

LETTER FROM MISS ELLENE RANSOM TO JO REID, READ BY JANE CAMPBELL WHITELEY

FUNERAL MASS FOR JO BRANS -- SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2019

Jo Brans was the only daughter and oldest of the three children of Winton and Sammie Reid, of Pittsboro, Mississippi. In the summer of 1953, her father was working on a road construction crew, operating a dragline. Winton Reid frequently brought his older son, Sonny, with him to his worksites to help out. One day in that hot Mississippi summer, in an accident involving the machine his father was running, Sonny was killed. He was 16 years old.

Jo was studying at Belhaven College for Ladies in Jackson, but she was home for the summer. Her favorite English professor at Belhaven, Miss Ellene Ransom, learned of Sonny's death from one of Jo's fellow students. Miss Ransom, the daughter of a Methodist minister, was the sister of John Crowe Ransom, the noted Southern poet, one of the Fugitives, and a literary critic who was a founder of the New Criticism. Jo revered Miss Ransom for her brilliant teaching. When talking of her she would always identify her as the sister of John Crowe Ransom, noting that if Miss Ransom had had the advantages of her brother's sex, no doubt there would be two Ransoms in the American literary canon. She was Jo's inspiration for becoming an English professor and writer.

On July 11, 1953, from her brother's home in Nashville, Miss Ransom wrote a letter of condolence to Jo. Jo reread this letter over and over, carrying it with her wherever she lived for the rest of her life. Almost seven years ago, at Christmas dinner hosted by her and Willem, Jo asked if I would read this letter at her funeral.

Miss Jo Reid, Olive Branch, Mississippi

July 11, 1953

My sweet Jo,

Yes, Carol has written me the devastating news of your brother's death. Even I, who didn't know him, find it hard to believe, and I experience a deep pain when I think of how unbelievable and how dreadful is the sense of sorrow you and the family who loved him best, must now be facing. Please tell your mother for me that it is she of whom I thought first, just as you have thought of her most, for no one can measure what this "loss" means to her. I wish I knew all your family, for I find myself in my thoughts exploring the relationships which make family life rich and sweet, and in my imagination to some small degree understanding what this present sorrow means to each of you as well as what you mean to one another.

And that is my first step out of – or in – the sorrow toward some comfort or "betterness." For one thing, I know that now your brother means more to you than he ever meant before, and that you have a greater understanding of him and of the relationship between you than ever before. Death has a way of doing that: it casts clear white light upon peaks and valleys only dimly seen before. It also gradually, as realization comes, sifts out all that was trivial and leaves safe whatever was most worth keeping. It has no power whatever over anything that is of the spirit. Its only power is over the physical. It does irrevocably claim the body and separates us physically from those we love. But no death of the body can take away the precious things of the spirit. The older one grows, the richer becomes one's treasury of remembrance, the surer one's insight into those spiritual qualities which are permanent. There is a verse in Moffatt's translation which goes something like this: "The trouble of the passing hour resulteth in a solid glory past all comparison for those of us whose eyes are upon the unseen; for the seen is the transient, the unseen the eternal."

Wishing, though, that I might somehow help comfort you, I would inevitably give you my favorite promise. You can find it yourself in Revelation 21:4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” The former things have passed away for your brother, just as someday they will pass for each of us. But the crying and sorrow also pass away, and life goes on into new experiences which now we cannot understand. Life, I said – for death is a matter of only moments or hours except as we prolong it in our thoughts. Death, not life, passes. Life is lasting, triumphant.

Comfort there is, too, in doing your all-important part in helping to comfort the others to whom you do and can mean so much. Your tenderness and your capacity for selfless understanding are now and will continue to be beyond price for your mother and others who loved your brother.

Dear Jo, I love you.

Sincerely,

Ellene Ransom