

SECOND-BORN SON

1.

This house, September, and a woman
even you could believe in. I came here
on a ferry to write these lines about you, I
in my thirty-sixth year in perfect health,
as you would say, as you did say, and I too
a second-born son enamored of ferries:
the continuous white froth behind, the sea-birds
gliding impossibly close to water or diving
for scraps as you did into your chaos,
content with what crusts you could find there.
Sideswiped by any grace, how the faces
of strangers undid you, Tuesday through Monday--
cab drivers, ferrymen, widows--that world
you owned like a lamp you could not stop
rubbing. But especially on ferries,
wide-mouthed and handsome: who worried
about destinations? And the sun and moon
on opposite horizons falling and rising
as though connected by wires, the sun orange
and the moon orange. And you between sea floor
and sky floor, your reflection pendant, a creature
alike of air as of water, the face that you loved
there wistful and whiskered and your hat cocked
as you pleased, and your slow omnivorous smile.

2.

The light here could take you like touch
away. Goldenrod. Bird Flash. Shadow.
But this wind--howl-sick, unsettling--listen:
whistle in the underpinnings, window-caresser.
Houses you built with your brothers in Brooklyn,
a trade learned from your father who, even as you
whistled down your reckonings toward tomorrow,

lay there dying of what he missed, some lack
you tried hard to supply with your words--
supple, insinuating, carefree, careening toward
disasters you had not begun, luckily, to understand.
Between the soles of your feet and that hard
earth what a sad distance. Earth and father
you coupled, saving for mothers the sea,
or the moon--sagging, yellow-breasted, brown-
nipples--oh how you courted it, eclipsing
with your father's house-building hands
its uncentering brilliance at the last minute.
Hammerblow and firedamp. So far down
no wind would howl there but only the dark
interstices of your firstlove floating you back
to such omnipotence as you could muster.
All your moons are mothers, and the womb,
given its own good time, has its own revenge.

3.

Which self was it, Walt, that called you
to the window that dusk as your father
lay dying, your only older brother going mad,
your youngest brother crippled and half-witted,
your mother knitting her yarn of helplessness
around you all tighter and tighter--to that window
where you saw prefigured in clouds off Long Island
your own face and heard the late mockingbird
speak your name in the elms? I see you there
tentative as the first stars, turning not bright
but transparent as glass through which you wander
into the evening to become the lover of lonely
housewives, the begetter of invisible children,
sunder of depths, food for the hungry
who do not know they are hungry, salt
for their food and their wounds, flesh-fiber
and muscle-fiber, mica on the rock, dust mote
in the day-ending light that streams past your body
and shapes on the silent form of your father
the elongated shadow of his second-born,
looming like nightfall. And in the manuscript
the long dusty avenues of your lines rise
weightlessly from the page and wind off toward
some zero of expectation, high over Paumanok.