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, never 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."