

Kim Roberts

Removed despite his brother's objections,
the brain was placed in an oil-cloth bag
and ferried across the Delaware River
to the American Anthropometric Society

in Philadelphia. One doctor noted
the "magnificent symmetry of the skull"
and recorded a 45-ounce weight.
The autopsy states it would join

a collection of "high-type brains"
of scientists and eminent men.
Injected with a special solution,
the brain would be hardened and preserved,

the external surfaces photographed,
and a plaster cast made. The brain
could then be compared with lesser types:
apes and criminals and women.

But none of this was done. When the brain
was accidentally dropped, it broke up, it ran:
each component part that Whitman believed
corresponded to a personality trait

dispersed, Self-esteem dribbling down
the examination table, Caution skidding
behind the door, Adhesiveness splashed
on the doctor's hands, Combativeness lurking

by the legs of a wooden stool, Philoprogenitiveness
in lumps on the lab's white tile floor.
The oily scum of the preserving alcohol,
the stench, the dashed and sticky remnants.