

When I regained my sister's house at Mile End she was in a pettish mood, moving from chair to couch, now staring out of the window, then pacing like a caged bear.

Her husband was at his wits' end with her.

'Here,' he thrust a parchment into her hands, 'perhaps this will amuse you. A saucy verse penned by your uncle's secretary. It is doing the rounds of the Inns of Court. Not for ladies' eyes, so I knew you would wish to see it.'

He chuckled her chin affectionately, to cut the edge of his words.

Mary opened the paper. 'It is called "The Flea"'. Not the fittest of subjects for poetry.' Clearing her throat she read the verse aloud.

'Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

The Lady and the Poet

Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to this, self murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
In what could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me the weaker now;
'Tis true, then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.'

As she finished reading my sister started to laugh so much she had to drink a sip of ale to quiet herself. 'I must admit, he is a witty fellow your Master Donne. I wonder if he wrote it to woo the lovely Isabella.'

I twitched the paper from her. 'He is not my Master Donne. And the lovely Isabella has no maidenhead to protect. Unless her husband is even more incompetent than he seems.'

Yet the truth was, I was stirred more than I chose to admit by the lines I had heard, witty and polished on the surface yet with the veiled hint of erotic mastery beneath.

For there was that in me which might, despite the strictures of God and family, be tempted to surrender my own maidenhead to a laughing, dark-eyed suitor.

Yet I covered such thoughts by pretending scorn and anger so that I stamped from the room, imagining the smiles on the

Death be not proud: Creative Writing

Death's shadow still loomed over the streets of London. The stench of plague clung to the air and the gallows creaked under the weight of traitors. Death roamed the city without care for age, status or gender. One man in particular felt Death's eyes glaring into his soul. John Donne, having wrestled with Death his whole life, forced himself out of his sick bed, anguish in every move. He had lost his brother, children, his wife, and on many occasions he felt that it was his time, yet death still stalked in the darkness not claiming him. This may well have been another of those times but Donne had no intention of running, for he had no reason to be afraid. He was preparing to preach a sermon- perhaps his last- to the masses, to offer solace from the grim mortality of life and to confront Death face to face.

St Paul's was a structure so immense in its beauty and stature that only a person like Donne could match it in divine grandeur. It struck those that entered it with a sense of heavenly power so great that it felt as though God was truly sat among the people. All were welcomed by the holy embrace of the cathedral and the atmosphere beckoned all who passed by to enter. Even Death, like a stray seeking warmth, had dragged itself inside with the crowds and now lurked in the furthest, darkest corners.

The excited ruckus in St Paul's settled to an anticipated hum as Donne, frail and slow, rose to the pulpit. The silence spoke immense truths about Donne. His popularity, his way with words, his power over the people. For many, listening to Donne preach was an escape from the mundane and a hope for a better future. Donne's voice, though hollow and strained, echoed through the church, and into the hearts of the people. All whisperings of Donne's ailment and speculations that he wanted to die on the pulpit were cut off as he began. As he spoke so confidently, so calmly, so truthfully, death retreated and shrunk as the fear of the people- which once provided power- was now being cleansed by Donne. He was teaching trust in God over fear of Death and as the hearts of the people were lifted, their hopes set ablaze with truth, Death's pride was quenched, diminished into irrelevance. No great plague or bomb plots could reignite Death's fire. No amount of pain and suffering would ever allow Death's embers to once again take hold because Donne had enlightened the people and the people were no longer afraid.

I sit alone. The candles burning around me shed little light on the words I try to pen, nor on my bleak circumstances. Despite all my efforts, nothing comes forth and the page remains blank.

The wine sitting on my desk is old, and must now taste of gall, or perhaps something worse. As I sip the bitter liquid, I am reminded of the Saviour, and cannot imagine his suffering and anguish to be as great as mine own. There is no sound, nothing to drown out the constant chatter in my mind. With all the words and images flitting before my eyes, I feel like the prophets of old. But, instead of foretelling the coming and death of Christ, I instead see my own demise. As I despair, I see only one solution. And, despite how He has abandoned me in recent years, I, once again, turn to God.

His presence has been a constant in my life, for better or worse, I do not know. But, unlike those who suffer here on earth, He will not waver.

So, I open His Holy Book, to the Gospels and their messages of faith and optimism. These feelings, I have long forgotten, but it must be done; if I cannot feel hope, I can at least inspire it in others. Matthew is who I turn to first, and his account of the resurrection of the son of God. A dismal tale, but one that ends in new life and salvation for all men. I must believe it is true, or myself, my wife, our children will be in eternal darkness, and I cannot allow myself to believe that. I think of her, in heaven, and I...

Matthew, chapter twenty-seven, verses forty-five to fifty-six:

‘Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias. And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him. Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.’

As God abandoned his son, so he has forsaken me. I have given up my spirit, and I commend it to His hands, trusting that, despite his absence in my life, he will guide me through. I put pen to paper, yet still, nothing presents itself to me. Instead, I look for more inspiration. The bible before me seems the best place to start.

Luke, chapter twenty-three, verse thirty-four: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’

Luke, chapter twenty-three, verse forty-three: ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’ I imagine Anne is saying this to me, and when I look down, words have appeared on the page that was once void;

*Spit in my face, you Jews, and pierce my side,
Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me,
For I have sinn'd, and sinne', and only He,
Who could do no iniquity, hath died.*

I must have written them, but my hand seems to have become separate from myself; God truly has begun to guide me once more, and another of the Seven Sayings of Jesus Christ comes to mind:

Luke, chapter twenty-three, verse forty-six: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.' As I read this passage, the inspiration strikes again, and I continue my work.

*But by my death cannot be satisfied
My sins, which pass the Jews' impiety.
They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I
Crucify him daily, being now glorified.
O let me then His strange love still admire;
Kings pardon, but He bore our punishment;
And Jacob came clothed in vile harsh attire;
But to supplant, and with grateful intent...*

Whilst I read what I have written, I see that I struggle with my sermon due to my own sins. I cannot preach about forgiveness and eternal life, when I do not deserve such luxury. While my wife and children wait in heaven, I must look down. There will be no peace for me.

How? How can I tell others of what awaits them in heaven, when I am worse than the Jews were to Christ? when I will spend my eternity in fire and brimstone?

I stand, attempting to clear my head, and above me I glimpse a portrait of my dear wife. Her smiling eyes look down on me with amusement, and it suddenly strikes me. That, to aspire to perfection, is to ignore the lessons in this passage.

All men are imperfect, but it is imperfection that makes us men.

Christ joined the ranks of man to understand what it is like to feel woe, and if I am to be received in heaven, I must do my best to understand his plight. He was imperfect, but sought to make others better, and I must do the same. With that in mind, I sit once more and set about creating my sermon for Good Friday; before long it is finished.

I sit back, pleased with my composition and ready to retire. As I rise from my place, I see the sonnet I had begun, but had left incomplete.

But to supplant, and with grateful intent...

With my renewed determination, I find I am able to complete the work, at last.

*But to supplant, and with grateful intent;
God clothed himself in vile man's flesh, that so
He might be weak enough to suffer woe.*

And thus, my work is concluded. I look forward to the days ahead, prepared for death, but thankful for all the hours I have left.

The candles are burnt out. The ink is dry. My words disappear. This night, I say, *Tetelestai*.

It is finished.

1611

It was curious how the leak, that had stricken the floorboards above ~~it~~, assumed a most picturesque novelty. However far more curious was it that this was what ~~was~~ withheld the majority of my focus, in my final hours before the impending expedition.

But alas with each drip my attention wavered from the quill clenched in my grasp to the sea, which would soon be my home for the coming days. I hustled

my focus around the room constantly but I could not tempt it away from the ~~or~~ suspicious deficiency in my ceiling. It quickly became apparent that ~~was~~ the only solution to securing my attention once more was to fix the problem at its core.

Swiftly, I retrieved a bucket from the parlour to ~~it~~ reduce the swelled mass of the puddle accumulating on the floor, ~~but~~ but consequently to my utter disappointment, this simply added an element of music as the dripping now made an incessant chime. Fervently, I plodded over

to the bucket and pondered at my reflection in the
 pond of liquid that had now built up inside. While
 this was something I often did to pass the
 or inspire a fortnight piece of one's own art. There
 was a transfixing nature of the distortedness ~~which~~
 I simply could not draw away my
 gaze. Questions of existence and
 intimacy invaded my mind and I was
 left in a trance of pure uncertainty, only
 to be dragged out by a water drop landing on
 my skull.

This acted as a sign that the leak must be fixed
 by oneself, and by hand. While suffering thoughts
 of abandoning the entire voyage altogether,
 I laboured through the process of constructing
 a ladder to fix the problem. Whatever
 my plans, I could not in good faith leave
 my beloved to suffer the same torment
 as I.

As the handwork was complete, the deficiency
 expunged and my hands infested

with splinters, it was in this state that the honest
~~new~~ direction of the poem was found. I grasped
my quill and wrote.