

# Poetry on Aging

## (A Tri-C Common Reading Program Assignment)

Total Points Possible: \_\_\_\_\_

Due: \_\_\_\_\_

### Required Reading:

- *The Postmortal*
- The following eight (8) poems:
  - “Do Not Go Gentle” (Dylan Thomas)
  - “Courage” (Anne Sexton)
  - “You Can’t Have It All” (Barbara Ras)
  - “Old Woman” (Elizabeth Jennings)
  - “Mother’s Closet” (Maxine Scates)
  - “Letter to Dad” (Lou Suarez)
  - “Death Be Not Proud” (John Donne)
  - “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (Emily Dickenson)

### The Assignment:

#### Step 1:

Experience the eight poems listed above.

You can access written copies of the poems below, at the end of this document. Embedded links allow you to access audio recordings of some of the poems.

Although you will ultimately reflect upon just two of the poems, take the time to enjoy each of them. Listening to poetry is a pleasurable experience. Allow yourself this luxury. Experiencing all the poems will also help you determine which pair of poems most appeals to you.

#### Step 2:

Select just **ONE** of the writing assignment options below and respond to the prompt in a thoughtful reflection. Remember: Each option asks you to reflect upon two of the eight poems.

#### Step 3:

Post your reflection to our class Blackboard site, in the appropriate Discussion Board forum.

#### Step 4:

Respond to any three (3) of your classmates' original posts.

- Please see the class guidelines and rubric for [Discussion Board posts](#) and [response posts](#).

# Writing Assignment Options

(Select one.)

## Option 1: Is there a good way to approach death?

Working with “Do Not Go Gentle” and “Courage,” consider Dylan Thomas’ and Anne Sexton’s sentiments toward death. Consider also the perspective on death which John Farrell’s father seems to hold in Magary’s novel. What similarities and/or differences do you find between these three perspectives? Which perspective comes closest to your own?

Respond in a thoughtful 300 – 350 word post. Be sure to reference both poems and a quote from Farrell’s father at some point in your reflection.

## Option 2: Aging Gracefully?

Barbara Ras (“You Can’t Have it All”) and Elizabeth Jennings (“Old Woman”) use their poems to capture the experience of aging. Both poems explore the inevitability of death and our attempts to walk through the chapter of old age gracefully, with a spirit of acceptance.

Select one character from *The Postmortal*. Do your *own* feelings toward death resonate more closely with the sentiments expressed by that character, Ras’ poem or Jennings’ poem? Explain why.

Respond in a thoughtful 300 – 350 word post. Be sure to reference both poems and a quote from *The Postmortal* character at some point in your reflection.

## Option 3: Life Cycles

“Mother’s Closet” (Maxine Scates) and “Letter to Dad” (Lou Suarez) both address death from the perspective of an adult child left behind – the son or daughter of a deceased or dying parent. Both poems also capture the human spirit’s ache for continuance.

Write a reflective paragraph in which you consider the following:

- In your opinion, is the natural life cycle (from childhood to young adulthood to middle age to old age) a natural cycle, one that ultimately benefits the human race?
- Should older people find a certain degree of contentment in handing off the baton to the next generation?
- Should the generation left behind find contentment in that cycle as well?

Respond in a thoughtful 300 – 350 word post. Be sure to reference both poems at some point in your reflection.

## Option 4: The Spiritual Realm

“Death Be Not Proud” (John Donne) and “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (Emily Dickenson) give voice to their authors’ faith in a life beyond the grave. In a similar vein, the fictional Vatican in Magary’s novel notes that “Death is what makes us humble before God” (12).

Staff writers for the President’s 2002 Council on Bioethics pose the following questions, which hint at the possibility that aging may involve a *spiritual* aspect:

Is aging a disease? Is our degeneration and mortality a scourge to be pushed back as far as possible? Or is there some edifying facet to the life cycle, which might be undermined if the cycle was stretched out of shape? Why does the psalmist ask God to “teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom?” (“Staff Background Paper: The Promise and Challenge of Aging Research”).

In *The Postmortal*, John Farrell cites a columnist (Wyatt Dearborn) who approaches the issue from a different perspective than do Donne, Dickenson and the 2002 Council on Bioethics. Dearborn observes: “If I forgo the cure and end up dying at seventy to please a Lord who turns out to not exist, I’m gonna feel like a real jackass. Isn’t it better to live an extra thousand years or so, just in case?” (14).

In your opinion, are there spiritual implications to “the cure”? In other words, were we meant to age physically, and does the cure somehow undermine a necessary (and even desirable) spiritual path?

Respond in a thoughtful 300 – 350 word post. Be sure to reference both poems at some point in your reflection.

## Do Not Go Gentle (Dylan Thomas)

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

From *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (J.M. Dent, 1977)

[http://us.yhs4.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?hsparm=iry&hsimp=yhs-fullyhosted\\_003&type=bnk\\_coinis\\_15\\_06&param1=1&param2=cd%3D2XzuyEtN2Y1L1QzuyEzzyD0A0ByCzz0A0FyDtCyD0E0FyDyCtN0D0Tzu0StCtCtAtAtN1L2XzutAtFyBtFyBtFyDtN1L1CzutCyEtBzytDyD1V1StN1L1G1B1V1N2Y1L1Qzu2SyBtD0EyD0CtD0AyBtG0EtBtByDtGtByD0A0CtGzyztD0CtGyBztD0AtDyCyByD0C0EyCOD2QtN1M1F1B2Z1V1N2Y1L1Qzu2StByE0CtCzzyCyC0CtGzyyE0E0EtGyE0E0CtBtGzy0E0EtBtG0E0EtBtCtBtD0CtA0DtAtBzy0C2Q%26cr%3D405291789%26a%3Dbnk\\_coinis\\_15\\_06%26f%3D4%26cat%3Dweb%26sid%3D6e44dffdbda04f3b7889b265e22890a9%26sesid%3D701b8b04a53a6644d216ec6a0555ae70%26ip%3D98.27.213.146%26b%3DIE%26bv%3D11.0%26os%3DWindows%2B8.1%26pa%3Dbinkiland&p=do+not+go+gentle+dylan+thomas+reading](http://us.yhs4.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?hsparm=iry&hsimp=yhs-fullyhosted_003&type=bnk_coinis_15_06&param1=1&param2=cd%3D2XzuyEtN2Y1L1QzuyEzzyD0A0ByCzz0A0FyDtCyD0E0FyDyCtN0D0Tzu0StCtCtAtAtN1L2XzutAtFyBtFyBtFyDtN1L1CzutCyEtBzytDyD1V1StN1L1G1B1V1N2Y1L1Qzu2SyBtD0EyD0CtD0AyBtG0EtBtByDtGtByD0A0CtGzyztD0CtGyBztD0AtDyCyByD0C0EyCOD2QtN1M1F1B2Z1V1N2Y1L1Qzu2StByE0CtCzzyCyC0CtGzyyE0E0EtGyE0E0CtBtGzy0E0EtBtG0E0EtBtCtBtD0CtA0DtAtBzy0C2Q%26cr%3D405291789%26a%3Dbnk_coinis_15_06%26f%3D4%26cat%3Dweb%26sid%3D6e44dffdbda04f3b7889b265e22890a9%26sesid%3D701b8b04a53a6644d216ec6a0555ae70%26ip%3D98.27.213.146%26b%3DIE%26bv%3D11.0%26os%3DWindows%2B8.1%26pa%3Dbinkiland&p=do+not+go+gentle+dylan+thomas+reading)

(Click on the above link for audio recording of Anthony Hopkins reading “Do Not Go Gentle.”)

## Courage (Anne Sexton)

It is in the small things we see it.  
The child's first step,  
as awesome as an earthquake.  
The first time you rode a bike,  
wallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart  
went on a journey all alone.

When they called you crybaby  
or poor or fatty or crazy  
and made you into an alien,  
you drank their acid  
and concealed it.

Later,  
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets  
you did not do it with a banner,  
you did it with only a hat to  
cover your heart.  
You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
though it was there.  
Your courage was a small coal  
that you kept swallowing.  
If your buddy saved you  
and died himself in so doing,  
then his courage was not courage,  
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,  
if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone,  
getting a transfusion from the fire,  
picking the scabs off your heart,  
then wringing it out like a sock.  
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,  
you gave it a back rub  
and then you covered it with a blanket  
and after it had slept a while  
it woke to the wings of the roses  
and was transformed.

Later,  
when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
those you love will live in a fever of love,  
and you'll bargain with the calendar  
and at the last moment  
when death opens the back door  
you'll put on your carpet slippers  
and stride out.

From *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Houghton Mifflin, 1977)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWIPQebR8ZE>  
(Click on the above link for audio recording of "Courage.")

## You Can't Have it All (Barbara Ras)

But you can have the fig tree and its fat leaves like clown hands  
gloved with green. You can have the touch of a single eleven-  
year-old finger  
on your cheek, waking you at one a.m. to say the hamster is back.  
You can have the purr of the cat and the soulful look  
of the black dog, the look that says, If I could I would bite  
every sorrow until it fled, and when it is August,  
you can have it August and abundantly so. You can have love,  
though often it will be mysterious, like the white foam  
that bubbles up at the top of the bean pot over the red kidneys  
until you realize foam's twin brother is blood.  
You can have the skin at the center between a man's legs,  
so solid, so doll-like. You can have the life of the mind,  
glowing occasionally in priestly vestments, never admitting  
pettiness,  
never stopping to bribe the sullen guard who'll tell you  
all roads narrow at the border.  
You can speak in a foreign language, sometimes,  
and it can mean something. You can visit the marker on the  
grave  
where your father wept openly. You can't bring back the dead,  
but you can have the words *forgive* and *forget* hold hands  
as if they meant to spend a lifetime together. And you can be  
grateful  
for makeup, the way it kisses your face, half spice, half amnesia,  
grateful  
for Mozart, his many notes racing one another towards joy,  
for towels  
sucking up the drops on your clean skin, and for deeper thirsts,  
for passion fruit, for saliva. You can have the dream,  
the dream of Egypt, the horses of Egypt and you riding in the  
hot sand.  
You can have your grandfather sitting on the side of your bed,  
at least for a while, you can have clouds and letters, the leaping  
of distances, the Indian food with yellow sauce like sunrise.  
You can't count on grace to pick you out of a crowd  
but here is your friend to teach you how to high jump,  
how to throw yourself over the bar, backwards,  
until you learn about love, about sweet surrender,  
and here are periwinkles, buses that kneel, farms in the mind  
as real as Africa. And when adulthood fails you,  
you can still summon the memory of the black swan on the pond  
of your childhood, the rye bread with peanut butter and bananas  
your grandmother gave you while the rest of the family slept.  
There is the voice you can still summon at will, like your mother's,  
it will always whisper, you can't have it all,  
but there is this.

From *Bite Every Sorrow* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uQofaW0Ofk>  
(Click on the above link for audio recording of “You Can’t Have it All.”)

### **Mother’s Closet (Maxine Scates)**

There is everything she ever closed a door  
on, the broom closet of childhood  
where no one could ever find a broom.  
Here, layer upon layer, nothing breathes:  
photo albums curl at the edges, books  
she brought home from the library  
where she worked, handled by thousands  
of other hands before their final exile  
where they’ve waited, paper and more paper  
taking in the ocean air, about to sprout.

Mother’s sitting on the bed  
with her tattered list of dispersals – who gets  
what among the treasures she hopes  
I’ll find, but I know I’m seeing  
what she doesn’t want me to see,  
the daughter cleaning doing what the son  
would never do. After an hour of excavation  
the console TV emerges from beneath  
forgotten sweaters and balled up nylons  
saved for stuffing puppets, a long ago church project –  
the TV arrived in 1966 the same day I crushed  
the fender of the car, upsetting  
the careful plans she’d made for payment.

She wants to leave so much behind. Hours later  
I’ve found nothing I want but the purple mache mask  
I made in the fourth grade. I like its yellow eyes.  
She looks at each magazine I remove, saving  
every word about my brother, the coach. He’s sixty  
and a long dead mouse has eaten the laces  
of his baby shoes. I want order. I say  
I’m old myself, I’ve started throwing things away.  
I’m lying. I’ve kept everything she’s ever given me.

From *Black Loam* (Cherry Grove Collections, 2005)

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/181556>  
(Click on the above link for audio recording of “Mother’s Closet.”)

## Old Woman (Elizabeth Jennings)

So much she caused she cannot now account for  
As she stands watching day return, the cool  
Walls of the house moving towards the sun.  
She puts some flowers in a vase and thinks  
    "There is not much I can arrange  
In here now, but flowers are suppliant

As children never were. And love is now  
A flicker of memory, my body is  
My own entirely. When I lie at night  
I gather nothing now into my arms,  
    No child or man, and where I live  
Is what remains when men and children go."

Yet she owns more than residue of lives  
That she has marked and altered. See how she  
Warns time from too much touching her possessions  
By keeping flowers fed, by polishing  
    Her fine old silver. Gratefully  
She sees her own glance printed on grandchildren.

Drawing the curtains back and opening windows  
Every morning now, she feels her years  
Grow less and less. Time puts no burden on  
Her now she does not need to measure it.  
    It is acceptance she arranges  
And her own life she places in the vase.

From *Collected Poems*. (Macmillan, 1967)

## Letter to Dad (Lou Suarez)

Your golf clubs are rusting  
beside your bowling ball,  
which is covered by dust,  
and miscellaneous bags and corrugated  
boxes. You should write back,  
let this death business go,  
tell us what you think  
about the brakes on Mom's  
'83 Tempo, the mutual fund  
you bought into – market whore,  
the broker now calls it –  
the twenty-year roof  
on the sixty-year-old

house you built.  
Old Man Sissay will come  
next week to shape Mom's  
silver maples into shrubs  
unless you tell her no.

By the way, I dreamed  
last night about his son,  
Bobby Sissay. Do you remember?  
"He has a screw loose,"  
you used to say. "He's  
one brick short." "He couldn't  
tell shit from shinola." He  
was dream-dead, too, still  
a boy with a man's frame,  
still trying to talk without  
spraying God's face with spittle,  
still trying to name things  
his mournful eyes somehow saw  
as if they were new,  
still shaking words into sentences –  
luckless dice on hard ground.

Nothing happened in the dream,  
but then the next morning  
a big guy who looked  
like Bobby was selling soap  
door to door. He had  
the expression of a dog  
too long beaten by newspapers.  
He was silent a moment,  
then said only, "A donde'  
tu' vas, ya yo fui',  
me sente' y me tome'  
una Coca Cola y regrese'."  
Maybe this, too, I dreamed.  
Or maybe that soap man  
was you, there to tell me  
your opinion of my life.

Not that it matters but  
I wonder where in heaven  
you learned to speak Spanish  
so well, son of immigrants,  
and why, why in God's  
good name you didn't stay  
a while, didn't say more.

From *Ask* (Mid-List Press, 2004)

## Death Be Not Proud (John Donne)

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but they 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 art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

From *Holy Sonnets*, 1633

## Because I Could Not Stop For Death (Emily Dickinson, 1863)

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Grazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –  
The Dews drew quivering and chill –  
For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We passed before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet

Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity.

From *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998)  
First published posthumously in 1890.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177119>

(Click on the above link for audio recording of "Because I Could Not Stop For Death.")