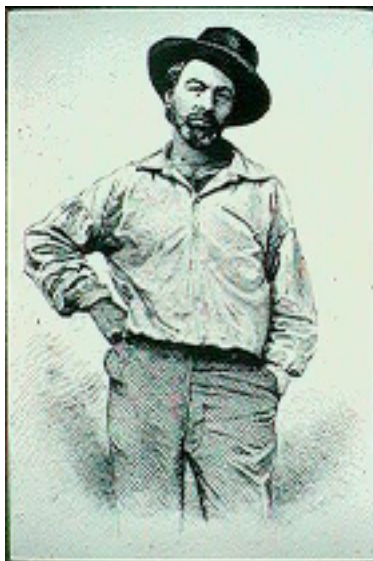


V I C T O R F R O S T

Nocturne

for tenor and piano, op. 40

on lines from "The Sleepers" by Walt Whitman



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Nocturne for tenor and piano, op. 40

When my much beloved mother was passing from our midst in 1982, I reflected upon how lucky I had been so recently, in the 70s, to have spent so much time with her on what Whitman calls the family "homestead." I was pursuing graduate study then at the University of Miami with pianist George Roth, and had attained a sufficient age that she and I were now able to relate to each other pretty much as adult to adult. She had become, for example, quite forthcoming while telling tales about our family from before my arrival in it. It was thus that, after she left us, I mused about a line out of *Leaves of Grass*: "Now I tell what my mother told me today as we sat at dinner together," and considered the possibility of a rendition for tenor and piano of the section from which it derives. I wonder now how different the cycle that eventually emerged would be if those had been the exact words I read when I pulled Whitman's tome down from the bookshelf, instead of "Now what my mother told me one day as we sat at dinner together." Let me explain the difference.

At Christmas 2002, my sister gave me a copy of the original 1855 edition of *Leaves*, quite unaware of its importance in my creative life. I had never released my cycle from 1982 and 1983, always sensing (as I do with many other still unreleased works out of my *œuvre*) that it could be somehow improved. I had no idea how radically different, inside the fancy gifted volume, the section out of "The Sleepers" was from the one I had set decades before. I just put the book aside until it made it into the next summer's (2003) reading pile.

When I did read my way into "my" section, I noticed a few slight changes in the text I had set, but considered them inconsequential until I got to an entire "chant" (think of a *canto* in Dante) in the poem that the good gray poet had seen fit to excise from his Deathbed Edition (as scholars are wont to call it) of 1881. It concerned a rebellious slave, and my research online has convinced me of this fact: that the poet's conception of the idealized black man underwent a significant change in those pivotal years from before the American Civil War (1855, *Leaves of Grass* first edition) to Reconstruction (1881, expurgated edition). Lucifer (which word means "light bearer") is invoked not because of any association with evil (at least, not in the poet's estimate) but because of his temerity in engaging in the ultimate rebellion: against the Godhead itself. But by 1881, with the blacks' emancipation won at such great sacrifice, the nation now needed to see the kind of good, law-abiding citizen portrayed as would never fit into the present poem—or no portrayal at all!

I was so stirred by the powerful imagery in the (for me) new text that I was reading that I resolved to incorporate it into my now twenty-year-old setting. Over the next few weeks I prepared the new version of my cycle, using what I had from before for the most part, interpolating new music for the lines the aged Whitman chose to cut, and in one case recomposing a large section because of the need I felt to make an allusion back to my rebel music, spanking new though

it was at the time. This was my rationale. I believe I am the first person to notice that a phrase from later in the poem that was retained in 1881 refers nevertheless back to the first-person narrative of the black slave. One of the first lines of the chant that Whitman cut in 1881 (but never in all the editions until then) reads: "I have been wronged....I am oppressed....I hate him that oppresses me." Later in the stream of consciousness which characterizes "The Sleepers," but still within the section I had chosen to set, we find Whitman reflecting back on numerous characters he had treated earlier in the poem. Anon we encounter in this comprehensive summary the words "he that is wronged" which, particularly given their relative position in Whitman's sequence, can only mean the uprising black. Incorporating at this point in the old music a quotation from the fiery passage I had so recently written for the rebellious slave was quite the most involved and difficult of the interpolations I had to effect.

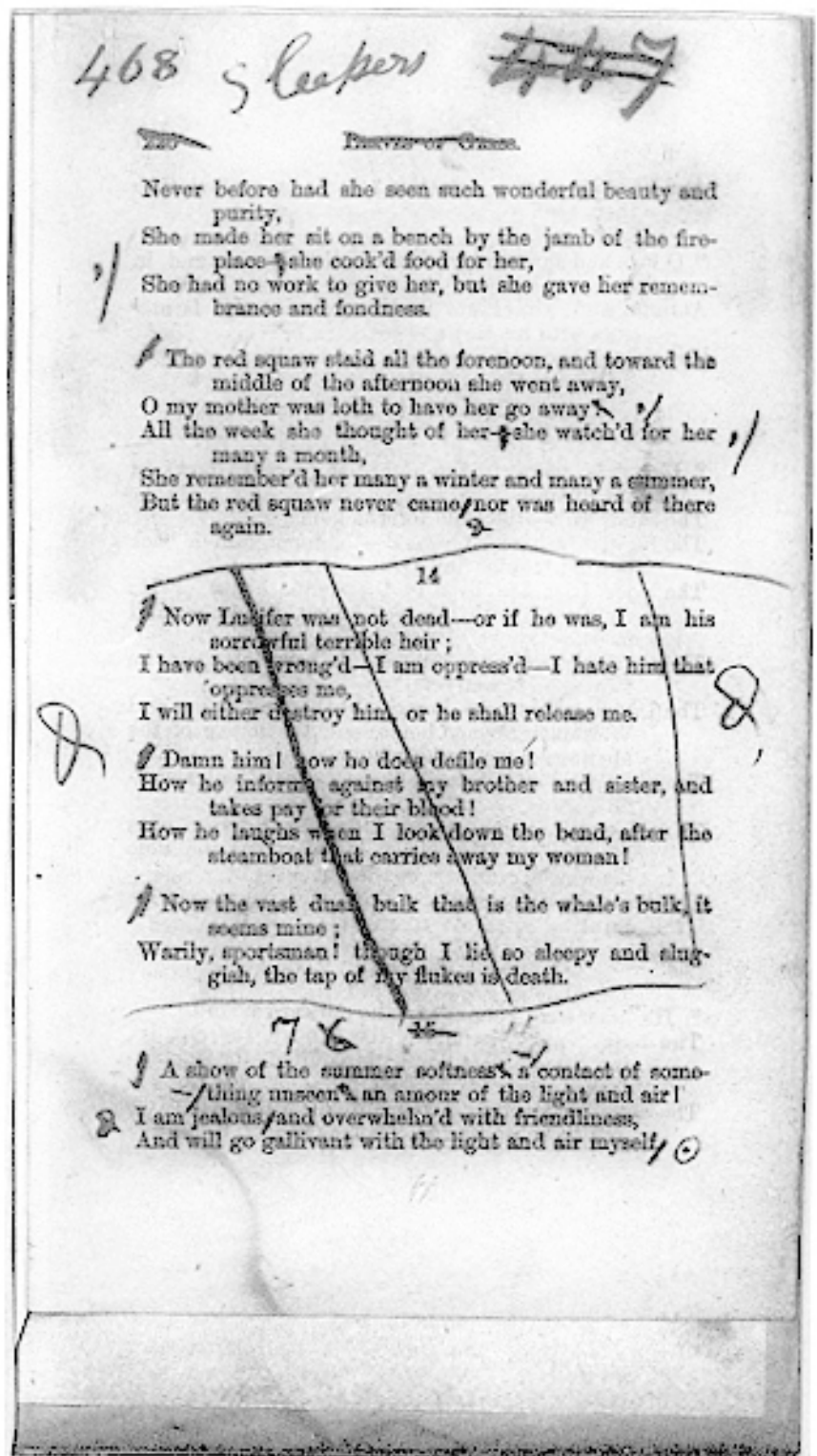
I should probably mention three discrepancies with the 1855 text for anyone following that edition. I noticed that in his description of the red squaw he had by 1881 changed the word "beauty" in the 1855 line "She looked at the *beauty* of her tallborne face" to "freshness." I then noticed that two lines further down, within the same description, the word "beauty" had been repeated. It would seem that Whitman decided at some point before 1881 to give his illustration of the Indian more point by this use of a second noun. But is it possible he got these two lines confused in his hasty editorializing? The original word "beauty" (from 1855) certainly works better in the first line, as I quote it above. But rather than just give up the 1881 word "freshness," I took the liberty of incorporating it, in lieu of "beauty," into Whitman's *second* line where, I say, he possibly meant to insert it anyway, and where, I say, it really does fit much better. That would make: "Never before had she seen such wonderful *freshness* and purity," which never existed in any edition, and excuse me but a lightning bolt just came through the roof of my apartment. The next discrepancy happens in the passage where the slave compares himself to a massive, dangerous whale. This chant's final line originally (1855) read simply, "my tap is death." At some point before 1881 this became instead "the tap of my flukes is death." I used the latter form of the pronouncement, which even the actively supportive pianist stops long enough to hear against dead silence. Finally, my use of the redundant word "it" in the line "it comes or it lags behind." That second "it" was not to be found in the 1855 Ur-Edition, but here I could not go with my semantic preference, this original version. When setting in 1983 the only text then at my disposal, that from 1881, I gave the extra word its own note melodically, and could find no elegant way to change it in my work earlier this decade. Bear in mind that in my setting, whether from 1983 or 2003, I did not use any melisma (more than one note per syllable of text) and I did not repeat a single word Whitman wrote. I might also mention two typos, dutifully reproduced in authentic 1855 reprints, but already fixed in the edition the author put out the very next year: the word "goes" in the line "the Pole goes his way" was permanently excised; and the word "night" in the line "every thing in the dim night" was always meant to be "light" instead.

If you were to read the poem to me, there would be certain emphases, modulations, inflections, delays, accelerations, silences, lengthening, curtailing, that would figure in your recital. The present cycle represents in idealized form how in my turn I would read it to you.

Nocturne for tenor and piano, opus 40, is dedicated to my dear friend, the composer and pianist Paul Leavitt.

Victor Frost
15 XI 10
New York City

This page is from the working copy of the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman used to show the typesetter how the final one, issued in 1881, should look. Notice the numeration, old and new, of the chants. The wholesale removal of the chant then numbered 14. That its final line reflects the "tap of my flukes" revision used in my setting. The changes in punctuation represent a gradual simplification over the years. (The 1855 original even had two different kinds of ellipses: one with two dots and the other with four! Unfortunately, most such subtle usage of punctuation to convey meaning was already gone in the 1856 "handbook" edition.) The circled dot at the very end means that a period should replace the old comma. This was because the next line of text, with which the following page had begun, was being excised. I restored all these missing lines in the 2003 revision of my song cycle.



to Paul Leavitt

Nocturne

on lines from "The Sleepers" by Walt Whitman

for tenor and piano, op. 40

Victor Frost

mf $\text{♩} = 65$

Now I tell what my mother told me to -

f *mp*

day as we sat at dinner together, Of when she was a nearly

mf

grown girl living home with her parents on the old homestead.

10

pp

8

A red squaw came one break-fast-

dim.

pp

13

8

time to the old home - stead, On her back she car - ried a

13

5

15

(non. cresc.)

p

8

bun - dle of rush - es for rush - bot - tom - ing chairs; Her hair straight shin - y

15

p

5

17 *mp* *mf*

8 coarse black and pro - fuse half - en - vel - oped her face,

17 *mp* *mf*

19 *f* *dim.*

8 Her step was free and e - las - tic, her voice sound-ed

19 *f* *dim.*

5 5

21 *> p f*

8 ex - qui - site - ly as she spoke. My mo - ther looked in de - light and a - maze - ment

21 *p* *mf*

5

24 *mp* *f*

8 at the strang - er, She looked at the beau - ty of her tall - borne face and
(fresh - ness)

27 *mp* *f*

8 full and pli - ant limbs, The more she looked up - on her she loved her,

30 *mp*

8 Nev - er be - fore had she seen such won - der - ful fresh - ness and pur - i - - - -
(beau - ty)

30 *mp* 5

33
8

ty; _____ She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the

33

Red. *

36
8

fire - place, she cooked food for her, She had no work to give her but she

36

40
8

dim. gave her re - mem - brance and fond - ness. _____ *pp*

40

dim. *pp*

Red. *

43

The red squaw staid all the fore - noon, _____ and toward the

Red.



45b

mid-dle of the af - ter - noon she went a - way; O my mo - ther was loth to have her go a -

50

way, All the week she thought of her, she watched for her man - y a month, She re -

53 *dim.*

mem - bered her man - y a win - ter _____ and man - y a sum - mer, But the

f

57 *p* *Accel.*

red squaw nev - er came nor was heard of there a - gain. _____

dim. *p* *cresc. poco a poco*

62

62

65

65

$\text{♩} = 65$

fff

68

Now Lu - ci - fer was not dead - or if he was I am his

ff

68

70

sor - row - ful ter - ri - ble heir; I have been

70

72
8
wronged - I am op - pressed - I hate him

74
8
that op - pres - ses me, I will

76
8
ei - ther de - stroy him, or he shall re - lease me.

78

Damn him! how he does de - file me, How he in -

80

forms a - gainst my bro - ther and sis - ter and

dim.

82

takes pay for their blood, How he laughs when I

p

pp

85 *cresc.*

look down the bend af - ter the steam - boat that car - ries a - way my

88 *f*

wo - man.

90 *fff*

Now the vast dusk bulk that is the

92
8 whale's bulk, it seems mine, War - i - ly,

94
8 sports - man! though I lie so sleep - y and slug - gish, the

96
8 tap of my flukes is death.

99

8

101

8

8^{va}

103

8

(8^{va})

fffz

14

106

♩ = 104

p

A show of the sum-mer soft - ness -a

112

con-tact of some-thing un - seen -an a - mour of the light and air; _____

116

I am jeal - ous and o - ver - whelmed with friend - li -

120 *p*

ness, And will go gal - li - vant with the light and the air my - self,

120 *p* *mp* *p*

125 *mp* *p*

And have an un - seen some - thing to be in con - tact with them al - - - so.

125 *mp*

129 *p*

O love and sum - mer! you are in the dreams and in

129 *p*

133 *mf* *pp*

me, Au - tumn and win - ter are in the dreams, the farm - er goes with his

137 *p* *mp*

thrift, The droves and crops in - crease, the barns are well -

141 *mf*

filled. _____

mf *p, cresc.*

And.

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Rose Tree". It consists of three staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 8/8. The score is divided into two measures, each 4 measures long. The vocal line starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The piano accompaniment starts with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one sharp. The melody is a simple, folk-like tune. The lyrics "The Rose Tree" are written below the vocal line.

The image displays a musical score for the song "The Rose Tree". It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature (C). The melody is written in a simple, folk-like style. The second system has a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. The bass line is more complex, featuring a variety of note values and rests. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* (forte), *p* (piano), and *mf* (mezzo-forte), as well as a crescendo and decrescendo hairpin. The lyrics "The Rose Tree" are written below the bass staff, and the word "Solo" is written above the treble staff in the second system.

154 *p, cresc.*

El - e - ments merge in the night, ships make tacks in the dreams,

cresc.

158 *f*

the sail - or sails, the ex - ile re - turns

f

160

home, The fu - gi - tive re - turns un - harmed, the im - mi - grant is back be - yond months and years;

162
8

The poor Ir - ish - man lives in the sim - ple house of his child - hood,

162

5

164
8

with the well - known neigh - bors and fac - es, They warm - ly wel - come him, he is

164

5

166
8

bare - foot a - gain, he for - gets he is well - off; [A bit of laughter here might not be inappropriate.]

166

p

169

8

6

6

cresc.

172

8

f

dim.

175

8

6

6

mp f

6

177 *mf*

8 The Dutch - man voy - ag - es home, and the Scotch - man and Welch - man voy - age

177 *mf*

179 8 home, and the na - tive of the Me - di - ter - ra - ne - an voy - ag - es

179

181 8 home;

181 *p*

185 *p, cresc.*

To ev - 'ry port of Eng - land and

185 *mf* *p* *cresc.*

188

8 France and Spain en - ter well - filled ships;

188

191 *f*

The Swiss foots it toward his hills, the Prus - sian goes his way, and the Hun -

191 *f*

The Swiss foots it toward his hills, the Prus - sian goes his way, and the Hun -

193

8 ga - ri - an his way, and the Pole his way, The Swede re - turns, and the

195

dim. *mp* $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$

8 Dane and Nor - we - gian re - turn. _____

199

8 The home - ward bound and the out - ward

203 *mf*

bound, _____ The beau - ti - ful lost swim - mer, the

203 *mf*

207 *mp*

en - nuy - ee, the o - na - nist, the

207 *mp*

211 *p*

fe - male that loves un - re - quit - ed, the mo - ney - ma - ker,

211 *p*

215

8 The act - or and act - ress, those through with their parts and

215

222

8 those wait - ing to com - mence,

mp

222

mp

226

8 The af - fec - tion - ate boy, the hus - band and wife,

226

230 *mf*

— the vot - er, the nom - i - nee that is cho - sen

234 *mp* *p*

and the nom - i - nee that has failed,

238

The great al - read - y known, and the great an - y - time af - ter to -

241 *mp*

8 day, The stam - mer - er, the sick, the

241 *mp*

245 *mf*

8 per - fect - formed, _____ the home - ly, The

245 *mf*

249 *mp*

8 cri - mi - nal that stood in the box, the judge that

249 *mp*

253 *p* *f*

8 sat and sen - tenced him, the flu - ent law - yers, the

253 *p* *f*

257 *ff* *f*

8 ju - ry, the au - di - ence, The laugh - er and weep - er, the danc - er, the

257 *ff* *f*

262 *pp*

8 mid - night wi - dow, the red squaw,

262 *pp* marcato

267

271 $\text{♩} = 65$

cresc.

5

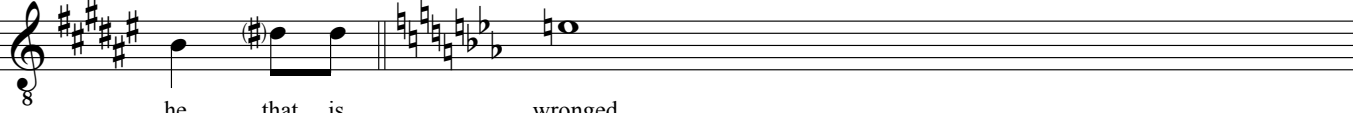
273 *mf, cresc.*

The con - sump - tive, the e - ry - si - pa - lite, the i - di - ot,

f

$\text{♩} = 65$ *fff*

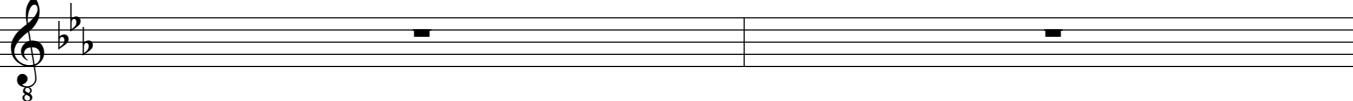
274b



274b



276



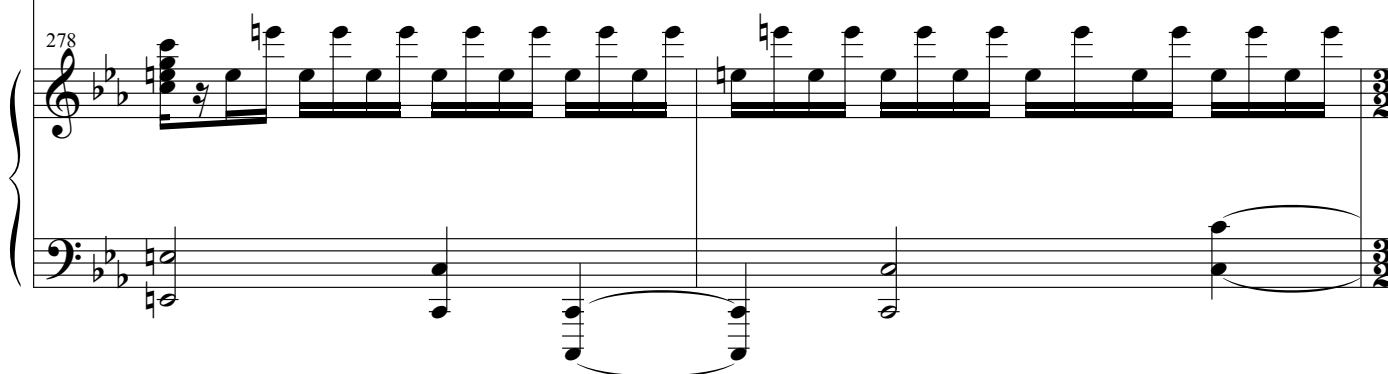
276



278

fff

278



♩ = 104

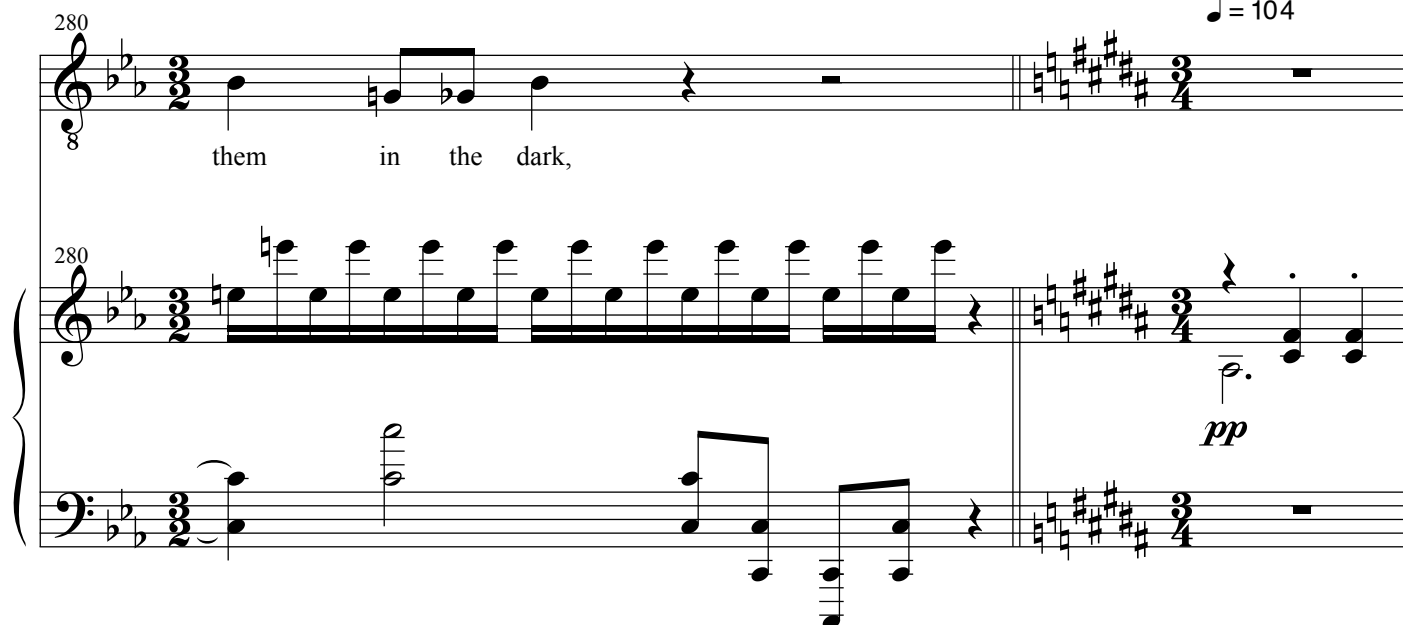
280

8

them in the dark,

280

pp



282

8

mf

I swear they are

282

mf



287

8

av - er - aged now - one is no bet - ter than the o - ther,

287

5



291

pp *mp*

297

p

The night and sleep have lik - ened them

302

pp *pp*

and re - stored them

308 *ff* $\text{♩} = 65$ *mf*

8 I swear they are all beau - ti - ful, Ev - 'ry one that

308 *ff* *mf*

312 8 sleeps is beau - ti - ful, ev - 'ry thing in the dim light is beau - ti - ful,

312

315 8 The wild - est and blood - i - est is o - ver and all is peace.

315

319

8

Peace is al - ways

5

323

8

beau - ti - ful, The myth of hea - ven in - di - cates

5

327

8

peace and night. The myth of hea - ven

3

3

ff

331
8

in - di - cates the soul; _____

331

336
8

mf

The soul is al - ways

336

mf

341
8

beau - ti - ful, it ap - pears more or it ap - pears less, it comes or it

341

345
8
lags be - hind,

350
8
ff
It comes from its em - bow - ered gar - den and looks pleas - ant - ly on it -

354
8
dim. *mf*
self and en - clos - es the world;

359 *mp*

Per - fect and clean the ge - nit - als pre - vi - ous - ly jet - ting, and

363

per - fect and clean the womb co - her - - - ing, The

367

head well - - - grown and pro -

bisbigliando

369
8
por - tioned and plumb, and the

371
8
bowels and joints pro - - -

373
8
por - tioned and plumb. The

mf

375

soul is al - ways beau - ti - ful, The u - ni - verse is du - ly in or - der,

379

ev - 'ry thing is in its place, What is ar - rived is in its place, and

383

what waits is in its place; The twist - ed skull

387

8 waits, the wa - ter - y or rot - ten blood waits,

391

8 The child of the glut - ton or ve - ne - re - al - ee waits

394

8 long, and the child of the

398
8 drunk - ard waits long, and the drunk - ard him - self waits



402 *pp*
8 long,

402 *pp*

5 5



406

406

mp



410

8

410

pp

5

413

8

413

5

5

416

8

416

mp

pp

3

3

419 *mp*

8 The sleep - ers that lived and died wait, the

419 *p* *mp*

3

423

8 far ad - vanced are to go on in their turns, and the

423

427

8 far be - hind are to go on in their turns,

427

44

431

8 The di - verse shall be no less di -

435

8 verse, but they shall flow and u - nite - they u - nite now.

441

8