An Anatomy of the World

The First Anniversary

by John Donne (1572–1631); in The Poems of John Donne (1896).

Her name defined thee, gave thee form and frame,
And thou forget’st to celebrate thy name. 37

But though it be too late to succour thee,
Sick world, yea dead, yea putrefied, since she,
Thy intrinsic balm and thy preservative,
Can never be renew’d, thou never live,
I—since no man can make thee live—will try
What we may gain by thy Anatomy. 60

Her death hath taught us dearly, that thou art
Corrupt and mortal in thy purest part.

Or there’s a kind of world remaining still;
Though she, which did inanimate and fill
The world, be gone, yet in this last long night
Her ghost doth walk, that is, a glimmering light,
A faint weak love of virtue and of good
Reflects from her, on them which understood
Her worth; and though she have shut in all day,
The twilight of her memory doth stay;
Which, from the carcase of the old world free,
Creates a new world, and new creatures be
Produced; the matter and the stuff of this
Her virtue, and the form our practice is. 75

And can there be worse sickness than to know
That we are never well, nor can be so?

How witty’s ruin, how importunate
Upon mankind! it labour’d to frustrate
Even God’s purpose, and made woman, sent
For man’s relief, cause of his languishment.
They were to good ends, and they are so still,
But accessory, and principal in ill;
For that first marriage was our funeral;
One woman, at one blow, then kill’d us all;
And singly, one by one, they kill us now.
We do delightfully ourselves allow
To that consumption; and, profusely blind,
We kill ourselves to propagate our kind.

We seem ambitious God's whole work to undo;
Of nothing He made us, and we strive too
To bring ourselves to nothing back; and we
Do what we can to do 't so soon as He.
With new diseases on ourselves we war,
And with new physic, a worse engine far.

This man, this world's vice-emperor, in whom
All faculties, all graces are at home
- And if in other creatures they appear,
They're but man's ministers and legates there,
To work on their rebellions, and reduce
Them to civility, and to man's use -
This man, whom God did woo, and, loth to attend
Till man came up, did down to man descend;
This man so great, that all that is, is his,
O, what a trifle, and poor thing he is!

Then as mankind, so is the world's whole frame,
Quite out of joint, almost created lame;
For before God had made up all the rest,
Corruption enter'd and depraved the best.
It seized the angels, and then first of all
The world did in her cradle take a fall,
And turn'd her brains, and took a general maim,
Wronging each joint of th' universal frame.
The noblest part, man, felt it first; and then
Both beasts and plants, cursed in the curse of man.

And new philosophy calls all in doubt;
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the planets, and the firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
All just supply, and all relation.
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phœnix, and that then can be
None of that kind of which he is, but he.