

BOOK XXVIII

The Sleepers

1

I wander all night in my vision,
Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping,
Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers,
Wandering and confused, lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory,
Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping.

How solemn they look there, stretch'd and still,
How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles.

The wretched features of ennuyes, the white features of corpses, the
 livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists,
The gash'd bodies on battle-fields, the insane in their
 strong-door'd rooms, the sacred idiots, the new-born emerging
 from gates, and the dying emerging from gates,
The night pervades them and infolds them.

The married couple sleep calmly in their bed, he with his palm on
 the hip of the wife, and she with her palm on the hip of the husband,
The sisters sleep lovingly side by side in their bed,
The men sleep lovingly side by side in theirs,

And the mother sleeps with her little child carefully wrapt.

The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep,

The prisoner sleeps well in the prison, the runaway son sleeps,

The murderer that is to be hung next day, how does he sleep?

And the murder'd person, how does he sleep?

The female that loves unrequited sleeps,

And the male that loves unrequited sleeps,

The head of the money-maker that plotted all day sleeps,

And the enraged and treacherous dispositions, all, all sleep.

I stand in the dark with drooping eyes by the worst-suffering and
the most restless,

I pass my hands soothingly to and fro a few inches from them,

The restless sink in their beds, they fitfully sleep.

Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear,

The earth recedes from me into the night,

I saw that it was beautiful, and I see that what is not the earth is
beautiful.

I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers
each in turn,

I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,

And I become the other dreamers.

I am a dance--play up there! the fit is whirling me fast!

I am the ever-laughing--it is new moon and twilight,
I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble ghosts whichever way look,
Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea, and where it is
neither ground nor sea.

Well do they do their jobs those journeymen divine,
Only from me can they hide nothing, and would not if they could,
I reckon I am their boss and they make me a pet besides,
And surround me and lead me and run ahead when I walk,
To lift their cunning covers to signify me with stretch'd arms, and
resume the way;
Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards! with mirth-shouting
music and wild-flapping pennants of joy!

I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician,
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day,
The stammerer, the well-form'd person, the wasted or feeble person.

I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair expectantly,
My truant lover has come, and it is dark.

Double yourself and receive me darkness,

Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him.

I roll myself upon you as upon a bed, I resign myself to the dusk.

He whom I call answers me and takes the place of my lover,
He rises with me silently from the bed.

Darkness, you are gentler than my lover, his flesh was sweaty and panting,
I feel the hot moisture yet that he left me.

My hands are spread forth, I pass them in all directions,
I would sound up the shadowy shore to which you are journeying.

Be careful darkness! already what was it touch'd me?
I thought my lover had gone, else darkness and he are one,
I hear the heart-beat, I follow, I fade away.

2

I descend my western course, my sinews are flaccid,
Perfume and youth course through me and I am their wake.

It is my face yellow and wrinkled instead of the old woman's,
I sit low in a straw-bottom chair and carefully darn my grandson's
stockings.

It is I too, the sleepless widow looking out on the winter midnight,

I see the sparkles of starshine on the icy and pallid earth.

A shroud I see and I am the shroud, I wrap a body and lie in the coffin,
It is dark here under ground, it is not evil or pain here, it is
blank here, for reasons.

(It seems to me that every thing in the light and air ought to be happy,
Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave let him know he has enough.)

3

I see a beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies
of the sea,
His brown hair lies close and even to his head, he strikes out with
courageous arms, he urges himself with his legs,
I see his white body, I see his undaunted eyes,
I hate the swift-running eddies that would dash him head-foremost on
the rocks.

What are you doing you ruffianly red-trickled waves?
Will you kill the courageous giant? will you kill him in the prime
of his middle age?

Steady and long he struggles,
He is baffled, bang'd, bruis'd, he holds out while his strength
holds out,
The slapping eddies are spotted with his blood, they bear him away,

they roll him, swing him, turn him,
His beautiful body is borne in the circling eddies, it is
continually bruise'd on rocks,
Swiftly and ought of sight is borne the brave corpse.

4

I turn but do not extricate myself,
Confused, a past-reading, another, but with darkness yet.

The beach is cut by the razory ice-wind, the wreck-guns sound,
The tempest lulls, the moon comes floundering through the drifts.

I look where the ship helplessly heads end on, I hear the burst as
she strikes, I hear the howls of dismay, they grow fainter and fainter.

I cannot aid with my wringing fingers,
I can but rush to the surf and let it drench me and freeze upon me.

I search with the crowd, not one of the company is wash'd to us alive,
In the morning I help pick up the dead and lay them in rows in a barn.

5

Now of the older war-days, the defeat at Brooklyn,
Washington stands inside the lines, he stands on the intrench'd
hills amid a crowd of officers.

His face is cold and damp, he cannot repress the weeping drops,

He lifts the glass perpetually to his eyes, the color is blanch'd
from his cheeks,
He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by
their parents.

The same at last and at last when peace is declared,
He stands in the room of the old tavern, the well-belov'd soldiers
all pass through,
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,
The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,
He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another, he shakes hands
and bids good-by to the army.

6

Now what my mother told me one day as we sat at dinner together,
Of when she was a nearly grown girl living home with her parents on
the old homestead.

A red squaw came one breakfast-time to the old homestead,
On her back she carried a bundle of rushes for rush-bottoming chairs,
Her hair, straight, shiny, coarse, black, profuse, half-envelop'd
her face,
Her step was free and elastic, and her voice sounded exquisitely as
she spoke.

My mother look'd in delight and amazement at the stranger,

She look'd at the freshness of her tall-borne face and full and
pliant limbs,
The more she look'd upon her she loved her,
Never before had she seen such wonderful beauty and purity,
She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the fireplace, she cook'd
food for her,
She had no work to give her, but she gave her remembrance and fondness.

The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward the middle of the
afternoon she went away,
O my mother was loth to have her go away,
All the week she thought of her, she watch'd for her many a month,
She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer,
But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again.

7

A show of the summer softness--a contact of something unseen--an
amour of the light and air,
I am jealous and overwhelm'd with friendliness,
And will go gallivant with the light and air myself.

O love and summer, you are in the dreams and in me,
Autumn and winter are in the dreams, the farmer goes with his thrift,
The droves and crops increase, the barns are well-fill'd.

Elements merge in the night, ships make tacks in the dreams,

The sailor sails, the exile returns home,
The fugitive returns unharm'd, the immigrant is back beyond months
and years,
The poor Irishman lives in the simple house of his childhood with
the well known neighbors and faces,
They warmly welcome him, he is barefoot again, he forgets he is well off,
The Dutchman voyages home, and the Scotchman and Welshman voyage
home, and the native of the Mediterranean voyages home,
To every port of England, France, Spain, enter well-fill'd ships,
The Swiss foote it toward his hills, the Prussian goes his way, the
Hungarian his way, and the Pole his way,
The Swede returns, and the Dane and Norwegian return.

The homeward bound and the outward bound,
The beautiful lost swimmer, the ennuye, the onanist, the female that
loves unrequited, the money-maker,
The actor and actress, those through with their parts and those
waiting to commence,
The affectionate boy, the husband and wife, the voter, the nominee
that is chosen and the nominee that has fail'd,
The great already known and the great any time after to-day,
The stammerer, the sick, the perfect-form'd, the homely,
The criminal that stood in the box, the judge that sat and sentenced
him, the fluent lawyers, the jury, the audience,
The laugher and weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow, the red squaw,
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wrong'd,

The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark,
I swear they are averaged now--one is no better than the other,
The night and sleep have liken'd them and restored them.

I swear they are all beautiful,
Every one that sleeps is beautiful, every thing in the dim light is
beautiful,
The wildest and bloodiest is over, and all is peace.

Peace is always beautiful,
The myth of heaven indicates peace and night.

The myth of heaven indicates the soul,
The soul is always beautiful, it appears more or it appears less, it
comes or it lags behind,
It comes from its embower'd garden and looks pleasantly on itself
and encloses the world,
Perfect and clean the genitals previously jetting, and perfect and
clean the womb cohering,
The head well-grown proportion'd and plumb, and the bowels and
joints proportion'd and plumb.

The soul is always beautiful,
The universe is duly in order, every thing is in its place,
What has arrived is in its place and what waits shall be in its place,
The twisted skull waits, the watery or rotten blood waits,

The child of the glutton or venerealee waits long, and the child of
the drunkard waits long, and the drunkard himself waits long,
The sleepers that lived and died wait, the far advanced are to go on
in their turns, and the far behind are to come on in their turns,
The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite--
they unite now.

8

The sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed,
They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as
they lie unclothed,
The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American
are hand in hand,
Learn'd and unlearn'd are hand in hand, and male and female are hand
in hand,
The bare arm of the girl crosses the bare breast of her lover, they
press close without lust, his lips press her neck,
The father holds his grown or ungrown son in his arms with
measureless love, and the son holds the father in his arms with
measureless love,
The white hair of the mother shines on the white wrist of the daughter,
The breath of the boy goes with the breath of the man, friend is
inarm'd by friend,
The scholar kisses the teacher and the teacher kisses the scholar,
the wrong 'd made right,
The call of the slave is one with the master's call, and the master

salutes the slave,
The felon steps forth from the prison, the insane becomes sane, the
suffering of sick persons is reliev'd,
The sweatings and fevers stop, the throat that was unsound is sound,
the lungs of the consumptive are resumed, the poor distress'd
head is free,
The joints of the rheumatic move as smoothly as ever, and smoother
than ever,
Stiflings and passages open, the paralyzed become supple,
The swell'd and convuls'd and congested awake to themselves in condition,
They pass the invigoration of the night and the chemistry of the
night, and awake.

I too pass from the night,
I stay a while away O night, but I return to you again and love you.

Why should I be afraid to trust myself to you?
I am not afraid, I have been well brought forward by you,
I love the rich running day, but I do not desert her in whom I lay so long,
I know not how I came of you and I know not where I go with you, but
I know I came well and shall go well.

I will stop only a time with the night, and rise betimes,
I will duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return to you.

Transpositions

Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are forever
bawling--let an idiot or insane person appear on each of the stands;
Let judges and criminals be transposed--let the prison-keepers be
put in prison--let those that were prisoners take the keys;
Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest.