

The Body Electric*

by

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DESCRIPTION

During the Civil War, Walt Whitman volunteered his time as a nurse. Always close to those he helped, he finds his spirit drawn to Henry Smith, who refuses to let the doctors take his leg.

CHARACTERS

- WALT WHITMAN
- HENRY SMITH

SETTING

- Civil War battlefield
- Union Square Hospital, Washington D.C.

TIME

- Sometime during the Civil War

Inspired by the short story Every Night for a Thousand Years by Chris Adrian, Walt Whitman's Specimen Days, and various letters, journals, poems, and biographies.

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Scene 1

On an army cot set center stage lies WALT WHITMAN, a young man with a short but thick beard, non-descript clothing. He is lying on his left side, facing the audience, asleep, his hat on the floor. The lighting should be soft, as if from a strong moon coming in through a window to his left. A voice, beginning softly, speaks to him. It grows louder.

VOICE

Walter, don't let them take my leg. Don't let them take my leg.
Don't let them take my leg. Walter, don't let them take my leg!

WHITMAN wakes up quickly, sits upright on the bed.

WHITMAN

I won't, Hank. It will not go to the deadhouse. It will not be exiled.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a letter, looks at it, puts it back. He looks at the moon light.

WHITMAN

I will never leave this place.

The sound of artillery crashes, musket fire—loud, assaultive. The lights bump to full, very bright. WHITMAN exits stage right and comes back on with a wounded man, HENRY SMITH. SMITH's arm is around WHITMAN's shoulders, and his left leg is damaged. He helps him to the cot. SMITH sits.

SMITH

So there I had the gun cocked at the surgeon, him standing there with the saw hanging from his hand, his assistants looking like hog stickers, slathered in blood. "You ain't takin' this leg," I told 'em. "The rebs didn't get it. You ain't gettin' it." Those chopping butchers had no right to my leg. I aimed it right at his heart, his second-most vital organ. He put the saw down. Said, "Off or on doesn't matter to me. Keep it the way God attached it."

WHITMAN

(overlapping)

"The way God attached it."

SMITH

Told the story already, haven't I?

WHITMAN

Doesn't matter. I like to hear it.

The sound of a train whistle and the startup of an engine. The sound fades down to underscoring. Over the next lines WHITMAN and SMITH move as if they're being jostled by a train ride. SMITH lays out on the cot, head stage right. WHITMAN kneels at his head.

SMITH

Oh, God, here we go.

(clutches his leg, grabs WHITMAN's hand)

Oh, Christ! Oh, Christ!

(screams in pain)

I jammed the gun right in their faces. Damn the shite in his eyes!
Not my leg. Hold. Hold. The pain is an angel in my heart. Lift me,
lift me. Oh, Christ! Oh, Christ!

All through this WHITMAN whispers comforts to him, massages his temple with his free hand.

SMITH

Keep my eyes long—that's what you told me. Look deep. Breathe.
Breathe.

WHITMAN

Sing, dear boy.

SMITH

Can't sing. Tin ear. Leave the goddamn leg right where you found
it!

WHITMAN

Sing.

SMITH

(sings tunelessly)

"Oh Susanna, oh don't you cry for me / For I come from Alabama
with a banjo on my knee."

WHITMAN

(chimes in on the last line)

"From Alabama with a banjo on my knee."

Lights dim with the two of them singing. Railroad sounds out.

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Scene 2

*SMITH lies sleeping on the cot. WHITMAN moves downstage right. He is talking as if in
conversation with someone.*

WHITMAN

I try to visit all the hospitals, wherever they are. Yes, some pretty strange places where they have been forced to bivouac the patients—the Patent Office was one of the oddest. Young boys lying in front of the Declaration of Independence or General Washington's camp equipment. It more than satisfies the voice of irony.

Oh, I bring fruit and candy to them, read letters and newspapers, hand out tobacco—there is a powerful craving for that, though I've never found myself drawn to it. Sing. Pray. I am not religious myself—though I sometimes sit in the chapel and attend to the services.

WHITMAN pulls a small leather notebook out of his pocket.

WHITMAN

I have been keeping a compendium of the names.
(riffles the pages)
So many names. Each a poem.

I do it because they are so—precious—to me. Momentary kindnesses to smooth their anguish. And mine. Whitman—my last name. Walter. From Brooklyn. I came to Falmouth looking for my brother—yes, he's still alive. It was a longer distance than you think.

WHITMAN moves to SMITH. SMITH sits up, looking feverish, damned.

SMITH

I beat that God-fart, typhoid, right here in the hospital. I had my lawyer, Mr. 45-caliber Colt, argue my case before the doctor. But they still want to take it, Walt. I can't let them.
(stares vacantly for a beat)
Lines of command. You're it.
(tries to stand)
I've got to get out.

WHITMAN

You should let the doctors win this one. Your leg is not good. It is outflanking you, it is killing you.

SMITH

You are my charger. We must advance.

WHITMAN

Will you trust my judgment?

SMITH

Yes.

WHITMAN

Give me your arm. I'll take you away.

They stand and move downstage left. The lights become softer, as if a winter night under gaslight. WHITMAN sits SMITH down on the ground, sits beside him. SMITH is obviously delirious, barely consciousness.

WHITMAN

Rest, dove. Lay your head on my shoulder.

SMITH falls asleep, fitfully, his damaged leg straight out in front of him.

WHITMAN

In certain places out West—I've read this—sacramental places, there is no sickness, no dissolution. You can bury a young boy, plant him deep under an oak tree, and in just one day—so the chronicles tell—his hand will sprout, five fingers stabbing the sunlight! And if you grasp that hand and pull, pull with the heartsong of a true friend, a living body comes to harvest. In these places, death has no veto over friendship.

By this time SMITH is visibly agitating in his sleep.

WHITMAN

If we are to go west, Henry, now is the time to go.

He stands and pulls SMITH up to him; SMITH is now unconscious. WHITMAN cradles and carries him to the cot; he lays him down with SMITH's head stage right. The lights change to a harsh white light, very aseptic, tightly focused on the cot. The lights should be set in three parts: one part to cover the lower half of SMITH, one part to cover his upper half, and a focused spot on his head.

SMITH

(murmuring in his delirium)

Walter, don't let them take my leg. Don't let them take my leg.
Don't let them take my leg. Walter, don't let them take my leg!

WHITMAN

I won't, Hank. It will not go to the deadhouse. It will not be exiled.

WHITMAN speaks as if to someone standing near the bed.

WHITMAN

Be quick with your cuts, doctor. Be swift in the division.

WHITMAN kneels at the head of the cot, his hands massaging SMITH's temples. The light should dim to match WHITMAN's words: first, the lower half of SMITH's body, then the upper half. A final light on WHITMAN's hands, then that out as well. As it fades, WHITMAN kisses SMITH's forehead and places SMITH's hands gently across his chest.

WHITMAN

(as the lights dim)

"The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand...some are so young, / Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad, / (Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested, / Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)"*

WHITMAN moves to downstage left, in the same wintry light as before. He takes the letter out of his pocket. As he does this, SMITH rises and stands there in the dim shadow watching WHITMAN. WHITMAN half-turns to look at SMITH, but it is clear WHITMAN cannot see him.

WHITMAN

I will never leave this place.

WHITMAN speaks to the audience, exhibits the letter.

WHITMAN

Dear friends, I thought you would like to know something of the last days of your son, Henry Smith. He behaved like a noble boy. He did not lie among strangers. He had someone who gave him your dying kiss.

WHITMAN puts away the letter.

He kneels.

He then mimes as if he were reaching deep into a hole in the ground, his hand extended and ready to grasp. He should do this slowly, timing it to SMITH's speech.

SMITH

“Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death, / I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again.)”**

WHITMAN
(overlapping)

“We shall surely meet again.”

WHITMAN strains and strains to reach SMITH’s hand. SMITH watches, then turns and exits.

WHITMAN continues to strain, to reach. He takes his jacket off, reaches—not enough.

WHITMAN

“Stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!”***

He takes his shirt off, reaches—not enough.

WHITMAN

“We use you...we plant you permanently within us.”

He takes his undershirt off, reaches—not enough.

WHITMAN

“...we love you—there is perfection in you also...”

His breathing labors. Still not enough. Still not enough. Still not enough.

Lights dim on WHITMAN.

BLACKOUT

* From “The Wound-Dresser”, Drum-Taps

** From “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”, Drum-Taps

*** From “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

