

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

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SARAMAGO

"down with the enemies of life, it's lucky for them that there's no more death"

– *"Death With Interruptions"*

Such a seductive proposition you offer – death interrupted by what – life?, which we want to believe continues in some form despite the certainty of our demise. Take heaven, for instance, the lure of the bliss of angels, seraphim and cherubim, pearly gates and reuniting with friends and loved ones. So why bother living, I ask, why not get right down to it and bypass life's vagaries? Who of us would be fearful were we to believe this to be our destiny? Ah, but here's the rub – we aren't sure, no one has come back with irrefutable testimony, is that not true? So, as you write, when death takes a holiday, as it were, in a country unnamed (and just as well), there is great clamor and rejoicing in the streets – the certitude of immortality, antidote to secret and not so secret doubts and fears that come with the territory the moment of our birth. Even those at the very stoop of death's door are denied the grace of death and muddle along with no notion of what is taking place but, as we soon learn, all is not peaches and cream, to borrow a metaphor which itself should have long ago been cast to the graveyard of stale cliché. How could it be that not everyone is happy, never mind ecstatic? Let us start with the undertakers, who now have nobody to embalm and coffin. Or the life insurance salespeople, whose product is no longer viable. Their livelihoods, while not defined as human, are no less certainly dead. And what of the nursing homes which are flooded with those who by now should be dead, might as well be dead if one just looked at their eyes which offer not a glint of life, but are not - stacked like so much human cordwood? Even the Angel of Death is out of business, temporarily at least until, as we learn, she regains her wits and reclaims the prerogative which is hers and hers only. She sends out her letters informing people who should long ago have been dead or on the road to death of the date, even the hour, of their passing – this on violet letterhead, no less. Violet? How preposterous! Not even black borders, which would have been far more appropriate given the gravity of the message. Of course, as they have been so notified the recipients promptly oblige on their day of reckoning and all returns to normal but for a strange occurrence – one letter keeps coming back, the upshot of which I will leave to readers of the story and move on to the next – *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*", in which our protagonist is periodically visited by his friend, or more correctly the ghost of his friend and fellow poet, one Fernando Pessoa who comes from the world of the dead, if that is the correct term, to offer Senor Reis tidbits of wisdom and observances as seen from the Other Side, wherever that might be. In one such visitation Pessoa said he had a dream that he was alive – a paradox, one might think at first. But he *had* been alive, had known life and who is to say that he, as a dead man, had nothing to dream about? And here we have Reis who senses the nearness of his own passing to the point where he dreams he is dead. And what are we to draw from this – that death is part of being alive or vice versa? Ah, but the dead man, or at least his ghost, has a leg up – he once lived and has knowledge of things mortal whereas, to state the obvious, the mortal has no such knowledge of life's opposite, only that some

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day he will die. So, my dear Saramago, it's not that I haven't contemplated such conundrums but I must hand it to you – you had the gall or, should I say, temerity – perhaps that is the better word – to put such musings down on paper, so to speak, and we all know that paper (or these days, more likely bundles of electrons) ends up in the trash bin of history and that the dead, from wherever they might find themselves, will smile knowingly, having lived. When I was young and perhaps foolish I wanted to live forever or, maybe, more honestly could not imagine falling into the abyss. But then, I began to think – living forever, God, how boring! Much better, like Pessoa, to revisit once in a while