

“The Dead City” (1847)

Christina Rossetti

Once I rambled in a wood
With a careless hardihood,
Heeding not the tangled way;
Labyrinths around me lay,
But for them I never stood.

On, still on, I wandered on,
And the sun above me shone;
And the birds around me winging
With their everlasting singing
Made me feel not quite alone. 10

In the branches of the trees,
Murmured like the hum of bees
The low sound of happy breezes,
Whose sweet voice that never ceases
Lulls the heart to perfect ease.

Streamlets bubbled all around
On the green and fertile ground,
Thro’ the rushes and the grass,
Like a sheet of liquid glass,
With a soft and trickling sound. 20

And I went, I went on faster,
Contemplating no disaster;
And I plucked ripe blackberries,
But the birds with envious eyes
Came and stole them from their master:

For the birds here were all tame;
Some with bodies like a flame,
Some that glanced the branches thro’
Pure and colourless as dew;
Fearlessly to me they came. 30

Before me no mortal stood
In the mazes of that wood;
Before me the birds had never
Seen a man, but dwelt for ever
In a happy solitude;

Happy solitude, and blest
With beautitudes of rest;
Where the woods are ever vernal,
And the life and joy eternal,
Without Death’s or Sorrow’s test. 40

Oh most blessed solitude!
Oh most full beatitude!
Where are quiet without strife,
And imperishable life,
Nothing marred, and all things good.

And the bright sun, life begetting,
Never rising, never setting,
Shining warmly overhead,
Nor too pallid, nor too red,
Lulled me to a sweet forgetting, 50

Sweet forgetting of the time:
And I listened for no chime
Which might warn me to begone;
But I wandered on, still on,
‘Neath the boughs of oak and lime.

Know I not how long I strayed
In the pleasant leafy shade;
But the trees had gradually
Grown more rare, the air more free,
The sun hotter overhead. 60

Soon the birds no more were seen
Glancing thro’ the living green;
And a blight had passed upon
All the trees; and the pale sun
Shone with a strange lurid sheen.

Then a darkness spread around:
I saw nought, I heard no sound;
Solid darkness overhead,
With a trembling cautious tread
Passed I o’er the unseen ground. 70

But at length a pallid light
Broke upon my searching sight;
A pale solitary ray,
Like a star at dawn of day
Ere the sun is hot and bright.

Toward its faintly glimmering beam
I went on as in a dream;
A strange dream of hope and fear!
And I saw as I drew near,
‘Twas in truth no planet’s gleam; 80

But a lamp above a gate
Shone in solitary state
O’er a desert drear and cold,
O’er a heap of ruins old,

O'er a scene most desolate.

By that gate I entered lone
A fair city of white stone;
And a lovely light to see
Dawned, and spread most gradually
Till the air grew warm and shone. 90

Thro' the splendid streets I strayed
In that radiance without shade,
Yet I heard no human sound;
All was still and silent round
As a city of the dead.

All the doors were open wide;
Lattices on every side
In the wind swung to and fro;
Wind that whispered very low;
Go and see the end of pride. 100

With a fixed determination
Entered I each habitation,
But they were all tenantless;
All was utter loneliness,
All was deathless desolation.

In the noiseless market-place
Was no care-worn busy face;
There were none to buy or sell,
None to listen or to tell,
In this silent emptiness. 110

Thro' the city on I went
Full of awe and wonderment;
Still the light around me shone,
And I wandered on, still on,
In my great astonishment,

Till at length I reached a place
Where amid an ample space
Rose a palace for a king;
Golden was the turreting,
And of solid gold the base. 120

The great porch was ivory,
And the steps were ebony;
Diamond and chrysoprase
Set the pillars in a blaze,
Capitalled with jewelry.

None was there to bar my way—
And the breezes seemed to say:

Touch not these, but pass them by,
Pressing onwards: therefore I
Entered in and made no stay. 130

All around was desolate:
I went on; a silent state
Reigned in each deserted room,
And I hastened thro' the gloom
Till I reached an outer gate.

Soon a shady avenue
Blossom-perfumed, met my view.
Here and there the sun-beams fell
On pure founts, whose sudden swell
Up from marble basins flew. 140

Every tree was fresh and green;
Not a withered leaf was seen
Thro' the veil of flowers and fruit;
Strong and sapful were the root,
The top boughs, and all between.

Vines were climbing everywhere
Full of purple grapes and fair:
And far off I saw the corn
With its heavy head down borne,
By the odour-laden air. 150

Who shall strip the bending vine?
Who shall tread the press for wine?
Who shall bring the harvest in
When the pallid ears begin
In the sun to glow and shine?

On I went, alone, alone,
Till I saw a tent that shone
With each bright and lustrous hue;
It was trimmed with jewels too,
And with flowers; not one was gone. 160

Then the breezes whispered me:
Enter in, and look, and see
How for luxury and pride
A great multitude have died:--
And I entered tremblingly.

Lo, a splendid banquet laid
In the cool and pleasant shade.
Might tables, every thing
Of sweet Nature's furnishing
That was rich and rare, displayed; 170

And each strange and luscious cate
Practised Art makes delicate;
With a thousand fair devices
Full of odours and of spices;
And a warm voluptuous state.

All the vessels were of gold
Set with gems of worth untold.
In the midst a fountain rose
Of pure milk, whose rippling flows
In a silver basin rolled. 180

In a green emerald baskets were
Sun-red apples, streaked, and fair;
Here the nectarine and peach
And ripe plums lay, and on each
The bloom rested every where.

Grapes were hanging overhead,
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;
And in panniers all around
Yellow melons shone, fresh found,
With the dew upon them spread. 190

And the apricot and pear
And the pulpy fig were there;
Cherries and dark mulberries,
Bunch currants, strawberries,
And the lemon wan and fair.

And unnumbered others too,
Fruits of every size and hue,
Juicy in their ripe perfection,
Cool beneath the cool reflection
Of the curtains' skyey blue. 200

All the floor was strewn with flowers
Fresh from sunshine and from showers,
Roses, lilies, Jessamine;
And the ivy ran between
Like a thought in happy hours.

And this feast too lacked no guest
With its warm delicious rest;
With its couches softly sinking,
And its glow, not made for thinking,
But for careless joy at best. 210

Many banquetters were there,
Wrinkled age, the young, the fair;
In the splendid revelry
Flushing cheek and kindling eye

Told of gladness without care.

Yet no laughter rang around,
Yet they uttered forth no sound;
With the smile upon his face
Each sat moveless in his place,
Silently, as if spell-bound. 220

The low whispering voice was gone,
And I felt awed and alone.
In my great astonishment
To the feasters up I went—
Lo, they all were turned to stone.

Yea they all were statue-cold,
Men and women, young and old;
With the life-like look and smile
And the flush; and all the while
The hard fingers kept their hold. 230

Here a little child was sitting
With a merry glance, befitting
Happy age and heedless heart;
There a young man sat apart
With a forward look unweeting.

Night them was a maiden fair;
And the ringlets of her hair
Round her slender fingers twined;
And she blushed as she reclined,
Knowing that her love was there. 240

Here a dead man sat to sup,
In his hand a drinking cup;
Wine cup of the heavy gold,
Human hand stony and cold,
And no life-breath struggling up.

There a mother lay, and smiled
Down upon her infant child;
Happy child and happy mother
Laughing back to one another
With a gladness undefiled. 250

Here an old man slept, worn out
With the revelry and rout;
Here a strong man sat and gazed
On a girl, whose eyes unraised
No more wandered round about.

And none broke the stillness, none;
I was the sole living one.

And methought that silently
Many seemed to look on me
With strange steadfast eyes that shone. 260

Full of fear I would have fled;
Full of fear I bent my head,
Shutting out each stony guest:--
When I looked again the feast
And the tent had vanished.

Yes, once more I stood alone
Where the happy sunlight shone
And a gentle wind was sighing,
And the little birds were flying,
And the dreariness was gone. 270

All these things that I have said
Awed me, and made me afraid.
What was I that I should see
So much hidden mystery?
And I straightway knelt and prayed. 275