

A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves (c. 1862) by Eastman Johnson. Oil on board (22" × 26 1/4").

The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Gwendolyn O. L. Conkling (40.59.A).



from *Song of Myself*

Walt Whitman

from 33

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
The courage of present times and all times,
† How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the
steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was faithful
of days and faithful of nights,

5 And chalk'd in large letters on a board, *Be of good cheer, we will not
desert you;*
How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days and
would not give it up,
– How he saved the drifting company at last,
How the lank loose-gown'd women look'd when boated from the
side of their prepared graves,
How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the sharp-
lipp'd unshaved men;
10 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.°

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood,
her children gazing on,
† The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence,
blowing, cover'd with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the
15 murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

/ I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the
marksmen,

1–11. **I understand . . . I was there:** This stanza was inspired by an incident that occurred in 1853. According to reports in the *New York Weekly Tribune* of January 21, 1854, the ship *San Francisco* sailed from New York City on December 22, 1853, destined for South America. A violent storm hit the ship several hundred miles out of port, washing many passengers overboard. The captain of another ship helped rescue the survivors. A copy of the newspaper story was found among Whitman's papers after his death.

I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs,^o thinn'd with the ooze
of my skin,

19. **dribs** *n. pl.*: dribbles.

20 I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
wounded person,

25 My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired,^o I heard the yelling shouts of my
comrades,

28. **inspired** *v.*: breathed in.

30 I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for
my sake,
Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy,
White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared
of their fire-caps,
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.

35 Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the clock
myself.

I am an old artillerist, I tell of my fort's bombardment,
I am there again.

40 Again the long roll of the drummers,
Again the attacking cannon, mortars,
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.

I take part, I see and hear the whole,
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,
The ambulanza^o slowly passing trailing its red drip,
45 Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs,
The fall of grenades through the rent roof, the fan-shaped
explosion,
The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.

44. **ambulanza** (äm·bōō·länt'sə):
Italian for "ambulance."

Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general, he furiously waves
with his hand,
He gasps through the clot *Mind not me—mind—the entrenchments.*