

Carl Dennis

## ETERNAL LIFE

An immortal soul, that's something for me to wish for,  
To be off on a long trek after my body's buried  
And my friends have driven away from the graveyard.

Where am I headed? Not downward, if I'm permitted  
To judge by the rules of fairness as I conceive them,  
For nothing I've done seems ripe for eternal punishment.

Not upward, for nothing seems worthy of eternal bliss.  
Odds are I'll stay where I am, forever earthbound,  
And face the problem of filling the endless return

Of earthly summers and autumns, winters and springs.  
It won't be easy for a being retired from action,  
A shadow too weak even to hold open a door

When a friend among the living, bearing a tea tray,  
Comes to join her guests on the verandah.  
The conversation should hold my interest all evening

Even if I can't participate, my voice too small.  
But later, when strangers fill the familiar rooms,  
I'll seem to be listening to a script that's conventional,

To acting forced and wooden, and slip outside.  
What then? Do I keep my distance from other ghosts  
Or join them in sharing stories about the old days

In cricket whispers? Either way, I'll wonder about the joy  
I imagined coming my way with death behind me,  
Not looming ahead, and leisure, so scarce before,

Suddenly limitless. Not much solace is likely  
When I compare the vague ghosts of my friends  
With the living originals, whose particular lusters

Can't be divorced from their lifelong gloom on birthdays,  
Their protests against their mirrors, their witty admissions  
In listing the enemies that creased their foreheads

And slowed their pace to a hobble, and made them forgetful,  
Though they remembered their promises well enough  
And tried to keep many till death released them.

But how can ghosts swear loyalty to the end  
If there is no end for them, only a boundless ocean;  
Or does a truth I haven't a map to now

Wait in my ghostly existence to be discovered? If not,  
It won't surprise me if I find myself on my knees  
Cupping my hands with others at the river's edge

To sip forgetfulness. No surprise if I'm ferried back,  
Oblivious, to be born again in the flesh  
Among strangers it will take me years to recognize.