

**Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845)**

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!  
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?  
Nephews—sons mine . . . ah God, I know not! Well—  
She, men would have to be your mother once,  
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was! 5  
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,  
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,  
And as she died so must we die ourselves,  
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.  
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie 10  
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,  
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask  
"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.  
Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;  
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought 15  
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:  
—Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;  
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South  
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!  
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence 20  
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,  
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,  
And up into the aery dome where live  
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:  
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there, 25  
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,  
With those nine columns round me, two and two,  
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:  
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe  
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse. 30  
—Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,  
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,  
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!  
Draw close: that conflagration of my church  
—What then? So much was saved if aught were missed! 35  
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig  
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,  
Drop water gently till the surface sink,  
And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, I! ...  
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft, 40  
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,  
Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,  
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,

Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast ...  
 Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all, 45  
 That brave Frascati villa with its bath,  
 So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,  
 Like God the Father's globe on both His hands  
 Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,  
 For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst! 50  
 Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:  
 Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?  
 Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—  
 'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else  
 Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath? 55  
 The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,  
 Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance  
 Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,  
 The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,  
 Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan 60  
 Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,  
 And Moses with the tables . . . but I know  
 Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,  
 Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope  
 To revel down my villas while I gasp 65  
 Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine  
 Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!  
 Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then!  
 'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve.  
 My bath must needs be left behind, alas! 70  
 One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,  
 There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—  
 And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray  
 Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,  
 And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs? 75  
 —That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,  
 Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,  
 No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—  
 Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!  
 And then how I shall lie through centuries, 80  
 And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,  
 And see God made and eaten all day long,  
 And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste  
 Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!  
 For as I lie here, hours of the dead night, 85  
 Dying in state and by such slow degrees,  
 I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,  
 And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,  
 And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop

Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work: 90  
 And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts  
 Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,  
 About the life before I lived this life,  
 And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,  
 Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount, 95  
 Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,  
 And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,  
 And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,  
 —Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?  
 No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best! 100  
 Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.  
 All lapis, all, sons! Else I give the Pope  
 My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?  
 Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,  
 They glitter like your mother's for my soul, 105  
 Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,  
 Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase  
 With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,  
 And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx  
 That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down, 110  
 To comfort me on my entablature  
 Whereon I am to lie till I must ask  
 "Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!  
 For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude  
 To death—ye wish it—God, ye wish it! Stone— 115  
 Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat  
 As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—  
 And no more lapis to delight the world!  
 Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,  
 But in a row: and, going, turn your backs 120  
 —Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,  
 And leave me in my church, the church for peace,  
 That I may watch at leisure if he leers—  
 Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,  
 As still he envied me, so fair she was! 125