

Live Oak, with Moss.

I.

Not the heat flames up and consumes,
Not the sea-waves hurry in and out,
Not the air, delicious and dry, the air of the ripe summer, bears lightly along white down-
balls of myriads of seeds, wafted, sailing gracefully, to drop where they may,
Not these—O none of these, more than the flames of me, consuming, burning for his love
whom I love—O none, more than I, hurrying in and out;
Does the tide hurry, seeking something, and never give up?—O I, the same, to seek my life-
long lover; 5
O nor down-balls, nor perfumes, nor the high rain-emitting clouds, are borne through the
open air, more than my copious soul is borne through the open air, wafted in all
directions, for friendship, for love.—

II.

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the branches,
Without any companion it grew there, glistening out with joyous leaves of dark green,
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself; 10
But I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there without its friend, its
lover—For I knew I could not;
And I plucked a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little
moss, and brought it away—And I have placed it in sight in my room,
It is not needed to remind me as of my friends, (for I believe lately I think of little else than
of them,)
Yet it remains to me a curious token—I write these pieces, and name them after it;
For all that, and though the live oak glistens there in Louisiana, solitary in a wide flat space,
uttering joyous leaves all its life, without a friend, a lover, near—I know very well I could
not. 15

III.

When I heard at the close of the day how I had been praised in the Capitol, still it was not a
happy night for me that followed;
And else, when I caroused—Or when my plans were accomplished—it was well enough—
Still I was not happy;
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, electric, inhaling sweet
breath,

When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,
 When I wandered alone over the beach, and undressing, bathed, laughing with the waters,
 and saw the sun rise, 20
 And when I thought how my friend, my lover, was coming, then I was happy;
 O then each breath tasted sweeter—and all that day my food nourished me more—And the
 beautiful day passed well,
 And the next came with equal joy—And with the next, at evening, came my friend,
 And that night, O you happy waters, I heard you beating the shores—But my heart beat
 happier than you—for he I love was returned and sleeping by my side,
 And that night in the stillness his face was inclined toward me, while the moon's clear
 beams shone, 25
 And his arm lay lightly over my breast—And that night I was happy.

IV.

This moment as I sit alone, yearning and pensive, it seems to me there are other men, in
 other lands, yearning and pensive.
 It seems to me I can look over and behold them, in Germany, France, Spain—Or far away in
 China, or in Russia—talking other dialects,
 And it seems to me if I could know those men better I should love them as I love men in my
 own lands,
 It seems to me they are as wise, beautiful, benevolent, as any in my own lands; 30
 O I know we should be brethren—I know I should be happy with them.

V.

Long I thought that knowledge alone would suffice me—O if I could but obtain knowledge!
 Then my lands engrossed me—For them I would live—I would be their orator;
 Then I met the examples of old and new heroes—I heard the examples of warriors, sailors,
 and all dauntless persons—And it seemed to me I too had it in me to be as dauntless as
 any, and would be so;
 And then to finish all, it came to me to strike up the songs of the New World—And then I
 believed my life must be spent in singing; 35
 But now take notice, Land of the prairies, Land of the south savannas, Ohio's land,
 Take notice, you Kanuck woods —and you, Lake Huron—and all that with you roll toward
 Niagara—and you Niagara also,
 And you, Californian mountains—that you all find some one else that he be your singer of
 songs,
 For I can be your singer of songs no longer—I have passed ahead—I have ceased to enjoy
 them.
 I have found him who loves me, as I him, in perfect love, 40
 With the rest I dispense—I sever from all that I thought would suffice me, for it does not—
 it is now empty and tasteless to me,
 I heed knowledge, and the grandeur of The States, and the examples of heroes, no more,

I am indifferent to my own songs—I am to go with him I love, and he is to go with me,
It is to be enough for each of us that we are together—We never separate again.—

VI.

What think you I have taken my pen to record? 45
Not the battle-ship, perfect-model'd, majestic, that I saw to day arrive in the offing, under
full sail,
Nor the splendors of the past day—nor the splendors of the night that envelopes me—Nor
the glory and growth of the great city spread around me,
But the two men I saw to-day on the pier, parting the parting of dear friends.
The one to remain hung on the other's neck and passionately kissed him—while the one to
depart tightly prest the one to remain in his arms.

VII.

You bards of ages hence! when you refer to me, mind not so much my poems, 50
Nor speak of me that I prophesied of The States and led them the way of their glories,
But come, I will inform you who I was underneath that impassive exterior—I will tell you
what to say of me,
Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover,
The friend, the lover's portrait, of whom his friend, his lover, was fondest,
Who was not proud of his songs, but of the measureless ocean of love within him—and
freely poured it forth, 55
Who often walked lonesome walks thinking of his dearest friends, his lovers,
Who pensive, away from one he loved, often lay sleepless and dissatisfied at night,
Who, dreading lest the one he loved might after all be indifferent to him, felt the sick
feeling—O sick! sick!
Whose happiest days were those, far away through fields, in woods, on hills, he and
another, wandering hand in hand, they twain, apart from other men.
Who ever, as he sauntered the streets, curved with his arm the manly shoulder of his
friend—while the curving arm of his friend rested upon him also. 60

VIII.

Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted,
Hours of the dusk, when I withdraw to a lonesome and unfrequented spot, seating myself,
leaning my face in my hands,
Hours sleepless, deep in the night, when I go forth, speeding swiftly the country roads, or
through the city streets, or pacing miles and miles, stifling plaintive cries,
Hours discouraged, distracted,—For he, the one I cannot content myself without— soon I
saw him content himself without me,
Hours when I am forgotten—(O weeks and months are passing, but I believe I am never to
forget!) 65
Sullen and suffering hours—(I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am;)

Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the like feelings?
 Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?
 Is he too as I am now? Does he still rise in the morning, dejected, thinking who is lost to
 him? And at night, awaking, think who is lost?
 Does he too harbor his friendship silent and endless? Harbor his anguish and passion? 70
 Does some stray reminder, or the casual mention of a name, bring the fit back upon him,
 taciturn and deprest?
 Does he see himself reflected in me? In these hours does he see the face of his hours
 reflected?

IX.

I dreamed in a dream of a city where all the men were like brothers,
 O I saw them tenderly love each other—I often saw them, in numbers, walking hand in
 hand;
 I dreamed that was the city of robust friends—Nothing was greater there than the quality
 of manly love—it led the rest, 75
 It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city, and in all their looks and
 words.—

X.

O you whom I often and silently come where you are, that I may be with you,
 As I walk by your side, or sit near, or remain in the same room with you,
 Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me.—

XI.

Earth! My likeness! Though you look so impassive, ample and spheric there,—I now
 suspect that is not all, 80
 I now suspect there is something terrible in you, ready to break forth,
 For an athlete loves me,—and I him—But toward him there is something fierce and terrible
 in me,
 I dare not tell it in words—not even in these songs.

XII.

To the young man, many things to absorb, to engraft, to develope, I teach, that he be my
 eleve,
 But if through him rolls not the blood of divine friendship, hot and red—If he be not silently
 selected by lovers, and do not silently select lovers—of what use were it for him to seek
 to become eleve of mine? 85

Note on the Text

This reading text of Walt Whitman’s “Live Oak, with Moss” sequence observes and rejects the poet’s holograph changes according to revision classifications based on evidence of Whitman’s inscription and disassembly of its notebook state. For full details of the editorial principles guiding this reconstructed edition, see Steven Olsen-Smith, “The Inscription of Walt Whitman’s “Live Oak, with Moss” Sequence: A Restorative Edition” (<http://scholarlyediting.org/2012/editions/intro.liveoakwithmoss.html>). Changes described by Olsen-Smith as contingent “class 4” revisions are here observed in their latest forms. Whitman’s non-standard spellings such as “prest” for “pressed” (6.5) are preserved, as is the period spelling “develope” (12.1). Whitman’s “=” signs in compound words are here altered to hyphens, and words split at line endings are normalized. All revisions in the manuscript are described in the “Notes” section of the electronic version.