

SELECTED POEMS FROM *Leaves of Grass*

I HEAR AMERICA SINGING

I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear;
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it
should be, blithe and strong;
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank
or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work,
or leaves off work;
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat
—the deck-hand singing on the steamboat
deck;
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench—the
hatter singing as he stands;
The wood-cutter's song—the ploughboy's, on his way
in the morning, or at the noon intermission, or
at sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother—or of the young
wife at work—or of the girl sewing or washing
—Each singing what belongs to her, and to
none else;
The day what belongs to the day—At night, the
party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious
songs.

COME UP FROM THE FIELDS FATHER

Come up from the fields, father, here's a letter from
our Pete;
And come to the front door, mother—here's a letter
from thy dear son.

Lo, 'tis autumn;
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio's villages, with leaves fluttering
in the moderate wind;
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang, and grapes on
the trellis'd vines;
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat, where the bees were lately
buzzing?)

Above all, lo, the sky, so calm, so transparent after
the rain, and with wondrous clouds;
Below, too, all calm, all vital and beautiful—and the
farm prospers well.

Down in the fields all prospers well;
But now from the fields come, father—come at the
daughter's call;
And come to the entry, mother—to the front door come,
right away.

Fast as she can she hurries—something ominous—
her steps trembling;
She does not tarry to smooth her white hair, nor adjust
her cap.

Open the envelope quickly;
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd;
O a strange hand writes for our dear son—O stricken
mother's soul!
All swims before her eyes—flashes with black—she
catches the main words only;
Sentences broken— gun-shot wound in the breast, cavalry
skirmish, taken to hospital,
At present low, but will soon be better .

Ah, now the single figure to me,
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio, with all its cities
and farms,
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,
By the jamb of a door leans.

Grieve not so, dear mother, (the just-grown daughter
speaks through her sobs;
The little sisters huddle around, speechless and dis-
may'd;)
See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better .

Alas, poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be
needs to be better, that brave and simple soul;)
While they stand at home at the door, he is dead already;
The only son is dead.

But the mother needs to be better;
She, with thin form, presently drest in black;
By day her meals untouch'd—then at night fitfully
sleeping, often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep
longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed—silent from life,
escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

BIVOUAC ON A MOUNTAIN SIDE

I SEE before me now, a traveling army halting;
 Below, a fertile valley spread, with barns, and the orchards of summer;
 Behind, the terraced sides of a mountain, abrupt in places, rising high;
 Broken, with rocks, with clinging cedars, with tall shapes, dingily seen;
 The numerous camp-fires scatter'd near and far, some away up on the mountain;
 The shadowy forms of men and horses, looming, large-sized, flickering;
 And over all, the sky—the sky! far, far out of reach, studded with the eternal stars.

THE VETERAN'S VISION

(Whitman renamed this poem several times: “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” and “The Veteran”)

WHILE my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long,
 And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the mystic midnight passes,
 And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the breath of my infant,
 There in the room, as I wake from sleep, this vision presses upon me:
 The engagement opens there and then, in my busy brain unreal;
 The skirmishers begin—they crawl cautiously ahead—I hear the irregular snap! snap!
 I hear the sounds of the different missiles—the short t-h-t! t-h-t! of the rifle balls;
 I see the shells exploding, leaving small white clouds—I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass;
 The grape, like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees, (quick, tumultuous, now the contest rages!)
 All the scenes at the batteries themselves rise in detail before me again;
 The crashing and smoking—the pride of the men in their pieces;
 The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece, and selects a fuse of the right time;
 After firing, I see him lean aside, and look eagerly off

to note the effect;
 —Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging—
 (the young colonel leads himself this time, with
 brandish'd sword;)
 I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys, (quickly
 fill'd up—no delay;)
 I breathe the suffocating smoke—then the flat clouds
 hover low, concealing all;
 Now a strange lull comes for a few seconds, not a shot
 fired on either side;
 Then resumed, the chaos louder than ever, with eager
 calls, and orders of officers;
 While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts
 to my ears a shout of applause, (some special
 success;)
 And ever the sound of the cannon, far or near, (rousing,
 even in dreams, a devilish exultation, and all the
 old mad joy, in the depths of my soul;)
 And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions—
 batteries, cavalry, moving hither and thither;
 (The falling, dying, I heed not—the wounded, dripping
 and red, I heed not—some to the rear are hob-
 bling;)
 Grime, heat, rush—aid-de-camps galloping by, or on a
 full run;
 With the patter of small arms, the warning s-s-t of the
 rifles, (these in my vision I hear or see,)
 And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd
 rockets.

O YOU WHOM I OFTEN AND SILENTLY COME

O YOU whom I often and silently come where you are,
 that I may be with you;
 As I walk by your side, or sit near, or remain in the
 same room with you,
 Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your
 sake is playing within me.

O BOY of the West!

To you many things to absorb, I teach, to help you
 become elevel of mine:
 Yet if blood like mine circle not in your veins;
 If you be not silently selected by lovers, and do not
 silently select lovers,
 Of what use is it that you seek to become elevel of mine?
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