

WALT WHITMAN

COMPLETE POETRY AND COLLECTED PROSE

Leaves of Grass (1855)

Leaves of Grass (1891-92)

Complete Prose Works (1892)

Supplementary Prose

ed. Justin Kaplan



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Long, long I muse, then on my way go wandering,
 Many a changeful season to follow, and many a scene of life,
 Yet at times through changeful season and scene, abrupt,
 alone, or in the crowded street,
 Comes before me the unknown soldier's grave, comes the
 inscription rude in Virginia's woods,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.

Not the Pilot

NOT the pilot has charged himself to bring his ship into
 port, though beaten back and many times baffled;
 Not the pathfinder penetrating inland weary and long,
 By deserts parch'd, snows chill'd, rivers wet, perseveres till
 he reaches his destination,
 More than I have charged myself, heeded or unheeded, to
 compose a march for these States,
 For a battle-call, rousing to arms if need be, years, centuries
 hence.

Year That Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me

YEAR that trembled and reel'd beneath me!
 Your summer wind was warm enough, yet the air I breathed
 froze me,
 A thick gloom fell through the sunshine and darken'd me,
 Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself,
 Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?
 And sullen hymns of defeat?

The Wound-Dresser

I

AN old man bending I come among new faces,
 Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
 Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that
 love me,
 (Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarm, and
 urge relentless war,

But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I
 resign'd myself,
 To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch
 the dead;)
 Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these
 chances,
 Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? the other was
 equally brave;)
 Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
 Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
 What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
 Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what
 deepest remains?

2

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
 What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden
 your talking recalls;
 Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat
 and dust,
 In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout
 in the rush of successful charge,
 Enter the captur'd works—yet lo, like a swift-running river
 they fade,
 Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers' perils
 or soldier's joys,
 (Both I remember well—many the hardships, few the joys,
 yet I was content.)

But in silence, in dreams' projections,
 While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
 So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the
 imprints off the sand,
 With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for
 you up there,
 Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong
 heart.)

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
 Straight and swift to my wounded I go,

Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
 Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
 Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd
 hospital,
 To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
 To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do
 I miss,
 An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
 Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and
 fill'd again.

I onward go, I stop,
 With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
 I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
 One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never
 knew you,
 Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if
 that would save you.

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
 The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the
 bandage away,)
 The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and
 through I examine,
 Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet
 life struggles hard,
 (Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
 In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
 I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the
 matter and blood,
 Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and
 side-falling head,
 His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the
 bloody stump,
 And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
 But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and
 sinking,
 And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-
 wound,
 Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so
 sickening, so offensive,
 While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray
 and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out,
 The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
 These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in
 my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

4

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
 Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
 The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
 I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
 Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
 (Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd
 and rested,
 Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Long, Too Long America

LONG, too long America,
 Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn'd from joys
 and prosperity only,
 But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish,
 advancing, grappling with direst fate and recoiling not,
 And now to conceive and show to the world what your
 children en-masse really are,
 (For who except myself has yet conceiv'd what your children
 en-masse really are?)