

# On Contemplating Life and Death

A poetic exploration of this life and the next



Michelle Hopkins



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## **Introduction**

Philosophy and religion try to explain what happens when the body dies. The physical self will rot and be consumed by the earth but it is the soul that we are most concerned about. Will it rise above the earth, entering Heaven, where it will remain for the remainder of eternity in absolute peace? Or do the lights turn off and all the remains is rotting meat? We will never know as long as we are living what waits for us when we close our eyes for that last time.

The poets that follow are discussing the ultimate question of life and death. Many of them take the religious route, looking into the idea of glorious heaven and the world beyond. They look toward god for the answer to what happens. Other poets, however, have different views on this concept. Andrew Marvell uses the

concept of death to convince his lady that they should fornicate because life is short. John Donne talks of death as a way of haunting his mistress for the crimes she committed. Like Marvell, some of the poems are less about what happens in the afterlife and instead focus on the idea of how life should be lived on earth.

Time is short for all of us. While these poets may not have answer to the world's greatest questions, they give us a new perspective.

# The Poems





## Holy Sonnet I

—John Donne

THOU hast made me, and shall Thy work decay?  
Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste;  
I run to death, and Death meets me as fast,  
And all my pleasures are like yesterday.  
I dare not move my dim eyes any way;  
Despair behind, and Death before doth cast  
Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste  
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.  
Only Thou art above, and when towards Thee  
By Thy leave I can look, I rise again;  
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
That not one hour myself I can sustain.  
Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art  
And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.

## Holy Sonnet X

—John Donne

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those, whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy picture[s] be,  
Much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou'rt slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

## **Sonnet LXXIII**

— William Shakespeare

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire  
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.  
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

## **Upon a Deedman's Hed**

—John Skelton

Youre ugly tokyn  
My mynd hath brokyn  
From worldly lust;  
For I have dyscust  
We ar but dust,  
And dy we must.  
It is generall  
To be mortall:  
I have well espyde  
No man may hym hyde  
From Deth hollow eyed,  
With synnews<sup>1</sup> wyderyd,  
With bonys shyderyd,  
With hys worme etyn maw<sup>2</sup>,  
And his gastly jaw  
Gaspyng asyde,  
Nakyd of hyde,  
Neyther flesh nor fell.  
Then, by my councell,

1. Synnews—referring to muscles  
2. Maw—jaws or throat

Loke that ye spell  
Well thys gospell:  
For wher so we dwell  
Deth wyll us qwell,  
And with us mell.

For all oure pampered  
paunchys<sup>3</sup>,  
Ther may no fraunchys,  
Nor worldly blys,  
Redeme us from this:  
Oure days be datyd,  
To be chekmatyd so  
With drawttys of deth,  
Stoppyng oure breth;  
Oure eyen synkyng,  
Oure bodys stynkyng,  
Oure gummys grynnnyng,  
Oure soulys brynnnyng.  
To whom, then, shall we sew,  
For to have rescew,  
But to swete Jesu,  
On us then for to rew?

3. Paunchys—Large bellies

O goodly chyld  
Of Mary mylde,  
Then be oure shylde I  
That we be not exyld  
To the dyne dale  
Of boteles bale,  
Nor to the lake  
Of fendys blake.

But graunt us grace  
To se thy face, so  
And to purchace  
Thyne hevenly place,  
And thy palace,  
Full of solace,  
Above the sky,  
That is so hy;  
Eternally  
To beholde and se  
The Trynyte!  
Amen.  
Myrres vous y<sup>4</sup>.

4. "Myrres Vous y"—Fr trans "See yourself therein"

## **Skeltoniad**

—Michael Drayton

The Muse should be sprightly,  
Yet not handling lightly  
Things grave; as much loath,  
Things that be slight, to cloath  
Curiously: To retayne  
The Comelinesse in meane,  
Is true Knowledge and Wit.  
Not me forc'd Rage doth fit,  
That I thereto should lacke  
Tabacco, or need Sacke,  
Which to the colder Braine  
Is the true Hypocrene<sup>1</sup>;  
Nor did I ever care  
For great Fooles, nor them spare.  
Vertue, though neglected,  
Is not so dejected,  
As vilely to descend  
To low Basenesse their end;  
Neyther each ryming Slave  
Deserves the Name to have  
Of Poet: so the Rabble  
Of Fooles, for the Table,

1. Hypocrene—Gk myth fountain on Mt. Helicon, was sacred to the Muses; supposed to bring poetic inspiration

That have their jests by Heart,  
As an Actor his Part,  
Might assume them Chayres<sup>2</sup>  
Amongst the Muses Heyres<sup>3</sup>.  
Parnassus<sup>4</sup> is not clome  
By every such Mome;  
Up whose steep side who swerves,  
It behoves t' have strong Nerves:  
My Resolution such,  
How well, and not how much  
To write, thus doe I fare,  
Like some few good that care  
(The evil sort among)  
How well to live, and not how long.

2. Chayres—Gk goddess of charm, beauty, nature, human creativity and fertility.

3. Heyres—heirs

4. Parnassus—mountain in Greece home of poetry, literature and learning.  
Named after the founder, Parnassus

## The Apparition

—John Donne

WHEN by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead,  
And that thou thinkst thee free  
From all solicitation from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see:  
Then thy sick taper will begin to wink,  
And he, whose thou art then, being tired before,  
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think  
Thou call'st for more,  
And, in false sleep, will from thee shrink:  
And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected thou  
Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie,  
A verier ghost than I.  
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,  
Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent,  
I'd rather thou shouldst painfully repent,  
Than by my threatenings rest still innocent.

## **A Dialogue between the Body and Soul**

—Andrew Marvell

A Dialogue between the Soul and Body.

### **Soul.**

O Who shall, from this Dungeon, raise  
A Soul inslav'd so many wayes?  
With bolts of Bones, that fetter'd stands  
In Feet; and manacled in Hands.  
Here blinded with an Eye; and there  
Deaf with the drumming of an Ear.  
A Soul hung up, as 'twere, in Chains  
Of Nerves, and Arteries, and Veins.  
Tortur'd, besides each other part,  
In a vain Head, and double Heart.

### **Body.**

O who shall me deliver whole,  
From bonds of this Tyrannic Soul?  
Which, stretcht upright, impales me so,  
That mine own Precipice I go;  
And warms and moves this needless Frame:  
(A fever could but do the same.)  
And, wanting where its spight to try,  
Has made me live to let me dye.  
A Body that could never rest,  
Since this ill Spirit it posses!

### **Soul.**

What Magick could me thus confine  
Within another's Grief to pine?  
Where whatsoever it complain,  
I feel, that cannot feel, die pain.  
And all my Care its self employes,  
That to preserve, which me destroys:  
Constrain'd not only to indure  
Diseases, but, what's worse, the Cure:  
And ready oft the Port to gain,  
Am Shipwrackt into Health again.

### **Body.**

But Physick yet could never reach  
The Maladies Thou me dost teach;  
Whom first the Cramp of Hope does Tear:  
And then the Palsie Shakes of Fear.  
The Pestilence of Love does heat:  
Or Hatred's hidden Ulcer eat.  
joy's chearful Madness does perplex:  
Or Sorrow's other Madness vex.  
Which Knowledge forces me to know ;  
And Memory will not foregoe.  
What but a Soul could have the wit  
To build me up for Sin so fit?  
So Architects do square and hew,  
Green Trees that in the Forest grew.

## To Daffadills

—Robert Herrick

Faire Daffadills, we weep to see  
You haste away so soone:  
As yet the early-rising sun  
Has not attain'd his noone.  
Stay, stay,  
Until the hasting day  
Has run  
But to the Even-song;  
And, having pray'd together, we  
Will goe with you along.  
We have short time to stay, as you,  
We have as short a spring ;  
As quick a growth to meet decay,  
As you, or any thing.  
We die,  
As your hours doe, and drie  
Away,  
Like to the summers raine;  
Or as the pearles of morning's dew  
Ne'r to be found againe.

## To His Coy Mistress

—Andrew Marvell

HAD we but World enough, and time,  
This coyness Lady were no crime.  
We would sit down, and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.  
Thou by the Indian Ganges side  
Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide  
Of Humber would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood:  
And you should if you please refuse  
Till the Conversion of the Jews.  
My vegetable Love should grow  
Vaster then Empires, and more slow.  
An hundred years should go to praise  
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.  
Two hundred to adore each Breast:  
But thirty thousand to the rest.  
An Age at least to every part,  
And the last Age should show your Heart.  
For Lady you deserve this State;  
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I alwaies hear  
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:  
And yonder all before us lye  
Desarts of vast Eternity.  
Thy Beauty shall no more be found,

Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound  
My echoing Song: then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity:  
And your quaint Honour turn to dust;  
And into ashes all my Lust.  
The Grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hew  
Sits on thy skin like morning glew,  
And while thy willing Soul transpires  
At every pore with instant Fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may;  
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our Time devour,  
Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r.  
Let us roll all our Strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:  
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,  
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.



## **Further Reading**

(All texts available at Archive.org)

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