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1890

Osceola

Walt Whitman

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Whitman, Walt, "Osceola" (1890). *Early Visions Bucket*. 54.
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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Walt Whitman, “Osceola”

Walt Whitman, “Osceola.”

The following first appeared in Munyon’s Illustrated World (April 1890) then in the 1891-1892 “deathbed” edition of Leaves of Grass. Whitman explains the origins of this elegy: “When I was nearly grown to manhood in Brooklyn, New York, (middle of 1838,) I met one of the return’d U.S. Marines from Fort Moultrie, S.C., and had long talks with him—learn’d the occurrence below described—death of Osceola. The latter was a young, brave, leading Seminole in the Florida war of that time—was surrender’d to our troops, imprison’d and literally died of ‘a broken heart,’ at Fort Moultrie. He sicken’d of his confinement—the doctor and officers made every allowance and kindness possible for him; then the close”

WHEN his hour for death had come,

He slowly rais’d himself from the bed on the floor,

Drew on his war-dress, shirt, leggings, and girdled the belt around his waist,

Call’d for vermilion paint (his looking-glass was held before him,)

Painted half his face and neck, his wrists, and back-hands.

Put the scalp-knife carefully in his belt—then lying down, resting a moment,

Rose again, half sitting, smiled, gave in silence his extended hand to each and all,

Sank faintly low to the floor (tightly grasping the tomahawk handle,)

Fix’d his look on wife and little children—the last:

(And here a line in memory of his name and death.)

[i] Sullivan's Island.