

FROM THE DIARY OF PETER DOYLE

it was a cold, stormy night. I was working  
my horse-car, on late duty, no passengers  
when along came this burly, bearded man  
blown in by the storm  
a blanket thrown over his shoulders.  
he got on and sat down, silent.  
I looked at him sitting slightly hunched  
against the cold--he seemed vigorous  
like an old sea-captain.  
it was lonely on a lonely night  
so I decided to talk to him. something in me  
was drawn to him. he was drawn the same way, too.  
we were familiar at once. I put my hand on his knees.  
we understood. he didn't get out at the end of the trip  
in fact went all the way back with me.  
from that time on we were the biggest sort of friends.

we used to stroll of an evening  
after work, Walt and I  
flowing with the crowds and bustle  
Walt would wave and talk to everyone  
he was an attraction so genial and open  
his eyes warm under his crushed hat with his  
long hair and flowing beard like old Father Jove  
himself come to walk the world.  
little presents continuously he'd buy me  
sweet-meats, candy, a mother-of-pearl knife  
I remember with 3 blades. it was great  
of an evening to shake loose and drift  
the streets with Walt.

he's good to me so why do I despair?  
worked til 2 a.m. and there was Walt  
waiting. we went on a moonlight ramble

through the Capitol, past the White House  
down the long avenues the streets deserted  
finally resting on the bank of the Potomac  
the water shivered with thousands of silver fish  
Walt started to explain the constellations  
his voice so deep and tender I fell asleep  
woke, startled, to his calm grey eyes  
in the morning light, his coat over me  
said he got used to sitting up all night  
with wounded soldiers. his face looked  
the way an angel's face might, stepping on thorns:  
full of love and pain and so far away  
I was jealous. but I ain't wounded, I said  
I got the use of all my limbs and faculties  
meaning a joke. he got up kinda hurried  
called me "son." embraced me. I went home to bed.

I am ugly I know  
my complexion is like sour milk  
it turns their stomachs--  
girls, I mean, from the most dainty  
to the gross ones who slop beer  
on my pants at table

but you, Walt, you look through  
my craters on the moon  
with such soft puzzlement  
like I held a key you couldn't turn  
in a dream and it means a lot  
or like I was the head-waters of the Nile  
and you the first man to find them!  
what do you want of me?  
I feel like I'm some kind of cosmic joke.

when I got home tonight  
there was a bouquet of flowers:  
a bunch of hairy-tongued iris  
small pink roses, some daffodil.  
struck me blank at first  
but it was Walt, all right.

I'm so low down blue and miserable  
my face all broken out with barber's itch  
I feel so bad I could throw myself under a train  
get sliced up but damned pieces would just  
continue throbbing with more pain  
more misery, spread around more  
like smashing a wasp's nest with a stick.

it's almost like a marriage  
and that almost is what kills. . .

he took me to the Doctor to see about my face  
he has clothes made for me--rough flannel  
shirts, the kind he wears himself  
he lends me money when I need it  
gives me good advice about my job  
wants me to advance and get along  
sends me bouquets of flowers  
embraces me, kisses me, is dotting  
and loving. calls me "son," "brother," "dear boy,"  
"darling," "baby," calls himself "your old man"  
so why do I despair get blue and low down  
threaten to kill myself so he's upset  
and angry? . . .

oh, Walt, I could tell you why  
but I can't. you're the good grey poet, the man  
so pure and manly he never sins and though  
the world may call your writing obscene and dirty  
your followers, some very important men,  
know different. I guess I know, too.

I've read "Leaves of Grass," the Calamus poems  
in fact I have my own calamus songs, Walt.  
they're not like yours innocent and ideal  
though it probably comes to the same thing:  
the damn writing wins out and we  
and everything else about us go down.

at least I know there's something more to us  
while you fuss and evade like a mother hen.  
I love you, Walt, and understand your  
need--for fame. I was willing, oh, so willing  
to give and that's what hurts. the old body  
insists on having its say,  
not to break and unravel slowly to the end.

after your stroke and my taking care of you  
you said you'd mend and it'd be old times  
but I knew, Walt, it was a plea for me  
to pretend. so, I'll pretend whatever you say  
and I'll write you a letter once a week  
but I won't come visit you in Camden.

I was turned away at your funeral  
til someone recognized me and led me in.  
I saw you, Walt, stretched out  
serene and olympian--a bit waxy and  
rouge-flushed, but you'd made it.  
one of their immortals at last.

I didn't break down--not there anyway.  
the crowds, your gentlemen friends  
fussing, the newsmen--made our being  
together unreal. not til I got home  
and remembered the night I fell asleep  
on your shoulder--the warmth and shaginess  
of your grey shawl on my cheek  
your solid chest beneath like a cavern  
near the sea full of mysterious sighs  
and quiverings, a universe that grew  
forever so it seemed--did I cry  
for us, Walt, blind and exhausted.

200 dollars and a gold watch in your will  
for me, Walt! I never saw either the money  
or the watch--hear you gave them to another  
boy instead.

for those eight years of love and suffering  
spent with my youth in tow, I say  
goodbye, you have them. I move easy among  
railroad men and do my job  
do what I can each day, remember  
the good times--they're mine  
exclusive. I wake to them  
every morning, Walt, like a soft fog  
that rolls in overnight and leaves its taste  
a bit metallic and burning on my tongue.



*photo of Whitman and Peter Doyle c. 1865*