Pretty much every poet in every age has written about death and dying. Along with love, it might be the most popular subject in poetry. Yet, until now, no anthology has gathered the best and most famous of these verses in one place.

You’ll find death poetry’s greatest hits, including:
• “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson
• “To an Athlete Dying Young” by A.E. Housman
• “Do not go gentle into that good night” by Dylan Thomas
• “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” by Walt Whitman
• “Annabel Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe

The rest of the band includes . . .

Jane Austen
Mary Jo Bang
Willa Barnstone
Charlotte Brontë
William Blake
Lord Byron
Lucille Clifton
Andrei Codrescu
Wanda Coleman
Billy Collins
Ralph Waldo Emerson
T.S. Eliot
Nick Flynn
Benjamin Franklin
Robert Frost
Kimiko Hahn
Homer
Victor Hugo

Langston Hughes
James Joyce
C.S. Lewis
Amy Lowell
W.S. Merwin
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Pablo Neruda
Thich Nhat Hanh
Friedrich Nietzsche
Willard Owen
Rainer Maria Rilke
Christina Rossett
Rumi
Sappho
Shakespeare
Wallace Stevens
Ruth Stone
Wislawa Szymborska
W.B. Yeats

and a few hundred more.

—Russ Kick,
from the Introduction
Every poem [is] an epitaph.

T.S. Eliot

Name any well-known poet from any age, any country. He or she wrote at least one poem about death, most likely several poems. I can basically guarantee it. Death is one of the most common themes in the entirety of poetry. Whether it’s a lamentation for a loved one or a public figure, a reflection on their own upcoming appointment with the grave, a meditation on the nature of death, or perhaps what happens afterward, every poet has found inspiration—sometimes welcome, often not—in the fate we all have in common. It provides a lens through which to examine life, changing everything else by its looming, inevitable presence. Our time here is brief; this play has a limited engagement, and there are no do-overs. Everything we do counts. Time is always running out, and the poets know that this casts life in an entirely different light than if we were immortal.

Death also provides a profound mystery—the ultimate mystery, really—to be examined, prodded, hypothesized about, potentially unraveled (but probably not). Poets love a mystery, and there is none bigger. In an interview, the great Anne Sexton said: “You see, I can explain sex in a minute, but death—I can’t explain.”

Finally, death provides a taboo, which poets love. It’s disturbing, not to be talked about. But poetry specializes in taboos. It provides a way to speak about the unspeakable. The social rules of normal discourse, even the social rules of other types of writing, don’t apply to poetry. By approaching things obliquely, by using language in a nonordinary—you could even say
“magic”—way, by short-circuiting the rules of dialog and sneaking underneath the barbed wire of our rational, logical minds, poetry can address with impunity any topic it wants to. “Tell all the Truth,” Emily Dickinson wrote, “but tell it slant.”

Given the universality of death in poetry, you would expect to find a lot of anthologies collecting poetry on the topic. Themed collections of poetry are extremely popular. Bookshelves sag with anthologies of cowboy poetry, Japanese poetry, poems about the ocean, poems on motherhood, baseball, spirituality, music, food. . . . The number of books that collect love poetry is beyond calculating. And, as I write this, you can choose from more than ten anthologies of dog poetry in print. (Cats have around the same number.) But no one has brought together a big selection of the wide-ranging poems about death. There are several anthologies of poems specifically about loss, mourning, and grieving, and some of them are specifically marketed as providing readings for funeral services, or as a way to help the bereaved cope with their loss. There is a small omnibus of poems about murder, and you won’t have trouble finding anthologies of war poems.

Just why it has been mostly ignored is puzzling, but my guess is that the taboo of death comes into play here. Maybe it strikes publishers and anthologists as morose. Maybe the topic of death is considered too much of a buzzkill. Putting together anthologies about personal loss and grieving is a psychological service. Creating anthologies about war is an historical and social service. But creating an anthology about death in general—in all its aspects—well, that’s just bleak, right? Morbid. No, actually. Not at all. When you have many of the finest creative minds in history addressing one of the most important aspects of the human condition, you’re going to get riches—a revealing, finely wrought kaleidoscope of ideas, attitudes, and experiences.

You’re going to get Walt Whitman celebrating death as an important part of the richness of life. Lord Byron penning a beautiful epitaph for his beloved dog (there’s dogs and poetry again!). Emily Dickinson going for a carriage ride with Death, and Dylan Thomas pleading with his father to not go gentle into that good night. The ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus ironically but accurately noting death’s role as a
healer. The Nobel Prize-winning Modernist poet Wallace Stevens opining that “Death is the mother of beauty.” The decadent Charles Baudelaire reminding his lover that one day she’ll be a rotting corpse. Thomas Hardy—best known for his novels *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—wryly writing about a widow and an ex-wife meeting over the grave of the man they had in common. American slaves singing of the holy glories to come, and the Irish singing about a man who comes back to life at his own wake. The ancient Indian holy text *The Baghavad Gita* explaining the immortality of our true essence. Biting epitaphs by Scotland’s Robert Burns. Wanda Coleman’s furious litany of innocent African Americans killed by police.

In this collection, several soldier-poets write of life in the trenches and on the battlefield, and Miranda Beeson offers an unexpected angle on 9/11. Former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins cheekily wonders if death is closing in on him, while an earlier Laureate, William Stafford, writes about losing his grip while mountain climbing. The seventeenth-century Cavalier poet Robert Herrick ponders the death of trees, and, around 250 years later, Imagist poet Amy Lowell graphically describes killing flowers. Literary legend D.H. Lawrence uses the moon to form a pact with his dead beloved, while the always astonishing Edna St. Vincent Millay is relieved that her paramour died before their relationship could go sour. The recently departed Lucille Clifton addresses the unborn child she aborted at home, while Charlotte Brontë grieves for her younger sister Anne, killed by consumption. Todd Davis puts a rabbit out of its misery, and Linda Hogan comforts a horse who has lost her foal. Two of the poets here (Tichborne and Villon) wrote verse while waiting for their death sentence the following morning. Others imagine what Heaven or Hell might be like. Some poets can’t wait to die, while the unjustly overlooked Sara Teasdale loves life and nature so much that she doesn’t want to leave, even vows to find a way back.

As you can tell, this collection ranges dramatically. It goes across all of history, from the ancients straight through to today. Across countries and languages, across schools of poetry. You’ll find a plethora of approaches—witty, humorous, deadly serious, tear-jerking, wise, profound, angry, spiritual, atheistic, uncertain, highly personal, political, mythic, earthy, and
only occasionally morbid. Every angle you can think of is covered—the
deaths of children, lost loves, funeral rites, close calls, eating meat, serial
killers, the death penalty, roadkill, the Underworld, reincarnation, elegies
for famous people, death as an equalizer, death as a junk man, death as a
child, the death of God, the death of death . . .

This is a dazzling, largely unmined vein in poetry’s long history. I hope
this collection captures a big cross section of that mosaic.

—RUSS KICK
the nature of death

In which the poets reflect on what death is, meditate on why it happens, and pontificate on what it means to us
From “Song of Myself”

WALT WHITMAN

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon
out of their laps.
What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to
arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

•   •   •

Death the Leveller

JAMES SHIRLEY

The glories of our blood and state
    Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate;
    Death lays his icy hand on kings:
    Sceptre and Crown
    Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookèd scythe and spade.

Some men with swords may reap the field,
    And plant fresh laurels where they kill:
But their strong nerves at last must yield;
    They tame but one another still:
Early or late
They stoop to fate,
And must give up their murmuring breath,
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow;
Then boast no more your mighty deeds;
Upon Death's purple altar now
See, where the victor-victim bleeds:
Your heads must come
To the cold tomb;
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in their dust.

• • •

Dirge

ALFRED KREYMBORG

Death alone
has sympathy for weariness:
understanding
of the ways
of mathematics:
of the struggle
against giving up what was given:
the plus one minus one
of nitrogen for oxygen:
and the unequal odds,
you a cell
against the universe,
a breath or two
against all time:
Death alone
takes what is left
without protest, criticism
or a demand for more
than one can give
who can give
no more than was given:
doesn’t even ask,
but accepts it as it is,
without examination,
valuation,
or comparison.

Poets Have Chanted Mortality

JOHN CROWE RANSOM

It had better been hidden
But the Poets inform:
We are chattel and liege
Of an undying Worm.

Were you, Will, disheartened,
When all Stratford’s gentry
Left their Queen and took service
In his low-lying country?

How many white cities
And grey fleets on the storm
Have proud-built, hard-battled,
For this undying Worm?

Was a sweet chaste lady
Would none of her lover.
Nay, here comes the Lewd One,
Creeps under her cover!
Have ye said there’s no deathless
   Of face, fashion, form,
Forgetting to honor
   The extent of the Worm?

O ye laughers and light-lipped,
   Ye faithless, infirm,
I can tell you who’s constant,
   ’Tis the Eminent Worm.

Ye shall trip on no limits,
   Neither time ye your term,
In the realms of His Absolute
   Highness the Worm.

•   •   •

Death Is a Fisherman

Death is a fisherman, the world we see
His fish-pond is, and we the fishes be;
His net some general sickness; howe’er he
Is not so kind as other fishers be;
For if they take one of the smaller fry,
They throw him in again, he shall not die:
But death is sure to kill all he can get,
And all is fish with him that comes to net.

•   •   •
Death Snips Proud Men

CARL SANDBURG

Death is stronger than all the governments because
    the governments are men and men die and then
death laughs: Now you see ’em, now you don’t.

Death is stronger than all proud men and so death
    snips proud men on the nose, throws a pair of
dice and says: Read ’em and weep.

Death sends a radiogram every day: When I want
    you I’ll drop in—and then one day he comes with a
master-key and lets himself in and says: We’ll go now.

Death is a nurse mother with big arms: ’T won’t hurt
    you at all; it’s your time now; just need a
long sleep, child; what have you had anyhow
better than sleep?

•   •   •

On Death, Without Exaggeration

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

It can’t take a joke,
    find a star, make a bridge.
It knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,
    building ships, or baking cakes.

In our planning for tomorrow,
    it has the final word,
which is always beside the point.
It can’t even get the things done
that are part of its trade:
dig a grave,
make a coffin,
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,
it does the job awkwardly,
without system or skill.
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,
but look at its countless defeats,
missed blows,
and repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn’t strong enough
to swat a fly from the air.
Many are the caterpillars
that have outcrawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,
tentacles, fins, tracheae,
nuptial plumage, and winter fur
show that it has fallen behind
with its halfhearted work.

Ill will won’t help
and even our lending a hand with wars and coups d’état
is so far not enough.

Hearts beat inside eggs.
Babies’ skeletons grow.
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves
and sometimes even tall trees fall away.
Whoever claims that it’s omnipotent
is himself living proof
that it’s not.

There’s no life
that couldn’t be immortal
if only for a moment.

Death
always arrives by that very moment too late.

In vain it tugs at the knob
of the invisible door.
As far as you’ve come
can’t be undone.

Translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

That Morning
STANLEY MOSS

I got up a little after daybreak:
I saw a Luna Moth had fallen
between the window and a torn screen.
I lifted the window, the wings broke
on the floor, became green and silver powder.
My eyes followed green, as if all green
was a single web, past the Lombardy poplars,
and the lilac hedge leading to the back road.
I can believe the world
might have been the color of hide or driftwood,
but there was—and is—the gift of green,
and a second gift we can perceive the green,
although we are often blind to miracles.
There was no resurrection of green and silver wings.
They became a blue stain on an oak floor.
I wish I had done something ordinary,
performed an unknown, unseen miracle,
raised the window the night before,
let the chill November air come in.

I cannot help remembering
e.e. cummings’ wife said, hearing him
choking to death in the next room,
she thought she heard moths on the window screen
attracted to the nightlight in his study.
Reader, my head is not a gravestone.
It’s just that a dead poet and a Luna Moth
alighted. Mr. Death, you’re not a stone wall.
You’re more like a chain-link fence
I can see through to the other side. There’s the rub:
You are a democracy, the land of opportunity,
the Patria. Some say you are a picnic.
Are there any gate-crashers beside the barbecue?
I’m afraid every living and once-living thing
will be asked to leave again.
The first death is just playtime.
There is a DEAD END beyond darkness
where everyone and every thing tries to turn around.
Every thing that ever lived sounds its horn.
And you, Mr. Death, are just a traffic cop.

•   •   •
“Death is a dialogue between”

EMILY DICKINSON

Death is a dialogue between
The spirit and the dust.
I have another trust.”

Death doubts it, argues from the ground.
The Spirit turns away,
Just laying off, for evidence,
An overcoat of clay.

•   •   •

Death

GEORGE PELLEW

Calm Death, God of crossed hands and passionless eyes,
Thou God that never heedest gift nor prayer,
Men blindly call thee cruel, unaware
That everything is dearer since it dies.
Worn by the chain of years, without surprise,
The wise man welcomes thee, and leaves the glare
Of noisy sunshine gladly, and his share
He chose not in mad life and windy skies.
Passions and dreams of love, the fever and fret
Of toil, seem vain and petty when we gaze
On the imperious Lords who have no breath:
Atoms or worlds—we call them lifeless, yet
In thy unending peaceful day of days
They are divine, all-comprehending Death.

•   •   •
Faded Love
BARRY GIFFORD

I am surrounded by death
it happens to everyone
all the time
Some people try not to notice
not me I’ve always known this
and paid attention
Nobody forces me to go on
I know what this means
one day I won’t pay attention
and nobody will notice

•   •   •

From Queen Mab
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
When throned on ocean’s wave
It blushes o’er the world;
Yet both so passing wonderful!

•   •   •
Morphine

HEINRICH HEINE

Great is the similarity between
These two fair figures, although one appears
Much paler than the other, far more calm;
Fairer and nobler even, I might say,
Than his companion, in whose arms
I lay so warmly. How divine and soft
Were all his smiles, and what a look was his!
It must have been the poppy-wreath he wore
About his brows that touched my throbbing head
And with its magic perfume soothed all pain
And sorrow in my soul . . . But such sweet balm
Lasts but a little while; I can be cured
Completely only when the other one,
The grave and paler brother, drops his torch.
For Sleep is good, but Death is better still—
The best is never to be born at all.

Translated from the German by Louis Untermeyer

•   •   •

On Death

JOHN KEATS

Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream,
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,
And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.

How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
His future doom which is but to awake.

•   •   •
Sleep and His Brother Death
WILLIAM HAMILTON HAYNE

Just ere the darkness is withdrawn,
    In seasons of cold or heat,
Close to the boundary line of Dawn
    These mystical brothers meet.

They clasp their weird and shadowy hands,
    As they listen each to each,
But never a mortal understands
    Their strange immortal speech.

• • •

From The Faerie Queene
EDMUND SPENSER

For all that lives, is subject to that law:
All things decay in time, and to their end do draw.

• • •

“Were I a King”
EDWARD VERE, EARL OF OXFORD

Were I a King, I might command content;
    Were I obscure, unknown should be my cares;
And were I dead, no thoughts should me torment,—
    Nor words, nor wrongs, nor love, nor hate, nor fears!
A doubtful choice for me, of three things, one to crave:
    A Kingdom, or a Cottage, or a Grave!

• • •
Death the Consecrator

CAROLINE SPENCER

O Death, the Consecrator!
Nothing so sanctifies a name
As to be written—Dead.
Nothing so wins a life from blame,
So covers it from wrath and shame,
As doth the burial-bed.

O Death, the revelator!
Our deepest passions never move
Till thou hast bid them wake;
We know not half how much we love
Till all below and all above
Is shrouded for our sake.

O Death, the great peacemaker!
If enmity hath come between
There’s naught like death to heal it;
And if we love, O priceless pain,
O bitter-sweet, when love is vain!
There’s naught like death to seal it.

•••

“O Death the Healer”

AESCHYLVUS

O Death the Healer, scorn thou not, I pray,
To come to me: of cureless ills thou art
The one physician. Pain lays not its touch
Upon a corpse.

Translated from the Greek by E.H. Plumptre

•••