

*The Prairies* (1832)

These are the Gardens of the Desert, these,  
 The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,  
 For which the speech of England has no name—  
 The Prairies. I behold them for the first,  
 And my heart swells, while the dilated sight  
 Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo! they stretch  
 In airy undulations, far away,  
 As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell,  
 Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed,  
 And motionless for ever.—Motionless?—  
 No—they are all unchained again. The clouds  
 Sweep over with their shadows, and, beneath,  
 The surface rolls and fluctuates to the eye;  
 Dark hollows seem to glide along and chase  
 The sunny ridges. Breezes of the South!  
 Who toss the golden and the flame-like flowers,  
 And pass the prairie-hawk that, poised on high,  
 Flaps his broad wings, yet moves not—ye have played  
 Among the palms of Mexico and vines  
 Of Texas, and have crisped the limpid brooks  
 That from the fountains of Sonora glide  
 Into the calm Pacific—have ye fanned  
 A nobler or a lovelier scene than this?  
 Man hath no part in all this glorious work:  
 The hand that built the firmament hath heaved  
 And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their slopes  
 With herbage, planted them with island groves,  
 And hedged them round with forests. Fitting floor  
 For this magnificent temple of the sky—  
 With flowers whose glory and whose multitude  
 Rival the constellations! The great heavens  
 Seem to stoop down upon the scene in love,—  
 A nearer vault, and of a tenderer blue,  
 Than that which bends above the eastern hills.  
 As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,  
 Among the high rank grass that sweeps his sides,  
 The hollow beating of his footstep seems  
 A sacrilegious sound. I think of those

Upon whose rest he tramples. Are they here—  
 The dead of other days?—and did the dust  
 Of these fair solitudes once stir with life  
 And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds  
 That overlook the rivers, or that rise  
 In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,  
 Answer. A race, that long has passed away,  
 Built them;—a disciplined and populous race  
 Heaped, with long toil, the earth, while yet the Greek  
 Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms  
 Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock  
 The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields  
 Nourished their harvests, here their herds were fed,  
 When haply by their stalls the bison lowed,  
 And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke.  
 All day this desert murmured with their toils,  
 Till twilight blushed and lovers walked, and wooed  
 In a forgotten language, and old tunes,  
 From instruments of unremembered form,  
 Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came—  
 The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,  
 And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.  
 The solitude of centuries untold  
 Has settled where they dwelt. The prairie wolf  
 Hunts in their meadows, and his fresh-dug den  
 Yawns by my path: The gopher mines the ground  
 Where stood their swarming cities. All is gone—  
 All—save the piles of earth that hold their bones—  
 The platforms where they worshipped unknown gods—  
 The barriers which they builded from the soil  
 To keep the foe at bay—till o'er the walls  
 The wild beleaguers broke, and, one by one,  
 The strongholds of the plain were forced, and heaped  
 With corpses. The brown vultures of the wood  
 Flocked to those vast uncovered sepulchres,  
 And sat, unscared and silent, at their feast.  
 Haply some solitary fugitive,  
 Lurking in marsh and forest, till the sense  
 Of desolation and of fear became  
 Bitterer than death, yielded himself to die.

Man's better nature triumphed. Kindly words  
 Welcomed and soothed him; the rude conquerors  
 Seated the captive with their chiefs; he chose  
 A bride among their maidens, and at length  
 Seemed to forget, — yet ne'er forgot, — the wife  
 Of his first love, and her sweet little ones  
 Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race.

Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise  
 Races of living things, glorious in strength,  
 And perish, as the quickening breath of God  
 Fills them, or is withdrawn. The red man too —  
 Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long,  
 And, nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought  
 A wider hunting-ground. The beaver builds  
 No longer by these streams, but far away,  
 On waters whose blue surface ne'er gave back  
 The white man's face — among Missouri's springs,  
 And pools whose issues swell the Oregon,  
 He rears his little Venice. In these plains  
 The bison feeds no more. Twice twenty leagues  
 Beyond remotest smoke of hunter's camp,  
 Roams the majestic brute, in herds that shake  
 The earth with thundering steps — yet here I meet  
 His ancient footprints stamped beside the pool.

Still this great solitude is quick with life.  
 Myriads of insects, gaudy as the flowers  
 They flutter over, gentle quadrupeds,  
 And birds, that scarce have learned the fear of man,  
 Are here, and sliding reptiles of the ground,  
 Startlingly beautiful. The graceful deer  
 Bounds to the wood at my approach. The bee,  
 A more adventurous colonist than man,  
 With whom he came across the eastern deep,  
 Fills the savannas with his murmurings,  
 And hides his sweets, as in the golden age,  
 Within the hollow oak. I listen long  
 To his domestic hum, and think I hear  
 The sound of that advancing multitude  
 Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground  
 Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice

Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn  
 Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds  
 Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain  
 Over the dark-brown furrows. All at once  
 A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,  
 And I am in the wilderness alone.

### *The Fountain*

Fountain, that springest on this grassy slope,  
 Thy quick cool murmur mingles pleasantly,  
 With the cool sound of breezes in the beach,  
 Above me in the noontide. Thou dost wear  
 No stain of thy dark birthplace; gushing up  
 From the red mould and slimy roots of earth,  
 Thou flashest in the sun. The mountain air,  
 In winter, is not clearer, nor the dew  
 That shines on mountain blossom. Thus doth God  
 Bring, from the dark and foul, the pure and bright.

This tangled thicket on the bank above  
 Thy basin, how thy waters keep it green!  
 For thou dost feed the roots of the wild vine  
 That trails all over it, and to the twigs  
 Ties fast her clusters. There the spice-bush lifts  
 Her leafy lances; the viburnum there,  
 Paler of foliage, to the sun holds up  
 Her circlet of green berries. In and out  
 The chipping sparrow, in her coat of brown,  
 Steals silently, lest I should mark her nest.

Not such thou wert of yore, ere yet the axe  
 Had smitten the old woods. Then hoary trunks  
 Of oak, and plane, and hickory, o'er thee held  
 A mighty canopy. When April winds  
 Grew soft, the maple burst into a flush  
 Of scarlet flowers. The tulip-tree, high up,  
 Opened, in airs of June, her multitude  
 Of golden chalices to humming-birds  
 And silken-winged insects of the sky.