from
NOW THE DRUM OF WAR: Walt
Whitman and his Brothers in the Civil War by Robert Roper, 2008

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TWO BLUE SHIRTS made of wool flannel followed Walt to Washington. Jeff mailed them soon after Walt rushed off to find George at Fredericksburg, and they were waiting for him when he returned from Virginia. Walt wrote his sister-in-law Mat, "I have not heard anything from dear brother George since I left the camp last Sunday . . . I wrote to him on Tuesday last—I wish to get him the two . . . woolen shirts . . . as they would come very acceptable to him."[1] Walt kept the shirts temporarily—and probably wore them. They had been made to fit Jeff, but Jeff thought they would fit Walt well enough, and they eventually fit George, too—from which we can conclude that the brothers were roughly of a size.

George wrote his mother in late February, "Another thing I want to come home for is to get a suit of Clothes as the ones I have are getting pretty seedy and if I dont get home soon I have been thinking of getting measured here and sending on to Walt or Jeff to have me a suit made. Mother how are the bank funds[?]"[2] On the same day, he wrote Walt about his attempts to get a furlough; none was being "alowed except in case of sickness or in a case of life and death or something of that sort," and again he mentioned needing new clothes.[3]

On March 12—George having gotten his furlough—Jeff again wrote about the two blue shirts, asking Walt to mail them to Brooklyn:

> [I]f you *possibly* can get them to me by or before Tuesday morning next . . . George . . . wants them very much indeed Nothing that he can buy will make him half as comfortable. The thought just strikes me that perhaps you are using them yourself, if so all right, or if you want one and can send him one why do so . . . I think it would be a "big thing" for George to get them as they would be very useful both winter and summer.[4]

The saga of the blue shirts was not over yet. Mrs. Whitman urged Walt to "send those flannel shirts" by express courier before George returned to his regiment. On March 18, Walt wrote Jeff,

> I suppose George must be about leaving you to-day . . . and I can realize how gloomy you will all be . . . I suppose the bundle of George's shirts, drawers, &c came safe by Adams express. I sent it last Saturday, and it ought to have been delivered Monday in Brooklyn. I did not pay the freight.[5]

The shirts, plus some underwear Walt probably bought new, arrived just in time. Mrs. Whitman wrote on the nineteenth,

> [T]hose things you sent George all came safe he thinks he wont want any more cloths in some time he had just gone when the express came he said he gesst they would not come that he must get some shirts he was going down to Harrisons [photographers] to have his likeness taken so marthe got ready quick and [ran after him] and told him they had come.[6]

Mattie, a skilled seamstress, probably made the shirts herself, cutting them to fit her young husband. The intimacy of this exchange among the brothers had nothing sentimental about it, but the hopeful offering of yet another blue shirt—by Walt to one of his wounded boys—was the most passionate, most seductive gesture he made during the war of which there remains evidence. Very soon after he began in the hospitals, probably in February, he met a young sergeant by the now-iconic name of Tom Sawyer, a Massachusetts boy who had been wounded at Second Bull Run (August 28–30, 1862). Tom was nearly healed and soon to return to his regiment when Walt got to know him at Armory Square, in the company of Lewy Brown, who was also a patient there.

"Dear comrade," Walt wrote Tom on April 26,

> I have not heard from you for some time [Sawyer had now rejoined his unit], Lewy Brown has received two letters from you, & Walter in Ward E has received one three weeks ago . . . I was sorry you did not come up to my room to get the shirt & other things you promised to accept from me and take when you went away. I got them all ready, a good strong blue shirt, a pair of drawers & socks, and it would have been a satisfaction to me if you had accepted them.[7]

Walt had prepared a bundle that was an exact duplicate of the one for his brother George—its very sameness may have convinced him that the gesture could not be taken amiss. Had Sawyer come up to his room, "I should have often thought now Tom may be wearing around his body something from *me*," Walt added, "& that it might contribute to your comfort, down there in camp on picket, or sleeping in your tent."[8]

Sawyer had dark hair and gray eyes.[9] He could read and write, and a nature both sociable and appealing is suggested by his postwar course in life, as a father of eight who sometimes worked as a traveling salesman.[10] Whether it was his physical beauty, his warmth, his workman's hands, or a combination of these and other factors unknown, Walt went for him in a big way. The first letter to Sawyer is unmistakably romantic:

> Tom, I wish you was here. Somehow I don't find the comrade that suits me to a dot—and I won't have any other, not for good . . .
>
> Dear comrade, you must not forget me, for I never shall you. My love you have in life or death forever. I don't know how you feel about it, but it is the wish of my heart to have your friendship, and also that if you should come safe out of this war, we should come together again in some place where we could make our living, and be true comrades and never be separated while life lasts.[11]

Walt added Lewy Brown to the proposal ("and take Lew Brown too, and never separate from him"); "Lew is so good, so affectionate—when I came away [last evening from Armory Square], he reached up his face, I put my arm around him, and we gave each other a long kiss, half a minute long."[12]

Walt may have been hoping to make his proposal of a life lived together less shocking by including another man. Or he may have hoped to kindle jealousy. The letters written to Tom Sawyer, although pitched always in a loving key, with endearing and intentional grammatical slips here and there, were composed most carefully—again, we know of their existence only because Walt saved his first drafts, which show many corrections, and corrections of corrections.[13]

On May 27 he wrote,

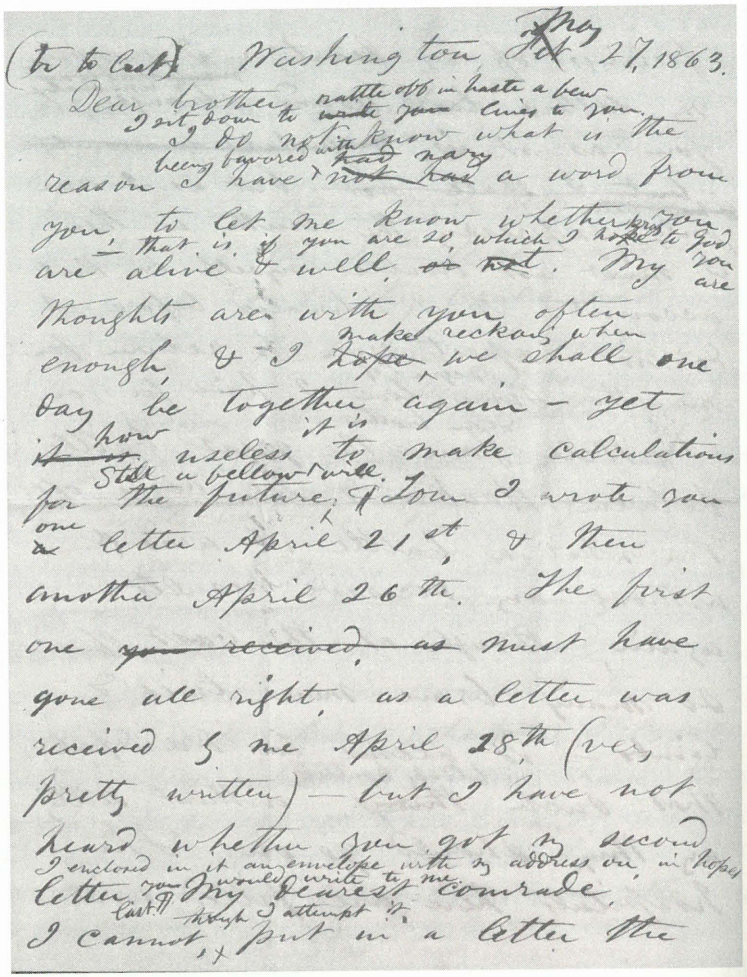
> I sit down to rattle off in haste a few lines to you. I do not know what is the reason I have been favored with nary a word from you, to let me know whether you are alive & well . . . My thoughts are with you often enough, & I make reckoning when we shall one day be together again—yet how useless it is to make calculations for the future.[14]

This letter written in haste shows much reworking—especially when he tried to describe his emotions, Walt grew cautious, and at the same time entirely bold:

> I cannot, though I attempt it, put in a letter the feelings of my heart—I suppose my letters ~~look~~ sound strange ~~and unaccustomed~~ & unusual to you as it is, ~~and perhaps unaccountable, but I shall not~~—but as I am and have been only expressing the truth in them, I ~~must~~ do not trouble myself on that account.[15]

He added, "Lewy Brown seems to be getting along pretty well . . . he is a good boy, & has my love, & when he is discharged, I should feel it a comfort to share with [him] whatever I might have—& indeed if I ever have the means, he shall never want."[16]

This seems to be an offer of financial support, to Sawyer as to Brown, should either decide to throw in their lot with a certain older man.[17] The vagueness of the proposal offered a degree of protection, but only a degree—to promise money for intimate favors was to flirt with serious trouble, or at least with serious embarrassment. Walt skated right up to and over a line with Tom. The "feelings of his heart" overwhelmed him. This is the same man who, in *Leaves of Grass*, contrived in a



Walt Whitman's draft of a letter to Tom Sawyer, May 27, 1863.

masterful way to say "everything" but never quite to define himself; the poet who always took back with one hand what he gave with the other, singing the pleasures of man-to-man kisses while posing also as a lover of women, a potential husband, a nature worshipper and nothing more.

The mad chaos of war, with beautiful young men being torn apart, pushed feelings further than they might have gone in calmer times. This

is one conclusion to draw from Walt's passion for Sawyer, and one measure of its seriousness is that he kept on writing to the elusive soldier. But by November, the dangerous proposals had lost their heedlessness, becoming more what they had half-pretended to be all along—simple offers of friendship. "I wrote to you six or seven weeks ago," Walt reminded Tom on the twentieth:

> I am well & fat, eat my rations regular . . . [In Brooklyn] I have so many friends, I believe, now I am here they will kill me with kindness, I go around too much, & I think it would be policy for me to put back to Washington . . . Well, comrade, I must close. I do not know why you do not write to me . . . Anyhow I go on my own gait, & wherever I am in this world . . . if I should have some shanty of my own, no living man will ever be more welcome there than Tom Sawyer. So good by, dear comrade, & God bless you, & if fortune should keep you from me here, in this world, it must not hereafter.[18]

Following the Sawyer infatuation, Walt became more guarded. His work in the hospitals required control: If he was to accomplish the sober tasks he had taken upon himself, he needed to preserve himself, to avoid vulnerabilities of a certain kind. What he saw in the hospitals in his first weeks in Washington was trying enough. On February 4, a soldier met at Armory Square had "a fearful wound in a fearful condition, was having some loose splinters of bone taken from the neighborhood of the wound. The operation was long, and one of great pain . . . He sat up, propp'd—was much wasted—had lain a long time quiet in one position . . . a bloodless, brown-skinn'd face—"[19]

Another soldier nearby was dying. A female nurse tended him, and Walt watched:

> I noticed how she sat a long time by [the] poor fellow who just had, that morning, in addition to his other sickness, [had a] bad hemmorhage—she gently . . . reliev'd him of the blood, holding a cloth to his mouth, as he cough'd it up . . . so weak he could only just turn his head over on the pillow.[20]

About a soldier named William Thomas, Walt wrote in a hurry:

[W]e are there as—the dresser bed sores great hole in which you can stick—round edges rotted away / flies— / two men hold him / the smell is awful great sores—the flies act as if they were mad / he has one horrible wound three bad ones / a fracture— / & several shocking bed sores—three men besides the dresser.[21]

The phrase "three men besides the dresser" suggests that the soldier was fighting his treatment. Walt may have been one of those who held him; certainly, he was close enough to smell and see everything that went on.

Another young soldier, a "New York man with a bright, handsome face," had been "lying several months from a most disagreeable wound . . . A bullet had shot him right through the bladder, hitting him front, low in the belly, and coming out back. He had suffer'd much—the water came out of the wound, by slow but steady quantities, for many weeks—so that he lay almost constantly in a sort of puddle."[22]

Walt came to know this soldier well; his name was John Mahay, and, there being only a slim chance of repairing such a lesion, Mahay's task was to await the end with as much composure as he could summon. Walt saw such things if not every day then often enough. He came to prefer Armory Square to the other hospitals in Washington at the time—it routinely accepted the worst cases, and it was commanded by a competent surgeon, D. Willard Bliss, who was friendly to Walt and welcomed his presence on the wards.*

President Lincoln sometimes showed up at Armory Square, moving gravely from bed to bed and clasping the hand of each soldier.[23] The hospital was located close to a steamboat landing at the foot of Seventh Street, SW, and near the tracks of the Washington and Alexandria Railroad. Soldiers wounded in battles in northern Virginia were often left there as a matter of convenience or for fear of carrying them any farther. Over the course of the war, it recorded more deaths than any other hospital in Washington, although it was not the largest.[24]

Walt had visited in hospitals before. In New York he had been well

*Walt cycled through most, if not all, of the fifty-plus military hospitals operating in or near Washington during the war and immediately after.

known at the general hospital on Broadway, which he sometimes wrote about in the papers. He described an operation he attended there on

an United States soldier, who had been badly wounded in the foot . . . Under the old dispensations, the operation would have taken off the leg nearly up to the knee . . . but in this case it was done . . . after what is known as the Symes' [method]. The bones of the foot forward were all amputated, and then the flap of the heel brought around and left to make a cushion to walk upon, so that the crippled leg will only be a trifle shorter.[25]

His detached tone—scientific, doctorly—hinted at a degree of pride in his own cool head. But what began in January 1863 was different, an immersion to the very end. This was not just "the tragic interest of mortal reality," as he described, in an article, what had drawn him to hospitals in the first place; no, it *was* reality, a flood of it.

On January 21, he "went pretty thoroughly through Wards F, G, H, and

Ward K, Armory Square Hospital, a few months after the end of the war.

I" of Armory Square, giving away apples, oranges, tobacco plugs, and stationery to some two hundred men. Following this initial run-through, he sat with a few "interesting cases in Ward I," distributing further gifts of money as needed.[26] That evening he returned for more, this time visiting Campbell Hospital, the converted army barracks at Boundary Street between Fifth and Sixth. He distributed more writing paper, then sat with D. F. Russell, a farmer's son who was recovering from typhoid fever.[27]

Armory Hospital, unlike Campbell, represented the most up-to-date thinking about hospital design. It had long wooden ward buildings raised up on cedar posts for all-around circulation of air, and there were many windows in the whitewashed walls. The morgue and stables were kept separate, for hygienic reasons, but the sewage and water-delivery systems were primitive, and something harum-scarum about the plumbing can be gathered from an account that Walt gave about a strange incident:

> [T]here has been a man in ward I, named Lane, with two fingers amputated, very bad with gangrene . . . last Thursday his wife came to see him, she seemed a nice woman but very poor, she stopt at the chaplain's—about 3 o'clock in the morning she got up & went to the sink, & there she gave birth to a child, which fell down the sink into the sewer runs beneath, fortunately the water was not turned on.[28]

The chaplain, Eliphalet W. Jackson, grabbed some men who

> with spades &c. dug a trench . . . and got into the sink, & took out the poor little child, it lay there on its back, in about two inches of water . . . strange as it may seem, the child was alive, (it fell about five feet through the sink)—& is now living and likely to live, is quite bright, has a head of thick black hair.[29]

The latrines were only wooden commodes over holes in the ground; the wards were often foul smelling, no matter how scrupulously swept and whitewashed.[30]

Writing to Margaret Curtis, his hospital-fund donor, Walt communicated the feeling of peace that sometimes obtained at Armory Square—or that he wished her to believe did:

> As it happens I find myself rapidly making acknowledgment of your welcome letter [and recent thirty dollar donation] from the midst of those it was sent to aid . . . As I write I sit in a large pretty well-fill'd ward by the cot of a lad of 18 belonging to Company M, 2d N Y cavalry, wounded three weeks ago to-day . . . a large part of the calf of the leg is torn away . . . I have been writing to his mother . . . Although so young he has been in many fights & tells me shrewdly about them, but only when I ask him—He is a cheerful good-natured child—has to lie in bed constantly, his leg in a box—I bring him things—he says little or nothing in the way of thanks . . . smiles & brightens much when I appear—looks straight in my face & never at what I may have in my hand for him.[31]

Armory Square has twenty-five to thirty wards, he tells Mrs. Curtis:

> [W]ard C, has beds for 60 patients, they are mostly full . . . the principal here, Dr Bliss, is a very fine operating surgeon—sometimes he performs several amputations or other operations of importance in a day . . . you will see a group absorbed playing cards up at the other end of the room [as the amputations are done] . . . one must be calm & cheerful, & not let on how their case really is . . . brace them up, kiss them, discard all ceremony, & fight for them, as it were, with all weapons . . . It is now between 8 & 9, evening—the atmosphere is rather solemn here to-night—there are some very sick men here . . . all is quite still—an occasional sigh or groan—up in the middle of the ward the lady nurse sits at a little table with a shaded lamp, reading . . . the light up & down the ward from a few gas-burners about half turned down—It is Sunday evening—to-day I have been in the hospital, one part or another, since 3 o'clock.[32] *

*Walt's hospital visiting was an ample vocation. He divided his time on the wards into two shifts, from twelve to four in the afternoon and again for a few hours after dinner. When he felt the need of it, he sat up all night with a patient; if not up all night, he might exhaust himself to the point of needing to sleep over at a hospital in a spare room. Except for the months when he was home in Brooklyn recuperating, he was in the hospitals for six or seven days a week.

Very early on, probably in January, Walt scrawled in one of his pocket notebooks, "My opinion is *to stop the war now*."[33] He had just returned from seeing George at Fredericksburg, and his first hospital visits in Washington produced this unequivocal response.

He supported the Union war effort—supported it firmly. Short of enlisting in the army himself, he would do everything he could to bring that cause success, yet hatred of war was his deepest feeling. The savaging of young men's bodies was not to be borne. Nothing was worth that.

Still, it would have to be borne. If he was to continue on in Washington, doing needful work, then he had to find a way forward emotionally, a way to persist and not be sickened by what he saw. He made careful accommodations to his psychological situation—living with the O'Connors, he was daily among people who supported and admired him, who fed him well (Nelly O'Connor was an excellent cook), and who helped him limit his fixed expenses to not much more than the seven dollars per month he paid for an upstairs room.

The intellectual circle around William O'Connor was also sustaining, and for further diversion from the grimness he did what he had always done—he roamed, immersing himself in the crowd. Washington, which at first he disliked, soon showed itself to be his kind of place, a rough city within walking distance of remnant wilderness, with a great river nearby. In early 1863, as the horrors of the wounds sank in, the weather was temptingly fine, inviting him outdoors. February 16 was "soft and balmy, the atmosphere velvet of clearness"; he joined a crowd on Pennsylvania Avenue made up of people hurrying toward the Capitol in one direction, toward Willard's Hotel in the other. Army wagons pulled by mule teams filled the avenue, "the teamster astride of the wheel-horse, or walking along by the side, drest in blue overcoat with whip over shoulder."[34]

In a pocket journal he noted many ex-slaves, some with brutal faces, others looking "as dandified and handsome as any body," and also "a long train of wood wagons twenty, thirty forty of them passing up the avenue, slowly, heavily rumbling, driven by black drivers, the mules straining with their tails out, as it is up hill here."[35]

As always, he paid special attention to public conveyances, noting "the tinkling bells of the cars, plying toward Georgetown one way, or the

Capitol, the other," adding that "the city cars [are] all driven by tidy handsome young American men—the drivers of the wagons of the Express lines ditto."[36] A fancy carriage with liveried attendants passed by, bearing a diplomat "or one of the great Secretaries," possibly Seward or Stanton. "Occasionaly some ladies, very richly drest, with children, in furs and feathers," and then the

> ambulances—not so frequently just here [on Pennsylvania Avenue], though there are plenty of them . . . hundreds, I don't know but thousands, constantly on the move—but they generally take the [sidestreets]. The ambulance . . . at last arrived here, in our land, domiciliated, a common word [a French borrowing], used and understood at last every where in These States—that unknown term three years ago.[37]

That night, winter arrived. At noon on February 17 he wrote,

> Now there is thick snow falling,—it commenced before day-light, and is quite deep—no wind so it covers the trees, every limb and twig—the trees in the streets, and in the [Presidential Forest], are thickly powdered—a coverlid of white snow, everywhere . . . falling fine and thick, the air full of it.[38]

Snow was not usually of much interest to him. Unlike Emerson ("The Snowstorm," 1835), John Greenleaf Whittier ("Snow-bound," 1865), and countless lesser poets of the day, he almost never mentioned snow nor did he have much poetic use for its conventional association, of sweet peace beneath the white blanket. But the lovely metamorphosis may have meant something to him after six weeks of immersion in the hospitals. His description of the storm continues at length; on February 22, a second storm, an enormous one, dropped several feet over the city, moving him to write again, rapturously,

> Washington has the deepest and most driving snow-storm of the season—would be considered a pretty big storm even in the north—I write this at noon . . . nobody is out—the expanse looks very, very white—every thing is so ample and open here, it makes a very different

appearance, under a snowstorm, than from the closely crowded [Northern] cities—being Sunday, no business, no army wagons, nor other vehicles, no pedestrians—a city housed, still, muffled in snow.[39]

He may only have been casting about for a usable scene—something for an article in a New York paper, perhaps, to be called "Washington in White" or the like. "[H]ardly a sound breaks the repressed city . . . there I see one sleigh, hear the merry tinkle of the collars of bells on the horses—a first-class old-fashioned yellow sleigh for four persons . . . trotting cheerfully . . . up the avenue."[40]

Before the cleansing storms, he visited Armory Square one Saturday and found John Mahay enduring "one of his spasms of pain."[41] "[E]xcruciating agony for about half an hour," Walt recorded in a notebook, "the water ran out of his eyes—the muscles of his face distorted, but he bore it all groanless."[42] Mahay was in bed 30 of Ward E. Walt stopped with a young Pennsylvania soldier, Thomas H. B. Geiger, in bed 47 of Ward H, finding him to be "silent and rather weak" until he saw Walt approaching. Then Geiger became animated; it was not Walt's first visit to the "young bright handsome" boy, and he began talking about how "for some time after his [right forearm was amputated] he could yet feel it—could feel the fingers open and shut."[43]

This same day, Walt met Lewy K. Brown for the first time, in a bed in Ward K. Lewy caught his attention with lurid tales about the punishments being meted out to the soldiers, how they were "bucked and gagged" (tied up, with a stick in the mouth like a horse's bit) or forced to stand on a barrel with a knapsack full of bricks for hours, often for trivial offenses. Lewy was engaging; Walt's record of their conversation is colored by the young man's outrage but also by his humor and by his hints of misbehavior among the troops (heavy drinking and consorting with camp followers, probably prostitutes).[44]

Returning to the O'Connors' house, Walt had Saturday dinner with them and with one of the men from Armory Square, Justus F. Boyd, a corporal. Boyd was recovering from pleurisy and a "sick affection of the kidneys" after five months of treatment.[45] He returned to the hospital at around six P.M. that day, which would not have left much time for a visit to Walt's upstairs room, since dinner was at four thirty.[46] That Walt felt something special for Justus can be inferred from a notation made eleven

days later, with joyful punctuation: "When I came to L. street, to dinner [on a second occasion, February 25], found Justus Boyd, waiting for me! His papers are through—he is DISCHARGED—and expects to leave . . . for home."[47]

The day after the first Saturday dinner—after meeting Lewy Brown for the first time, and seeing John Mahay in agony, and passing time with numberless other patients at Armory Square—Walt did not go visiting, although it was a Sunday and Sunday was normally his most faithful day in the hospitals. Instead he went to the office of the army paymaster, where he worked part-time during the week, and sat by himself for a few hours and wrote. His writings on this Sabbath day did not include any personal letters now known to scholars—this prolific correspondent who wrote scores or hundreds of letters per week for the soldiers, in addition to his own letters to his mother, brothers, and numerous others, probably needed a rest.[48]