A Valediction: Forbidden Mourning

John Donne
Title:

- **Valediction**: A farewell speech (from the speaker to his wife)
- **Forbidden Mourning**: When the speaker and his wife part they should not cry and make a big scene
Lines 1-2:

- “virtuous” = with high moral standards
- “pass mildly away” = die peacefully because they have no regrets or shame
- “whisper” = they are in control and softly send their souls to the afterlife
- CONCEIT: A comparison of things that are usually dissimilar i.e. “our love is like the death of an old man”
Lines 3-4:

• They die so quietly that friends at their deathbed argue about whether they have breathed their last breaths or not.
• Just like their friends can’t tell when virtuous men have died, so unnoticeable should the parting be between the speaker and his wife.
Lines 5-6:

• “let us melt” – Their parting should be slow and unnoticed, like ice melting.

• There should be no exaggerated shows of emotion when they part (“tear-floods” and “sigh-tempests”)
Lines 7-8:

- “Twere” = It (“flood-tears” and “tempests”) were
- “Profanation” = being disrespectful
- “laity” = common people
- A big show of emotion / publicising the pain they feel when they part will cheapen their love.
Lines 9-10:

- An earthquake has a huge impact ("harms" and "fears") on people’s reactions.
- Everyone talks about it for a while, but there are no long-lasting consequences.
Lines 11-12:

- “trepidation” = vibrating
- “spheres” = stars/planets
- “innocent” = unseen
- When stars/planets move, the event goes by unnoticed but the lasting impact is greater than an earthquake.
- This is how the speaker and his wife’s parting should be (SUBTLE).
• “sublunary” = beneath the moon i.e. Earthly/Ordinary
• “soul is sense” = earthly lovers are connected by earthly things, namely the five senses.
• Their love is based on the PHYSICAL
• “admit” = allow
• Ordinary lovers can’t allow “absence” because it takes away that which created (“elemented”) the relationship in the first place.

• Their relationships are based solely on physical presence therefore they are “shallow lovers”
Lines 17-18:

- “we” = the speaker and his wife
- Their love is so “refined” (so far above this world) that they don’t know what it is.
- EXTENDED METAPHOR: Their love is subtle but powerful like the trembling of the planets (l.11), and not shallow like earthquakes (l.9) or the love of ordinary people (l.13).
Lines 19-20:

- “Inter” = a sharing of the mind
- Unlike “earthly lovers” (l.14), the speaker and his beloved is connected by their minds (NOT just physical desires).
- “care less” = the lovers do not care about missing each other physically (“eyes”, “lips” and “hands”)

Lines 21-22:

- Marriage takes TWO individuals and forms ONE unit
- Paradox: The idea of being two vs being one emphasises the mysterious, confusing nature of wedded love
Lines 23-24:

• When the speaker departs, they will endure an “expansion”, not a break (“breach”).

• Simile: Their relationship is like gold which can be hammered, and be spread over a great distance without breaking its unity.

• Paradox: There won’t be a break, only an expansion (even though he leaves).
Lines 25-26:

- If the speaker has to admit that he and his wife are in fact TWO individuals.
- Then he sees them as the two legs of a compass (simile): The legs are separate but they are joined permanently.
Lines 27-28:

- The speaker’s wife is the “fixed foot” that stays planted in the centre of the circle.
- The “fixed foot” does not move unless the other leg moves.
- I.e. his wife is completely faithful to him and supports him in whatever he does (he praises his wife).
As the other foot of the compass moves (“roam”) further away, the fixed foot leans towards it – his wife misses him and longs for him to come home.

As the roaming foot moves closer, the fixed foot will stand up straight – his wife will stand proud and firm when he returns.
“obliquely” = diagonally – when one foot is moved away, both feet are at an angle / lean toward each other. The lovers long for each other.

“firmness” = “faithfulness”

His wife’s faithfulness and firmness (not causing a big emotional scene) motivates him to return to her (“end where I begun”).