

On the Beach at Night

On the beach at night,
Stands a child with her father,
Watching the east, the autumn sky.

Up through the darkness,
While ravening clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses
5 spreading,
Lower sullen and fast athwart and down the sky,
Amid a transparent clear belt of ether^o yet left in the east,
Ascends large and calm the lord-star Jupiter,
And nigh at hand, only a very little above,
10 Swim the delicate sisters the Pleiades.^o

From the beach the child holding the hand of her father,
Those buried clouds that lower victorious soon to
devour all,
Watching, silently weeps.

Weep not, child,
15 Weep not, my darling,
With these kisses let me remove your tears,
The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious,
They shall not long possess the sky, they devour the
stars only in apparition,
Jupiter shall emerge, be patient, watch again another
night, the Pleiades shall emerge,
They are immortal, all those stars both silvery and
20 golden shall shine out again,
The great stars and the little ones shall shine out again,
they endure,
The vast immortal suns and the long-enduring pensive
moons shall again shine.

Then dearest child mournest thou only for Jupiter?
Considerest thou alone the burial of the stars?
25 Something there is,
(With my lips soothing thee, adding I whisper,
I give thee the first suggestion, the problem and indirection),
Something there is more immortal even than the stars,
(Many the burials, many the days and nights, passing
away),
Something that shall endure longer even than lustrous
30 Jupiter,
Longer than sun or any revolving satellite,
Or the radiant sisters the Pleiades.

7. **ether**: sky.

10. **Pleiades** (plē'ō-dēz): a cluster of seven stars in the constellation Taurus, imagined to be seven sisters.

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Responding to the Poem

Analyzing the Poem

Identifying Details

1. What does *ravering* mean in lines 5 and 17?
2. Why does the child weep silently in lines 11–13?
3. How does the poet reassure the child in the fourth stanza?

Interpreting Meanings

4. The last stanza implies that the poem is intended to be read on a **symbolic**, as well as on a literal, level. What do you think the “ravering clouds” might symbolize? What might Jupiter and the “immortal stars” symbolize?

5. When the poet says in line 27 that he is giving “the first suggestion, the problem and indirection,” it is as if he were teaching the child her first lesson on an important, and possibly difficult subject. What do you think the subject is, and what is the lesson the poet wants to teach the child?
6. What specific **images** help you to visualize what is happening in the sky? How do the two figures on the beach contrast with these distant sky images? How is this contrast important to the poem?
7. What do you think he means by the “something” in the last stanza—the “something” that is immortal and will endure? Do you think the lesson he intends for the child is clear? How would you respond to Whitman’s main point in this poem?