



Thanatopsis

BY WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

To him who in the love of Nature holds
 Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
 A various language; for his gayer hours
 She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
 And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
 Into his darker musings, with a mild
 And healing sympathy, that steals away
 Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
 Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
 Over thy spirit, and sad images
 Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
 And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
 Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
 Go forth, under the open sky, and list
 To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
 Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
 Comes a still voice—

Yet a few days, and thee
 The all-beholding sun shall see no more
 In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
 Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
 Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
 Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
 Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
 And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
 Thine individual being, shalt thou go
 To mix for ever with the elements,
 To be a brother to the insensible rock
 And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
 Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
 Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
 Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
 With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
 Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
 All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
 Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
 Stretching in pensive quietness between;
 The venerable woods—rivers that move
 In majesty, and the complaining brooks
 That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,

Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.