

Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 9-12, First Place winner, “On Dying”

We all would like to know what happens to us after death, and many authors, from Emily Dickinson to C. K. Williams have given us their slant on the topic. In the very competitive high school group, the author of the deserving first place poem, “On Dying,” also examines this issue. The poem describes beliefs concerning the afterlife held by Judaism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and specifically shows what would happen to a believer of each faith when this speaker dies. “On Dying” does not offer a tragic or lofty view of the afterlife, nor does it mock or belittle questions surrounding death; instead, its wry tone and use of irony lighten the issues of life after death. Using understated humor, bright and original metaphor, and dynamic language, this talented writer explores life after death as it pertains to three major faiths.

The first of the poem’s seven sections opens with statements of how these three religions view death. This sets up the poem’s construction as “options” for each of these beliefs:

Judaism doesn’t discuss the afterlife.
Catholicism cradles the afterlife as
its pink-faced newborn. Hinduism says
the ants peppered around the apple core
on your granite counter: that’s the
afterlife.

Similar to the language in the rest of poem, the phrases, “Catholicism cradles,” and “ants peppered” add to the poem’s impact and reflect the author’s often surprising diction. The phrase, “Catholicism cradles,” alludes to the nativity scene and the birth of Jesus, while the word, “peppered,” offers a metaphorical vision of ants on an apple core.

In the next section, the poet confesses that her mother is aware of the viewpoints expressed and also gives the setting of the poem. “My mother tells me to stop / being such an existentialist” the speaker admits in her bedroom in the middle of the night. Then, the poet informs us that “It’s 2 AM / on a Saturday morning and my sister is / comatose (what an appropriate adjective) in the bed next to mine.” Middle of the night ruminations lend themselves to all-encompassing topics such as dying. Outside the room, the speaker sees the “tattooed purple” sky with a “hint of clementine” that the speaker’s grandmother asserts are “inevitable in a Chicago night.” In spite of the family brought into this poem—a mother, a sister, and a grandmother—and the uplifting picture of the night sky—all the speaker “can think about is dying.”

And that thought is *not* because of the speaker’s morbidity, but due to curiosity and inventiveness regarding faith and death. The poem continues with sections titled “Options 1,” “Options 2,” and “Options 3,” each giving the events of the afterlife as the speaker would experience them according to each religion’s beliefs. In “Options 1” (“Judaism doesn’t discuss the afterlife”), death’s unadorned truth is most evident:

I’d be swallowed into a balsa box that would
eventually be swallowed into cemetery dirt
that would eventually be swallowed into
worms. I think it would be nice to be worm food.
Nourishing pink bodies until plump, I call
it helping the ecosystem.

Of course, what is being spoken of here is a person's body decomposing after death and used as food for worms. The speaker is not squeamish; she does not view this as distasteful. The word "swallowed" nests like Russian Matryoshka dolls as it describes death as being "swallowed into a balsa box," then "swallowed into cemetery dirt," and finally "swallowed into worms." I especially appreciate the rhythm of the phrase.

The utilitarian nature of the Jewish belief system concerning the afterlife shows death as purposeful, ecological, even. One can be "nourishing" of "pink bodies" (worms) and "help... the ecosystem." Missing from this pragmatic statement is the act of actually dying, and any pain or sorrow associated with death. Instead, the speaker's straightforward and cheerful voice portrays the purpose of death and the afterlife as being environmentally beneficial.

"Option 2" considers the afterlife from a Catholic (Christian) point of view ("Catholicism cradles the afterlife as / its pink-faced newborn")—the down-to earth voice claims. In this section, "the inner parts of me, buoyed beneath layers / of skin and muscle and bone would rise / past the rooftops my friends and I camped out on one / night in 2014, past the tip of the Sears tower." As in the opening stanza, the setting grounds the poem and makes the rising of the soul 'real', since there are recognizable structures the soul would pass on its journey. This adds a bit of wry humor; one's soul beautifully rises to heaven after it passes "rooftops my friends and I camped out on" and the "tip of the Sears Tower.") The experience continues with the soul finding a "chalice top-heavy with heaven" to "bathe in it. / Wash away the mundane in all holy-water glory." The chance to "wash away" the 'mundane' is too priceless for this speaker, who would "stew until my / fingers wrinkle into prunes and beyond that." This description of stewing "in holy-water glory" sounds a bit unappealing.

So far, to achieve the afterlife dictated by two major faiths and as interpreted by this speaker, one is eaten by worms and the other is to stew in Holy water—neither seems tempting. Perhaps the third religion, Hinduism, will offer a more pleasant experience. "Option 3" describes the Hindu afterlife as being reborn as another living thing, such as "ants peppered around an apple core: that's the / afterlife." In the Hindu afterlife, one could become

. the elm tree that skulks in
the corner of the yard or the first lightening bug a
little girl ever traps in a jar, her face brimming
with amazement that something so small could
be so blinding. Becoming your sister, or his mother
or that girl's new dog. Be conjured into this
cycle of existence that I didn't know was,
but is.

Reincarnation offers life in another form in an ever-lasting cycle of being reborn as something else. Here, it's an "elm tree that skulks in the corner," a "lightening bug" that is "trapped in a jar," her "own sister, (who was 'comatose' earlier in the poem) or his mother / or that girl's new dog." The idea is almost comforting, until one examines three of the verbs—"skulks," "trapped," and "conjured"; all suggest negative images of being reborn. So, reincarnation may offer a continuation, but only one that someone is "conjured into" even if he or she "didn't know [it] was."

The concluding stanza brings the speaker and reader back to reality. "It's now 3 AM on the same Saturday morning / and my sister is still comatose but the sky looks / a little less purple and a little more

clementine.” The marvelous metaphor of the coming morning, “someone’s raising the dimmer on the earth,” leads the speaker to conclude that “maybe tomorrow I won’t be able / to see it.” The last three lines of the poem explain why: “I’ll be rigid, or / prune, / or a fly.” This fitting conclusion summarizes in three words the upshot of the afterlife of three major religions and is a delightful, understated twist to the end of this treatise on the afterlife.

It’s important to note the importance of place in the poem. The entire poem occurs in the speaker’s bedroom beginning at two AM with a “comatose” sister in the room, and the words of a grandmother evoking the description of a Chicago sky “tattooed purple” with a “hint of clementine.” We travel first to a grave, then heaven, and last to various spots on earth reincarnated to fulfill three religious tenets of the afterlife. In the end, the setting is the same bedroom an hour later after the speaker’s ruminations, with the sister “still comatose,” and the sky “a little less purple and a little more clementine” and the sun revealing its morning light. This repetition of the bedroom, the sister, the grandmother’s words, and the lovely night sky leading to morning allows the poet to reveal this place that is so anti-death.

A word on the excellent choice of “comatose” to describe the speaker’s sister, for I believe the meaning is more than simply “in a coma.” While the speaker poses observations of life after death, her sister remains so asleep that she appears “comatose.” Apparently, these thoughts concerning the afterlife do not trouble her. I don’t believe the speaker is complaining; just making an ironic perception of the stark difference between the two. The sister’s lethargy contrasts with the speaker’s two AM existential inquiry, highlighting the speaker’s depth of thought and the sister’s preference for sleep. “Comatose” can also mean “dead”—another intriguing reason the word is so apt.

While I believe this poem can be seen as a death wish or a cry for help, I believe it is far more than that—if it is that at all. I see it as an intelligent, inventive, and thoughtful writer’s exploration of the afterlife’s meaning held by three major religions. That this writer does so with unique and imaginative metaphor, precise language, and a nimble and sometimes ironic tone is all the more reason to name “On Dying” the first place poem in this grade group. I hope this talented writer continues to put pen to paper to write more accomplished work.

Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!

Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2016
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