

[otatahaiku@gmail.com](mailto:otatahaiku@gmail.com)

**A print edition is available.**

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*This is Mnemosyne's tomb. When death touches you  
go to Hades' well-built houses: There's a fountain on the right  
and beside it a straight white cypress;  
descending from there the souls of the dead cool themselves.  
Do not get too close to the fountain;  
but in front of it you will find cool water running  
from the fen of Mnemosyne, and the guards stand above,  
who will ask you in their dark heart  
what you are looking for in the ruinous shadows of Hades.  
Tell them: I am the some of Greve and starry Heaven,  
Parched with thirst I am dying; and they give you, at once  
cold water that flows from Mnemosyne's marsh.  
And truly they will show you kindness by the will of the underworld's king,  
and truly they will let you drink from Mnemosyne's marsh;  
And finally you will take the sacred way the glorious ones  
take as well, and the other initiates and possessed of Dionysos.*

\* Text written upon an "orhic" gold foil recovered at the necropoli of Hipponion (today Vibo Valentia) in a tomb containing a female skeleton, dating from the V-VI century BCE, preserved at the state archaeological museum of Vibo Valentia. Translated from the Italian version of Giorgio Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Adelphi, Milan 1977.

# POSTCARDS FROM THE DEAD



Here the end of spring and end of winter are more or less the same thing. The first roses are the signal. I saw one of them while they took me in the ambulance. I shut my eyes thinking of that rose while the driver and nurse up front spoke of a new restaurant where they show you a good time and charge very little.

I had just finished watching television. I felt weak. I was stretched out on the sofa and felt like a gigantic hand was pressing down on my heart. I thought I was dying and hadn't bought a niche. Surely they would put me underground. And that would be the final failure of my life.

I taught letters in a middle-school. One morning, while writing the outline of an Italian assignment, I felt ill. They took me to hospital. I didn't have hands anymore, or eyes or legs — my heart beat in the middle of nothing.

I took the current, struck dead in a flash. We were working at the cinema, the work was nearly done. I had just returned from Switzerland. Was happy.

Leaving the bar I took the wrong street. The wind was very strong and it was snowing. My heart froze under my coat.

Later my day came. Wake up, my wife said. Wake up, she kept repeating.

I'd almost gotten used to the sickness. It was a feast day,  
and I was well dressed. I watched my wife as she went  
around in the house, worn out. I was dead from the blow  
of a cough while trying to eat a mandarin.

I ate a lot of roast meat and now my wife is convinced that's why I came down with intestinal disease. I was sick many times, but a little bit for show. When the sickness really arrived it no longer went away. I stopped eating meat. My wife fed me baby food but there wasn't anything to do.

In the final hours the priest came, then the physician.  
There was always someone there beside me. I didn't eat for  
ten days. Now and then I watched the crucifix and thought  
all of life's a swindle.

It was a beautiful day. I didn't want to die with all that beautiful sun outside. I'd always thought I'd die at night, when the dogs were baying. And instead I died at midday, with the start of a cooking program on the tv.

I tried in various ways but without conviction. In the end I hanged myself.

I was a bachelor. I died in my sleep. They found me two days later. The whole house was full of the smell of my death. A neighbor put her hand on my forehead. It smelled of rotten apples.

I had just said that I felt well. My mother was cooking. My father had stepped out for a breath of air. I started again on that game of solitaire I could never win.

It was an October day. The sun came out, the papers came out. There were cars in the street and people talking in the bars. I was set apart abruptly. It was my moment, I don't know how to explain it.

I am one of those who a minute before dying was well.

They say early morning is the most common time of death. For years I rose at four and stood waiting for the ugly hour to pass. I would read or watch television. Sometimes I went out to the street. I died at seven in the evening and it wasn't anything special. That vague annoyance that had always been the world, that vague annoyance of being in the world was suddenly over.

I fell from the courtroom bench. I was sleepy that morning and had finished my coffee. Trials were to be held, there would be acquittals or convictions. I am certain that if thermos had been full, I'd still be alive.

I had half taken off my winter shirt. I tired of hanging them one by one and finding a place to hide them. There were too many things in my house. Too many shirts, too many shoes, too many coats, too many scarves. I fell to the floor squeezing myself into a sweater. It was a green one I had never worn.

I had gone to the city. I was in line for over an hour. A vein burst deep in my head. A few seconds later it was dead as a car motor.

I was ninety nine. My children only came to the nursing home to talk about my hundred-year birthday. It didn't mean a thing to me. I didn't hear them; I only heard my weariness. It happened under the eyes of my first-born daughter. She was giving me an apple slice and talking about the cake with its number 100. The one must be tall as a cane and the zeroes big as bicycle wheels, she was saying.

I was shaving an old man. I was forty-nine and he ninety.  
I died with the razor in my hand. I toppled backwards, as  
from a horse.

My husband threw me down the well. He had gone into a rage, a fury I'd never seen before. I shouted as he dragged me, but no one was there, just the sparrows going back and forth, building their nest below the roof of our house.

I'm sorry for you, I said to my wife who was clutching my hands. When we're well, no one clutches our hands like that. No one.

It was an autumn day and I was alone in the piazza. I held my cane tightly between my hands. The wind came from everywhere. It lifted me into the sky along with the bench.

Blood from the mouth. Everything was broken inside.  
Outside the clock went on, the geranium continued to  
soak up the water that I'd given it the day before.

A fly landed on my sweaty face. I was dying and it liked the nasty smell.

My last breath was an ant's. It was so small that no one noticed. They were all agitated, they were already looking for my new shoes, the handkerchief, my black jacket.

Only my mother still believed I'd recover. She boiled the milk for me every morning. She went to buy the paper. I died when she wasn't there, she had gone to pray to Padre Pio for me.

I went for walks, ate little, tried not to get angry with anyone. It didn't make any difference.

I was playing billiards. Then the usual story: *have something to drink, sit down*. Someone who takes your pulse, someone who continuously says your name.

I was eleven and played at hanging myself. The gate fell on me. A leaf of hammered iron smashed my face.

I was taking a stress test. The doctor had just told me to keep pedalling.

All because of a cow in the middle of the highway one night.

I died of old age, even though I wasn't so old, I was fifty-nine.

When they told me I had cancer, I didn't go out into the piazza anymore. I went out into the country in my car. I leaned the seat back a bit and opened the windows to take in the air.

I've always been an unfortunate sort. The day of my funeral they talked about the funeral of the pharmacist's daughter, dead the day before.

It was a Wednesday in January. There was snow in the air.  
I had just spoken with Vincent the marble-cutter. I hadn't  
the slightest idea I was about to die.

One who dies at home dies in the bedroom or bath, almost never in the kitchen, and sometimes in the living room. I died on the balcony.

I had gone to the blacksmith. We were talking about the railings. How can one believe in god when one dies while talking about a railing?

No one explained a thing to me. I had to do everything alone: remain fixed and mute, chill myself, start decomposing on my own.

My wife expected a final word, but I didn't say a thing  
although I opened and closed my mouth continuously.

They found me after three days. The fire was out. I was on the ground, by the door. I left a lot of money. It's not that I was tight-fisted, it's that I wasn't able to spend anything. I liked to go about in the country. They don't sell anything in the country.

The priest had already come a lot of times. Everything was ready but at the end I didn't manage to die. Sometimes I was able to eat or get out of bed. It went on like this for a year. A score of extreme unctions, my son coming three times from Switzerland. When it finally happened, there was truly no one.

I was an elementary-school teacher on pension. I had been a widower for a little while. And that's all.

My wife still complains that the doctors didn't treat me well, but I always felt I was incurable, even when Italy won the world cup, even when I got married.

In the mental institution around five in the morning.  
My neighbor telling me, *Don't die, don't die, tomorrow  
your daughter's coming to visit, don't die, wait for her to  
come see you. Wait.*

They put lots of dolls in my coffin. And even the tombstone is covered with toys. Every birthday my mother buys something new and brings it to me.

I was beautiful. I had a handsome fiancé. It was a long illness. I seemed to get better but then it would start again. He waited months to be able to give me a kiss.

I was unconscious. Gerard the mechanic put me in his 127 and brought me to the hospital. I remember that him endlessly repeating *Mother of God, Mother of God, what a mess!*

My sisters were helping my mother to dress me. Then my father arrived. He came close and while he looked at me, the desire to be alive returned, and to embrace him just for a moment.

It rained the day I died. It was my birthday. It was four in the afternoon and already night. My mother's weeping was beautiful, it opened the housewalls and touched the roots of the plants. Even my father in the picture frame changed his aspect, his skin became lighter.

I had cirrhosis of the liver, but up to a few days before dying, I went all around in my scarf from Naples, the *Sporting News* under my arm.

The day my doctor told me I had cancer I lost two kilos. I lost them crying.

The morphine quieted my pain, but not the vexation with everything I saw. Finally a slice of ham on a plate bothered me, the sound of coffee ready to be served.

In certain cases, mine for instance, death's the icing on the cake.

On the first day of hunting season someone took me for a quail.

They came every evening to talk about their sauces and complain about their husbands. When I died, the neighbors were unhappy because they lost their pastime.

I died at seven in the morning. Another way to start the day.

Those who have no fear of death — I've never understood them, and now I understand them even less.

I always believed I had some hideous illness, but the doctors always told me I didn't have a thing. Now I'd like go and to kick them one by one.

I was in Zurich. On the police report they wrote that I went upstairs to my father's house. The truth is I was thrown from the fifth floor.

The one thing that made me happy was the Nativity scene, every year more ornate, arranged in front of the door to my house, which was always open. I divided the one room with white and red work-in-progress tape. I offered a glass of beer to all who stopped and admired the scene, before explaining everything, cartons, moss, sheep, magi, rivers, castles, shepherds and damsels, the grotto, the child, the comet, the electrical system. The electrical system was my masterpiece. I died alone on Christmas night watching the scene with all its lights lit.

My body is a vase full of earth; in the midst of the black  
and brown remains the blue of my blouse.

The day of my funeral was a day like any other. And even the day after.

At a certain point you feel something begin to go sour, perhaps it begins with a slight inflammation, a point of acid.

I always felt breathless and out of place in life. Now, finally, I rest tranquilly in a tomb near mine.

My name was Alfred. I lived in Germany for thirty years and came home for the pension. I died the evening of the earthquake, in the bar. The one playing cards with me was spared.

I fell down in front of the fridge. My wife found me with my hands on my face, as if I were ashamed of what had happened.

The day of the procession, about two o'clock. I was one of those who carried the saint. I didn't get any relief. We were passing the most crowded point. I wanted to be seen sweaty, suffering.

Of all the things in the world I only miss the air. Perhaps for this reason, the last thing I said to my wife was open the window.

I was left on the ground in my vineyard. I called on god  
and the madonna and all the saints. I wanted someone to  
help me but instead it started to rain.

My name's Mario. My name was also Mario when I was alive, but now my name has a purpose.

Now I'm curious about something a little silly. I would like to know if afterwards my cousin Mauricio managed to sell his second-hand Golf, for which he wanted six million.

I've always been an optimist. And it's ok even so.

I was plowing. The tractor flipped over and I ended underneath. I only had time to think I hadn't paid it off.

I was at the sea; I had just come out of the water and was drying myself. I fell on a sand castle.

Easter Monday. And also the day after. Yes, because when one begins to die one doesn't finish anymore.

At first the one who loves us wants to have us back, then that one gets used to the fact that we're dead, then for everyone we're fine where we are.

I'm not dead yet, but I've put my photo on the tombstone anyway, beside that of my wife.

My name was Peter. I got drunk every night and beat my wife. A lot of people came to the funeral. I was friendly in the piazza, I offered everyone a drink. It was home that gave me a case of the nerves, it was the smell of my wife and the house.

I'm here among the highest niches, in the north wall of the cemetery. The snow gets in through a fissure and stays for months.

Me, too. Yes, even me.

## *THE THORN*

Death's a very small thorn  
stuck in the blood from who knows when  
it's a ballerina who has chosen my head  
for her exercises  
a river that passes under all my bridges  
death comes to mind  
while I read while I'm put on my shoes  
when I take a shower  
when I'm talking on the phone  
sitting at the computer  
at funerals at festivals  
when there's blood on the toilet paper  
when they ask me if I'm tired  
I'd like to live at least one hour  
without death  
without its shadow  
I'd like to go out for some air  
really cry and laugh  
without death's watching me  
I'd like to shout to grieve  
without being here dazed  
in the words I write  
I'd like to fall and get up

drive myself  
into life like a nail  
dry out in sun seize rain  
kiss snow  
leave silence and speaking behind  
step out of my body and universe  
and this time that gulps us down  
I'm ready for huge businesses  
for death is putting its heel on me  
is afraid of me for in me  
there's nothing and death wants all of nothing  
for itself.

# BREATHLESS STORIES

My eyes were always full of tears. My name was Elvira, and now I don't know where all those tears I cried ended up, all gone, not a single tear was saved. I only hope that when one of you cries, my tears will also be there in the midst of yours. We aren't eternal, but all tears are equal, and sorrow is. Only the names change. I was Elvira.

I died at Oswald's wedding. I was dancing with my brother's wife. I danced and drank, the wedding seemed to have started months ago, seemed like it would never end. The couple had already made two children during the reception. Many of those invited had turned gray. The children were no longer children. The wife's father had died, my brother Nino had emigrated to Switzerland. And all the while I danced. I kept dancing until my heart broke, shattered, the way a plate shatters when it hits the floor.

Now that I'm dead I tell you: pay attention when you greet an old person, when you watch a child, be happy to screw in a lightbulb, to lace your shoes, but more than anything enjoy the beauty of turning for home, it doesn't matter whether from a long trip or a funeral.

I never enjoyed myself, never trusted other people and never trusted life: How can you trust something that can end at any moment? My own ended while I was putting potatoes in the ashes. It was my favorite supper. Potatoes a little burned and a glass of wine. And if it snowed outside, my digestion was all the better. I liked the world buried in snow.

I worked at the post-office in Milan. I was happy because I got my transfer to the country. Then the tumor came and I returned to Milan. I remember the train trips. The tumor and I in the compartment, my husband who paced the corridor. He didn't clasp my hand when I died because he was pacing in the room.

I was a widow for thirty years. My husband died in Germany and my daughter in Turin. One morning I was paralyzed. I was in a coma for two years but didn't die. In bed I got smaller and smaller, the nurse held me weightlessly in her arms when they had to change the sheet.

Only my next-door neighbor cried at my funeral. He saw me every day. My relatives hadn't seen me for years. They only came for the money. My neighbor didn't take anything. Now he's alone on the street whereas before we'd been two and every now and then played brisk.

\* Brisk or *briscolla*, a card game, something like hearts, from the south of Italy.

A night of ugly weather. A wind blowing straight from the bones of the dead. The blackest howling of dogs. I expected death in the morning and my friend coming to find me. I had a friend, just one. One who spoke little, who checked on me in the morning before going to work. I didn't die in front of him: I waited for him to shut the door and to say we'd see each other tomorrow.

I decided to split wood. There was a huge pile. In years past I'd gotten the help of a neighbor much stronger than me, but on that day I decided to do it all myself. With every blow of the axe I wasn't striking wood, I was striking the mayor whose ordinance removed my hens, the surveyor who built my eternally muggy house, the doctor who didn't realize that my wife's tumor was big as an orange. I died while striking the greengrocer, who sold me apples that had no taste.

Like all married women, I was left alone. A few days after our wedding my husband was already a stone, a dry trunk. Later he died, and I went on for many years, until I became thin as a leaf, light as a sparrow.

I was a sister. I gave my whole life to a village near mine. My name was Giacinta. Now I am buried in my village cemetery. Now and then someone tells me they remember me. They remember the days in kindergarten and a small sister of few words. Then I think of my brothers and my mother, I think of all the children I held in my arms, I think of snowy mornings and sunny ones, of the cats that slept in my bed. God is the good we do and nothing more.

I looked for that thing everyone calls love and that no one knows how to give. Love's that thing that if you really want it will be denied you. And so my tumor began when I understood that love would never come. It blackened, it mutated one cell at a time, as if there weren't any rush, as if death wanted to give me time to convince myself that it was the single solution.

All of a sudden one February afternoon I realized that the world is a postage-stamp. It was clear that I was dying and that we were all on the same stamp, everyone in his place, for a little while and forever.

I didn't put myself in a coffin. When I understood I was about to die I went to a woods very far from home. I went to walk. I wanted to die walking and so it was and no one found me again. Animals roamed about in me, the animals came before the people who were looking. No one would be able to remember my dead face.

We live to go home and it's a race against time. We have to get there before dying. This is why death makes us afraid — because it can come before we manage to get home. Birth is a shipwreck and all that follows never dries us off. We should at least tell each other these things with sweetness, one beside another. And instead, we stand, spiteful, edgy, alarmed. I surrendered, but I didn't do it alone. Illness helped me.

If I could turn around I would pay attention to everything, I would greet everyone, I would get down on my knees many times a day and pray and not be afraid of talking to a wall, of caressing a bench. I would party all day because there are so many things and I can watch them.

While relatives and friends were around me, while the coffin was still open, I began to decompose. I lost my eyes, I lost my nose, the skin of my hands disappeared. Then my relatives and friends thought that it would be good not to bring the priest, but good to close the coffin immediately and cancel the funeral. I had shown myself to be untrustworthy in death as well.

## OTHER POSTCARDS

I who am dead  
now am father and mother  
and son and sister  
and leaf and ant and worm  
and the black of nothing.  
Every death is sap for the branches  
the reason we laugh  
the seed of weeping and pleasure.  
Every death is the reason  
we embrace  
taking and leaving  
flight and prayer  
dawn and bone, the wind  
and its turning.

My hands in the coffin's darkness: one on each side. They won't ever touch again.

The relatives came from Switzerland: antipasto, pasta with sauce, oven-roasted lamb with potatoes, fruit, then café Vienna and the heart attack.

I died just as my wife recovered.

Now I'm dead what's to become of my books, my shoes,  
my hats? I'd just opened the toothpaste. The refrigerator  
was full.

I wanted to save one last drop of blood for you, my son.  
I knew that you had left Lausanne to see me while I still  
lived. I pricked my finger with a needle. I put the drop of  
blood on the nightstand.

I had a big nose and a crooked neck. Death put everything right.

I don't say to resuscitate, that would be too much, but at least once, just one time, you can let out a yawn.

There were a few months when no one died.

I was working in Belgium. I returned home because my mother was dying. It happened to me instead.

At a certain point nothingness has the right of way in our bodies. The heart caves in, the ribs crumble. It seems terrible but if you're attentive I and the other dead can appear in a bird's beak, in a strawberry's red.

I only had two teeth when I died. One's still there.

In the tomb next to mine there's someone who coughs  
once in a while.

Give me back one breath, any one, a Thursday afternoon.

Once upon a time when one died they took a tile from the roof to ease the soul's passage. They removed a few tiles for me, but my soul stayed where it was.

Death is just the last thing that happens in life. For me it was the first.

The day after my fiftieth birthday I began to take *Vital*  
50+ pills. I died at fifty-two and a few months.

It wouldn't be bad if someone could give me mustaches for the photo on my tombstone.

I had a *lot* of problems. I resolved them all with an infarct.

There was a landslip and so my bones are all in a corner.

I died Friday night, they buried me Saturday afternoon,  
Saturday night my son was at the bar. I won't speak to him  
anymore.

I said to the other dead: let's come together, it doesn't make sense to be like this here each, on his own.

I didn't have anything to do the morning I died. Perhaps any burden would have been enough and I wouldn't be dead.

I had two baby girls and a husband who loved me. Now only the mandibles, hair and the heels of their shoes remain.

If I knew it was so I died first.

I don't trust any of the dead. Now and then I rise halfway to control the situation.

There were few at my funeral and they left in a hurry.

Sunday morning I set out to put the garage in order. In the afternoon I committed suicide.

I have only one cousin. Now and then she brings me yellow flowers, the ones dogs piss on.

Once there were three thousand mules in the country and  
me too.

I'm Alfonso Cappa. When I committed suicide I had a green Simca. I always parked it under the municipale building, when I wouldn't get fined.

My wife opened the wardrobe and I closed my eyes.

Yesterday I met a pharoah.

Sometimes at night I get into my daughter's coffin. I stretch out close to her. The darkness holds us tight.

At the end I was so tired I couldn't draw my last breath.

A hundred million galaxies. A hundred million stars in our galaxy. All this stuff and me shut forever in my coffin.

It ends then one day a lizard takes the sun on your tombstone.

I've been dead a long time now and no one left remembers me. When I lived in Namur in Belgium the same thing happened.

We were such friends that I went to his funeral and he came to mine.

I was a priest. Frankly, I expected a bit more of death.

I smoked a hundred cigarettes a day. I didn't *get* the lung tumor. I gave myself to it.

I was calm enough in life. Nervous exhaustion came to me here in the cemetery.

After you die three things happen: Your body decomposes, the souls reveals its nonexistence, I don't know how to tell you the third.

I lived in Asti but when I returned to my village I always said that I lived in Turin. I died in Asti.

In my coffin they dressed me in a designer dress. And my son secretly put my cellphone in the handbag.

I have always been impatient — monstrously so. They hadn't even fitted my coffin in the crypt and I was already asking for news of my resurrection.

We are always the same ten people who are born and die  
for millennia and millennia.

I died while they were taking me to the hospital. My brother-in-law didn't realize it and kept telling me we were about to get there, it was nothing. Eventually he began to talk about his stomach problems.

Ashes — finally!

*If you don't believe in life after death, you must believe more in life during life. I call my faith intensity. Intensity comes to me through watching: one doesn't get it on vacation or at work, it's the adventure of your nerves in your places, but also elsewhere, you have to be indulgent with this adventure, you must protect it as if it were the one truth you possessed. So, say when you think you're dying and the thought will stop. Say when you think you're getting sick, and cure yourself by speaking, and feel how others are a drug. Goodness resides in trees, water, faces. The good always takes the side of one who is intense. It could care less about one who peddles ecstasies or desperation.*

## NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In making this book, I drew upon the first edition of *Postcards From the Dead*. There were 128 and a note. I have made a few small corrections and used 83 of them here.

In 2016, I published the smaller *New Postcards From the Dead* with the Luigi Pelligrini in Calabria. I have placed 11 of those here.

The other texts have not been previously published.

I thank the residents of the House of Paeseology and friends on the web who have helped with their readings and Livio Armino in whom I have taken my final counsel.

I dedicate this text to readers old and new of the postcards.



*Death is a very small storm  
suck in the blood from who knows when  
it's a butterfly who has chosen my dead  
for her exercise  
a river that passes under all my bridges  
death comes so soon  
while I read while I'm put on my shoes  
when I'm in a shower  
when I'm talking on the phone  
staring at the computer  
at fireworks at festivals*

**Franco Arminio** (1960) was born and lives in Bisaccia (Ispina d'Orsento), Italy. He has published some twenty books, and is also a photographer and maker of documentary films. As a *journalist* he has written for years in journals and on the web in defense of small places. He conceived and developed the House of Poetry in Treviso and the festival of *The Moon and the Bushes* at Alzano ([www.h2o.zsica.lanchi.it](http://www.h2o.zsica.lanchi.it)).

