

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd

WALT WHITMAN

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Although “O Captain! My Captain!” is the more famous of Walt Whitman’s eulogies of Lincoln, the poet (1819–92) himself preferred this elegy to the fallen president. Composed in the summer of 1865, the poem was inspired by the lilacs Whitman saw on his mother’s doorstep in Brooklyn after hearing the news of Lincoln’s assassination. In Specimen Days, he later wrote, “By one of those caprices that enter and give tinge to events without being at all a part of them, I find myself always reminded of great tragedy of that day by the sight and odor of these blossoms. It never fails.”

Note the poem’s three major motifs—the lilacs, a western star (Venus), and the hermit thrush. Why do you think the poet chose them? What is the connection between Lincoln, the poet, and these three symbols? What is the “swamp” that the poet seeks (section 15), and what is the “harsh surrounding cloud” that holds him back (section 2)? What is the meaning of the bird’s song (see, especially, section 4, where the poet calls it “Death’s outlet song of life”)? How does it inspire the poet’s vision (section 18)? What consolation does it offer the poet and the reader? Why do you think the poet chose a lilac to put on Lincoln’s coffin (section 6)?

1

When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul!

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3

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom, rising, delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle . . . and from this bush in the door-yard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

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4

In the swamp, in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary, the thrush,
The hermit, withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat!
Death's outlet song of life—(for well, dear brother, I know
If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes, and through old woods, (where lately the violets peep'd from the ground,
spotting the gray debris;)
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes—passing the endless grass;
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields
uprising;
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards;
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women, standing,

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With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit—with the silent sea of faces, and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn;
With all the mournful voices of the dirges, pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—Where amid these you journey,
With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual clang;
Here! coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

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7
(Nor for you, for one, alone;
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring:
For fresh as the morning—thus would I carol a song for you, O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,
O death! I cover you over with roses and early lilies;
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious, I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes;
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you, and the coffins all of you, O death.)

8
O western orb, sailing the heaven!
Now I know what you must have meant, as a month since we walk'd,
As we walk'd up and down in the dark blue so mystic,
As we walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell, as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down, as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd
on;)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something, I know not what, kept me
from sleep;)
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west, ere you went, how full you were
of woe;
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze, in the cold transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul, in its trouble, dissatisfied, sank, as where you, sad orb,

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Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on, there in the swamp!

O singer bashful and tender! I hear your notes—I hear your call;

I hear—I come presently—I understand you;

But a moment I linger—for the lustrous star has detain'd me;

The star, my departing comrade, holds and detains me.

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10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?

And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?

And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds, blown from east and west,

Blown from the eastern sea, and blown from the western sea, till there on the prairies meeting:

These, and with these, and the breath of my chant,

I perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?

And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,

To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring, and farms, and homes,

With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,

With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air;

With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific;

In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there;

With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows;

And the city at hand, with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,

And all the scenes of life, and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning.

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12

Lo! body and soul! this land!

Mighty Manhattan, with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships;
The varied and ample land—the South and the North in the light—Ohio's shores, and
flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies, cover'd with grass and corn.

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Lo! the most excellent sun, so calm and haughty;
The violet and purple morn, with just-felt breezes;
The gentle, soft-born, measureless light;
The miracle, spreading, bathing all—the fulfill'd noon;
The coming eve, delicious—the welcome night, and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on! sing on, you gray-brown bird!

Sing from the swamps, the recesses—pour your chant from the bushes;
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on, dearest brother—warble your reedy song;
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid, and free, and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul! O wondrous singer!
You only I hear . . . yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart;)
Yet the lilac, with mastering odor, holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day, and look'd forth,
In the close of the day, with its light, and the fields of spring, and the farmer preparing his
crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land, with its lakes and forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds, and the storms;)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and
women,
The many-moving sea-tides,—and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,

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And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and minutia of daily usages;

And the streets, how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent—lo! then and there,
Falling upon them all, and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,

Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail;

And I knew Death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

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15

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,

And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,

And I in the middle, as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night, that talks not,

Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,

To the solemn shadowy cedars, and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me;

The gray-brown bird I know, receiv'd us comrades three;

And he sang what seem'd the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,

From the fragrant cedars, and the ghostly pines so still,

Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,

As I held, as if by their hands, my comrades in the night;

And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

DEATH CAROL.

16

Come, lovely and soothing Death,

Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,

In the day, in the night, to all, to each,

Sooner or later, delicate Death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,

For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious;

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And for love, sweet love—But praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding Death.

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?

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Then I chant it for thee—I glorify thee above all;
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach, strong Deliveress!
When it is so—when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose, saluting thee—adornments and feastings for thee;
And the sights of the open landscape, and the high-spread sky, are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night, in silence, under many a star;
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave, whose voice I know;
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song!
Over the rising and sinking waves—over the myriad fields, and the prairies wide;
Over the dense-pack'd cities all, and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee, O Death!

17
To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure, deliberate notes, spreading, filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist, and the swamp-perfume;
And I with my comrades there in the night.

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While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

18

I saw askant the armies;
And I saw, as in noiseless dreams, hundreds of battle-flags;
Borne through the smoke of the battles, and pierc'd with missiles, I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody;
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men—I saw them;
I saw the debris and debris of all the dead soldiers of the war;
But I saw they were not as was thought;
They themselves were fully at rest—they suffer'd not;
The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

19

Passing the visions, passing the night;
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands;
Passing the song of the hermit bird, and the tallying song of my soul,
(Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying, ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth, and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,)
Passing, I leave thee, lilac with heart-shaped leaves;
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring,
I cease from my song for thee;
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous, with silver face in the night.

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20

Yet each I keep, and all, retrievements out of the night;
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star, with the countenance full of woe,
With the lilac tall, and its blossoms of mastering odor;
With the holders holding my hand, nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine, and I in the midst, and their memory ever I keep—for the dead I loved
so well;
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands . . . and this for his dear sake;
Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim.

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