

Longfellow, The Cross of Snow

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Cross of Snow"

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face--the face of one long dead--
Looks at me from the wall, where round its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.
Here in this room she died, and soul more white
Never through martyrdom of fire was led
To its repose; nor can in books be read
The legend of a life more benedight.
There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
And seasons, changeless since the day she died.



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife died tragically when an ember from the fireplace caught her dress on fire and burnt her so badly that she died a few days later. Longfellow tried to put out the fire, and it is said that his face was so badly disfigured that he grew the familiar long beard to hide the scars.

Eighteen years later he was looking at a book with pictures of the far west and the mountains when he came across a picture much like the one reproduced here. The poem that resulted is "The Cross of Snow," one of his most poignant and touching sonnets.