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# When Lilacs Bloomed: An Elegy

1892

by Laura Madeline Wiseman

After a lecture, a man in a straw hat stopped. *Will you walk with me in the city?* Walt Whitman offered his arm and nodded

toward the boardwalk and promenade. The fireflies sparked. I took his arm and tucked my free hand into my lace shawl.

My black skirt collected the dust of the day, sent it in whirl in the honey light. Aware of Walt Whitman's saunter,

I stretched my ankles, stiff with the art required to keep up with the audience of a thousand to hear *Men and Their Whims*.

I said, *I've read your Leaves of Grass and the reviews*. Newspaper critics wrote he was a man always touching himself

in his poems. None denied the weight of the man's body in "Song of Myself." I wondered if women were merely a prop.

Walt Whitman's elbows jutted rakishly at pairs of boys just old enough to be men. They watched our blue eyes.

Walt Whitman stroked the heft of his beard. Like an invitation, his trouser buttons winked. We turned a corner and paused

before a blacksmith's shop. Inside a red hot point plunged into the barrel in a hiss. The man at the bellows flexed.

Whitman's gaze lingered. I asked, *How do you do it? Find a paper to print your reviews of your own poetry collection?*

Never averting his eyes from the man, Walt Whitman smirked. Walt Whitman tipped his hat. *Never tell anyone who you really are.*

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**Laura Madeline Wiseman** has a MA from the University of Arizona and a PhD from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where she teaches English. Her work has appeared in *Margie*, *Poet Lore*, *Blackbird*, *Arts & Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Fence*, *The Los Angeles Review* and *13<sup>th</sup> Moon*. She is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Branding Girls* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), *Ghost Girl* (Pudding House, 2010), and *My Imaginary* (Dancing Girl Press, 2010). Recently, she has collaborated with the artist Kate Johnson on a limited edition series of broadsides that combine poetry and graphic art printed at the Prairie Center of the Arts.

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