

The Passing Show

By Ambrose Bierce

I know not if it was a dream. I viewed
A city where the restless multitude,
Between the eastern and the western deep
Had reared gigantic fabrics, strong and rude.

Colossal palaces crowned every height;
Towers from valleys climbed into the light;
O'er dwellings at their feet, great golden domes
Hung in the blue, barbarically bright.

But now, new-glimmering to-east, the day
Touched the black masses with a grace of gray,
Dim spires of temples to the nation's God
Studding high spaces of the wide survey.

Well did the roofs their solemn secret keep
Of life and death stayed by the truce of sleep,
Yet whispered of an hour when sleepers wake,
The fool to hope afresh, the wise to weep.

The gardens greened upon the builded hills
Above the tethered thunders of the mills
With sleeping wheels unstirred to service yet
By the tamed torrents and the quickened rills.

A hewn acclivity, reprieved a space,
Looked on the builder's blocks about his base
And bared his wounded breast in sign to say:
"Strike! 'tis my destiny to lodge your race.

"'Twas but a breath ago the mammoth browsed
Upon my slopes, and in my caves I housed
Your shaggy fathers in their nakedness,
While on their foemen's offal they caroused."

Ships from afar afforested the bay.
Within their huge and chambered bodies lay
The wealth of continents; and merrily sailed
The hardy argosies to far Cathay.

Beside the city of the living spread—

Strange fellowship!—the city of the dead;
And much I wondered what its humble folk,
To see how bravely they were housed, had said.

Noting how firm their habitations stood,
Broad-based and free of perishable wood—
How deep in granite and how high in brass
The names were wrought of eminent and good,

I said: “When gold or power is their aim,
The smile of beauty or the wage of shame,
Men dwell in cities; to this place they fare
When they would conquer an abiding fame.”

From the red East the sun—a solemn rite—
Crowned with flame the cross upon a height
Above the dead; and then with all his strength
Struck the great city all aroar with light!

II

I know not if it was a dream. I came
Unto a land where something seemed the same
That I had known as 'twere but yesterday,
But what it was I could not rightly name.

It was a strange and melancholy land,
Silent and desolate. On either hand
Lay waters of a sea that seemed as dead,
And dead above it seemed the hills to stand.

Grayed all with age, those lonely hills—ah me,
How worn and weary they appeared to be!
Between their feet long dusty fissures clove
The plain in aimless windings to the sea.

One hill there was which, parted from the rest,
Stood where the eastern water curved a-west.
Silent and passionless it stood. I thought
I saw a scar upon its giant breast.

The sun with sullen and portentous gleam
Hung like a menace on the sea's extreme;
Nor the dead waters, nor the far, bleak bars
Of cloud were conscious of his failing beam.

It was a dismal and a dreadful sight,
That desert in its cold, uncanny light;
 No soul but I alone to mark the fear
And imminence of everlasting night!

All presages and prophecies of doom
Glimmered and babbled in the ghastly gloom,
 And in the midst of that accursed scene
A wolf sat howling on a broken tomb.