

A Boston Ballad, 1854

A poem by Walt Whitman

This poem was Whitman's commentary on the highly publicized Boston events associated with the return by federal marshals of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns. It was written in 1854, but first published in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass.

Burns was taken into custody by Federal authorities in Boston, and a biracial abolitionist group attempted to rescue him in an attack on the courthouse. The attempt failed, one of the guards was killed, and federal troops were called in to secure order. A week-long trial under the recently passed Fugitive Slave Law found that Burns should be returned to his master in Virginia. The delivery of Burns from the courthouse to the wharf was a spectacle unparalleled in the brief history of the law. More than 10,000 troops called out by President Pierce, including the entire Boston police force and various companies of United States Marines, escorted Burns under arms to an awaiting ship. More than 20,000 persons lined the streets, jeering the police and cheering Burns. But Burns was transported back to the South by federal authorities despite the protests.

Both McPherson and Potter report that the Burns case significantly agitated Northern opinion, particularly in New England, motivating many more moderate citizens, including Whitman, to become far more militant. As McPherson recounts, "The fallout from this affair radiated widely. 'When it was over, and I was left alone in my office, wrote a heretofore conservative Whig, 'I put my face in my hands and wept. I could do nothing less.' The textile magnate Amos A. Lawrence said that 'we went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs & waked up stark mad Abolitionists.'" (McPherson at 120.) Lawrence would go on to become a major financial backer of free-state settlers in Kansas.

The poem's references to "Jonathan" reflect that "Brother Jonathan" was a phrase used in this period to describe a New England citizen, as well as the Republic as a whole – much like "Uncle Sam" might be used today.

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To get betimes in Boston town, I rose this morning early;
Here's a good place at the corner—I must stand and see the show.

Clear the way there, Jonathan!
Way for the President's marshal! Way for the government cannon!
Way for the Federal foot and dragoons—and the apparitions copiously tumbling.

I love to look on the stars and stripes—I hope the fifes will play Yankee Doodle.

How bright shine the cutlasses of the foremost troops!
Every man holds his revolver, marching stiff through Boston town.

A fog follows—antiques of the same come limping,
Some appear wooden-legged, and some appear bandaged and bloodless.

10

Why this is indeed a show! It has called the dead out of the earth!
The old graveyards of the hills have hurried to see!
Phantoms! phantoms countless by flank and rear!
Cock'd hats of mothy mould! crutches made of mist!
Arms in slings! old men leaning on young men's shoulders!

15

What troubles you, Yankee phantoms? What is all this chattering of bare gums?
Does the ague convulse your limbs? Do you mistake your crutches for firelocks, and level them?

If you blind your eyes with tears, you will not see the President's marshal;
If you groan such groans, you might balk the government cannon.

For shame, old maniacs! Bring down those toss'd arms, and let your white hair be;
Here gape your great grand-sons—their wives gaze at them from the windows,
See how well dress'd—see how orderly they conduct themselves.

20

Worse and worse! Can't you stand it? Are you retreating?
Is this hour with the living too dead for you?

Retreat then! Pell-mell!
To your graves! Back! back to the hills, old limpers!
I do not think you belong here, anyhow.

25

But there is one thing that belongs here—shall I tell you what it is, gentlemen of Boston?
I will whisper it to the Mayor—he shall send a committee to England;
They shall get a grant from the Parliament, go with a cart to the royal vault—haste!

30

Dig out King George's coffin, unwrap him quick from the grave-clothes, box up his bones
for a journey;
Find a swift Yankee clipper—here is freight for you, black-bellied clipper,
Up with your anchor! shake out your sails! steer straight toward Boston bay.

Now call for the President's marshal again, bring out the government cannon,
Fetch home the roarers from Congress, make another procession, guard it with foot and
dragoons.

35

This centre-piece for them:
Look! all orderly citizens—look from the windows, women!

The committee open the box, set up the regal ribs, glue those that will not stay,
Clap the skull on top of the ribs, and clap a crown on top of the skull.

You have got your revenge, old buster! The crown is come to its own, and more than its
own.

40

Stick your hands in your pockets, Jonathan—you are a made man from this day;
You are mighty cute—and here is one of your bargains.