

V. John Milton (1608-74)

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LYCIDAS

*In this Monody the author bewails a learned friend<sup>1</sup>, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637; and by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then in their height.*

YET ONCE more, O ye laurels, and once more  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere<sup>2</sup>,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear  
Compels me to disturb your season due;  
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,  
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.  
Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew  
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.  
He must not float upon his watery bier<sup>3</sup>  
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,  
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

Begin then, sisters of the sacred well  
That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring;  
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.  
Hence with denial vain and coy excuse!  
So may some gentle muse  
With lucky words favor my destined urn,  
And as he passes turn  
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud!  
For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,  
Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill;

Together both, ere the high lawns appeared  
Under the opening eyelids of the morn,  
We drove afield, and both together heard  
What time the gray-fly winds her sultry horn<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup>Lycidas is a shepherd poet in Virgil's ninth Eclogue; the friend was Edward King, a young scholar, poet and clergyman at Cambridge as a student with Milton. This poem was the last in a volume of memorial verses published by King's friends after King's ship mysteriously foundered on a clear day in August, 1637. A Monody is a dirge or elegy sung by a single voice.

<sup>2</sup>*sere*, dark or withered; the three sorts of leaves were used to garland the heads of epic, lyric and tragic poets, respectively.

<sup>3</sup>*bier*, stand on which a corpse is laid, then drawn towards the grave. *welter*, roll about. *meed*, tribute

<sup>4</sup>At midday; the insect buzz is likened to the sound of a horn "winded", i.e., blown.

Battening our flocks with the fresh dews of night,  
Oft till the star that rose at evening bright  
Toward heaven's descent had sloped his westering wheel.  
Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,  
Tempered to th' oaten flute;  
Rough Satyrs danced, and Fauns with cloven heel<sup>5</sup>,  
From the glad sound would not be absent long;  
And old Damoetas loved to hear our song.

But O the heavy change now thou art gone,  
Now thou art gone, and never must return!  
Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves,  
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,  
And all their echoes mourn.  
The willows and the hazel copses green  
Shall now no more be seen  
Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.  
As killing as the canker to the rose,  
Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,  
Or frost to flowers that their gay wardrobe wear  
When first the white thorn blows:  
Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear.

Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep  
Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?  
For neither were ye playing on the steep  
Where your old bards, the famous Druids, lie,  
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,  
Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream<sup>6</sup>.  
Aye me! I fondly dream  
Had ye been there - for what could that have done?  
What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,  
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son,  
Whom universal nature did lament,  
When by the rout that made the hideous roar  
His gory visage down the stream was sent,  
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore?

Alas! what boots it with incessant care  
To tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade,  
And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?

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<sup>5</sup>Fauns and satyrs were half-human, half-goat, associated with drink and lust; *Damoetas* is a conventional name in ancient pastoral, here possibly one of the Cambridge tutors.

<sup>6</sup>The three places named are in Wales or England, just south of that part of the Irish sea where King drowned. "The muse" is Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. Her son, Orpheus, was torn limb from limb by a band of Thracian Maenads, because he slighted sex and marriage. His head was flung in the river Hebrus and drifted to the isle of Lesbos, across the Aegean.

Were it not better done, as others use,  
 To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,  
 Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair<sup>7</sup>?  
 Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise  
 (That last infirmity of noble mind)  
 To scorn delights and live laborious days;  
 But the fair guerdon<sup>8</sup> when we hope to find,  
 And think to burst out into sudden blaze,  
 Comes the blind Fury with th' abhorred shears,  
 And slits the thin-spun life. "But not the praise,"  
 Phoebus<sup>9</sup> replied, and touched my trembling ears;  
 "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,  
 Nor in the glistening foil  
 Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumor lies,  
 But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes  
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;  
 As he pronounces lastly on each deed,  
 Of so much fame in Heaven expect thy meed."

O fountain Arethuse, and thou honored flood,  
 Smooth-sliding Mincius<sup>10</sup>, crowned with vocal reeds,  
 That strain I heard was of a higher mood.  
 But now my oar proceeds,  
 And listens to the Herald of the Sea<sup>11</sup>,  
 That came in Neptune's plea.  
 He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,  
 "What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?"  
 And questioned every gust of rugged wings  
 That blows from off each beaked promontory.  
 They knew not of his story;  
 And sage Hippotades their answer brings,  
 That not a blast was from his dungeon strayed;  
 The air was calm, and on the level brine  
 Sleek Panope with all her sisters played.

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<sup>7</sup>Amaryllis and Neaera were shepherdesses who seduced shepherds from their pastoral duty in Virgil.

<sup>8</sup>reward. The Blind Fury is Atropos, the third of the Fates, who cuts the line of life.

<sup>9</sup>Apollo, god of poetic inspiration, tweaked Tityrus's ear in Virgil's sixth Eclogue, warning him not to try epic poetry but stick to lesser forms of verse. *foil*, setting for a gem. *meed*, wages

<sup>10</sup>*Arethuse* and *Mincius*, associated with the pastoral poets Theocritus and Virgil, respectively

<sup>11</sup>Triton, who pleads Neptune's innocence of Lycidas's death. *Hippotades*, roundabout Greek for the son of Hipotas, that is, Aeolos, god of the winds. *Panope*, one of the daughters of the Old Man of the Sea, Nereus. *Bark*, a ship.

It was that fatal and perfidious bark,  
Built in th' eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,  
That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.

Next Camus<sup>12</sup>, reverend sire, went footing slow,  
His mantle hairy, and his bonnet sedge,  
Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge  
Like to that sanguine flower inscribed with woe.  
"Ah! who hath reft," quoth he, "my dearest pledge?"  
Last came, and last did go,  
The Pilot of the Galilean lake;  
Two massy keys he bore of metals twain  
(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain).  
He shook his mitered locks, and stern bespake:  
"How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,  
Enow of such as for their bellies' sake  
Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold?  
Of other care they little reckoning make  
Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast  
And shove away the worthy bidden guest.  
Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold  
A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least  
That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs!  
What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;  
And when they list their lean and flashy songs  
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,  
The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,  
But, swoll'n with wind and the rank mist they draw,  
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;  
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw  
Daily devours apace, and nothing said,  
But that two-handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more".

Return, Alpheus<sup>13</sup>: the dread voice is past  
That shrunk thy streams; return, Sicilian Muse,  
And call the vales and bid them hither cast  
Their bells and flowerets of a thousand hues.

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<sup>12</sup>The river Cam, representing Cambridge University, dressed in academic robes. *Pilot of the lake*, St. Peter. *amain*, forcefully. *swain*, shepherd. *recks*, reckons up. *are sped*, have prospered, been advanced. *scrannel*, meager. *privy paw*, secret machinations of anti-Low Church forces.

<sup>13</sup>A river-god who loved the nymph Arethusa. When she fled to Sicily, he dove into the sea off the coast of Italy and emerged on the island. There she changed into the "fountain Arethuse" mentioned above and their waters mingled. *swart star*, the dog-star Sirius, at its zenith in late summer when vegetation withers. *rathe*, early. *freaked*, mottled. *amaranthus*, mythical flower that never fades. *hearse*, bier.

Ye valleys low, where the mild whispers use  
 Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,  
 On whose fresh lap the swart star sparely looks,  
 Throw hither all your quaint enameled eyes,  
 That on the green turf suck the honeyed showers  
 And purple all the ground with vernal flowers.  
 Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,  
 The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,  
 The white pink, and the pansy freaked with jet,  
 The glowing violet,  
 The musk-rose, and the well attired woodbine,  
 With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,  
 And every flower that sad embroidery wears;  
 Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,  
 And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,  
 To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.  
 For so to interpose a little ease,  
 Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.  
 Aye me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas  
 Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled;  
 Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,  
 Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide  
 Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world,  
 Or whether thou, to our moist vows<sup>14</sup> denied,  
 Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,  
 Where the great vision of the guarded mount  
 Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold:  
 Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth<sup>15</sup>;  
 And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,  
 For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,  
 Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor;  
 So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,  
 And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
 And tricks<sup>16</sup> his beams, and with new spangled ore  
 Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:

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<sup>14</sup>Tearful prayers. An unnamed figure of speech later common in eighteenth-century poetry., in which the *genus* is renamed and an unusual specification is made of the species (as in calling *man* a “featherless biped” or *fish* the “finny tribe”). *fable of Bellerus*, mythical figure allegedly buried at the tip of Cornwall, near the “mount” of St. Michael, who gazes south towards Nemancos and the stronghold of Bayona in Spain.

<sup>15</sup>What the ruthless lack—pity. *dolphins* were reputed to push bodies, living or dead, towards the shore.

<sup>16</sup>Adjusts. *ore*, gold. *genius of the shore*, presiding spirit of a place. *uncouth*, uneducated. *Doric*, the Greek dialect in which ancient pastorals were written.

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high  
Through the dear might of him that walked the waves;  
Where, other groves and other streams along,  
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,  
And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,  
In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.  
There entertain him all the saints above,  
In solemn troops, and sweet societies,  
That sing, and singing in their glory move,  
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.  
Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more:  
Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,  
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good  
To all that wander in that perilous flood.

Thus sang the uncouth swain to th' oaks and rills,  
While the still morn went out with sandals gray;  
He touched the tender stops of various quills,  
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay;  
And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,  
And now was dropped into the western bay;  
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:  
To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

## HOW SOON HATH TIME

HOW SOON hath Time the subtle thief of youth,  
Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth year!  
My hasting days fly on with full career,  
But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.  
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,  
That I to manhood am arrived so near,  
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,  
That some more timely-happy spirits indow'th.  
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,  
It shall be still in strictest measure even  
To that same lot, however mean, or high,  
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven;  
All is, if I have grace to use it so,  
As ever in my great task Masters eye.

## ON HIS BLINDNESS<sup>17</sup>

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-labor, 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  
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.

## METHOUGHT I SAW MY LATE ESPOUSED SAINT

METHOUGHT I saw my late espousèd Saint<sup>18</sup>  
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,  
Who Jove's great Son to her glad Husband gave,  
Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.  
Mine as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint  
Purification in the old Law did save,  
And such as yet once more I trust to have  
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,  
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:  
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight  
Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined  
So clear, as in no face with more delight.  
But O as to embrace me she inclined  
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

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<sup>17</sup>Milton had become totally blind by 1651. The parable of the talents may be found in Matthew, xxv, 14-30

<sup>18</sup>Probably Milton's second wife, who died less than two years after marriage, in 1658. Since Milton could never have seen her, some suggest that the saint is his first wife who died in childbirth in 1652, but then she would not have been "late espousèd" *Alcestis*, the wife of Admetus, brought back from the dead by Heracles, son of Zeus. *The Old Law*, Leviticus 12 prescribes sacrificial rituals for the purification of women after childbirth.