

*When I do count the clock that tells the time
 And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
 When I behold the violet past prime
 And sable curls all silvered o'er with white,
 When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
 Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
 And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
 Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard:
 Then of thy beauty do I question make
 That thou among the wastes of time must go,
 Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
 And die as fast as they see others grow,
 And nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defense
 Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence.*

Time, one of the strongest threads in the sonnets, now casts its shadow on the speaker's vision of the natural world. It has been apparent since Sonnet 2 that time cannot be evaded, even by the power of nature herself. The first eight lines are neatly paired but depict an almost random series of images that are connected only by their transiency: the sinking day, the fading violet, the whitened curls of hair, the barren leaves, the trussed up sheaves that resemble an old man being carried to his grave. The very randomness of these glimpses suggests the dissolution of life, the helter-skelter damage done by time.

The question raised by the mortality of all lovely things consumes the speaker, who is still appealing to the youth. He also threatens him by describing his vision of the youth among "the wastes of time" (l. 10), a phrase more devastating than the collective images of the octave. The youth, like "sweets and beauties" (l. 11) will forsake himself and die while others grow. This is the same image that is used in the opening of Sonnet 11, but the optimism has become pessimism. The swift change is not only in keeping with the idea of time, but it reflects the nature of the speaker, which is clearly mercurial.

Despite all the negatives and the first line of the couplet—"nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defense," the speaker whips out his solution in one word: breed. The cursory closing is not very convincing in view of the case the speaker has made for the omnipotence of time. And he must know it.