

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 edition.

### **FIRST O SONGS FOR A PRELUDE.**

FIRST O songs for a prelude,  
Lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum pride and joy in my city,  
How she led the rest to arms, how she gave the cue,  
How at once with lithe limbs unwaiting a moment she sprang,  
(O superb! O Manhattan, my own, my peerless!  
O strongest you in the hour of danger, in crisis! O truer than steel!)  
How you sprang—how you threw off the costumes of peace with  
indifferent hand,  
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were  
heard in their stead,  
How you led to the war, (that shall serve for our prelude, songs  
of soldiers,)  
How Manhattan drum-taps led.

Forty years had I in my city seen soldiers parading,  
Forty years as a pageant, till unawares the lady of this teeming  
and turbulent city,  
Sleepless amid her ships, her houses, her incalculable wealth,  
With her million children around her, suddenly,  
At dead of night, at news from the south,  
Incens'd struck with clinch'd hand the pavement.

A shock electric, the night sustain'd it,  
Till with ominous hum our hive at daybreak pour'd out its myriads.

From the houses then and the workshops, and through all the  
doorways,  
Leapt they tumultuous, and lo! Manhattan arming.

To the drum-taps prompt,  
The young men falling in and arming,  
The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the black-  
smith's hammer, tost aside with precipitation,)  
The lawyer leaving his office and arming, the judge leaving the  
court,  
The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down,  
throwing the reins abruptly down on the horses' backs,  
The salesman leaving the store, the boss, book-keeper, porter, all  
leaving;  
Squads gather everywhere by common consent and arm,  
The new recruits, even boys, the old men show them how to wear  
their accoutrements, they buckle the straps carefully,  
Outdoors arming, indoors arming, the flash of the musket-barrels,  
The white tents cluster in camps, the arm'd sentries around, the  
sunrise cannon and again at sunset,

Arm'd regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and  
embark from the wharves,  
(How good they look as they tramp down to the river, sweaty,  
with their guns on their shoulders!  
How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces  
and their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust!)  
The blood of the city up—arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere,  
The flags flung out from the steeples of churches and from all the  
public buildings and stores,  
The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his  
mother,  
(Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to  
detain him,)  
The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing  
the way,  
The unpent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for their  
favorites,  
The artillery, the silent cannons bright as gold, drawn along,  
rumble lightly over the stones,  
(Silent cannons, soon to cease your silence,  
Soon unlimber'd to begin the red business;)  
All the mutter of preparation, all the determin'd arming,  
The hospital service, the lint, bandages and medicines,  
The women volunteering for nurses, the work begun for in earnest,  
no mere parade now;

War! an arm'd race is advancing! the welcome for battle, no  
turning away;  
War! be it weeks, months, or years, an arm'd race is advancing  
to welcome it.

Mannahatta a-march—and it's O to sing it well!  
It's O for a manly life in the camp.

And the sturdy artillery,  
The guns bright as gold, the work for giants, to serve well the guns,  
Unlimber them! (no more as the past forty years for salutes for  
courtesies merely,  
Put in something now besides powder and wadding.)

And you lady of ships, you Mannahatta,  
Old matron of this proud, friendly, turbulent city,  
Often in peace and wealth you were pensive or covertly frown'd  
amid all your children,  
But now you smile with joy exulting old Mannahatta.