Catullus, Poem 3: On the Death of a Pet Sparrow

One of Rome’s best-known and best-loved poets, Catullus wrote on a wide range of topics, using various styles, tones, and meters. He was equally comfortable with and skillful at writing erotic or satiric lyrics, witty or abusive epigrams, polished hymns and learned epyllia (“little epics”).

Born around 84 B.C. to a wealthy family from Verona, Catullus soon settled into the fashionably elegant and educated circles in Rome and fell in love with a rich married woman, Clodia, whom he refers to as “Lesbia” in many of his poems. Although not mentioned by name in the following poem, she is likely the puella of this poem and the loss of her pet sparrow, the topic.

Perhaps the scene of his recitation might be in the company of his admirers (Veneres Cupidinesque) who have pleaded with him to sing a little song for their entertainment. If so, what is Catullus’ tone and what creates it? Is this simply about the death of a pet or does it hint at something more complex, even provocative?

Text and Translation

Lugete, O Veneres Cupidinesque
Mourn, O Venuses and Cupids

et quantum est hominum venustiorum.
and however great (the number) is of people (who are) rather charming.

Passer mortuus est meae puellae,
The sparrow of my girlfriend is dead,

1. **lugete**: lugeo, -ere, luxi, luctum: mourn
   **Veneres**: Venus, -eres, f.: Venus, goddess of love, wife of Vulcan, mother of Cupid; here, plural perhaps referring to the women present
   **Cupidines(que)**: Cupido, -inis, m.: Cupid, god of love; here, plural perhaps referring the young men in the gathering

2. **quantum**: quantus, -a, -um: how great
   **quantum est hominum**: literally, how much of people there is = however great the number of people (who are)
   **venustiorum**: venustus, -a, -um: full of Venus; here, charming

3. **passer**: passer, -eris, m.: sparrow (a bird sacred to Venus)
   **mortuus**: mortuus, -a, -um: dead
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
the sparrow, delight of my girlfriend,

quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.
whom that girl loved more than her own eyes.

Nam mellitus erat, suamque norat
For it was sweet-as-honey, and knew its own

ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem;
mistress herself as well as a girl (knows) her own mother;

nec sese a gremio illius movebat,
nor was it moving itself from that girl’s lap,

sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc
but jumping around now here, now there

4.  **deliciae**: deliciae, -arum, fem. pl.: delight
5.  **oculis**: oculus, -i, m.: eye
6.  **mellitus**: mellitus, -a, -um: sweet-as-honey
    **norat**: noverat (from nosco, -ere, -novi, notum: to be acquainted with; in perfect tenses = know)
7.  **suam ipsam**: its very own (mistress) herself
    **tam...quam**: as...as
8.  **sese**: sese = se (acc.)
    **gremio**: gremium, -ii, n.: lap
9.  **circumsiliens**: circumsilio, -ire, -ivi, -itum: jump around
    **modo...modo**: (adverb) now...now
    **huc**: (adverb) from this place; here, here
    **illuc**: (adverb) to that place; here, there
ad solam dominam usque pipiabat. 
and was constantly chirping to its mistress alone

Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
Now it goes along the shadowy path

illuc unde negant redire quemquam.
to that place where they say that no one returns from.

At vobis male sit, malae tenebrae
But may it be bad for you, evil darkness(es)

Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis;
of Orcus, you who devour all beautiful things;

tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis. 
you took away from me such a pretty sparrow.

10.  **dominam**: domina, -ae, f.: mistress  
**usque**: (adverb) constantly  
**pipiabat**: pipio (1): chirp

11.  **qui nunc**: (relative pronoun + adverb) who now; here, now it  
**it**: eo, ire, ivi or ii, itum: go; it is third singular present.  
**iter**: iter, itineris, n.: path  
**tenebricosum**: tenebricosus, -a, -um: shadowy

12.  **unde**: (adverb) whence; here, from  
**redire**: redeo, redire, redii, reditum: return (red- + eo)  
**quemquam**: quisquam, quaequam, quidquam: anyone, anything; here, no one

13.  **sit**: present subjunctive of *sum*, third person singular = may be (the subjunctive mood expresses a wish or uncertainty)  
**tenebrae**: tenebrae, -arum, fem. pl.: darkness

14.  **devoratis**: devoro (1): devour  
**Orci**: Orcus, -i, m.: Orcus, the underworld

15.  **abstulistis**: aufero, auferre, abstuli, ablatum: irregular verb (ab + fero); carry off; here, took away
O factum male! Io miselle passer!
O evil deed! Farewell, poor little sparrow!

Tuā nunc operā meae puellae
Now thanks to you, my girlfriend’s

flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.
little swollen eyes are red with weeping.

16. **Io**: exclamation of pain; here, Farewell!
**miselle**: misellus, -a, -um: poor little (diminutive of miser)

17. **opera**: opera, operae, f.: effort; **tu oper**: literally, your efforts; here, thanks to you

18. **flendo**: fleo, -ere, flevi, fletum: weep; here, the form is ablative gerund (verbal noun) = with weeping
**turgiduli**: turgidulus, -a, -um: slightly swollen (diminutive of turgidus, “swollen”)
**rubent**: rubeo, -ere: to be red
**ocelli**: ocellus, -i, m.: little eye (diminutive of oculus)