Poetry II: The Elegy

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group.

The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a [lament](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/lament-poets-glossary), where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace.

Many modern elegies have been written not out of a sense of personal grief, but rather a broad feeling of loss and metaphysical sadness. A famous example is the mournful series of ten poems in *Duino Elegies*, by German poet [Rainer Maria Rilke](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/rainer-maria-rilke). The first poem begins:

     If I cried out             who would hear me up there                    among the angelic orders?     And suppose one suddenly             took me to his heart                     I would shrivel

**The Haw Lantern** bySeamus Heany

The wintry haw is burning out of season,  
crab of the thorn, a small light for small people,  
wanting no more from them but that they keep  
the wick of self-respect from dying out,  
not having to blind them with illumination.

But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost  
it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes  
with his lantern, seeking one just man;  
so you end up scrutinized from behind the haw  
he holds up at eye-level on its twig,  
and you flinch before its bonded pith and stone,  
its blood-prick that you wish would test and clear you,  
its pecked-at ripeness that scans you, then moves on.

## Another Elegy by Jericho Brown

This is what our dying looks like.   
You believe in the sun. I believe   
I can’t love you. Always be closing,   
Said our favorite professor before   
He let the gun go off in his mouth.   
I turned 29 the way any man turns   
In his sleep, unaware of the earth   
Moving beneath him, its plates in   
Their places, a dated disagreement.   
Let’s fight it out, baby. You have   
Only so long left—a man turning   
In his sleep—so I take a picture.   
I won’t look at it, of course. It’s   
His bad side, his Mr. Hyde, the hole   
In a husband’s head, the O   
Of his wife’s mouth. Every night,   
I take a pill. Miss one, and I’m gone.   
Miss two, and we’re through. Hotels   
Bore me, unless I get a mountain view,   
A room in which my cell won’t work,   
And there’s nothing to do but see   
The sun go down into the ground   
That cradles us as any coffin can.

# When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d by Walt Whitman

**1**

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d,

And the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night,

I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,

Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,

And thought of him I love.

**2**

O powerful western fallen star!

O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!

O great star disappear’d—O the black murk that hides the star!

O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!

O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

**3**

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash’d palings,

Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,

With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,

With delicate-color’d blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

A sprig with its flower I break.

**4**

In the swamp in secluded recesses,

A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,

The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,

Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,

Death’s outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,

If thou wast not granted to sing thou would’st surely die.)

**5**

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,

Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep’d from the ground, spotting the gray debris,

Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,

Passing the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,

Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,

Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,

Night and day journeys a coffin.

**6**

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,

Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,

With the pomp of the inloop’d flags with the cities draped in black,

With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil’d women standing,

With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,

With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,

With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,

With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,

With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour’d around the coffin,

The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,

With the tolling tolling bells’ perpetual clang,

Here, coffin that slowly passes,

I give you my sprig of lilac.

**7**

(Nor for you, for one alone,

Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,

For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,

O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,

But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,

Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,

With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,

For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

**8**

O western orb sailing the heaven,

Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk’d,

As I walk’d in silence the transparent shadowy night,

As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,

As you droop’d from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look’d on,)

As we wander’d together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)

As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,

As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,

As I watch’d where you pass’d and was lost in the netherward black of the night,

As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,

Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

**9**

Sing on there in the swamp,

O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,

I hear, I come presently, I understand you,

But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain’d me,

The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.