



An old photograph of the reputedly haunted 18th century manor, Rose Hall, located in Montego Bay, Jamaica.

THE HOUSE OF NIGHT (1779, revised 1786)

A Vision

By Philip Freneau.

The son of a prosperous wine merchant of French extraction and a Scotch mother, Philip Freneau (1752-1832) graduated from Princeton, alongside fellows James Madison and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, with the class of 1771. It had originally been intended that he become a clergyman, but, caught up in the political and philosophical fervor of his times, he instead ended up turning to literary pursuits. After a few years working various jobs, including tutor on Long Island, and later some failed attempts at securing literary employment while in Maryland and Philadelphia, he set sail for the island of Santa Cruz in the West Indies in late Autumn of 1775. Why he left the country when it was just embarked upon that very struggle which he later with such passion and fervor wrote on behalf of is a bit of a mystery.¹ In any event, while in Santa Cruz Freneau resided at the estate of a Captain Hansen, and having in the interim acquired some skill at both navigation and mastering a vessel, was occasionally hired by Hansen for purposes of making short voyages and running local errands by ship. In addition, he also spent some time composing verse, and it was while on the island he wrote three of his most original and creative poetical works: "Santa Cruz," "The Jamaica Funeral," and "The House of Night" -- the last perhaps having been first worked on as early as 1775. Finally returning to the United States in June 1779, he reunited in Philadelphia with his old comrade and classmate Brackenridge; who at the time was publishing the short-lived, yet revolutionary in its own right, *United States Magazine*, and to which Freneau became a contributor. It was in this periodical that same year that his "House of Night" first appeared, and which one learned critic, while emphatic as to its undeniable flaws, calls "the most remarkable poem written in America up to it's time;"² which, though an overstatement in view of the works of Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, is not without its truth. Freneau subsequently expanded "House" to about twice its original size and published it again in 1786; then in the 1795 self-published edition of his verse included there a severely shortened version of the poem, "The Vision of Night -- A fragment;" yet which is so abridged as to bear only marginal similarity to the prior drafts.

As well as being something of a harbinger of the gothic romantic verse of such as Coleridge and Poe (some stanzas resemble lines from "The Raven"), "House of Night" is unique for its liveliness and vigor, and is on occasion even stupefying in its stark imagery and dramatization of the dreary. At others time, it is unintentionally risible, indeed, laugh out-loud funny (e.g., the allusion to George III) -- which presumably is why Freneau drastically reduced the poem in size in 1795. Yet as the critics agree, it is the crude and blunt earlier version (of 1786) that attracts the most interest. Drawing for inspiration evidently on

¹ Though be it noted, earlier in 1775 Freneau had taken up his pen to write *and publish* (in New York and later as well Philadelphia) "American Liberty, A Poem;" "General Gage's Confession, Being the Substance of His Excellency's Last Conference, with His Ghostly Father, Friar Francis;" "The Last Dying Words, Dying speech and Confession of J---s R---g---n [James Rivington], P---t---r, Who was Executed at New Brunswick, In the Province of New Jersey, On the Thirteenth Day of April, 1775. Supposed to be written by himself the night preceding the day of his execution;" "On the Conqueror of America Shut Up in Boston, A Poem;" and "A Voyage to Boston, A Poem."

² Samuel Marion Tucker, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 1, ch. IX, "The Beginnings of [Am.] Verse: 1610-1808," see p.181.

Thomas Parnell "A Night-Piece on Death" (1714),³ Edward Young's "Night Thoughts" (1742) and Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743); with their being present also echoes of Dante, John Donne's apostrophizing of Death, *Paradise Lost*, and Thomson's "Winter," "House," nonetheless, is novel and inventive in its own right. At times, and again allowing for its deplorable lack of structural unity, "House" has an emotional penetration and force that it is not too far fetched to describe as intoxicatingly brilliant; while being somewhat reminiscent of some of the better Elizabethan poets for its curious whimsy and flamboyant, if on occasion ludicrous and not a little morbid, flights of fancy.

Drawing then from Fred Lewis Pattee's comprehensive and thorough *The Poems of Philip Freneau* (1902), and without further ado, we reproduce this most imaginative and entertaining, if less than perfect, work for those who might otherwise have missed it.

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ADVERTISEMENT -- This Poem is founded upon the authority of Scripture, inasmuch as these sacred books assert, that the *last enemy that shall be conquered is Death*. For the purposes of poetry he is here personified, and represented as on his dying bed. The scene is laid at a solitary palace, (the time midnight) which, tho' before beautiful and joyous, is now become sad and gloomy, as being the abode and receptacle of Death. Its owner, an amiable, majestic youth, who had lately lost a beloved consort, nevertheless with a noble philosophical fortitude and humanity, entertains him in a friendly manner, and by employing Physicians, endeavours to restore him to health, altho' an enemy; convinced of the excellence and propriety of that divine precept, *If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink*. He nevertheless, as if by a spirit of prophecy, informs this (fictitiously) wicked being of the certainty of his doom, and represents to him in a pathetic manner the vanity of his expectations, either of a reception into the abodes of the just, or continuing longer to make havock of mankind upon earth. The patient finding his end approaching, composes his epitaph, and orders it to be engraved on his tombstone, hinting to us thereby, that even Death and Distress have vanity; and would be remembered with honour after he is no more, altho' his whole life has been spent in deeds of devastation and murder. He dies at last in the utmost agonies of despair, after agreeing with an avaricious Undertaker to intomb his bones. This reflects upon the inhumanity of those men, who, not to mention an enemy, would scarcely cover a departed friend with a little dust, without certainty of reward for so doing. The circumstances of his funeral are then recited, and the visionary and fabulous part of the poem disappears. It concludes with a few reflexions on the impropriety of a too great attachment to the present life, and incentives to such moral virtue as may assist in conducting us to a better.

1

Trembling I write my dream, and recollect  
A fearful vision at the midnight hour;  
So late, Death o'er me spread his sable wings,  
Painted with fancies of malignant power!

2

Such was the dream the sage Chaldean saw  
Disclos'd to him that felt heav'n's vengeful rod,  
Such was the ghost, who through deep silence cry'd,  
Shall mortal man be juster than his God?

---

<sup>3</sup> While Parnell is usually given credit for inaugurating the gothic movement in 18th century English poetry, Shakespeare, of course, also has his share and moments of ghostly midnight and churchyard verses; while Virgil, for example in the opening to his version of the Orpheus tale in Book IV of the *Georgics*, could be said to be one of the actual inventors of gothic poetry. As for the brand of gothic heralded by Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* it seems reasonable to surmise that Congreve's tragedy of 1687 "The Mourning Bride" -- an at one time extremely popular stage vehicle -- was also some kind of general influence on literary works.

3

Let others draw from smiling skies their theme,  
And tell of climes that boast unfading light,  
I draw a darker scene, replete with gloom,  
I sing the horrors of the House of Night.

4

Stranger, believe the truth experience tells,  
Poetic dreams are of a finer cast  
Than those which o'er the sober brain diffus'd,  
Are but a repetition of some action past.

5

Fancy, I own thy power -- when sunk in sleep  
Thou play'st thy wild delusive part so well  
You lift me into immortality,  
Depict new heavens, or draw the scenes of hell.

6

By some sad means, when Reason holds no sway,  
Lonely I rove'd at midnight o'er a plain  
Where murmuring streams and mingling rivers flow  
Far to their springs, or seek the sea again.

7

Sweet vernal May! Tho' then thy woods in bloom  
Flourish'd, yet nought of this could Fancy see,  
No wild pinks bless'd the meads, no green the fields,  
And naked seem'd to stand each lifeless tree:

8

Dark was the sky, and not one friendly star  
Shone from the zenith or horizon, clear,  
Mist sate upon the woods, and darkness rode  
In her black chariot, with a wild career.

9

And from the woods the late resounding note  
Issued of the loquacious Whip-poor-will,\*  
Hoarse, howling dogs, and nightly roving wolves  
Clamour'd from far off cliffs invisible.

[\*A Bird peculiar to America, of a solitary nature, who never sings but in the night. Her note resembles the name given to her by the country people. – Freneau's note.]

10

Rude, from the wide extended Chesapeake  
I heard the winds the dashing waves assail,  
And saw from far, by picturing fancy form'd,  
The black ship travelling through the noisy gale.

11

At last, by chance and guardian fancy led,  
I reach'd a noble dome, rais'd fair and high,  
And saw the light from upper windows flame,  
Presage of mirth and hospitality.

12

And by that light around the dome appear'd  
A mournful garden of autumnal hue,  
Its lately pleasing flowers all drooping stood  
Amidst high weeds that in rank plenty grew.

13

The Primrose there, the violet darkly blue,  
Daisies and fair Narcissus ceas'd to rise,  
Gay spotted pinks their charming bloom withdrew,  
And Polyanthus quench'd its thousand dyes.

14

No pleasant fruit or blossom gaily smil'd,  
Nought but unhappy plants or trees were seen,  
The yew, the myrtle, and the church-yard elm,  
The cypress, with its melancholy green.

15

There cedars dark, the osier, and the pine,  
Shorn tamarisks, and weeping willows grew,  
The poplar tall, the lotos, arid the lime,  
And pyracantha did her leaves renew.

16

The poppy there, companion to repose,  
Display'd her blossoms that began to fall,  
And here the purple amaranthus rose

With mint strong-scented, for the funeral.

17

And here and there with laurel shrubs between  
A tombstone lay, inscrib'd with strains of woe,  
And stanzas sad, throughout the dismal green,  
Lamented for the dead that slept below.

18

Peace to this awful dome! when strait I heard  
The voice of men in a secluded room,  
Much did they talk of death, and much of life,  
Of coffins, shrouds, and horrors of a tomb.

19

Pathetic were their words, and well they aim'd  
To explain the mystic paths of providence,  
Learn'd were they all, but there remain'd not I  
To hear the upshot of their conference.

20

Meantime from an adjoining chamber came  
Confused murmurings, half distinguish'd sounds,  
And as I nearer drew, disputes arose  
Of surgery, and remedies for wounds.

21

Dull were their feuds, for they went on to talk  
Of *Anchylosis*\* and the shoulder blade,  
*Os Femoris*,\* *Trochanters*\* -- and whate'er  
Has been discuss'd by Cheselden or Meade:

[\* *Anchylosis* -- a morbid contraction of the joints. *Os Femoris* -- the thigh bone. *Trochanters* two processes in the upper part of the thigh bone, otherwise called *rotator major et minor*, in which the tendons of many muscles terminate. -- Freneau's notes.]

22

And often each, to prove his notion true,  
Brought proofs from Galen or Hippocrates --  
But fancy led me hence -- and left them so,  
Firm at their points of hardy No and Yes.

23

Then up three winding stairs my feet were brought  
To a high chamber, hung with mourning sad,

The unsnuff'd candles glar'd with visage dim,  
'Midst grief, in ecstasy of woe run mad.

24

A wide leaf'd table stood on either side,  
Well fraught with phials, half their liquids spent,  
And from a couch, behind the curtain's veil,  
I heard a hollow voice of loud lament.

25

Turning to view the object whence it came,  
My frightened eyes a horrid form survey'd;  
Fancy, I own thy power -- Death on the couch,  
With fleshless limbs, at rueful length, was laid.

26

And o'er his head flew jealousies and cares,  
Ghosts, imps, and half the black Tartarian crew,  
Arch-angels damn'd, nor was their Prince remote,  
Borne on the vaporous wings of Stygian dew.

27

Around his bed, by the dull flambeaux' glare,  
I saw pale phantoms -- Rage to madness vext,  
Wan, wasting grief, and ever musing care,  
Distressful pain, and poverty perplex.

28

Sad was his countenance, if we can call  
That countenance, where only bones were seen  
And eyes sunk in their sockets, dark and low,  
And teeth, that only show'd themselves to grin.

29

Reft was his scull of hair, and no fresh bloom  
Of chearful mirth sate on his visage hoar:  
Sometimes he rais'd his head, while deep-drawn groans  
Were mixt with words that did his fate deplore.

30

Oft did he wish to see the daylight spring,  
And often toward the window lean'd to hear,

Fore-runner of the scarlet-mantled morn,  
The early note of wakeful Chanticleer.

31

Thus he -- But at my hand a portly youth  
Of comely countenance, began to tell,  
"That this was Death upon his dying bed,  
"Sullen, morose, and peevish to be well;

32

"Fixt is his doom -- the miscreant reigns no more  
"The tyrant of the dying or the dead;  
"This night concludes his all-consuming reign,  
"Pour out, ye heav'ns, your vengeance on his head.

33

"But since, my friend (said he), chance leads you here  
"With me this night upon the sick attend,  
"You on this bed of death must watch, and I  
"Will not be distant from the fretful fiend.

34

"Before he made this lofty pile his home,  
"In undisturb'd repose I sweetly slept,  
"But when he came to this sequester'd dome,  
"Twas then my troubles came, and then I wept:

35

"Twice three long nights, in this sad chamber, I,  
"As though a brother languish'd in despair,  
"Have 'tended faithful round his gloomy bed,  
"Have been content to breathe this loathsome air.

36

"A while relieve the languors that I feel,  
"Sleep's magic forces close my weary eyes;  
"Soft o'er my soul unwonted slumbers steal,  
"Aid the weak patient till you see me rise.

37

"But let no slumbers on your eye-lids fall,  
"That if he ask for powder or for pill

“You may be ready at the word to start,  
“And still seem anxious to perform his will.

38

“The bleeding Saviour of a world undone  
“Bade thy compassion rise toward thy foe;  
“Then, stranger, for the sake of Mary’s son,  
“Thy tears of pity on this wretch bestow.

39

“’Twas he that stole from my adoring arms  
“Aspasia, she the loveliest of her kind,  
“Lucretia’s virtue, with a Helen’s charms,  
“Charms of the face, and beauties of the mind.

40

“The blushy cheek, the lively, beaming eye,  
“The ruby lip, the flowing jetty hair,  
“The stature tall, the aspect so divine,  
“All beauty, you would think, had center’d there.

41

“Each future age her virtues shall extol,  
“Nor the just tribute to her worth refuse;  
“Fam’d, to the stars Urania bids her rise,  
“Theme of the moral, and the tragic Muse.

42

“Sweet as the fragrance of the vernal morn,  
“Nipt in its bloom this faded flower I see;  
“The inspiring-angel from that breast is gone,  
“And life’s warm tide forever chill’d in thee!

43

“Such charms shall greet my longing soul no more,  
“Her lively eyes are clos’d in endless shade,  
“Torpido, she rests on yonder marble floor;  
“Approach, and see what havock Death has made.

44

“Yet, stranger, hold -- her charms are so divine,  
“Such tints of life still on her visage glow,



“That even in death this slumbering bride of mine  
“May seize thy heart, and make thee wretched too.

45

“O shun the sight -- forbid thy trembling hand  
“From her pale face to raise the enshrouding lawn --  
“Death claims thy care, obey his stern command,  
“Trim the dull tapers, for I see no dawn!”

46

So said, at Death’s left side I sate me down,  
The mourning youth toward his right reclin’d;  
Death in the middle lay, with all his groans,  
And much he toss’d and tumbled, sigh’d and pin’d.

47

But now this man of hell toward me turn’d,  
And strait, in hideous tone, began to speak;  
Long held he sage discourse, but I forebore  
To answer him, much less his news to seek.

48

He talk’d of tomb-stones and of monuments,  
Of Equinoctial climes and India shores,  
He talk’d of stars that shed their influence,  
Fevers and plagues, and all their noxious stores.

49

He mention’d, too, the guileful *calenture*,\*  
Tempting the sailor on the deep sea main,  
That paints gay groves upon the ocean floor,  
Beckoning her victim to the faithless scene.

[\* *Calenture* -- an inflammatory fever, attended with a delirium, common in long voyages at sea, in which the diseased persons fancy the sea to be green fields and meadows, and, if they are not hindered, will leap overboard. – Freneau’s note.]

50

Much spoke he of the myrtle and the yew,  
Of ghosts that nightly walk the church-yard o’er,  
Of storms that through the wint’ry ocean blow  
And dash the well-mann’d galley on the shore,

51

Of broad-mouth'd cannons, and the thunderbolt,  
Of sieges and convulsions, dearth and fire,  
Of poisonous weeds -- but seem'd to sneer at these  
Who by the laurel o'er him did aspire.

52

Then with a hollow voice thus went he on:  
"Get up, and search, and bring, when found, to me,  
"Some cordial, potion, or some pleasant draught,  
"Sweet, slumb'rous poppy, or the mild Bohea.

53

"But hark, my pitying friend! -- and, if you can,  
"Deceive the grim physician at the door  
"Bring half the mountain springs -- ah! hither bring  
"The cold rock water from the shady bower.

54

"For till this night such thirst did ne'er invade,  
"A thirst provok'd by heav'n's avenging hand;  
"Hence bear me, friends, to quaff, and quaff again  
"The cool wave bubbling from the yellow sand.

55

"To these dark walls with stately step I came,  
"Prepar'd your drugs and doses to defy;  
"Smit with the love of never dying fame,  
"I came, alas! to conquer -- not to die!"

56

Glad, from his side I sprang, and fetch'd the draught,  
Which down his greedy throat he quickly swills,  
Then on a second errand sent me strait,  
To search in some dark corner for his pills.

57

Quoth he, "These pills have long compounded been,  
"Of dead men's bones and bitter roots, I trow;  
"But that I may to wonted health return,  
"Throughout my lank veins shall their substance go."

58

So down they went. -- He rais'd his fainting head  
And oft in feeble tone essay'd to talk;  
Quoth he, "Since remedies have small avail,  
"Assist unhappy Death once more to walk."

59

Then slowly rising from his loathsome bed,  
On wasted legs the meagre monster stood,  
Gap'd wide, and foam'd, and hungry seem'd to ask,  
Tho' sick, an endless quantity of food.

60

Said he, "The sweet melodious flute prepare,  
"The anthem, and the organ's solemn sound,  
"Such as may strike my soul with ecstasy,  
"Such as may from yon' lofty wall rebound.

61

"Sweet music can the fiercest pains assuage,  
"She bids the soul to heaven's blest mansions rise,  
"She calms despair, controuls infernal rage  
"And deepest anguish, when it hears her, dies.

62

"And see, the mizzling, misty midnight reigns,  
"And no soft dews are on my eye-lids sent!--  
"Here, stranger, lend thy hand; assist me, pray,  
"To walk a circuit of no large extent."--

63

On my prest shoulders leaning, round he went,  
And could have made the boldest spectre flee,  
I led him up stairs, and I led him down,  
But not one moment's rest from pain got he.

64

Then with his dart, its cusp unpointed now,  
Thrice with main strength he smote the trembling floor;  
The roof resounded to the fearful blow,  
And Cleon started, doom'd to sleep no more.

65

When thus spoke Death, impatient of controul,  
“Quick, move, and bring from yonder black bureau  
“The sacred book that may preserve my soul  
“From long damnation, and eternal woe.

66

“And with it bring -- for you may find them there,  
“The works of holy authors, dead and gone,  
“The sacred tome of moving Drelincourt,  
“Or what more solemn Sherlock mus’d upon: <sup>4</sup>

67

“And read, my Cleon, what these sages say,  
“And what the sacred Penman hath declar’d,  
“That when the wicked leaves his odious way,  
“His sins shall vanish, and his soul be spar’d.”

68

But he, unmindful of the vain command,  
Reason’d with Death, nor were his reasonings few:  
Quoth he “My Lord, what frenzy moves your brain,  
“Pray, what, my Lord, can Sherlock be to you,

69

“Or all the sage divines that ever wrote,  
“Grave Drelincourt, or heaven’s unerring page;  
“These point their arrows at your hostile breast,  
“And raise new pains that time must ne’er assuage.

70

“And why should thus thy woe disturb my rest?  
“Much of Theology I once did read,  
“And there ’tis fixt, sure as my God is so,  
“That Death shall perish, tho’ a God should bleed.

71

“The martyr, doom’d the pangs of fire to feel,  
“Lives but a moment in the sultry blast;  
“The victim groans, and dies beneath the steel,

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<sup>4</sup> [Edit. Charles Drelincourt (1595-1669) author of *The Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death; with Seasonable Directions How to Prepare Ourselves to Die Well* (1732), and William Sherlock (c.1641-1707) of *A Practical Discourse concerning Death* (1690).]

“But thy severer pains shall always last.

72

“O miscreant vile, thy age has made thee doat --  
“If peace, if sacred peace were found for you,  
“Hell would cry out, and all the damn’d arise  
“And, more deserving, seek for pity too.

73

“Seek not for Paradise -- ’tis not for thee,  
“Where high in heaven its sweetest blossoms blow,  
“Nor even where, gliding to the Persian main,  
“Thy waves, Euphrates, through the garden flow!

74

“Bloody has been thy reign, O man of hell,  
“Who sympathiz’d with no departing groan;  
“Cruel wast thou, and hardly dost deserve  
“To have *Hic Jacet* stamp’d upon thy stone.

75

“He that could build his mansion o’er the tombs,  
“Depending still on sickness and decay,  
“May dwell unmov’d amidst these drowsier glooms,  
“May laugh the dullest of these shades away.

76

“Remember how with unrelenting ire  
“You tore the infant from the unwilling breast --  
“Aspasia fell, and Cleon must expire,  
“Doom’d by the impartial God to endless rest:

77

“In vain with stars he deck’d yon’ spangled skies,  
“And bade the mind to heaven’s bright regions soar,  
“And brought so far to my admiring eyes  
“A glimpse of glories that shall blaze no more!

78

“Even now, to glut thy devilish wrath, I see  
“From eastern realms a wasteful army rise:  
“Why else those lights that tremble in the north?

“Why else yon’ comet blazing through the skies?

79

“Rejoice, O fiend; Britannia’s tyrant sends  
“From German plains his myriads to our shore.  
“The fierce Hibernian with the Briton join’d --  
“Bring them, ye winds! but waft them back no more.

80

“To you, alas! the fates in wrath deny  
“The comforts to our parting moments due,  
“And leave you here to languish and to die,  
“Your crimes too many, and your tears too few.

81

“No cheering voice to thee shall cry, Repent!  
“As once it echoed through the wilderness --  
“No patron died for thee – damn’d, damn’d art thou  
“Like all the devils, nor one jot the less.

82

“A gloomy land, with sullen skies is thine,  
“Where never rose or amaranthus grow,  
“No daffodils, nor comely columbine,  
“No hyacinths nor asphodels for you.

83

“The barren trees that flourish on the shore  
“With leaves or fruit were never seen to bend,  
“O’er languid waves unblossom’d branches hang,  
“And every branch sustains some vagrant fiend.

84

“And now no more remains, but to prepare  
“To take possession of thy punishment;  
“That’s thy inheritance, that thy domain,  
“A land of bitter woe, and loud lament.

85

“And oh that He, who spread the universe,  
“Would cast one pitying glance on thee below!  
“Millions of years in torments thou might’st fry,

“But thy eternity! -- who can conceive its woe!”

86

He heard, and round with his black eye-balls gaz'd,  
Full of despair, and curs'd, and rav'd, and swore:  
“And since this is my doom,” said he, “call up  
“Your wood-mechanics to my chamber door:

87

“Blame not on me the ravage to be made;  
“Proclaim, -- even Death abhors such woe to see;  
“I'll quit the world, while decently I can,  
“And leave the work to George my deputy.”

88

Up rush'd a band, with compasses and scales  
To measure his slim carcase, long and lean --  
“Be sure,” said he, “to frame my coffin strong,  
“You, master workman, and your men, I mean:

89

“For if the Devil, so late my trusty friend,  
“Should get one hint where I am laid, from you,  
“Not with my soul content, he'd seek to find  
“That mouldering mass of bones, my body, too!

90

“Of hardest ebon let the plank be found,  
“With clamps and ponderous bars secur'd around,  
“That if the box by Satan should be storm'd,  
“It may be able for resistance found.”

91

“Yes,” said the master workman, “noble Death,  
“Your coffin shall be strong -- that leave to me --  
“But who shall these your funeral dues discharge?  
“Nor friends nor pence you have, that I can see.”

92

To this said Death -- “You might have ask'd me, too,  
“Base caitiff, who are my executors,  
“Where my estate, and who the men that shall

“Partake my substance, and be call’d my heirs.

93

“Know, then, that hell is my inheritance,  
“The devil himself my funeral dues must pay --  
“Go -- since you must be paid -- go, ask of him,  
“For he has gold, as fabling poets say.”

94

Strait they retir’d -- when thus he gave me charge,  
Pointing from the light window to the west,  
“Go three miles o’er the plain, and you shall see  
“A burying-yard of sinners dead, unblest.

95

“Amid the graves a spiry building stands  
“Whose solemn knell resounding through the gloom  
“Shall call thee o’er the circumjacent lands  
“To the dull mansion destin’d for my tomb.

96

“There, since ’tis dark, I’ll plant a glimmering light  
“Just snatch’d from hell, by whose reflected beams  
“Thou shalt behold a tomb-stone, full eight feet,  
“Fast by a grave, replete with ghosts and dreams.

97

“And on that stone engrave this epitaph,  
“Since Death, it seems, must die like mortal men;  
“Yes on that stone engrave this epitaph,  
“Though all hell’s furies aim to snatch the pen.

98

*“Death in this tomb his weary bones hath laid,  
“Sick of dominion o’er the human kind  
“Behold what devastations he hath made,  
“Survey the millions by his arm confin’d.*

99

*“Six thousand years has sovereign sway been mine,  
“None, but myself, can real glory claim;  
“Great Regent of the world I reign’d alone,*



*“And princes trembled when my mandate came.*

100

*“Vast and unmatched throughout the world, my fame  
“Takes place of gods, and asks no mortal date --  
“No; by myself, and by the heavens, I swear,  
“Not Alexander’s name is half so great.*

101

*“Nor swords nor darts my prowess could withstand,  
“All quit their arms, and bow’d to my decree,  
“Even mighty Julius died beneath my hand,  
“For slaves and Caesars were the same to me!”*

102

*“Traveller, wouldst thou his noblest trophies seek,  
“Search in no narrow spot obscure for those;  
“The sea profound, the surface of all land  
“Is moulded with the myriads of his foes.”*

103

Scarce had he spoke, when on the lofty dome  
Rush’d from the clouds a hoarse resounding blast --  
Round the four eaves so loud and sad it play’d  
As though all musick were to breathe its last.

104

Warm was the gale, and such as travellers say  
Sport with the winds on Zaara’s barren waste;  
Black was the sky, a mourning carpet spread,  
Its azure blotted, and its stars o’ercast!

105

Lights in the air like burning stars were hurl’d,  
Dogs howl’d, heaven mutter’d, and the tempest blew,  
The red half-moon peeped from behind a cloud  
As if in dread the amazing scene to view.

106

The mournful trees that in the garden stood  
Bent to the tempest as it rush’d along,  
The elm, the myrtle, and the cypress sad

More melancholy tun'd its bellowing song.

107

No more that elm its noble branches spread,  
The yew, the cypress, or the myrtle tree,  
Rent from the roots the tempest tore them down,  
And all the grove in wild confusion lay.

108

Yet, mindful of his dread command, I part  
Glad from the magic dome -- nor found relief;  
Damps from the dead hung heavier round my heart,  
While sad remembrance rous'd her stores of grief.

109

O'er a dark field I held my dubious way  
Where Jack-a-lantern walk'd his lonely round,  
Beneath my feet substantial darkness lay,  
And screams were heard from the distemper'd ground,

110

Nor look'd I back, till to a far off wood,  
Trembling with fear, my weary feet had sped --  
Dark was the night, but at the enchanted dome  
I saw the infernal windows flaming red.

111

And from within the howls of Death I heard,  
Cursing the dismal night that gave him birth,  
Damning his ancient sire, and mother sin,  
Who at the gates of hell, accursed, brought him forth.

112

[For fancy gave to my enraptur'd soul  
An eagle's eye, with keenest glance to see,  
And bade those distant sounds distinctly roll,  
Which, waking, never had affected me.]

113

Oft his pale breast with cruel hand he smote,  
And tearing from his limbs a winding sheet,  
Roar'd to the black skies, while the woods around,

As wicked as himself, his words repeat.

114

Thrice tow'rd the skies his meagre arms he rear'd,  
Invok'd all hell, and thunders on his head,  
Bid light'nings fly, earth yawn, and tempests roar,  
And the sea wrap him in its oozy bed.

115

“My life for one cool draught! -- O, fetch your springs,  
“Can one unfeeling to my woes be found!  
“No friendly visage comes to my relief,  
“But ghosts impend, and spectres hover round.

116

“Though humbled now, dishearten'd and distrest,  
“Yet, when admitted to the peaceful ground,  
“With heroes, kings, and conquerors I shall rest,  
“Shall sleep as safely, and perhaps as sound.”

117

Dim burnt the lamp, and now the phantom Death  
Gave his last groans in horror and despair --  
“All hell demands me hence,” -- he said, and threw  
The red lamp hissing through the midnight air.

118

Trembling, across the plain my course I held,  
And found the grave-yard, loitering through the gloom,  
And, in the midst, a hell-red, wandering light,  
Walking in fiery circles round the tomb.

119

Among the graves a spiry building stood,  
Whose tolling bell, resounding through the shade,  
Sung doleful ditties to the adjacent wood,  
And many a dismal drowsy thing it said.

120

This fabrick tall, with towers and chancels grac'd,  
Was rais'd by sinners' hands, in ages fled;  
The roof they painted, and the beams they brac'd,

And texts from scripture o'er the walls they spread:

121

But wicked were their hearts, for they refus'd  
To aid the helpless orphan, when distrest,  
The shivering, naked stranger they mis-us'd,  
And banish'd from their doors the starving guest.

122

By laws protected, cruel and prophane,  
The poor man's ox these monsters drove away; --  
And left Distress to attend her infant train,  
No friend to comfort, and no bread to stay.

123

But heaven look'd on with keen, resentful eye,  
And doom'd them to perdition and the grave,  
That as they felt not for the wretch distrest,  
So heaven no pity on their souls would have.

124

In pride they rais'd this building tall and fair,  
Their hearts were on perpetual mischief bent,  
With pride they preach'd, and pride was in their prayer,  
With pride they were deceiv'd, and so to hell they went.

125

At distance far approaching to the tomb,  
By lamps and lanthorns guided through the shade,  
A coal-black chariot hurried through the gloom,  
Spectres attending, in black weeds array'd,

126

Whose woeful forms yet chill my soul with dread,  
Each wore a vest in Stygian chambers wove,  
Death's kindred all – Death's horses they bestrode,  
And gallop'd fiercely, as the chariot drove.

127

Each horrid face a grizly mask conceal'd,  
Their busy eyes shot terror to my soul  
As now and then, by the pale lanthorn's glare,

I saw them for their parted friend condole.

128

Before the hearse Death's chaplain seem'd to go,  
Who strove to comfort, what he could, the dead;  
Talk'd much of Satan, and the land of woe,  
And many a chapter from the scriptures read.

129

At last he rais'd the swelling anthem high,  
In dismal numbers seem'd he to complain;  
The captive tribes that by Euphrates wept,  
Their song was jovial to his dreary strain.

130

That done, they plac'd the carcase in the tomb,  
To dust and dull oblivion now resign'd,  
Then turn'd the chariot tow'rd the House of Night,  
Which soon flew off, and left no trace behind.

131

But as I stoop'd to write the appointed verse,  
Swifter than thought the airy scene decay'd;  
Blushing the morn arose, and from the east  
With her gay streams of light dispell'd the shade.

132

What is this Death, ye deep read sophists, say? --  
Death is no more than one unceasing change;  
New forms arise, while other forms decay,  
Yet all is Life throughout creation's range.

133

The towering Alps, the haughty Appenine,  
The Andes, wrapt in everlasting snow,  
The Apalachian and the Ararat  
Sooner or later must to ruin go.

134

Hills sink to plains, and man returns to dust,  
That dust supports a reptile or a flower;  
Each changeful atom by some other nurs'd

Takes some new form, to perish in an hour.

135

Too nearly join'd to sickness, toils, and pains,  
(Perhaps for former crimes imprison'd here)  
True to itself the immortal soul remains,  
And seeks new mansions in the starry sphere.

136

When Nature bids thee from the world retire,  
With joy thy lodging leave a fated guest;  
In Paradise, the land of thy desire,  
Existing always, always to be blest.

---

*William Thomas Sherman*

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