

Short Pain, Short Grief

Elen Eliza Evans

d. November 17, 1854 aged 5 years 6 months

Serendipity brought me here, a small
Welsh churchyard, fine August day. Say I came
hungry for a subject, keen to construct
a living syntax of bones. Scavenging
your resting-place for poetry,
I kneel on grass still fat with summer's green

and click my shutter on your epitaph —
all the other graves are out of focus:
“Short pain short grief dear babe was thine,
Now joys eternal and divine.
Yes, thou art fled and saints a welcome sing.
Thine infant spirit soars above on wing.”

Was that all: “Short pain short grief”? One line
for a harsh life, three for heaven's joys.

Must I think of you shuttered in the sick-
room, in pain, or raddled with consumption,
a write-off from the start, blighted flower
born to bloom unseen, your sweetness cloying

the dark air? I picture the stiff doctor
shaking his head. And what fodder your torture
must have been for the hovering minister —
(Look at him, pasty-faced, smelling as clean
as snow) — your wasted body fuel for yet
another sermon on mortality.

I take, but don't say I give nothing back.
I give you what I can — a day like this,
white dress, red boats, the hissing sand. Your eyes
thrill to see the nervous butterfly,
a fluttering mosaic among the ivy,
that always eludes my prying lens.

PETER ROBINSON