The University of Iowa

Section 1, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

Whitman opens his poem with a conventional iambic pentameter line, as if to suggest the formal openings of the classic epics, before abandoning metrics for a free-flowing line with rhythms that shift and respond to the moment. Instead of invoking the muse to allow him to sing the epic song of war, rage, and distant journeys, Whitman becomes his own muse, singing himself and announcing that the subject of his epic will be himself. He "celebrates" that self, and the etymology of the word "celebrate" indicates "to return to" or "to frequent." The whole poem will be Whitman's record of the self expanding out into the world, absorbing more and more experience, then contracting back into the self, discovering that he can contain and hold the wild diversity of experience that he keeps encountering on his journeys through the world. He sets out to expand the boundaries of the self to include, first, all fellow Americans, then the entire world, and ultimately the cosmos. When we come to see just how vast the self can be, what can we do but celebrate it by returning to it again and again?

Throughout the poem, Whitman probes the question of how large the new democratic self can become before it dissipates into contradiction and fragmentation, and each time he seems to reach the limit, he dilates even more. In the first three lines, he abandons the two main things that separate people, that create animosity, jealousy, and war—beliefs and possessions: "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to you as good belongs to me." At every level of our being, we are incessantly transferring and exchanging materials, ideas, emotions, affections. The atoms that yesterday composed a living cow or a growing plant today are part of us, as the eternal atoms of the universe continue their nonstop interaction and rearrangement.

It is in this way that Whitman introduces us to his two main characters, "I" and "you." This section begins with "I" and ends with "you," just as the entire "Song of Myself" does the same: we experience the transfer of energy from Whitman's "I" to the "you" that we as readers learn to inhabit in this poem. It is possible to hear the "you" in "Song" as addressed to the entire nation or the entire world, and it is also possible to hear it as intimately addressed only to the individual reader in this particular moment of encounter. It is one of the most difficult words in the poem to translate, because the second-person pronoun in English is quite promiscuous: "you" is the word we use to address our most intimate lover as well as a total stranger, a single person alone with us in a room or a vast crowd. Whitman teases out all the implications of this promiscuous English pronoun that signals at once only you, a "simple separate person," and also you, the "en masse," the world of potentially intimate strangers who always hover around us. Translators must decide in each case whether the "you" is informal or formal, singular or plural.

The speaker of the poem "loafes" and observes "a spear of summer grass," and the entire poem is generated in that act. Thinking of the land he grew up in and of his ancestors, he realizes that every leaf of grass is a sign of transference, like the grass that grows from graves, as the atoms of the dead arise again out of the earth and now give voice to him, forming the very tongue that will sing of his past (his organ of vocalization is literally made up of the atoms of the land he sings on and sings about). So "Song of Myself" starts us out on what the poet will call "a perpetual journey," one that turns into an escape narrative for all readers of the poem, who need to liberate themselves from all the enslaving beliefs and possessions that prevent individual growth, who need to put "Creeds and schools in abeyance" and risk a journey that will take us beyond preconceived notions of "good" and "bad," a journey that will allow us to confront the "original energy" of nature unchecked, nature freed of the restraints that we have all been taught to put on it.

—EF

Afterword

It is said that a poem is an act of attention—to someone, something, some experience or portion of existence, grasped, imagined, or remembered—and in the first section of "Song of Myself" Whitman offers an image of the poet attending to the world, loafing (marvelous word!), leaning, opening his soul up to the world. What he observes could not be simpler, a spear of grass, and that is the point: a poem seeking nothing less than to tell the story of the universe, within and without, will begin at the atomic level, in the blood, the soil, the air, and circulate everywhere—the testament of a man determined to enlarge our imaginative capacities.

The influence of “Song of Myself” on American poetry is incalculable. The poet insists that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”—words that have inspired countless poets to map new worlds. Indeed it is hard to imagine William Carlos Williams discovering “the pure products of America,” Theodore Roethke undertaking “the long journey out of the self,” or Allen Ginsburg writing “Howl” absent Whitman, not to mention the work of contemporary poets like C. K. Williams and Pattiann Rogers. We all live under the gaze of that pioneer who counsels us, in the final lines of “Song of Myself,” to look for him under our boot-soles.

A word about Whitman’s prosody: the movement from iambic pentameter in the first line to cadenced free verse in the manner of the Psalms signals his departure from traditional English versification, propelling him from the known into the unknown. He is ever traveling toward the future, from a spear of grass to the farthest star and back again, and for this journey he will need a more versatile music than he could muster in blank verse. The line that he discovered, which could accommodate an extraordinary range of subject, diction, tone, imagery, and ideas: “Nature without check with original energy.” This energy fuels his song.

—CM

Question

"I celebrate myself"—this was the first line of the first published version of "Song of Myself," to which Whitman later added the clause, "and sing myself." How does this addition change your understanding of the poem? Why do you think Whitman made such a change?

Section 2, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

In this section, Whitman breaks out of enclosures, whether they be physical enclosures or mental ones. In one of his early notebooks, Whitman had drafted the line “Literature is full of perfumes,” a recognition that books and philosophies and religions all offer filtered versions of how to view the world. They are all “intoxicating”—alluring, to be sure, but also toxic. We are always tempted to live our lives according to the views of those who came before us, but Whitman urges us to escape such enclosures, open up the senses fully, and breathe the undistilled atmosphere itself. It is in this literal act of breathing that we gain our “inspiration,” the actual *breathing in* of the world. In this section, Whitman records the physicality of singing, of speaking a poem: a poem, he reminds us, does not derive from the mind or the soul but from the *body*. Our inspiration comes from our respiration, and the poem is “the smoke of my own breath,” the breathing of the atoms of the air back out into the world again as song. Poems are written, Whitman indicates here, with the lungs and the heart and the hands and the genitals—with the air oxygenating our blood in the lungs and pumping it to our brain and every part of our body. We write (just as we read) with our bodies as much as our minds.

The poet in this section allows the world to be in naked contact with him, until he can feel at one with what before had been separate—the roots and vines now seem part of the same erotic flow that he feels in his own naked body (“love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine”), and he is aware of contact and exchange, as he breathes the world in only to breathe it back again as an undistilled poem. All the senses are evoked here—smell (“sniff of green leaves”), hearing (“The sound of the belch’d words of my voice”), touch (“A few light kisses”), sight (“The play of shine and shade”), taste (“The smoke of my own breath,” that “smoke” the sign of a newly found fire within).

Now Whitman gently mocks those who feel they have mastered the arts of reading and interpretation. As we read this poem, Whitman wonders if we have “felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems,” and he invites us now to spend a “day and night” with him as we read “Song of Myself,” a poem that does not hide its meanings and require occult hermeneutics to understand it. Rather, he offers up his poem as one that emerges from the undistilled and unfiltered sources of nature, the words “belch’d” (uttered, cried out, violently ejected, bellowed) instead of manicured and shaped. This is a poem, Whitman suggests, that does not want to become a guide or a “creed,” but one that wants to make *you* experience the world with your own eyes. We take in this poet’s words, and then “filter them” *from* our selves, just like we do with the atmosphere and all the floating, mingling atoms of the world.

–EF

Afterword

What poet can resist the temptation to "possess the origin of all poems," to drink continuously from the source of inspiration? This is what Whitman offers in the second section of "Song of Myself," and much more—"the good of the earth and sun" and all the stars, not to mention learning how to take experience at first-hand: to see for oneself what is truly there, to establish, as Emerson wrote, "an original relationship with the universe." To forge such a relationship the poet leaves behind the intoxicating perfume of human society and sets out on his own to breathe the odorless, inspiriting atmosphere of nature: a state of freedom, of readiness, in which the poet opens himself—and in flows the world. He invokes all of his senses—taste, touch, sound, smell, sight—in the long sentence fragment with which the second stanza concludes, for he is alert now to what is there: "The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea rocks, and of hay in the barn…" He takes it all in, he makes song out of his meeting with the sun, he extends his hand to anyone willing to stop with him for a day and a night. He promises to teach us to see and sing for ourselves, free of every influence, including that of the teacher. Here are the keys to a kingdom stretching to the very limits of the imagination. And here is how to take the measure of the universe—the grid within which the poems of the future will be written.

—CM

Question

How is it possible not to "take things at second or third hand" or not to "look through the eyes of the dead" or not to "feed on the spectres in books"? Don't we all learn about the world and develop our beliefs by listening to and learning from others, both living and dead?

Section 3, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

In this section, Whitman tells us what all the "talkers" he has heard over the years have always said. These talkers—whether philosophers or politicians or pundits or preachers—always "talk of the beginning and the end," birth and death, how all of life should be categorized and partitioned into separate and exclusive areas. All the words Whitman uses in this section (and the previous one) to characterize this kind of speech —"talk" and "discuss" and "reckon"—have in their etymological roots the sense of splitting, carving up, putting in columns, breaking up. Whitman distinguishes himself from these talkers: "I do not talk of the beginning or end." The speaker of "Song of Myself" is out to celebrate "now," the fragile moment of life, of the present, always the only moment in which we live. His fourfold repetition of "now" emphasizes the "here and now," the moment Whitman wrote the poem and the moment we read it.

Whitman rejects division, separation, and hierarchy and instead celebrates "the knit of identity," the ways we are literally comprised of differences, born of mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers before them, who were themselves composed of the atoms of the world in continual flux, a flux that now produces each of us. Our "distinction" is always a result of this knitting, this "breed of life," this "procreant urge" of "sex" that brings together individuals again and again to produce new individuals—individuals who should never forget the endless knitting of the world that produced them. Even the apparent division between body and soul is an illusion, Whitman says, for only in the knit of body and soul is identity formed: "Lack one lacks both." Today we have material bodies and are the "seen," but someday we will not have bodies and will become "the unseen." When we are "unseen," we will still receive "proof" of our existence by the new bodies that have emerged from the "procreant urge" of "now." We the living are the "proof" of the generations of the dead who produced us. There is no "beginning" and "end": *birth* and *death* are just misleading words that divert us from realizing the ongoing nature of life, the endless process of composting that does not distinguish birth from death. In the ongoing moment of "now," everything exists and nothing ends.

So Whitman rejects all the attempts to divide the world into "beginnings" and "ends," into "the best" and "the worst," into good and evil. Instead, he mutes all the talking and discussing and decides to "go bathe and admire myself," to celebrate the brief but eternal moment of "now" that he inhabits (there will always and only be a "now"). The "hugging and loving bed-fellow" that sleeps at Whitman's side was, in the original version of "Song of Myself," identified as "God." God is, for Whitman, an affectionate companion who, each morning, leaves him baskets of surprise, pregnant with possibilities. Every day, every "now," is a basket of possibility, yet so many of us "scream at [our] eyes" *not* to see this gift and to waste our moments

of “now” by “ciphering” and dividing and accounting and chasing false value, mistaking money for happiness, mistaking accounting for living.
–EF

Afterword

“I and this mystery here we stand,” Whitman declares exactly midway through the third section. The line serves as a hinge between his discovery of the force of desire, *“the procreant urge of the world,”* and his delight in a lover, who leaves at dawn. What is this mystery? The eternal now, *“a knit of identity,”* which unites self and other, the past and the future, words and worlds. Consider what the poet achieves with one small word, *here*, which functions in this line as a noun (this place), an adjective (modifying mystery, which is beside and all around him), and an adverb (in this particular case). Even different parts of speech can bind one thing to another, according to Whitman, for the mystery of existence, at once solid and fluid, incorporating here and there, the living and the dead, the unborn and the unrealized, is an essay in connecting. He stands here with all that is and all that is not: an unpunctuated phrase containing the sum of everything.
“Lack one lacks both,” another unpunctuated phrase lodged in the aural memory of many poets, enacts in four stressed syllables the wedding of two souls, like and unlike, which governs the shape, the dream, of ‘Song of Myself.’ What he experiences in the dark, in the presence of God or the beloved, is the underlying unity of existence - a vision of eternity vaster than heaven and hell. The lover leaving at dawn is thus a figure not of fleeting pleasure but of the mysterious ways in which emptiness leads to plenitude: baskets covered with white towels.
—CM

Question
Who are the “talkers” and “discussers” who want to divert our attention from the fullness of the present moment? Is it ever possible to shut them out so that we can fully focus on the moment of “now”?

Section 4, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

The “talkers” and “discussers” now become the “trippers” and “askers,” those well-meaning people who occupy our days with talk of all the things that we often trick ourselves into believing actually *form* us—our childhood, our local environs, our dress, the latest news of wars, sickness, the stock market. These things in some ways make up what we are, but there is something about each of us that goes far deeper.
Whitman shares with Henry David Thoreau this burning concern with the way life gets eaten up by trivialities, by what we learn to call “news.” “When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip,” Thoreau writes in ‘Life without Principle’: “We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.” Whitman, in this section of the poem, affirms his desire to hear from himself now, to access his “inward life,” what he calls *“the Me myself.”*
We are always surrounded by those who want to *“pull and haul”* us toward their own beliefs and concerns. The poet here tells us that he, too, wasted years trying to penetrate the “fog” of all the arguments of the *“linguists and contenders”*—those who use language to complicate life and divert our attention by getting us involved in the petty squabbles that occupy most people’s lives. Now, though, we are invited by the poet to contact the deeper area of ourselves that stands “apart” from these forces that are always trying to divert us from the self that matters.
Whitman here offers in words an image to match the engraving of the poet on the frontispiece of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poet in working-class garb, hat on, arm akimbo, fixing the reader with his penetrating gaze—a man who *“Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,”* one who

"Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm . . . Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next." The trick, Whitman says, is to figure out how to be *"Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it."* Unlike Thoreau, who sought his deeper self by removing himself from other humans, retreating to the wilderness, Whitman seeks the deeper self by carefully observing his urban surroundings, learning how to absorb it all while also standing apart from it, learning to *"witness and wait,"* to give himself time to see what is worth seeing. He will seek his *"Me myself"* not only in nature but in the multitudes of people he encounters daily, people who will challenge him to widen his sense of who he is.
—EF

Afterword

The poet C. K. Williams begins his book-length meditation on Whitman wondering "where his *music* came from"—a question that has haunted generations of readers and writers. How did an ordinary newspaperman and sometime carpenter become the poet central to American identity? Williams believes that "we'll never know when he first intuited, and heard, and knew, that surge of language sound, verse sound, that pulse, that swell, that sweep, which was to become his medium, his chariot—just to try to imagine him consciously devising it is almost as astounding as it must have been for him to discover it." But discover it he did. And the fourth section of the poem reveals that in his literary apprenticeship Whitman *"sweated through fog with linguists and contenders,"* desperate as any young poet to find his voice. What he learned was how to *"witness and wait,"* keeping part of his imagination free from *"the fever of doubtful news,"* observing his surroundings with a keen eye, listening hard to the inflections of men and women from all walks of life so as to render them in his verses with the respect that they deserve.
A variation on his discovery in the previous section—I and this mystery here we stand"—opens the second stanza: *"Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am."* Notice that he does not write *who I am* but *what I am*—the self, that is, constructed line by line, which keeps its distance from the crowd, watching and wondering. Here is the representative poet of a national experiment in democracy who will not name himself until the twenty-fourth section, by which point he has become us all: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos."
—CM

Question
Can you think of times you have felt "both in and out of the game," simultaneously a participant and an observer? What are the advantages and drawbacks of such a dual positioning of the self

Section 5, *Song of Myself*

Foreword
Now, having safely placed himself apart from the mockers and arguers and talkers and trippers and askers, the poet accesses his soul. And, in one of the most audacious poetic acts of the nineteenth century, he imagines his body and his soul having sex. Continuing his insistence on equality, he affirms that neither the soul nor the body must be judged inferior to the other. Whitman here evokes the ancient tradition of poets imagining a conversation between the body and the soul: the difference is that instead of having the soul win the debate (as happens in virtually all the poetry before Whitman's), the body and soul in this poem join in an ecstatic embrace and give each other identity. Where poets before Whitman imagined the soul as the enduring part of the self, the part that transcended the body at the body's death, Whitman imagines a *descendence* (instead of a transcendence). It is only when the soul descends into the body, Whitman suggests, that it gains its power to operate in the world; similarly, the body gains a reason to operate in the world only when it is energized by the soul. Without a soul, the body is just dead material; without a body, the soul is just abstract desire, an urge to join, absorb, see, hear, touch, taste, without the means to do so. Body and soul are one and are coexistent.
It is difficult to tell just what kind of sex act Whitman portrays as he evokes the sensual joining of his "I" with the "you." It is an act of intimacy that produces "voice," but a voice that does not speak in words, music, or rhyme, a voice that does not "*lecture*" but rather "*hums*." The most erotic part of the joining comes in the bizarre image of the unspecified lover opening the speaker's shirt and plunging *"your tongue to my bare-stript heart."* It is no wonder that Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, was a fan of Whitman's! Stoker

knew that Whitman's "I" was a bit vampiric, always lurking in his book (even long after his death) awaiting a living reader who would give voice and life to the otherwise dead words on the page. The plunging of the tongue to the heart perhaps suggests the joining of voice to body and spirit. Body and soul join here, and, in another sense, poet and reader join as well in an erotic embrace, as the reader's body now takes on the words of the departed poet.
And then, in a Biblical-sounding passage, *"peace and knowledge"* come to the satisfied speaker, and all the *"argument of the earth"* vanishes into a mystical moment of oneness with both God and the *"poke-weed,"* with all men and women and with the ants, with the most exalted and the most common. Now the speaker knows that his body and spirit are part of whatever God is, and all of creation from the highest to the lowest, from the most vast to the smallest, is vibrating with "*love*," which is the *"kelson of creation,"* the foundational beam of the universal ship on which all we all—great and small, significant and insignificant—journey.
–EF

Afterword

Here is a dirty little secret: Eros may be the most reliable guide to poetic exploration, for desire is the fuel that burns in the lyric imagination. From Sappho to William Blake to Patti Smith, poets understand, if rarely acknowledge, the central role that desire plays in the composition of a poem, whether the object of one's affections is the beloved, God, fame, immortality, revolution, or language itself. John Donne's late Holy Sonnets blaze as intensely as the love poems of his youth: "Batter my heart, three-personed God." And certain hymns to the divine composed by the Psalmist, Hafez, and St. John of the Cross carry a charge that we may recognize from the secret depths of our experience. What makes the fifth section of "Song of Myself" so audacious, and so moving, is Whitman's decision to address this matter directly, enacting the marriage of the body and soul that from time immemorial has governed the lyric impulse—*"a kelson of creation,"* the girder bolted to the keel of the boat in which the lover sails, alert to everything under the sun. In a state of expectation, a space between one obligation and another, a lull, the poet hears *"the hum of your valved voice,"* which is the voice of every reader of his lines, yours and mine, brothers and sisters, now and in the future, tasting salt, and the surge of the waves, and *"the peace and knowledge that pass all the arguments of the earth."* Here you are.
–CM

Question
Section 5 is simultaneously one of the most physical and one of the most spiritual of all the sections of "Song of Myself." How do you respond to Whitman's insistence that we can only access the vast mystery of creation through the physical body?

Section 6, *Song of Myself*

Foreword
In this section, a child asks the question that will generate the rest of the poem: "*What is the grass?*" The answer to this question will in some ways occupy the poet through all the rest of the sections, leading him eventually to entitle his entire book *Leaves of Grass*. As is often the case with children's questions, there is no easy answer to this one. And the poet, instead of offering a categorical reply (he is done with the lecturing and accounting and the talk of beginnings and endings), responds instead by offering guesses, shifting answers, for he realizes that, the more we think about what the grass truly is, the less we know. Maybe, in the way it manages to grow everywhere out of the soil (which is always composted death), the grass is the *"flag of my disposition,"* the very sign of the poet's optimism. Or maybe it's the very sign of God, a coy reminder of the mystery of creation, dropped everywhere for us to wonder whose it is (like a woman dropping a monogrammed handkerchief in the hope that it will be picked up by a possible lover and will lead him back to her).
The grass is itself a child, always emerging anew from the realm of death into a new life; it is a kind of coded writing that seems to speak equality since it grows among the rich and poor, among black and white. But it is primarily the sign of life emerging from death, and the poet imagines himself walking over graves and imagining the grass as the transformed life of those buried beneath him. His imagery here is delicate,

precise, and a bit macabre: *"This grass is very dark to . . . come from under the faint red roofs of mouths."* Just as, in the previous section, the tongue plunged to the heart, here the grass grows from the mouths of the dead, as if it is *"so many uttering tongues."* The tongue is the organ of voice, and Whitman hears tongues speaking everywhere he looks.

Whitman here begins his exploration of how the dead are not silent, are not voiceless, but rather how they are always speaking through the life that emerges from them. If we want to know what the dead are saying, we need only *"translate the hints"* of those *"uttering tongues"* of grass. The dead speak in *"a uniform hieroglyphic,"* a coded language that requires us to listen hard, to be fearless in our translation, in order to ultimately realize that *"the smallest sprout shows there is really no death."* The grass always speaks life and always emerges from death, so death always ceases the moment new life appears. Again, this is Whitman's faith in compost, in the cycle of death and life that guarantees that death is never an ending but always a beginning of ongoing life, which is forever moving *"onward and outward,"* making death far different than we might have supposed, not an ending but an ongoing process of dissolving again into diffuse and ever-leafing life. How lucky can we be to exist in a universe where death is only a harmless word we give to a passing moment in our ever-recycling life?

EF

Afterword

If poetry is a matter of hints and guesses—of translating hints from the imagination or memory and guesses about what lies before and beyond us—then the sixth section of this poem is a primer on the art. A child's question generates speculation, some of Whitman's most gorgeous phrases *("the flag of my disposition," "the handkerchief of the Lord," "the beautiful uncut hair of the graves"*), and an invitation to journey to the heart of existence—which, as it turns out, is hidden in the grass beneath our feet. Whitman claims to wish that he could *"translate the hints about the dead young men and women"*—and then he performs that very act of alchemy, discovering in the *"smallest sprout"* the philosopher's stone, concluding that the base materials of life are immortal. He summons from the grass evidence that no one and nothing will ever die, since every atom (belonging to you as well as to me) circulates forever. Scientists may yet prove him to be right.

"Hints followed by guesses," T. S. Eliot wrote in his version of scripture, *Four Quartets*; "and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action." Whitman took another view, believing that eternity lay all around him— in the lull; in the smoke of his breath; in a handful of grass; in the question that begs an answer, and then another and another; in the stars that travel *"onward and outward,"* presumably forever. What a thrilling prospect. And terrifying.

Question

In this section, Whitman invites us to play along with him as he guesses at possible answers to the child's seemingly simple question, "What is the grass?" What other answers would you offer to supplement or challenge the ones Whitman gives?

Section 7, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

Section 7 begins with one of Whitman's most audacious boasts: if you think it's *"lucky to be born,"* then, he is quick to let us know, *"it is just as lucky to die, and I know it."* How does he know it is lucky to die? By this point in the poem, Whitman has convinced us that these atoms belonging to us, composing us, did not originate with us but in fact have been circulating through the universe from the beginning of time and will be circulating until the end of time. We are all, as he will say later in the poem, *"the leavings of many deaths,"* just as we all are the seedbeds of many births. Each of us is literally made up of "*dead*" matter, of the atoms of previous lives that have been recirculated to produce us. And as we go through life, we are never *"contain'd between"* our hats and our boots; we are instead a dynamic, ever-shifting group of atoms physically and a dynamic, ever-shifting group of perceptions mentally. As we *"peruse"* the *"manifold objects"* around us, the ever-shifting scenes and sounds that our senses absorb, we continually become an ever-changing person, *"immortal and fathomless."* There is no end, Whitman suggests, to the ongoing life

that continues to produce new bodies—new eyes and new ears—that will forever absorb the kaleidoscope of sensations around us. And how can we ever probe the depths of the oceans of experience our senses bring to each of us, every day and every minute of our lives?
Even when he makes what sounds like a discriminating statement (*"Every kind for itself"*), that statement immediately radiates out into a kind of indiscriminate love. What, after all, is one's *"kind"*? For Whitman, his kind includes *"male and female," "children and the begetters of children,"* because all are needed for the ongoing life we are the immortal part of, the life that only we who live in the present experience, just as those who have lived in the past experienced it and those who will live in the future will experience it. So now Whitman issues his first exclamatory command: *"Undrape!"* Like some proto-Superman with x-ray vision, he tells us that he sees through whatever disguise we put on our body. After all, the one great democratic thing that we know is that we all have a body; we experience the world only in and through our bodies. And our eyes and ears, our tongues and nose and fingertips, are always hungry for sensation. Whitman looks at us, and, since he had a body too, he sees ours and knows what it is like. The poem at this point reaches out to us, grabs us, claims us, and *"cannot be shaken away."*

Afterword

The conjunction of *"immortal"* and *"fathomless"* in the seventh section marks a critical turning in "Song of Myself," Whitman the seer proclaiming the limits of his knowledge, which are the depths of the individual soul. He knows what cannot be measured—the secrets of a life, the inscrutable forces that lead someone to take one path instead of another, the stirrings of desire, demands of the community, promptings of the unconscious, uncharted currents, instincts, ideas, imperatives of—what? It is impossible to map the terrain traditionally reserved for God, and yet the poet records the voices murmuring in the dark, guesses at what was left out of the confession, offers hosannas for the living and the dead. In Whitman's democratic dispensation all is acknowledged, and absorbed, and absolved.
Hence the different levels of diction and registers of tone rubbing up against one another, forming a musical chord in which multiple languages (read: lives) are resolved: *"Every kind for itself."* Note how he glides in the second line from the bureaucratic *"I hasten to inform"* to the colloquial *"it is just as lucky,"* the lawyerly giving way to the wisdom of the streets—and the ages. *"Undrape!"* he commands, *"you are not guilty to me."* For this *"mate and companion"* of everyone, male and female, brother and sister, lover and mother *"and the mothers of mothers,"* sees all and forgives all, even the one who slighted him (a seemingly autobiographical moment.) He may not know what lies in the heart of the other but he will believe in it just the same.
CM

Question
When Whitman tells us he is "tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away," he sounds on one level very much like a pest, like something that just will not leave us alone. And when he tells us that he can "see through" our clothes, he sounds like a voyeur. Why does Whitman portray himself in this way? How do you react to a poem that makes these kinds of claims on you?

Section 8, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

Now the tone of the poem quiets in a very unsettling way, as Whitman's "I" simply stands aside and observes. He observes a scene of birth and one of death, with a lusty love scene in between. Just as in the previous section he was claiming to be a voyeur, with his gaze penetrating through our clothes to our bodies, so here he lifts the cover from a baby to gaze upon it, casually shooing away the flies; he gets a kind of bird's-eye view of a young couple about to make love in the bushes; and he observes and describes a suicide in a bedroom. Are these scenes related? Is there a kind of narrative implied (is this baby that the poet sees perhaps the result of the young couple giving in to their sexual desires, and is the suicide the result of the young woman's shame?), or are these just three unrelated scenes of different stages of life, as the poet observes the joys and horrors that take place somewhere around us every minute of every day?

The pace of the poem picks up as Whitman gives us his first urban catalog, each line capturing a different sound and movement of the city. In these catalogs, we hear Whitman at his slangy best, as he records the incessant noise of the urbanscape, as if the pavement itself is blabbing away, talking nonstop, saying indeterminate things. He hears the *"sluff of boot-soles,"* as he employs the informal spelling of "*slough*," using it to mean *"plodding through mud"* but also capturing the sound of all those shuffling boots. The wild variety of city sounds—blab and sluff and clank and clinking and hurrahs and flappings and echoes and groans and exclamations—meld into a cacophonous urban music, becoming the *"living and buried speech"* that is *"always vibrating here."* This is Whitman's version of what James Joyce would call "epiphanies" or of William Carlos Williams' belief that "poetry exists in the very language to which we have been listening all our lives." Just listen to the city streets, Whitman says, and you will hear the full range of human emotions, from the "groans" of those who have eaten too much to the groans of those who are "half-starved." The city compresses all human experience into a tight, noisy space, and its sounds always vibrate with meaning.

When Allen Ginsberg in the 1950s read the line that ends *"what howls restrained by decorum,"* he discovered the origin of *Howl*, his poem that defined the Beat Generation. *Howl* laid out just what happened when all those restrained howls finally burst through the veneer of decorum, releasing those "who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, . . . and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steam whistles." Ginsberg's poem is a mid-twentieth-century extension of Whitman's catalog, still finding poetry in the most unlikely urban places. Whitman's "I" remains the unfazed observer, looking closely, absorbing the good and the bad, the adulteries and the emergencies and the hidden lusts, reporting them, and then moving on. His persona here is not unlike the "impassive stones" of the city itself that "receive and return so many echoes." Poems are always vibrating all around us, if we only open our ears.

Afterword

Walking in New York City, schooled in the music of "Song of Myself," you may hear a version of *"the blab of the pave"* rehearsed in the eighth section: people on Fifth Avenue making way for a businessman shouting into his cell phone, a homeless veteran blessing an old woman under the scaffolding of a high-rise, a taxi driver asking for directions. Passion (birth, love, death) provides the melodic structure: a trio of couplets balanced by a fourteen-line stanza—a free verse sonnet in the form of a catalogue; if the time signature has changed to match the acceleration of modern life, the key remains the same: more, more. Watch and listen, the poet says. There are invitations everywhere. Abroad in the city at night, alone or with someone close to you, it may feel as if you are taking soundings in the babble of the crowd queuing for a show, in the murmur of a couple posing for a photograph in Times Square, in the clatter of horses' hooves outside the entrance to Central Park, in the wail of a siren by the river... These are echoes of what rang in the ear of the poet who was attuned to the music of all *"the souls moving along."*

Homer's catalogue of ships sailing to Troy, Ovid's list of trees, biblical genealogies—enumeration is a rich poetic device. And the names that Whitman gives to different aspects of the city, its *"living and buried speech,"* what resonates and what stays hidden, bring Adam's task to mind. This rough, this kosmos, is the first man of democracy, the invisible walls of which rise in the souls of every man, woman, and child, and "Song of Myself" unites what the ancient Chinese called "*the ten thousand things of the universe*." New York is all around us.

CM

Question

Think about Whitman's catalog of city sounds in this section. How would the catalog of sounds be different in cities today? How would the sounds be different from one city to another, or from a city in one country to a city in another country? What are the dominant urban sounds today?

Section 9, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

In this, one of the shortest sections of "Song of Myself" (only two other sections have eight lines, as this section does, and only one section has fewer lines), Whitman turns from the city to the country, from the urban to the rural, as he perhaps recalls his own early childhood memories on his family's Long Island farm (his family moved from the farm to Brooklyn just days before Whitman turned four) and his later visits to his grandparents' farm nearby. In his autobiography, *Specimen Days*, Whitman recalls as a boy how he had "often been out on the edges of these [Long Island] plains toward sundown, and can yet recall in fancy the interminable cow-processions, and hear the music of the tin or copper bells clanking far or near, and breathe the cool of the sweet and slightly aromatic evening air, and note the sunset." In this section of "Song of Myself," Whitman offers a closely observed visual poem, a kind of pre-imagist intensely focused moment, as he imagines or recalls riding on a hay wagon toward the open doors of *"the country barn,"* feeling the jolt of the wagon, and then jumping down into *"the clover and timothy"* (the grass with flower spikes cultivated for hay), immersing himself in the fall grass, feeling himself in a tangle with it. Whitman here captures not only a different aspect of life in America, but a different pace in the rural areas of the country, more leisurely and peaceful than the noisy staccato urban catalog that came just before.

Afterword

The revisions that Whitman made to "Song of Myself" between its first publication in 1855 and the deathbed edition of 1891 continue to unsettle some readers. Galway Kinnell, for example, argues that the poet's creative and critical faculties weakened as he grew older, and "the more he searched for perfection, the farther away it went." But who can blame Whitman for such a quest? Like a scientist who makes a discovery, which alters our understanding of the universe, and then spends the rest of his life refining the implications of his breakthrough, the poet tinkered with his work. "I come again and again," the original ending of the eighth section, was thus transformed into *"I come and I depart,"* and readers are left to wonder about the wisdom of the change, which brings to mind Auden's controversial decision to revise "We must love one another or die," in "September 1, 1939," to "We must love one another and die." Should an aging poet leave his or her early work alone? What to do with different versions of a poem? Is perfection even possible? "Song of Myself" raises such questions again and again.
Whitman made one change in the ninth section, dividing the single eight-line stanza into two end-stopped quatrains, which "look like the poetry of the past," in Kinnell's phrase. But that is the point: the poet invokes a moment from his rural childhood in an unrhymed variation on the ballad form. The folk tradition lives anew in the white space between stanzas, a static scene that will come to life in the speaker's declaration that he is there, *"stretched atop of the load."* Now he recalls his journey into the past, *"the soft jolts"* of memory, and jumps into the hay, and seizes his golden harvest—the music of clover and timothy, of a body in motion, of tangled hair.
CM

Question
What is the effect of devoting one whole section of the poem to this single simple experience of riding on a hay wagon and jumping into the clover and hay? Why do you think Whitman does not give us a catalog of the various aspects of rural life as he did with his previous catalog of city life?

Section 10, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

After Section 8 took us on a cacophonous urban journey—with omnibuses and snow-sleighs and ambulances and carts—and Section 9 took us on a peaceful rural hayride, Section 10 takes us on a series of imaginative journeys to America's western wilds, to the sea, and, eventually, to a stop on the underground railroad that formed a pathway to freedom for escaped slaves. The "I" of the poem is now moving beyond the actual experiences of Walt Whitman, who at the time he wrote "Song of Myself" never had gone hunting in the *"wilds and mountains,"* never had been on a *"Yankee clipper,"* never had experienced the *"marriage of a trapper . . . in the far west"* to an American Indian woman, and never had housed a *runaway slave*. But Whitman wants his poetic "I" to have experienced the breadth of the continent, so he uses stories he has heard and paintings he has seen (like Alfred Jacob Miller's "The Trapper's Bride") to expand the range of

his experiences. Imaginative expansion, after all, is not less real than actual experience: fantasy *is*, in fact, one way we allow ourselves to experience what it would be like to escape rules and expected behavior, and Whitman provides us with the means to join him in widening the scope of our experiences and broadening our beliefs. As he describes looking from the sailing vessel (the "clipper") through the wind-blown mist (the "*scud*"), Whitman says *"My eyes settle the land."* His eyes at this point are trying to make out the distant land through the mist and motion, and thus to steady his vision, but all through this section he is also using his eyes to *"settle the land"* in another sense—to occupy the continent from city to country, from the east to the west, from the south to the north, to put the land in democratic order by stretching its boundaries.

Whitman thus begins in this section to record the crossing of social and cultural boundaries in the United States. Social commentators like the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1840s had observed that there were "three races in America"—the white, red, and black—and that they had distinctly different qualities that kept them separate from each other. But Whitman offers here two scenes of racial mixing, as the white trapper marries a Native Indian woman, who is described as "*voluptuous*," and then the "I" welcomes a *"runaway slave"* into his house, gives him clothes, bathes him and nurses him, and has *"him sit next me at table,"* keeping his gun nearby to protect the slave from slave-catchers. The intimacy of both scenes emphasizes the physical nature of the joining, an interracial touching, that goes beyond the mere stating of respect for the racial "*other*." We can *feel* in these scenes the redemptive qualities of transgressing social boundaries, as Whitman continues to emphasize the need to absorb diversity, to overcome discriminations that we may have been taught, to recognize the deep identities we all share: *"every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."* Just as the *"big doors"* of the barn in Section 9 stood open to accept the fall harvest of leaves of grass, so now does the narrator's *"half-door of the kitchen"* swing open to reveal its interior to the escaped slave as both men discover the rich harvest of overcoming bias and discrimination, even as the gun in the corner serves as a reminder that such crossings and joinings are always potentially dangerous.

Afterword

Invention comes to the fore in this section, the poet creating a series of fictions to tell a difficult truth—that his celebration of the self includes everyone, regardless of race, identity, or place in society. The novelist Ron Carlson has remarked that he always writes from personal experience, whether he has had it or not, and this fiction-making guides Whitman's imaginings of a hunting party, a sea voyage, a clam dig, a trapper's marriage to an Indian girl, a drama with an escaped slave. His vignettes are not less powerful than the testimony of his senses, because he chooses to highlight details that seem to come straight from life—*"the sparkle and scud"* of the Yankee clipper at sail, the trowser-ends tucked into his boots, the *"coarse clean locks"* of the Indian girl and the *"coarse clean clothes"* (marvelous echo!) of the fugitive slave. The more dazzling the invention, the more it must be grounded in believable particularity.

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant," said Emily Dickinson. "Success in circuit lies." Poetic invention is a circular form of truth-telling, which Whitman employs at critical moments in the poem, often to extend his democratic self into new political terrain. Behind a mask the poet may speak more plainly. (It is no accident that among the heteronyms devised by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa was a Whitman-like character, Alberto Caeiro, a shepherd, "a mystic, but only of the body," who sang Nature in the same full-throated voice as the American bard.) In poetic monologues and portraits of real and imaginary historical characters we discover what Dickinson called "the truth's superb surprise." But danger lurks when the poet is inventing. No wonder Whitman keeps his fire-lock nearby. There is always someone at the door.

~ CM

Question

Whitman gives us three lines about going out to look for clams and then sharing clam chowder with the group of men. What is the effect of Whitman's invoking *the reader* at the end of this short scene and telling us: "You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle"?

Section 11, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

This strange and haunting section has generated endless discussion, and Whitman's emphasis on the number *"twenty-eight"* has particularly fascinated critics from the poet's time to our own. Some have argued that Whitman was suggesting the number of states in the union, and, while there were twenty-eight states in 1845 (when Texas was admitted), Iowa became a state in 1846, Wisconsin in 1848, and California in 1850, so, when Whitman wrote this section, there were in fact thirty-one states. Other critics have suggested that Whitman is evoking the lunar cycle (popularly thought of as 28 days, though actually between 29 and 30 days). Still others have suggested associations with Egyptian mythology, which Whitman had studied in some detail (Osiris was killed in the twenty-eighth year of his reign, and his body, by various accounts, was divided into fourteen or twenty-six or twenty-eight parts before being recovered by Isis, thus associating him with the lunar cycle). Others associate the "twenty-eightness" of this section with the menstrual cycle. All of these associations thus relate to fertility, union, birth, and regeneration—things that have eluded the "*lonesome*" woman.

But, whatever (if anything) Whitman meant to suggest by the number twenty-eight, he certainly does create in this section more crossings of boundaries, this time boundaries of class and gender. The woman is wealthy, the owner of a *"fine house,"* positioned on "*a rise*" above the rest of her community, from which she is separated by layers of richness—from her dress to her blinds. But this material comfort has isolated rather than truly comforted her, and her aching desire, built up over twenty-eight years, now reaches through her insulated walls, through her blinds, through social conventions, and through her clothing, out to the group of rough young men—one for every year of her lonely life—who cavort naked in the river below her. Reversing the usual poles of Western voyeurism, where men have secretly watched naked women (as in the biblical story of David and Bathsheba or Susanna and the Elders), and putting aside the guilt usually associated with such acts, in this section the *woman* engages in the joyful erotics of hidden looking. And just as she imagines herself released from all her constraints as she joins the men, becoming the twenty-ninth bather, in a naked ecstasy of touching, so the male poet, watching her, becomes by implication the thirtieth bather, imaginatively joining in the free-flowing frolic as well.

And so are we, the readers, male or female, gay or straight, invited to become the thirty-first bather, riding the trajectory of the lonely woman's desire out into the fluid world of democratic touch, where the constraints of gender and social conventions are momentarily cast aside. Gender itself evaporates as the young men's bellies "*bulge*" as if pregnant, and the descriptive phrase *"pendant and bending arch"* adheres equally to aspects of both male and female anatomy. It is Whitman's lesson in how the imagination is a democratic force that can carry us across the barriers of religion, morality, conventions, class, even sexual orientation, and test the waters of indiscriminate thinking.

Afterword

More invention, in an extravagant key. The poet's imagination brims with desire, in the form of a rich woman watching from her window twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore—one for each year of her life. Whatever other meanings might be attached to the number twenty-eight (the length of the lunar, solar, and menstrual cycles; the number of male consorts attending to the Egyptian moon goddess, Isis; the second perfect number, after six; and so on) the true number is one—the expansive identity of the self, which contains everyone: woman, poet, reader. For the "unseen hand" passing over the bathers belongs not only to the woman who in her imagination joins the men in the water but to the reader tracing a finger over the lines of the poet composing the scene. The poem as act *and* object of desire: another invention of the poet who discovered that unity is all, and always subject to the immutable law of nature that desire flows over the boundaries raised and enforced by custom, taste, and legal opinion. Whitman is innocent, of course, because in the act of writing he becomes Other, a change agent splashing water where he will. He doesn't care if you get wet—and that is the point: readers, now and in the future, can join in the fun that is more serious than you might first imagine. He is the woman *"seizing fast"* to all the young men, here and everywhere, who live and die in his lines, over and over again.

~CM

Question

How free do you think our imaginations are to carry us across the various borders that define us (nation, religion, economic class, race, sexuality)? Is the result of such imaginative flights usually joy or guilt? Why?

Section 12, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

After the leisurely and lyrical Section 11, with its wealthy lonely woman imagining her way into a sensual frolic with the twenty-eight young men, this section is quick and spontaneous, as if we have now followed those bathing young men back to their jobs. Now the poet observes young men as intently as the young woman observed them in the previous section. Through the poet's eyes, we see the young butcher changing out of his bloodied aprons *("his killing-clothes")* and sharpening his knives for the next day's grisly business. But even after work, the butcher's leisure involves more sharp tools and *"break-downs."* His very speech is "*repartee*," as Whitman reaches for what at first seems an inappropriate term to describe the way the butcher talks: "*repartee*" is French and invokes a higher social class, but it derives from a fencing term (a thrust in response to an attack) and came to mean a *"sharp retort"*—even the butcher's talk is a whetted instrument. And he entertains himself (and the poet) with his *"shuffle and break-down,"* two fast and energetic dances that emerged from African-American folk traditions. This butcher-boy enacts his own border-crossing, an early instance of America's crossover culture that has produced jazz and the blues and hip-hop.

Then the poet turns to a careful observation of blacksmiths at work, admiring their masculine bodies and the powerful rhythms of their work as their repeated motions sculpt their bodies into thin waists and *"massive arms."* These men *"environ the anvil,"* and Whitman's word "environ" creates an image of the men surrounding the heavy block of iron (the word itself has "iron" at its heart) on which they shape the molten iron from the furnace with their hammers. Their bodies move in a hypnotic repetition as, again and again, *"each man hits in his place,"* just as Whitman does here as he lovingly shapes his words to the meters of the workplace, hammering poetry out of the everyday world around him.

Afterword

Whitman extends the poetic tradition of addressing work—its motions and rhythms, it sweat and grime, its tedium and transport—with his delineation in this section of the complex relationship between work and play. From the repartee and dance of the high-spirited butcher-boy to the hammering of the blacksmiths lies white space animated by an unspoken question: what is work? If work is what defines us, at least in part, then the poet, who prefers to *"lean and loafe at [his] ease,"* will bring the spirit of play to the blacksmith's shop. He stands on the threshold, between the burning heart of the forge and the larger world, determined to link motion and matter through the act—the labor—of his observing. What pleasure he takes in watching the smithies work, reproducing on the page the cadences of their hammering as they fashion the artifacts that make up our environs. Three times in one line he uses the word "overhand," creating a hypnotic effect, which may inspire readers to summon memories of that brief and blessed state in which by a seeming miracle they sometimes lose themselves in their labors.

Drudgery, of course, is the more common experience of work—and what, in fact, makes possible the courting of transcendence: repetition may invoke a playful spirit, which is always hovering nearby. Around the anvil the smithies find a rhythm in which to merge their individual selves in a larger enterprise. Think of it as a collective form of *"shuffle and breakdown,"* a slow dance in which new shapes are delivered unto the world. Just so, writers gather around the anvil of language, our common inheritance, hammering word by word at their materials, seeking to find the right place and rhythm in which to leave their mark.

CM

Question

What activities of labor have you found to have a particular beauty or power, and why?

Section 13, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

Whitman's attention in this section is now focused firmly on a black man, not necessarily a slave (as was the case in Section 10), but rather a driver of a dray (a flat hauling cart, here carrying stones). It is tough, heavy

work, and this massive man is fully in charge of it, with his "commanding" glance and his *"polish'd and perfect limbs."* The sun bathes and highlights his body just as the water bathed the bodies of the twenty-eight young men in Section 11. Whitman pauses to peer at this man closely, admire his confident presence, and express "*love*" for him. That casual and easy expression of love across races came as something of a shock to many readers in the mid-nineteenth century. And the way this "*negro*" is dressed, surprisingly, is a mirror image of the frontispiece portrait of Whitman that opened the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (the same portrait reproduced on this website accompanying Section 1), with his shirt open at the neck, his *"calm and commanding"* glance, and the hat "*slouched*" to one side of his forehead. This self-identification of the poet with the black dray-driver is another step toward a democratic way of thinking, as the poet becomes a caresser of *all* life *("not a person or object missing")*, absorbing everyone and everything into his non-discriminating and always-expanding self.

To demonstrate his radical openness to the world, the poet's gaze drifts from the driver to the horses that he commands, and then to the oxen that pull their own heavy load. But he does not just observe them, he looks the cattle in the eye and finds in those eyes something inexpressibly rich and complex, *"more than all the print I have read in my life."* He watches birds rise into the air at the sound of his footsteps, admires the patterns of their circlings in the air *("those wing'd purposes")* and then engages in one of his many slides up and down the evolutionary chart, undoing what most people think of as hierarchy (humans somehow superior to animals) into an equalizing identity: he knows the bird is contained within himself, and he is at some level at one with the bird and the tortoise, all of them creatures with their own purposes, their own equally meaningful journeys in this world. We humans may be proud of our words and our intellect, but if we open our eyes and ears to the world around us, we quickly realize we are not the only creatures that sing the songs of ourselves: the jay never learned the scales but nonetheless "*trills*" a pretty good song. Look into the eyes of any animal, Whitman advises, to get the "*silliness*" of believing in your own special status shamed out of you.

Afterword

From the collective *we* to the individual *I*, from a community of likeminded souls to a solitary self joined at the molecular level to everything in the universe—this is the journey that Whitman undertakes in the thirteenth section, the quarter point of "Song of Myself." He joins the team of a black man driving "*the dray of the stone-yard"* into the wild, where he will absorb into himself every niche in the environment, oxen and birds and leafy shade, mindful of the limitations of human intelligence. Here the lord and giver of life affirmed in the Nicene Creed makes way for "*the caresser of life*," and in his proclamation of the unity of being Whitman deliberately echoes the language reserved by the Church Fathers for the Holy Spirit ("We believe in one holy and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."), and in so doing he expands the range of our affections. Signs of his faith are carried not by the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, but by drakes and ducks and jays, which tune his song, his credo: *"I believe in those wing'd purposes,/ And acknowledge red, yellow, white playing within me."* The colors of the rainbow, every race on earth, feathers and flowers, the tortoise and the bay mare—all inflame the imagination of the poet, who professes his belief in something larger than the Trinitarian godhead worked out by the bishops at the Council of Nicaea. Silly to imagine that we know more than an animal. Sillier yet to think that we are not on the same team.

Question

The American cereal magnate and vegetarian Will Kellogg once asked how anyone could eat anything that has eyes. His question is provocative because there is something mystical about eyes *("the windows to the soul,"* as they've been called for hundreds of years). What experiences of interspecies eye-gazing have you had, and what can you detect in the eyes of animals that is different from what you see in the eyes of other humans?

Section 14, *Song of Myself*

Foreword

Whitman, writing about education, once commented that "good brains ancient & modern agree that what is nearest & commonest is always last to be realized." Most of us spend our lives devoted to the distant and the abstract, only to recognize too late that the miracles all around us all the time are what we have deadened ourselves to. In this section, Whitman offers his most radical statement of democratic identity: *"What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me."* This is the poet's credo: he will discover himself not in the exotic, the faraway, the difficult, or the costly, but rather in the common people he encounters every day and the animals that inhabit and enliven his world. Continuing his observation of animals from the previous section, he has here a momentary conversation with a "*wild gander,*" who speaks his "*Ya-honk*" to the poet, who listens "*close*" to it and (unlike the impudent or "*pert*" folks who are have learned to arrogantly disregard the sounds of birds), he finds something deeply meaningful in it.

The poet's encounter with the "*wild gander*" is itself a "*gander*," in the figurative sense of that word ("to gander" is to take a long look, to crane our necks like a goose in order to see all around us): Whitman ganders at the gander and translates its non-verbal cry into letters. It is an example of Whitman's reverence for the natural world around him, a world of plants and animals that teaches us ways to see (and—as in the case of "gander"—ways to *talk* about *how* we see: if we are keenly observant, for example, we might be said to be "eagle-eyed" or "hawkeyed"). Birds flock throughout Whitman's poem, which will end, as we'll see, with a visit from a "spotted hawk." He is always on the alert for encounters with animals, plants, and the natural world, and he is one "*enamour'd of growing out-doors*" and of hanging around with those who work on farms, on the ocean, or in the woods.

Whitman counsels a kind of profligacy here, a *"spending for vast returns,"* an endless bestowing of himself *"on the first that will take me,"* looking always to "*scatter*" himself "*freely forever*." Whatever he has, he will give, taking the chance that by giving himself to everything around him, the surrounding world will shower him with "*vast*" and endlessly unexpected "*returns*."

Afterword

"Music is continuous," said Thoreau, "only listening is intermittent." Whitman teaches us how to listen in this section, inviting us to hear the music of the quotidian, the most spectacular concert of all. *Open, open*, he counsels readers—to the song of the gander, *Ya-honk,* and the grunt of the nursing sow, and the affections springing from the earth with each step that we take. It turns out that "the same old law" applies across the board: there is music in these bones.

Thoreau's insight inspired John Cage's musical composition, *4'33,"* in which the pianist is instructed *not* to play for the four minutes and thirty-three seconds that constitute the piece, creating space for the audience to hear what is there: an uncomfortable silence, perhaps, and then the sounds, the music, of the environment—breathing, waiting. To tune one's ears to such music is no small matter—the premiere of *4'33"* provoked outrage in some quarters. We would rather not hear the music surrounding us. How much we do not want to know! But for those who have ears to hear there is music even in great pain ("a formal feeling," in Emily Dickinson's words)—and even for the deaf or hard of hearing. For listening is a sensual matter: we take in the music of creation with our ears and also with our eyes, noses, tongues, and skin. Every fiber of our being yearns to listen, though we stopper our senses, like the homeward-bound sailors in *The Odyssey* who fill their ears with wax on the approach to the island of the Sirens, the enchantresses whose singing is so beautiful that it causes shipwrecks. Nevertheless it is better to lash ourselves to the mast like Odysseus and listen to that music, which will fill his heart with desire, than to spend a life in vague longing. If only we can listen! Ah, there's the rub--which has its own music.

CM

Question

Whitman renders the call of the gander as an echoic word: "*Ya-honk*." How does your language deal with the songs and calls of birds? In English, the call of an owl is often transcribed as "*Who?*," and the question seems profound coming from a bird; in English, then, the owl is associated with wisdom. What associations do different birds and the sounds they make have in your language?