PRESBYTERION
Covenant Seminary Review

Poems in the Park: My Cancer and God's Grace

David B. Calhoun

Vol. 34, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 65–92

Presbyterion 34/2 (Fall 2008): 65–92

POEMS IN THE PARK: MY CANCER AND GOD'S GRACE

David B. Calhoun*

Not long before he died of cancer in 1991, Howard Nemerov, professor emeritus at Washington University in St. Louis and former Poet Laureate of the United States, wrote this poem of two sentences.

> What rational being, after seventy years,
> When Scripture says he's running out of rope,
> Would want more of the only world he knows?
>
> No rational being, he while he endures
> Holds on to the inveterate infantile hope
> That the road ends but as the runway does.[1]

Nemerov makes two points in his little poem of forty-six words: 1) this life is pretty miserable, especially as one gets older; 2) people hold on to the childish, irrational hope that there is life after death. Perhaps the words "death after death" could sum up the poet's view.

Many centuries ago another—and far greater—poet also reflected on this life and what lies beyond it. His immortal words are found in the twenty-third Psalm—the most beloved of all the Psalms, probably the best known of all the chapters of the Bible, and perhaps the most memorable fifty-three words (in the Hebrew text) ever written in any language.

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He makes me lie down in green pastures.
> He leads me beside still waters.
> He restores my soul.
> He leads me in paths of righteousness
> for his name's sake.

---

* David Calhoun is professor emeritus of church history at Covenant Theological Seminary. He holds a PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary. A different version of this article appeared as a chapter in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, vol. 1 in the Theology in Community series, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

[1] Howard Nemerov, "Trying Conclusions," in *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961–1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 159.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.[2]

The Psalmist also makes two points: 1) this life is sometimes delightful and sometimes hard; 2) though our circumstances change, the Lord does not. He is with us, his people, all the way through this life and after this life we shall dwell in his house forever. We could sum up the Psalm with the words "life after life."

These two very different poems, one modern and one ancient, illustrate the power of poetry to express our deepest yearnings, our darkest fears, our most baffling questions, our greatest hopes, and our strongest certainties.

The most profound poetry—describing our joy and our suffering in their many dimensions and giving voice to our cries of lament—is the poetry of the Bible. Close to one-third of the Old Testament is poetry—a little in the narrative books, more in the prophets, and a large part of Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In *Living Through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness,* Kristin M. Swenson writes in a chapter with the title "Pain and the Psalms, Beyond the Medicine Cabinet" that the "Psalms provide a vocabulary and language for expressing pain, a grammar of pain, which continues to resonate for people struggling with difficulties understanding and describing their particular experiences of suffering."[3] John Calvin described the Psalms as "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs,

---

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[3] Kristin M. Swenson, *Living Through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness* (Waco: Baylor University, 2005), 74.

sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities . . . with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."[4]

Hebrew poetry is characterized by terseness, parallelism, repetition, chiasm, figures of speech, and sometimes assonance—most of which can be preserved in translations. We find in the words of the psalms not only the wisdom to teach and convince but also the power to comfort and sustain. The Psalms provide us with thoughts to think and words to speak when we don't know how to think and what to say.

During a period of intensive chemotherapy treatment some years ago, I found that it helped me to walk. Day after day I walked around and around a half-mile path in a park across the street from my house. I usually took with me a little book of poems or a small hymnbook. As I walked, I read the poems and hymns slowly, out loud. As the medicine flowed into my body each week in the hospital next to the park, so the words of the poetry flowed into my heart and mind every day as I walked, giving me a new infusion of courage, patience, hope, and trust.

There was no plan to my reading in the park. My choice of books and poets was almost accidental—which is another way of saying that it was completely providential. The book had to be small, so I could hold it easily and read as I walked. And the poems had to be, for the most part, plain. The Lord commanded Habakkuk to "write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it" (Hab. 2:2). I did not have the mental energy to struggle over obscure poetry. I made exceptions, however, for Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, and a few others. Hopkins wrote to a friend who found his poems obscure that he should not bother with the meaning but "pay attention to the best and most intelligible stanzas."[5]

The poets who helped me most were those who shared my Christian convictions. They represented many parts of the Christian tradition and reflected diverse theological and spiritual perceptions. I tried to avoid the sentimental, the falsely triumphant, the overly pious, the dishonest, and the sloppy in thought or language. Poetry did not have to be great poetry to help me, but it had to be honest and true.

Through poetry I began to see and hear things in a new way. Francis Thompson wrote:

> O world invisible, we view thee,
> O world intangible, we touch thee,
> O world unknowable, we know thee,
> Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

---

[4] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, tr. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:xxxvii.

[5] Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted in Frederick Buechner, *Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought To Say): Reflections on Literature and Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 10.

Thompson promised that, if we would only listen, we would hear the wings of the angels beating at our own "clay-shuttered doors." If we would only look we would see "the many-splendoured thing."[6] In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis describes the poetry of the Psalms as "a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible."[7] The Psalms, as well as hymns and the words of honest and thoughtful poets, can become little incarnations, enabling us to see the "many-splendoured things."

Barbara Kingsolver has written that "it's not such a wide gulf to cross . . . from survival to poetry."[8] Neither, we could add, is it such a wide gulf between poetry and survival. Those who have suffered and endured are often compelled to write about it. This is especially true for Christians. The meaning that many sufferers have found in poetry has given them hope and helped them survive everything from the relentless brutality of wartime prison camps to cruel persecution to the ravages of devastating illnesses.

I began this reflection with Psalm 23 for a reason. This inspired (in both senses of the word) poem shaped and organized the lessons that I learned through my reading of poems in the park.

My Shepherd

Psalm 23 is a "Psalm of David"—which could mean "to David" (in dedication), "of David" (belonging to David), or "for David" (to be used by David in worship). It seems right to believe that David himself was the author. Perhaps he wrote it when he was an old man, looking back over his life, as suggested by Frank Crossley Morgan in his *Psalm of an Old Shepherd*.[9] C. S. Lewis has said that the Psalms need "no historical adjustment."[10] They are immediately and directly accessible to us. We do not have to know the historical context of Psalm 23 nor do we have to understand sheep and their ways to appreciate its significance, although books on the psalm by shepherds offer enriching insights.[11]

---

[6] Francis Thompson, "In No Strange Land (The Kingdom of God is Within You)," in Ben Witherington III and Christopher Mead Armitage, eds., *The Poetry of Piety: An Anthology of Christian Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 119, 120.

[7] C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Collins, 1958), 12.

[8] Barbara Kingsolver, quoted in Swenson, *Living Through Pain*, 1.

[9] F. Crossley Morgan, *A Psalm of an Old Shepherd: A Devotional Study of Psalm Twenty-Three* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.).

[10] C. S. Lewis as quoted in Nancy Lammers Gross, "The Shepherd's Song: A Sermon," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 39.

[11] See J. Douglas MacMillan, *The Lord Our Shepherd* (Bryntirion: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1983), and Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).

"The Lord is my shepherd." Those words tell me who God is—and who I am. Human beings are not "the ultimate measure of things, the controller of their world, or the determiner of their destiny."[12] God is in control. I am not. He is the shepherd. I am one of his sheep. This basic truth (on which all other truths are based) is expressed in the Bible, hymns, and poetry in many different ways. Psalm 23 draws a lovely and peaceful picture (although it is not without deep trouble). Another picture, raw and startling but no less reassuring, is presented in Dorothy Sayers' play *The Just Vengeance.* "The Airman" utters these words as he plunges to his death.

> This is it. This is what we have always feared—
> The moment of surrender, the helpless moment
> When there is nothing to do but to let go. . . .
> "Into Thy hands"—into another's hand
> No matter whose; the enemy's hand, death's hand,
> God's. . . . The one moment not to be evaded
> Which says, "You must," the moment not of choice
> When we must choose to do the thing we must
> And will to let our own will go. Let go.
> It is no use now clinging to the controls,
> Let some one else take over. Take, then, take ...
> There, that is done . . . into Thy hand, O God.[13]

GREEN PASTURES . . . STILL WATERS . . . PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Shepherd leads his sheep into pleasant and refreshing places and along the best paths. He calms us down, strengthens our trust, and restores our souls.

I walked, almost everyday, on the path around a small pond with ducks and geese. Above me were the sky and clouds; below, the grass and trees. In the spring the wildflowers grew in the sun and waved in the wind. In the fall the trees turned from green to a variety of colors, often on the same tree, almost overnight. In the winter ice formed on the pond, and snow sometimes covered the ground, bringing its own freshness and interpreting God's creation in yet another delightful way.

C. S. Lewis wrote that "the same doctrine [of creation] which empties nature of her divinity also makes her an index, a symbol, a manifestation of the Divine."[14] The psalmists and the poets helped me to see God's creation with greater appreciation and understanding. Gerard

---

[12] Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak For Us Today,* 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 181.

[13] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Just Vengeance: The Lichfield Festival Play for 1946* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 76.

[14] Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms,* 70.

Manley Hopkins showed me "the grandeur of God" everywhere. "The Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings," he wrote.[15] Hopkins exhorts us to "look at the stars! look, look up at the skies! O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!"[16] He calls on us to praise God "for dappled things" and for "the wildness and wet" of a waterfall.[17] Hopkins' heart was "stirred" by the "brute beauty and valour and act" of the windhover, a small falcon, he praises for "the mastery of the thing!"[18]

For William Cowper "poetry was the spontaneous reaction to encountering God's wonders," including animals and birds.[19] In "The Winter Walk at Noon," Cowper describes a robin hopping from icy twig to twig, "pleas'd with his solitude," and a "squirrel, flippant, pert, and full of play."[20] Cowper's three pet rabbits lifted his often despondent spirits. Stating his opposition to shooting rabbits, Cowper wrote to a magazine explaining what "amiable creatures" rabbits are, "of what gratitude they are capable, how cheerful they are in spirits, what enjoyments they have of life."[21] I sometimes saw rabbits playing in the grass when I walked in my park. I always saw birds.

Sidney Lanier, Confederate soldier, musician, and poet, wrote about "dim sweet woods . . . the dear dark woods . . . the heavenly woods and glades, that run to the radiant marginal sand-beach within the wide sea-marshes of Glynn" in his native Georgia. And he drew a lesson from the birds that lived there:

> As the marsh hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
> Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
> I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh hen flies

---

[15] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (NY: Penguin Books, 1953), 27.

[16] Hopkins, "The Starlight Night," in *Poems and Prose*, 27.

[17] Hopkins, "Pied Beauty" and "Inversnaid," in *Poems and Prose*, 30, 50, 51.

[18] Hopkins, "The Windhover," in *Poems and Prose*, 30.

[19] George M. Ella, *William Cowper: The Man of God's Stamp* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2000), 97. Ella calls Cowper "the poet of the barber's shop, the linen draper's, the village church, the afternoon walk and, above all, the cosy fireside chair" (91).

[20] Quoted in Ella, *William Cowper*, 98, 99.

[21] Davis and DeMello, *Stories Rabbits Tell*, quoted by Agnieszka Tennant, "The Rabbit Habit," *Books & Culture*, vol. 12, no. 5 (September/October 2006), 29. Poet Norman Nicholson concluded his biography of Cowper with this sentence: "In his precarious pilgrimage he looked at the few feet of grass about him, at the creatures he saw, or the fireside he knew, with a love wide enough to include all Nature and all his fellow-men, and with the sharp tenderness of a long Good-bye." Norman Nicholson, *Collected Poems*, ed. Neil Curry (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), xxiv.

In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies.[22]

William Cullen Bryant describes how the waterfowl wanders alone "but not lost" because "there is a Power whose care teaches" the little bird its way along the "pathless coast" of New England. Weary, the waterfowl flies on but

. . . soon that toil shall end;
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.[23]

Many times I saw Anne Porter's "Wild Geese Alighting on a Lake" happen in my park.

I watched them
As they neared the lake

They wheeled
In a wide arc
With beating wings
And then

They put their wings to sleep
And glided downward in a drift
Of pure abandonment

Until they touched
The surface of the lake

Composed their wings
And settled
On the rippling water
As though it were a nest.[24]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning sought patience in the midst of "dreary life" from the birds, the ocean, the stars, and even from "a blade of grass" that "grows by, contented through the heat and cold."[25]

---

[22] Sidney Lanier, "The Marshes of Glynn," in *Poems and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1945), 46, 48.

[23] William Cullen Bryant, "To a Waterfowl," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry: A Treasury of Poems and the Stories of Their Writers*, comp. Pat Alexander (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 49.

[24] Anne Porter, "Wild Geese Alighting on a Lake," in *Living Things: Collected Poems* (Hanover, NH: Zoland Books, 2006), 154. The foreword describes Porter as a modern American poet who has "found a language to transmit her Franciscan joy in created things" (xiv).

[25] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Patience Taught by Nature," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 50.

In "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," Sidney Lanier imagined Christ's night on the Mount of Olives:

Into the woods my Master went,
Clean forspent, forspent.
Into the woods my Master came,
Forspent with love and shame.
But the olives they were not blind to Him,
The little gray leaves were kind to Him:
The thorn-tree had a mind to Him
When into the woods He came.

Out of the woods my Master went,
And He was well content.
Out of the woods my Master came,
Content with death and shame.
When Death and Shame would woo Him last,
From under the trees they drew Him last:
'Twas on a tree they slew Him—last
When out of the woods He came.[26]

Was Jesus helped by the quietness and beauty of nature? Did he even notice the trees? Were "the little gray leaves" kind to him? In a passage full of music young John Calvin wrote:

> For the young birds, singing, sing to God; the beasts shout aloud to Him; the elements proclaim His might; the mountains echo Him; the rivers and fountains sparkle to Him; the herbs and flowers smell sweet to Him.[27]

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer-poet, found solace in "The Peace of Wild Things."

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

---

[26] Lanier, "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," in *Poems and Letters*, 61. Lanier was disabled by illness, harassed by financial problems, and distracted by conflicting goals. He hoped that the gospel of love and beauty would redeem a world sick with materialism. Far from orthodox in his theology, there is in him a yearning for something great, good, and transforming.

[27] From an anonymous foreword to Olivetanus's French translation of 1535; after 1545 it was associated with Calvin. *Corpus Reformatorum* 9, 823ff. See W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 90–92.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.[28]

All his married life B. B. Warfield, professor at Princeton Seminary, lovingly cared for his wife, Annie, who suffered from a nervous condition brought on apparently by a fearful lightning storm. Warfield was a great theologian, not a great poet, but his little poem "Trusting in the Dark" spoke to me one stormy spring day as I walked in my park.

Said Robert Leighton,[29] holy man,
Intent a flickering faith to fan
Into a steady blaze—
"Behold yon floweret to the sun,
As he his daily course doth run,
Turn undeclining gaze."

"E'en when the clouds obscure his face,
And only faith discerns the place
Where in the heavens he soars,
This floweret still, with constant eye,
The secret places of the sky
Untiringly explores."

"Look up, my soul! What can this be
But Nature's parable to thee?
Look up, with courage bright!
The clouds press on thee, dense and black,
Thy Sun shines ever at their back—
Look up and see His light!"[30]

"Nature's parable" in Warfield's poem leads us further into Psalm 23, where the clouds, "dense and black," press on us.

VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

The first three verses of Psalm 23 describe the delightful experiences of the Christian's life—green pastures, still waters, paths of righteousness. But in verse four the picture suddenly changes, and we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* follows the Christian pilgrim through a varied landscape. There are

---

[28] Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things," in *Collected Poems: 1957–1982* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 69.

[29] Leighton, Archbishop of Glasgow from 1670 to 1674, combined deep-seated Calvinism with devotional piety. He tried to bring about unity between the Scottish Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

[30] B. B. Warfield, "Trusting in the Dark," in *Four Hymns and Some Religious Verses* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1910), 12.

"Delectable Mountains," but there is also "the Slough of Despond." There is "House Beautiful," but there is also "Hill Difficulty." There is "the Country of Beulah"—where birds always sing, flowers always bloom, and the sun shines night and day—and there is also "the valley of the shadow of death."

The valley of the *shadow* of death is not death itself but a place of darkness, sadness, affliction, and trial. In *The Pilgrim's Progress,* Christian came to this valley, and he "must needs go through it, because the way to the celestial city lay through the midst of it." "Now this valley," Bunyan explains, "is a very solitary place. The prophet Jeremiah thus describes it: a wilderness, a land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought, and of the shadow of death."[31] We experience this dark valley in different ways—in trials of illness, depression, addiction, abuse, rejection, bitter disappointment, and other hard experiences of life. Until that day when "death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore" (Rev. 21:4) there will be the valley of the shadow of death. And like Bunyan's Christian, we "must needs go through it."

Gerard Manley Hopkins' most intense suffering came in 1885 and 1886 when he wrote what a friend called his "terrible sonnets"—filled with desperation, exhaustion, and a sense of God's absence.[32]

> I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
> What hours, O what black hours we have spent
> This night! what sights, you, heart, saw; ways you went!
> And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
>
> With witness I speak this. But where I say
> Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
> Is cries, countless, cries like dead letters sent
> To dearest him that lives alas! away.[33]

Psalm 88 (sometimes described as the one Psalm without hope) ends with the words, "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend" (verse 18). Kathryn Greene-McCreight described her own experience with mental illness in a book whose title, *Darkness Is My Only Companion,* is taken from this verse.[34] For all its darkness, however, Psalm 88 contains a message of hope. It is a cry to the Lord, as are Hopkins' "terrible sonnets," and Kathryn Greene-McCreight's testimony. In another of his poems—described by Frederick

---

[31] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 64.

[32] See Buechner, *Speak What We Feel,* 19, 20.

[33] Hopkins, "Carrion Comfort," in *Poems and Prose,* 62.

[34] Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

Buechner as a "breathless, ragged poem"[35]—Hopkins, still obsessed with the darkness, came in the poem's last line to speak of the "now done darkness" (it is over and done with) as he "lay wrestling with (my God!) my God."[36] T. S. Eliot wrote that when we come to the place of letting go into the hands of God, we find that "the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing."[37] If we keep on reading beyond Psalm 88, we will come to Psalm 139:12—"Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with you."

Nicholas Wolterstorff entered the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death when a mountain climbing accident killed his son, Eric. Wolterstorff searched for solace in music. In his deeply moving *Lament for a Son,* he wrote: "The music that speaks *about* our brokenness is not itself broken. Is there no broken music?"[38] There is broken music, and there is broken poetry, as we find in the poem "Denial" by George Herbert. The speaker's "disorder" is illustrated and emphasized by the failure of his poem to rhyme fully.

When my devotions could not pierce
Thy silent ears,
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
My breast was full of fears
And disorder.

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did fly asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
Some to the wars and thunder
Of alarms.[39]

As good go any where, they say,
As to denumb
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,
"Come, come, my God, O come,"
But no hearing.

---

[35] Buechner, *Speak What We Feel,* 27.

[36] Hopkins, "Carrion Comfort," in *Poems and Prose,* 61. At Hopkins' death only five of his minor poems had been published, although he was sure that "our Lord" valued his work. He died of typhoid fever, a few weeks before his forty-fifth birthday. In one of his last poems, he pled with God to renew his spirit and his poetry in the prayer: "O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain" ("Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord, if I Contend," in *Poems and Prose,* 67).

[37] T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets—East Coker," in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 127.

[38] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 52.

[39] Often pronounced "alarums," meaning a call to battle.

Oh that Thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To cry to Thee,
And then not hear it crying! All day long
My heart was in my knee,
But no hearing.

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untuned, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipped blossom, hung
Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
Defer no time;
That so Thy favors granting my request,
They and my mind may chime,
And mend my rhyme.[40]

In my own time of suffering, I returned again and again to the poems of George Herbert. His "Bitter-Sweet" captures the spirit of the laments of the psalmists.

Ah my dear angry Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve;
And all my sour-sweet days
I will lament, and love.[41]

Herbert's "Jesu" is witty and profound.

Jesu is in my heart, his sacred name
Is deeply carved there: but th' other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev'n all to pieces; which I went to seek:
And first I found the corner, where was *J*,
After, where *ES*, and next where *U* was graved.
When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*,
And to my whole is *JESU*.[42]

---

[40] George Herbert, "Denial," in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), 79, 80.

[41] Herbert, "Bitter-Sweet," in *Works of George Herbert*, 171.

[42] Herbert, "Jesu," in *Works of George Herbert*, 112.

One day, as I walked in the park and through my own personal valley, I read "Litany to the Holy Spirit" by Robert Herrick. The poet prays for the Spirit's comfort when temptation oppresses, when doubts confuse, and when doctors fail.

When the artless doctor sees
No one hope, but of his fees,
And his skill runs on the lees,[43]
Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When his portion and his pill
Has or none or little skill,
Meet for nothing but to kill,
Sweet Spirit, comfort me![44]

This is not a cry for deliverance from the troubles of life, but a plea for comfort and help in all that comes. I read these words at a time when the chemotherapy threatened to kill me before the cancer did. Herrick's poem comforted (as it amused) me. Most of my doctors and nurses have been skillful and sympathetic, but one experience deeply distressed me. The poet helped me to pray for comfort from the "Sweet Spirit" of God.

A burden can become a cross, John Calvin asserts, when we willingly accept it as coming from God and gladly bear it with trust and patience.[45] William Henry Sheppard, Southern Presbyterian missionary to the Congo, knew about cross-bearing. An African-American, Sheppard was born in Virginia to former slave parents near the end of the Civil War. In Africa he faithfully preached the gospel and courageously stood against the brutal exploitation and mass slaughter of the Congolese people by the agents of the European rubber trade. He wrote:

God laid upon my back a grievous load,
A heavy cross to bear along the road;
I staggered on, till lo! One weary day,
An angry lion leaped across my way.
I prayed to God, and swift at His command
The cross became a weapon in my hand;
It slew my raging enemy, and then
It leaped upon my back a cross again!
I faltered many a league, until at length,
Groaning, I fell and found no further strength.
I cried, "Oh God! I am so weak and lame,"

---

[43] Meaning "his skill is drained to the last drop."

[44] Robert Herrick, "Litany to the Holy Spirit," in Witherington and Armitage, *The Poetry of Piety*, 33.

[45] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1:702–12.

And swift the cross a winged staff became.
It swept me on until I retrieved my loss,
Then leaped upon my back again a cross.
I reached a desert; on its burning track
I still perceived the cross upon my back.
No shade was there, and in the burning sun
I sank me down and thought my day was done;
But God's grace works many a sweet surprise.
The cross became a tree before mine eyes.
I slept, awoke, and had the strength of ten,
Then felt the cross upon my back again.
And thus through all my days, from that to this,
The cross, my burden, has become my bliss;
Nor shall I ever lay my burden down,
For God shall one day make my cross a crown.[46]

African-American spirituals are songs of sorrow and strength—from a people who knew plenty of both. One of those songs often puzzled me.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows like Jesus;
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah.

The last two words did not seem to fit. I could understand, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, woe is me!" But "Glory, Hallelujah"? One day as I was reading these words in the park, I remembered Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). Today's cross is tomorrow's crown. Glory, Hallelujah!

A poet who understood what it is to walk through the valley of the shadow of death was Anne Bradstreet, author of the first published book of verse to be written in the New World. She struggled, along with the other Pilgrim settlers of the Massachusetts colony, to survive the New England winters and the disease and dangers of life in a remote and primitive place. When her house was destroyed by fire, this mother of eight children wrote about the shock of seeing everything lost. In one of the poem's nine verses, she described her feelings:

And, when I could no longer look,
I blest his Name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust:
Yea so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was his own: it was not mine;
Far be it that I should repine.

---

[46] William Henry Sheppard, "The Cross," in Pagan Kennedy, *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo* (NY: Viking, 2002), vii.

But Anne Bradstreet knew that she had not lost everything. She reminded herself that she already had another house:

> Thou hast an house on high erect
> Fram'd by that mighty Architect,
> With glory richly furnished,
> Stands permanent tho' this be fled.
> It's purchased, and paid for too
> By him who hath enough to do.[47]

One early spring day I took a little book of Bradstreet's poems to the park, and I read these words:

> As spring the winter doth succeed,
> And leaves the naked trees do dress,
> The earth all black is cloth'd in green;
> At sunshine each their joy express.
>
> My sun's returned with healing wings,
> My soul and body doth rejoice,
> My heart exults and praises sings
> To him that heard my wailing voice.

Trouble comes back, as sure as winter comes again, and it has, in fact, for me. Because I write these words just after learning that my cancer, in remission for three years, has returned. Even in the winters of life, Anne Bradstreet knew that she had "a shelter from the storm" in God "who is . . . so wondrous great."[48]

Francis Thompson experienced the dark valley as he struggled with mental distress, opium addiction, homelessness, and suicidal thoughts. In one of his poems his desperate cries are answered at last:

> But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
> Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
> Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
> Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.
>
> Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
> Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;
> And lo, Christ walking on the water,
> Not of Gennesareth, but Thames![49]

---

[47] Anne Bradstreet, "Upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666," in *To My Husband and Other Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000), 14, 15.

[48] Bradstreet, "As Spring the Winter Doth Succeed," in *To My Husband*, 25.

[49] Francis Thompson, "In No Strange Land (The Kingdom of God is Within You)," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 77.

There are many ways of saying David's words to the Lord: "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." "Autumn," by Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian writer born in Prague, put it this way:

> The leaves are falling, falling as from far,
> as though above were withering farthest gardens;
> they fall with a denying attitude.
>
> And night by night, down into solitude,
> the heavy earth falls far from every star.
>
> We are all falling. This hand's falling too—
> all have this falling-sickness none withstands.
>
> And yet there's One whose gently-holding hands
> this universal falling can't fall through.[50]

The last two lines bring to mind a favorite Scripture text: "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27).

In one of her books Dorothy Sayers speaks through Balthazar—a wise man who has experienced famine, plague, wars, and the "burden of fear." Yet all this is nothing, he asserts, "if only God will not be indifferent."

> If He is beside me, bearing the weight of his own creation;
> If I may hear His voice among the voices of the vanquished,
> If I may feel His hand touch mine in the darkness,
> If I may look upon the hidden face of God
> And read in the eyes of God
> That He is acquainted with grief.[51]

God is not indifferent, William Blake assures us. God, who himself became "a man of woe," cares.

> Think not thou canst sigh a sigh
> And thy maker is not by;
> Think not thou canst weep a tear
> And thy maker is not near,
>
> O! he gives to us his joy
> That our grief he may destroy;
> Till our grief is fled and gone
> He doth sit by us and moan.[52]

---

[50] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Autumn," in *Poems* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 20.

[51] Dorothy Sayers, Prologue to *He That Should Come,* in *Two Plays About God and Man* (Norton, CT: Vineyard Books, 1977).

[52] William Blake, "On Another's Sorrow," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry,* 45.

How often I thought of these words during dark nights of sickness and suffering. Where is God? What is he doing? I know where he is. I know what he is doing. He is sitting by me and he is moaning. "Suffering is there," wrote Eugene Peterson, "and where the sufferer is, God is."[53]

William Cowper helps me to "fresh courage take" as I experience the mystery of God's providence in taking me through the valley.

> God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform;
> he plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm
>
> Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill
> he treasures up his bright designs, and works his sovereign will.
>
> Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread
> are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.
>
> Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;
> behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.
>
> His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
> the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r.
>
> Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain;
> God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.[54]

Every line, almost every word, is, like the clouds, "big" with meaning and mercy. Large books have been written about God's providence with less success than Cowper's hymn.

I experienced extreme hoarseness and difficulty in speaking after a course of radiation burned my vocal cords. As a teacher who could talk only fifteen minutes at a time, I felt that I had become useless. Others have struggled with similar feelings, including the great Puritan poet John Milton at the onset of his blindness.

> When I consider how my light is spent,
> Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide,
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide,
> "Doth God exact day labour, light denied?"
> I fondly ask! But Patience, to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
> Either man's work or his own gifts; who best

---

[53] Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 114.

[54] William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 128.

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."[55]

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, dense and complex like most of his poetry,[56] are filled with brilliant insights that flare forth from time to time. He writes that

The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars.[57]

These words suggest that there is pattern and purpose in everything—including the circulation of the lymph, an image sure to catch the attention of someone like me who has lymphoma.[58] Not only is there a purpose in everything, there is a person who cares.

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.[59]

The good shepherd who leads us in the valley of the shadow of death is also the great physician, who, wounded himself, knows first-hand our pain and who is so compassionate that he hurts to heal. Toward the end of *Four Quartets*, Eliot asks the inescapable question, "Who then devised the torment?" He gives a one-word answer, "Love."[60]

We are pilgrims, not wanderers. Or, to follow the image of Psalm 23, we are sheep. Our shepherd knows what is the best path for us to take. Sometimes our lives may seem disconnected and erratic. We may find it difficult or impossible to see any pattern. But there is a plan. There is a

---

[55] John Milton, "On His Blindness," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 31.

[56] An exception is *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. I read and reread these poems for fun.

[57] Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *Complete Poems and Plays*, 118.

[58] I read these words in a book by John Carmody in which he speaks to God: "You work my death. All the little cells, cancerous or benign, strut their stuff at your behest. I can't begin to comprehend the nearly infinite delicacy and beauty of how you've arranged our cells and nerves. . . . You are playing through us, circulating in our lymph. The harmonies of the spheres are echoing in our blood. Perhaps even the chorus of the 144,000 is sounding." John Carmody, *Cancer and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 32, 33. The allusion in the last sentence is to Revelation 14:3—"And they were singing a new song before the throne."

[59] Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *Complete Poems and Plays*, 127.

[60] Ibid., 144.

pattern, and someday (perhaps to some extent in this life, certainly and completely in heaven) we will look back over it all and be amazed at how perfect it was. Time spent in the valley is not wasted; it is part of God's plan for us. There we are blessed with his presence, comforted by his rod and staff, and learn more fully what it means to be "his people and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3).

TABLE . . . OIL . . . CUP

Verse four of Psalm 23 introduces another, quite different, image. The Lord is both the good shepherd who cares for his sheep and the gracious host who offers hospitality and protection. The two pictures come together, according to Bernhard Anderson, in the pastoral way of life that still prevails in some parts of the world today. The shepherd leads and cares for his sheep, and welcomes travelers to the hospitality and safety of his tent.[61]

In the tent we find that God blesses us abundantly even when we are experiencing life's most difficult times. Like the famous opening sentences of *A Tale of Two Cities*, illness can be both the worst of times and the best of times. There is anxiety and suffering. There are blessings to be counted and good things to enjoy. The psalmist wrote, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High" (Ps. 92:1). George Herbert began one of his poems with the words, "Thou that hast giv'n so much to me,/ Give one more thing, a grateful heart."[62]

First-century Jewish prayer not only offered a blessing over every meal but also at the spontaneous events of everyday life; benedictions are prescribed at the sight of meteors, earthquakes, lightning, thunder, wind, mountains, sea, rivers, even desert, as well as when building a new home or buying new clothes.[63]

On several of my walks, I took with me to the park a book of poems by Robert Louis Stevenson. His *Child's Garden of Verses* has a little two-line poem called "Happy Thought."

> The world is so full of a number of things,
> I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.[64]

After recovery from a time of deep despair, young G. K. Chesterton wrote in his notebook:

> You say grace before meals.
> All right.
> But I say grace before the play and the opera,

---

[61] Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 181.

[62] Herbert, "Gratefulness," in *Works*, 123.

[63] See David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 112.

[64] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 75.

And grace before the concert and the pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace before sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing;
And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.[65]

In God's tent the table is graciously and abundantly spread, not only in the presence of the hostile powers of this age but also in the presence of "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26).

ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE

During one of my walks around the park, I read and reread John Newton's "Amazing Grace." That day, a few days after I had received a discouraging report from my oncologist, I focused on this verse:

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.[66]

As I spent much of the fifth and sixth decades of my life struggling with cancer and cancer treatment, I realized that not only was serious illness threatening me but also that old age was coming on fast. Was my physical decline caused by cancer or old age or both? In a poem called "As One Oldster to Another," C. S. Lewis captures something of the pathos of aging. Some things are lost, but not everything.

Well, yes the old bones ache. There were easier
Beds thirty years back. Sleep, then importunate,
Now with reserve doles out her favours;
Food disagrees; there are draughts in houses.

Headlong, the down night train rushes on with us,
Screams through the stations . . . how many more! Is it
Time soon to think of taking down one's
Case from the rack? Are we nearly there now?

Yet neither loss of friends, nor an emptying
Future, nor England tamed and the ruin of
Long-builded hopes thus far have taught my
Obstinate heart a sedate deportment.

Still beauty calls as once in the mazes of
Boyhood. The bird-like soul quivers. Into her
Flash darts of unfulfill'd desire and
Pierce with a bright, unabated anguish.

---

[65] G. K. Chesterton, quoted in Buechner, *Speak What We Feel*, 119.
[66] John Newton, "Amazing Grace," *Trinity Hymnal*, 460.

Armed thus with anguish, joy met us even in
Youth—who forgets? This side of the terminus,
Then, now, and always, thus, and only
Thus, were the doors of delight set open.[67]

HOUSE OF THE LORD

Psalm 23 assures us that death is not the end. There is something more and something better. Following the words "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," there is not a period, but a comma (in our Bible translations) and the word "and." My last day on earth is not my last day. The road will end but it "ends . . . as the runway does." I will die, but I will dwell "in the house of the Lord forever."

No greater contrast can exist than that between the Christian view of departing this life and the darkness of death as represented in the ancient world. For the latter, death was a flower crushed, a ship wrecked, a race lost, a harp with strings snapped and all the music gone. For Christians death is the dawn of an eternal day, the gate to life, the end of the journey, a home-coming, and (in the words of C. S. Lewis) the beginning of "Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."[68]

I love the poem by John Donne, "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness." The first verse (of six) reads:

Since I am coming to that holy room
Where, with Thy choir of saints for evermore
I shall be made Thy music, as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before.

Anticipating death, Donne prepares for heaven. He writes in the last verse:

So, in His purple wrapped receive me Lord,
By these His thorns give me His other crown;
And as to others' souls I preached Thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
Therefore, that He may raise, the Lord throws down.[69]

---

[67] C. S. Lewis, "As One Oldster to Another," in *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 41, 42.

[68] C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (NY: Collier, 1956), 184.

[69] John Donne, "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness," in Witherington and Armitage, *The Poetry of Piety*, 26, 27.

As a minister who has preached to others for over fifty years, I am moved by Donne's words—as I come closer to the end of my journey and anticipate the nearer presence of God.[70]

The witty, bold, and compact poetry of Emily Dickinson intrigues me, even when her meaning eludes me. But I do understand, I think, something of this little poem.

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room.[71]

God, the King, is in charge of life and death. All is in his hands. All the rest is circumstance—and all that is in his hands, too. We wait and we learn to accept his timing of things, as did Puritan Richard Baxter.

Lord, it belongs not to my care,
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this thy grace must give.

If life be long I will be glad
That I may long obey;
If short—yet why should I be sad
To soar to endless day?

Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than he went through before;
He that unto God's kingdom comes,
Must enter by this door.

Come, Lord, when grace has made me meet
Thy blessed face to see;
For if thy work on earth be sweet,
What will thy glory be![72]

---

[70] According to Isaac Walton, Donne's contemporary biographer, this poem was written only eight days before Donne's death in 1631, although other accounts put it earlier.

[71] Emily Dickinson, "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died," in *Poems* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 203.

[72] Richard Baxter, "Lord, It Belongs Not to My Care," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 34.

Christina Rossetti spent her life caring for her widowed mother, serving the needy, and writing poems, including this one.

If I might only love my God and die!
But now he bids me love him and live on,
Now when the bloom of all my life is gone,
The pleasant half of life has quite gone by.
My tree of hope is lopped that spread so high;
And I forget how summer glowed and shone,
While autumn grips me with its fingers wan,
And frets me with its fitful windy sigh.
When autumn passes then must winter numb,
And winter may not pass a weary while,
But when it passes spring shall flower again:
And in that spring who weepeth now shall smile,
Yea, they shall wax who now are on the wane,
Yea, they shall sing for love when Christ shall come.[73]

American poet John Berryman wrote in the last of his "Eleven Addresses to the Lord":

Germanicus leapt upon the wild lion in Smyrna,
wishing to pass quickly from a lawless life.
The crowd shook the stadium.
The proconsul marvelled.

"Eighty & six years have I been his servant,
and he has done me no harm.
How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"
Polycarp, John's pupil, facing the fire.

Make too me (sic) acceptable at the end of time
in my degree, which then Thou wilt award.
Cancer, senility, mania,
I pray I may be ready with my witness.[74]

As a church history professor and cancer patient, I embraced these words with eagerness.

Jane Kenyon, poet laureate of New Hampshire, was diagnosed with leukemia and died the next year at the age of 47. Her quiet, simple poems, inspired by thoughtful observation of ordinary life and by the Bible and hymns, contain Psalm-like utterances of great beauty.

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving

---

[73] Christina Rossetti, "If Only," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 61.

[74] John Berryman, "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," in *Love and Fame*, 2nd ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 90. Germanicus, a young man, and the aged Polycarp were martyred at Smyrna in AD 155 or 156.

up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to the air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.[75]

Wandering far from his homeland and from the Calvinistic faith of his loving parents, Robert Louis Stevenson could not forget the "dull, cold northern sky" and the "brawling Sabbath bells" of Scotland.[76] In "Evensong," written in faraway Samoa, he returned to the simple trust and joys of a child.

The embers of the day are red
Beyond the murky hill.
The kitchen smokes: the bed
In the darkling house is spread:
The great sky darkens overhead,
And the great woods are shrill.
So far have I been led,
Lord, by Thy will:
So far I have followed, Lord, and wondered still.

The breeze from the embalmèd land
Blows sudden from the shore,
And claps my cottage door.
I hear the signal, Lord—I understand.
The night at Thy command

---

[75] Jane Kenyon, "Let Evening Come," in *Collected Poems* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2005), 213. Kenyon believed that the words of this poem were given to her by the Holy Spirit. See *Books & Culture* (January/February 1997): 22.

[76] Stevenson, "O Dull, Cold Northern Sky," in *Selected Poems*, 16.

Comes. I will eat and sleep and will not question more.[77]

C. S. Lewis' "Evensong" looks beyond the evening to the coming dawn.

Now that night is creeping
O'er our travail'd senses,
To Thy care unsleeping
We commit our sleep.
Nature for a season
Conquers our defences,
But th' eternal Reason
Watch and ward will keep.

All the soul we render
Back to Thee completely,
Trusting Thou wilt tend her
Through the deathlike hours,
And all night remake her
To Thy likeness sweetly,
Then with dawn awake her
And give back her powers.

Slumber's less uncertain
Brother soon will bind us
—Darker falls the curtain,
Stifling-close 'tis drawn:
But amidst that prison
Still Thy voice can find us,
And, as Thou hast risen,
Raise us in Thy dawn.[78]

Welsh poet Henry Vaughan wrote this beautiful "Easter Hymn."

Death and darkness get you packing,
Nothing now to man is lacking,
All your triumphs now are ended,
And what Adam marred is mended;
Graves are beds now for the weary,
Death a nap, to wake more merry;
Youth now, full of pious duty,
Seeks in thee for perfect beauty,
The weak, and aged tired, with length
Of days, from thee look for new strength,
And infants with thy pangs contest
As pleasant, as if with the breast;
Then, unto him, who thus hath thrown
Even to contempt thy kingdom down,
And by his blood did us advance

[77] Stevenson, "Evensong," in *Selected Poems*, 239.
[78] Lewis, "Evensong," in *Poems*, 128.

Unto his own inheritance,
To him be glory, power, praise,
From this, unto the last of days.[79]

Vaughan celebrates Christ's and therefore our victory over death, as John Donne does in his better known "On Death."

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou thinkst thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures 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 swellest thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die.[80]

George Herbert's "Dialogue Anthem" makes the same point.

Christian. Alas, poor Death, where is thy glory?
Where is thy famous force, thy ancient sting?
Death. Alas poor mortal, void of story,
Go spell and read how I have kill'd thy King.
Christian. Poor death! and who was hurt thereby?
Thy curse being laid on him, makes thee accurst.
Death. Let losers talk: yet thou shalt die;
These arms shall crush thee.
Christian. Spare not, do thy worst.
I shall be one day better than before:
Thou so much worse, that thou shall be no more.[81]

Here are the words of the priest in John Henry Newman's "The Dream of Gerontius."

Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!
Go from this world! Go, in the name of God,
The Omnipotent Father, who created thee!
Go, in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Son of the Living God, who bled for thee!
Go, in the Name of the Holy Spirit, who

---

[79] Henry Vaughan, "Easter Hymn," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 35.

[80] John Donne, "On Death," in *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 22. The correct punctuation of the last line is a major point of the movie *Wit*. I remember shouting out the last line during a cold, winter walk in my empty park.

[81] Herbert, "Dialogue Anthem," in *Works of George Herbert*, 295.

Hath been pour'd out on thee! Go, in the name
Of Angels and Archangels, in the name
Of Thrones and Dominations, in the name
Of Princedoms and of Powers, and in the name
Of Cherubim and Seraphim, go forth!
Go, in the name of Patriarchs and Prophets,
And of Apostles and Evangelists,
Of Martyrs and Confessors, in the name
Of holy Monks and Hermits, in the name of
Of holy Virgins, and all Saints of God,
Both men and women, go! Go on thy course,
And may thy place today be found in peace,
And may thy dwelling be the Holy Mount
Of Zion—through the Same, through Christ, our Lord.[82]

Now, that is a send-off!

Jane Kenyon looks back to this life in her "Notes from the Other Side."

I divested myself of despair
and fear when I came here.

Now there is no more catching
one's own eye in the mirror,

there are no bad books, no plastic,
no insurance premiums, and of course

no illness. Contrition
does not exist, nor gnashing

of teeth. No one howls as the first
clod of earth hits the casket.

The poor we no longer have with us.
Our calm hearts strike only the hour,

and God, as promised, proves
to be mercy clothed in light.[83]

The famous poem written by Dylan Thomas for his dying father begins:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

---

[82] John Henry Newman, "The Dream of Gerontius," quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, *As I Lay Dying: Meditations Upon Returning* (NY: Basic Books, 2002), 94, 95. Newman's work has been set to music by Edward Elgar and two of the poems in it are well known as hymns—"Firmly I Believe and Truly" and "Praise to the Holiest in the Height."

[83] Kenyon, "Notes From the Other Side," in *Collected Poems*, 267.

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.[84]

Thomas' words of despair at the dying of the light contrast with the moving farewell of Norman Nicholson as he thinks of the times he has looked from his beloved Cumbrian coast at the sunset over the "Sea to the West."

Yet in that final stare when I
(Five times, perhaps, fifteen)
Creak protesting away—
The sea to the west,
The land darkening—
Let my eyes at the last be blinded
Not by the dark
But by dazzle.[85]

By God's grace, I sometimes have caught a glimpse of "the many-splendoured thing" in the words and images of the poets, and my eyes were dazzled for a moment. Someday I shall see that greater light, a light that shall never fade, a light of which all our glimpses of glory are faint reflections, the light of the New Jerusalem, a city that has "no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). In that light the problem of pain will disappear and sickness and suffering will be no more "for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). The words of the poets will take physical shape and faith will become sight and what we love will never vanish. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Rev. 22:21).

---

[84] Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1973), 474.

[85] Norman Nicholson, "Sea to the West," in *Collected Poems*, 339. The closing lines of the poem are now on Nicholson's west-facing tombstone in the churchyard at Millom, the English Lake District town, where he had lived in the same small house for the whole of his seventy-three years.