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Inventions of Farewell:
A Book of Elegies



Edited and with an introduction by

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own work, her comment is singularly apropos to the anthologist who must battle for permissions in an era when all too many publishers are inclined, at least initially, to ask fees that editors of low-budget collections simply can't afford. In fact, because one or two publishers and/or agents demanded truly exorbitant permissions fees, there are a few important twentieth-century elegies, still in copyright, that I have had reluctantly to omit from this book. My pain at these omissions, however, has been more than assuaged by the courtesy of the many, many poets and editors whose generosity and flexibility have helped me assemble what I hope will be a powerful documentation of the ways in which some of the finest writers in the English language have confronted loss and grief over the centuries, from the late Middle Ages to the end of the 1990s. Indeed, it is for the generosity as well as the genius of the poets, in particular, that I reserve my profoundest gratitude.

Introduction

"I have heard it said that crows have funerals, or something akin to funerals, for other crows," mused the late *Newsweek* columnist Meg Greenfield in 1996. Meditating on the fate of what might be called ceremonial mourning—the kind of mourning expressed not just in tears and wails of lamentation but through religion's traditional funeral rituals and the time-honored literary forms of elegy and eulogy—she was wondering how a skeptical, hedonistic, often death-denying culture can find appropriate public and private ways of articulating grief.¹ When faced, today, with the death of someone we cherish, how do we show, and say, we're sorry?

Historically, both priests and poets have helped us find a language for loss, often a highly stylized and dramatic vocabulary through which to shape the otherwise inexpressible grief of bereavement. The need for such rituals is deep rooted in just about every society; indeed, if Greenfield's surmise that even "crows have funerals" is accurate, such a need may transcend our own species.² Yet like a number of sociologists and historians, the *Newsweek* columnist couldn't help noticing that we live in an age marked by considerable confusion about what might be called "procedures" for grieving.

That at this turn of the century mourning has become not so much electric as *eclectic* was made quite clear in early September 1997, when what Walt Whitman called "the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang" was

1. Greenfield, "Respecting the Dead," *Newsweek*, April 22, 1996.

2. For instance, in her *Fragments on the Deathwatch* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), Louise Harmon meditates on "elephant grief," noting that elephants "attend the births and deaths of members of their species" and describing the mourning behavior of one herd after "the death of an old bull." Citing a *National Geographic* article, she describes how the surviving elephants "approached his body in twos and threes, 'sweeping their trunks slowly over him, not touching him for the most part but maintaining an inch of distance between his skin and the moist tips of their trunks. The ritual was more impressive for its silence.'" (Cf. Dereck Joubert, "Eyewitness to an Elephant Wake," *National Geographic*, May 1991: 39, 40.)

heard worldwide, as the funeral cortège of Diana, Princess of Wales, passed solemnly through the flower-banked streets of London. A few weeks later, scornfully describing “the kitsch of the Diana shrines,” the *New Yorker* reporter Adam Gopnik exclaimed in an essay entitled “Crazy Piety” that “for two weeks good gray London took on the look of Lourdes or Fatima, with vast heaps of floral bouquets and honey-colored Teddy bears and hand-scrawled messages that seemed less like funeral tributes than like the contents of some vast piñata, filled with party favors, that someone had broken above” the city. And indeed, as most of the millions who watched the televised rites will also recall, the princess’s funeral ceremony itself was marked by a similarly odd concatenation of the traditional and the trivial, craziness and piety, sentimentality and solemnity. Anglican ritual and Elton John, the grave words of the King James Bible and the souped-up warble of the American Bible Belt echoed through Westminster Abbey like radio frequencies colliding in the stratosphere. If Diana herself was half a jet-setting single mom and half a populist madonna, her death—taken as a representative symbolic as well as literal experience of loss—illuminated the ambiguities of modern mourning.

“Brightness falls from the air; / Queens have died young and fair,” lamented Thomas Nashe in the 1590s, and “Goodbye England’s rose. . . . This torch we’ll always carry / For our nation’s golden child,” crooned Elton John, recycling not Nashe’s poem but his own earlier tribute to another queen who died young and fair—Marilyn Monroe—as he produced what was to be one of the greatest hits of the decade, if not the century. Well, harumphed Gopnik, in the excesses of the princess’s funeral, which was “in many ways a triumph of the popular, intuitive version of the Old Religion [i.e., Roman Catholicism], it was possible to discern a glimmer of religious feeling, of a very traditional kind.”³ Just a “glimmer,” though, for in this era where the guidelines of tradition are increasingly blurry, public mourning is usually more notable for its minimalism than for its excess. In fact, a few words spoken at the austere funeral of Ophelia in act 5 of *Hamlet* summarize questions that haunt all too many modern mourners. “What ceremony else?” the dead girl’s grieving brother, Laertes, poignantly asks the officiating priest, wondering

3. Gopnik, “Crazy Piety,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 29, 1997, 36.

“Must there no more be done?” *What ceremonies else* do we have, nowadays, for those who are bereaved? What more must be—*can* be—done to assuage grief?

This anthology is designed to offer some answers to such questions by introducing readers to at least one way of mourning that has persisted through massive cultural and theological turmoil, even while it has also, of course, been transformed by the fluctuations of history: the form of lyric poetry known as the elegy. For centuries, after all, poets have lamented the mortal losses that all of us must inexorably encounter. Whether (with Dylan Thomas) counseling readers to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” or (with Walt Whitman) taking comfort in the serene arrival, “sooner or later,” of “delicate death,” most writers of verse have “sooner or later” had to face bereavement. Aesthetic assumptions and poetic styles have altered over the centuries, yet the great and often terrifying themes of time, change, age, and death are timeless, even though cultural imaginings of them may differ radically. As we begin a new millennium, therefore, having just in a sense “put to rest” the last two thousand years of our communal past, it seems particularly appropriate to turn our attention to literary encounters with life’s end as well as to the ways in which such encounters have been inflected by the public history and personal stories they both record and mourn.

Taken together, the traditional and not-so-traditional elegies included in this anthology dramatize the range of strategies through which poets have long sought to confront and confound mortality. Representing both what endures and what varies in modes of lamentation, *Inventions of Farewell* collects English-language poems of mourning from the late Middle Ages to the present, focusing especially on works by modern and contemporary writers but also including such classics as Milton’s “Lycidas,” Shelley’s “Adonais,” and Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d.”

What endures: This book is organized thematically in order to emphasize common questions, concerns, and tactics with which poets have for generations approached and lamented loss. As the table of contents indicates, there are two main sections: an opening section tracing the visions of death and dying—the necessities of mortality, as it were—that implicitly or explicitly shape a number of elegies; and a longer, second

section cataloging the kinds of losses that poets have traditionally sought to record and sometimes even redress. Part I is then subdivided into four groups: poems recounting death scenes, poems focusing on “viewings” of the body in death, poems enacting funeral rituals or other ceremonies of separation, and poems imagining (in a whole range of ways) the ultimate fate of those who have died—perhaps a traditional “afterlife” or perhaps something very different. Similarly, after beginning with poems ostensibly mourning mythic figures in the pastoral tradition of which “Lycidas” and “Adonais” are the most famous English-language examples, Part II includes subsections devoted to poems lamenting a spectrum of different losses—the deaths of parents, of spouses and lovers, of children, of friends, of other poets, of the great and famous, and of the victims of war and other violence, along with what the critic Jahan Ramazani has called “self-elegies” and more generalized meditations on mortality.

What varies: Within individual sections, I have arranged poems chronologically in order to show how historical and cultural differences have produced aesthetic changes. In particular, my organization of texts is meant to illuminate the often strikingly transformed procedures for mourning devised by so many poets in our own era of mounting theological and social confusion. Thus *Inventions of Farewell*, my title for the anthology, is drawn from Wallace Stevens’s “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” the poet’s beautiful, mysterious, and curiously mystical elegy for his friend Henry Church. In this work, contemplating what he called the “mythology of modern death” that is the product of a skeptical age, the author of that post-Christian masterpiece “Sunday Morning” outlined a poetics of grief in which consolation comes from “inventions of farewell.” Such “forms of thought” may be merely “monsters of elegy,” Stevens concedes—mutations of a genre infected by what Matthew Arnold long ago called the “strange disease of modern life”—but they are also the “children of a desire that is the will, / Even of death,” a will to art and speech.

The new millennium has dawned with a curious combination of excitement and confusion. On the one hand, this twenty-first century that had long seemed so dreamlike, so impossibly apocalyptic, has plunged us into a world of virtual fantasy and fantastic virtuosity. We send rockets to

Mars and e-mail to cyberspace, replace worn-out organs and speculate on genetic engineering. In such a high-tech context, it may be hard for some people to focus on human vulnerability—the mortality of the flesh. Perhaps for this reason, death itself is often considered a kind of “unspeakable” event. As I began my research into the history of the elegy, I encountered a remarkable anecdote by a fellow investigator of what Stevens called “modern death”: “When I called the American Cancer Society to request permission to include some of their materials in [my] book, their representative responded: ‘Absolutely not. In no way do we want to be associated with a book on death. We want to emphasize the positive aspects of cancer only.’”⁴

What, though, are the implications of such an attitude toward dying, death, and the dead not only for those who are dying but for those who must mourn them? More specifically, with what “monsters of elegy” have recent poets responded to the anxious circumlocutions that mark this “mythology of modern death”? From the mid-twentieth-century elegies produced by (among others) Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath to the recent writings of poets including Ruth Stone, Thom Gunn, Donald Hall, Sharon Olds, Tess Gallagher, and Paul Monette, the poems in *Inventions of Farewell* arguably trace the evolution of a defiant contemporary poetics of grief that has been shaped by factors ranging from what the American critic J. Hillis Miller once called the “disappearance of God” to the twentieth-century privatization and medicalization of death along with the “rejection” of mourning that have been most notably studied by the French historian Philippe Ariès.

Ariès’s work is of particular interest here. Examining “western attitudes toward death” from the medieval “tame death” to the contemporary medicalized death, Ariès has incisively demonstrated that the necessities of dying and mourning have never before been seen as so *scandalous*: on the one hand, we live in an age when most people die in hospitals or hospices, and this medicalization of death has “eliminated [death’s] character of public ceremony, and made it a private act,” and on the other hand, associated with such privatization has been the “sec-

4. Quoted in David Wendell Moller, *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Mortality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. vii.

ond great milestone in the contemporary history of death”—the repudiation of most traditional modes of mourning. Yes, we do mourn but we don't usually “go into black,” as, say, the Victorians did, and “bereavement counselors,” hurrying us through the “stages of grief,” briskly advise us to “get on with life” as quickly and efficiently as possible rather than “fixating” lingeringly on loss.

But as a number of social commentators have shown, the widespread modern rejection of long-standing, customary procedures for grieving, together with intellectual anxiety about the so-called disappearance of God, has for decades elicited not just high-cultural gloom but also popular confusion and distress. From Jessica Mitford's midcentury bestseller *The American Way of Death* (which vigorously critiqued “the malarkey that surrounds the usual kind of funeral”) to the often bizarre outpourings of ceremonial improvisation that characterized Princess Diana's 1997 funeral, from the death counseling prescribed in the seventies by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to the cheerful spiritualism propounded by James Van Praagh's recent bestseller *Talking to Heaven*, the social bewilderment fostered by changing mythologies of death has issued in a number of sometimes contradictory modes of encountering loss.

Adding special poignancy to unfilled needs for ceremonial grief are technological innovations that have transformed our relationship to history and memory—namely, the development of films and videos that allow us to see and hear the dead as if they were among the living. While such ghostly presences are unprecedented, they are especially unnerving in a cultural context where death is a scandal to be denied and grief an embarrassment to be deplored. Can the dead be in and of history and memory if we can still see them and hear them? Equally to the point, how can we bear witness to the absolute fact that they are *not* here?

Theological uncertainty coupled with technological virtuosity, the fate of the souls of the dead uncertain yet the bodies of the dead apparently alive on screen, grief as illness and illness as culpable: Taken together these phenomena might have stifled poetic “inventions of farewell.” Yet contemporary poets resist the repression of death as resolutely as their great modernist precursors resisted the repression of sex. That we live in an era of calamitous worldwide human violence—of national as well as international murderousness—gives their work great

urgency. Indeed, as a number of the elegies collected in this anthology reveal, even before the AIDS pandemic forced death and dying out of the closet, testimonial imperatives fostered by traumas like the Great War and the Holocaust evolved into *literary* modes of resistance to both regressive sentimentalizings of grief and cultural valedictions forbidding mourning.

Brooding on what Wallace Stevens once called the “handbook of heartbreak”—the compendium of losses one necessarily encounters in even the sunniest life—modern and postmodern poets have even in the midst of (or in defiance of) deepest sorrow composed countless stirring “inventions of farewell,” a number of them represented in this volume. That all can draw on a powerful and empowering tradition of English-language elegies also represented here, a tradition reaching back some seven centuries to the time of Geoffrey Chaucer's talented contemporary William Dunbar and continuing on through the epochs of such dazzling figures as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, Dickinson, and Hardy, helps explain the strength of the work they produce. Yet as Stevens would no doubt have sought to remind us, this tradition that fortifies our contemporaries, like the “mythology of modern death” devised and revised by its inheritors, itself attests to the intensity of the desire that is the will to art.