Ernest Stefanik

"NOT TILL THE SUN EXCLUDES"

Back to the hills of Long Island,
broad-hatted Whitman breathed
the good news of the divine average.
When he invited his soul, the Milky Way
split at the Northern Cross,
revealing clusters and nebulae,
cradles of a hundred million suns.

Against the spires of Manhattan,
tousle-bearded Whitman chanted
the body electric in his valved voice.
As stars collapsed in winter
lightning, he paused in the city
lights disappearing—not forever--
into black holes and white space.

Near the yellow dust of Washington,
shirt-sleeved Whitman caressed
puritan souls with springs of lilac.
In the drowse of artillery fire, he saw
crows circle through white feathers,
caving that the living are the dead,
spiralling in a miracle of air.

Through paper-littered Camden,
open-collared Whitman absorbed
a new language in the orbic flex.
Across sun-burnt fields, he felt
the eagle slip through his gray fingers
as he traced its flight, wingbeat
by wingbeat, to the western hills.

In the one life of the nebulous float,
naked Whitman slouches underground,
a solitary singer, one of the roughs, still.
He tastes the first straws of sunlight,
creates constellations at midday,
ever knows the sadness of September
maples darkening under his eyes.

Henry Petroski

TRY SHEET

"Out of the forever rocking cradle."
Drawing a line through that, then another line,
Walt Whitman tried again, another line
Throughout the forever opening line
To find the proper rocking rhythm, line
Through line for more than two full pages,
line
After unsatisfactory line, through stillborn
line,
Lines iterating, lines converging, line
Through easy line, line through difficult
line
To say, "Out of the cradle...", just right, line
Excising, line excruciating, line
Unworthy, look for still another line
to leave the cradle rocking in the line
Below a better line, a freer line
With freer meter, freer feet, a line
To start all lines, to rock the mind, a line
To introduce the mockingbird, a line
To sail the sea a-singing, line!, line!, line!
A line to roll with the poem, a line
To roll on undulating seas, a line
To pull the poet into the poem, a line
To take him back to his opening line,
"Out of the cradle endlessly rocking."