

## Lone Woman Wandering Through Graveyards

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Cities and towns are good places to be alone.

I like the way we move around each other almost invisibly, the random inconsequential feel of our exchanges, our easy absorption of the new and the strange. But cities are noisy, their life revolves around commerce, they take a toll.

I look around for quiet places and shade, and that's why I wander in cemeteries and churchyards. These too are good places to be alone, alongside. Some calm container folds itself around the space there. Sound softens, the air clears, time slows. Just paths, trees, stones, space to breathe.

I understand the fears of others - of shadows and lurking strangers, of hidden and unseen things, of ghosts and the scent of death - but I don't share them. I feel calm in graveyards, and free. Their perspective is centuries rather than fleeting moments, there is no urgency. They connect us with memories, open us to ideas, surround us with deeper things - death, loss, sorrow, yes, but also time, history, meaning-making, and, more than anything, love. Love is the strongest theme here and it is unhidden, unforgotten, unlost.

It's not so much a decision or choice to go there, more a necessity, a gravitational pull. I warm to the spirits there - lone woman wandering, six planets in the twelfth house.

Sometimes there will be another walker, maybe someone changing flowers or clearing away a Christmas wreath. No ghosts, I have left them in the shopping malls where nothing seems real. There may be someone in a sleeping bag who will hunker down if I come too close. Occasionally there will be somebody who seems to be loitering, watching, but I'm not concerned, I am not lost or idly drifting. I have a focus, and perhaps that changes the energy around a person - our movement is purposeful, our absorption insulates us in way. I am busy, looking.



I'm looking for two things - weathered stones, and beautiful words.

The dedications we find on gravestones are among the most carefully chosen words we ever see - brief lives, heartfelt memories, favourite poems, remembered prayers. Sometimes I note and mix them into little poems of my own, working only with the words I can find.

Here now is a walk through two graveyards at the start of the year, in Edinburgh, city of beautiful stones.



It starts with a beautifully carved name in dusty grey, Isabella.

Nearby, a three-word dedication in warm sandstone, and now I have begun to imagine her. Moving quietly along the paths more phrases appear, and a striking quotation I would guess from the bible. The words rapidly fall into place:

**isabella**

she came to her grave as a shock  
as a bird out of the fowler's snare  
called hence by early doom

a fainting sweetly-shadowed spirit  
her flesh shall slumber in the ground

even now she is not lost  
her children rise up and call her  
comfort her  
call her by her name  
isabella

we who loved you will never forget you  
ever loving and unfading memory  
third daughter dearest sister

we comfort one another with these words  
isabella  
loved loving lovely



Further along the same path, in a monument of pale marble, there is mention of a journey on a ship named 'Icarus', and nearby a fiery quote from Shakespeare speaks back to it.

A slow walk through wet grass and tangled branches to the taller statues, looking for other words and ideas. Gradually another little poem takes shape:

### **icarus**

who after arduous journeying in many lands  
rose alone out of safe lodging  
as a bird into the clouds  
to seek the seven stars and orion  
and turn to the sun

there did he feel the furious heat  
and descend home  
with a shout with the voice of freedom

below his wing-wife and children  
in simpleness and gentleness call him home

icarus who wove the web of life  
sleep underneath the everlasting wing  
and fear no more the heat of the sun



Leaving the cemetery, I note an odd phrase: 'on the octave of all saints'. Perhaps the name of a forgotten low day, the eighth of November. I have never heard of it, but it is strangely evocative.

I walk into the city for errands and then back through more graves, in the shadow of the castle. A darker place. The stones are harder to read here and the shapes and patterns more worn and mysterious. In the most neglected corners, a few men with no other home sit on old blankets next to small smoky fires of found twigs and debris.

It's strange how the feel of the place changes the words I find. There is more loss here, less love, many forgotten souls. We are closer to death.

### on the octave of all saints

on this day

at sunrise we find

the death of the winter sailmaker  
the death of painted days on the far hills  
the death of the organ builder's heart

at noonday we find

the death of the last pious shipowner  
the death of medical truth and blood memory  
the death of strange bones and ordinary sorrow

at sunset we find

the death of the night physician in chains of desire  
the death of the shadow queen and her archangel  
the death of all hope that is neither lost nor found

on the octave of all saints  
in the house of forgotten shadows  
death is continued in verse and in ashes  
in adjoining graves  
on the other side of this stone

That last line was found in this most beautiful stone:



I must have passed it many times before without noticing. There are three tiny 'landscapes' hidden in it - one above, one below and one between. It was a while before I saw the unexpected inscription. Past and future come together in graveyards. Those who have died, those who were left, those who are here now, those who will come next.

I turn to leave. A sharp crack and fizz of opening cans, and sudden laughter from the roughly-made shelter under the arches. Life continues on the other side of this stone.

Walking up the muddy steps, back into the city noise. Crowds of shoppers and workers hurrying to their bus stops. I seem still to have clear space around me, to be walking at a different pace.