What would you say to me, Walt Whitman, today? 
Is there anything you can give me but your love, 
That total devotion to comprehension of the word? 
It is not the forms you evoked, these are changed, 
But the force you spoke with, the heart's holy rapture,

Your knowledge of the changeless in birth and death, 
The merit of man in his eternal suffering, 
Your love of the stars, of valour, and of doom 
That I would say to you, Walt Whitman, tonight, 
That you could say to me, Walt Whitman, today.

Philip Dacey

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS MEETS WALT WHITMAN IN HEAVEN

An Entertainment

Scene: A swimming hole duplicating Thomas Eakins'. 
Six swimmers are posed accordingly. As Whitman 
and Hopkins enter, the swimmers go into motion. 
The effect is that of a painting come to life by 
the entrance of the two poets.

HOPKINS: For us, Walt, Heaven is a swimming hole. 
God has decreed it so. We are 
To spend eternity here, beside 
And in these waters, flanked by the flanks 
Of naked young men.

WHITMAN: But you're 
A priest. I can understand why I 
Should be here, my heaven on earth, 
In the arms of a well-formed and loving 
Boy, become my earth in heaven, 
But unless your order has replaced its 
Prayer books with my Leaves of Grass 
I could sooner count the drops 
In that pool than say why you're here.

HOPKINS: Many reasons, I suppose, but none 
For me to know absolutely. Who 
Put me here explains nothing 
Fully. I once wrote to Bridges-- 
That's Robert, the poet, who acted as conductor 
Between your work and me, the fire 
Leaped—that I thought no one could admire 
The beauty of the human body more 
Than I. Still or in action. Did you see
That dive? Fairfall? And a poem of mine, 
Alas, like many others, most 
Of my gestures, unfinished, called
"Epithalamion,”
Celebrated my brother Everard's 
marrige 
By drawing a scene much like the one 
We’ve entered. "Boys from the town" 
with
"Bellbright bodies" frolic 
In a river, the "kindcold" Hodder, 
while a 
Spying stranger undoes piece 
By piece his wear until, Adam 
Again, he tries a pool close-by, 
Splash, and swims, laughs, is lavish 
In his gay grasp and waterloss, 
His float and wet kiss intimate.

WHITMAN: You're the first pagan Jesuit 
I've ever met. My pleasure. 
No wonder that poem never saw 
Completion. To turn material like that 
Into a wedding gift would require 
A miracle. You're not St. Hopkins, 
Are you, yet? Unless a couple 
Of the swimming boys wed.

HOPKINS: The dean 
Or dell was to be wedlock, the water 
Spousal love, and the flora 
Relatives and friends "ranked round."

WHITMAN: And your brother and his wife? Two 
weeds? 
Or rocks? Or would they enter and the 
bride 
Startle the boys into hiding?

HOPKINS: I admit 
To ill-conceiving. I was distracted 
By God's plenty in the form of flashing 
Backs, and hair that, whipped, gave 
Worlds to space, balled graced.

WHITMAN: I like the pure version of your poem. 
Stripped. The Sacred sense in the skin. 
But better I like that red-haired one 
Who did the flip. Look out! He means 
To soak us till we might as well 
Get in.

HOPKINS: "They do not think whom they 
souse 
With spray."

WHITMAN: You quote me before 
I could quote myself. You know my work 
Well. I wish I had known yours.

HOPKINS: My knowledge was scattered, partialpoor. 
But I picked up much from hints. I 
derived 
Whole meals from scraps. One leaf 
Or few lines of a leaf. So it was 
With your twenty-eight bathers. 
One glance and they grew. Into me. 
And now my poem, your poem, and this 
scene 
Grow into each other. They 
Marry. Marry! Even to a watcher 
In each poem who "unseen sees." And we 
The watchers here.

WHITMAN: I watch, I watch. 
And more. Let the voyeurs consume 
themselves 
In frets.

HOPKINS: That's my music.

WHITMAN: Did you 
Die from such discordance? Men have. 
Age won me, but you're too young.

HOPKINS: The immediate cause was Irish culture 
In the form of Dublin’s corrupted 
water 
System. Unheavenly. Only bacilli
Swam it. I contracted typhoid. The Irish,
Whose ambition, I noted, has always been
To say a thing as everybody says it
Only louder, were no doubt glad
To be rid of me. If a sneer drives
An Irishman to madness, and it does
I so drove many. My five years
In Dublin, dreary city, were my last,
And sufficient payment for this holiday—
And another drenching! Into what faith
Have I just been baptized? Do I
Offend any Irish blood in you?

WHITMAN: I had a good friend. Name of Doyle.
Peter. But I'll not let him, or me,
Get caught in cross-channel firing.

HOPKINS: And cross-Atlantic firing?

WHITMAN: If this Pool proves salty, I'll know two states
Meet here, to contend, and sign a pact.
Hello, England.

HOPKINS: Hello, America.
And hello, Mr. Hyde.

WHITMAN: Who? I
Am no Hide. I am Mr. Show. Mr.
Peel off the heavy layers. Mr.
Bare the heart, and loins. These clothes
Will have to go.

HOPKINS: Button up, Walt.
You'll have all eternity to parade
Unmediated by art. The water will wait.
Hyde is our Stevenson's new creation.
One man's secret self. You
Are mine. I told Bridges so:
"I always knew in my heart Walt

WHITMAN: Whitman's mind to be more like my own
Than any other man's living."

WHITMAN: Why not? The mother country watches
From a distance her son. Or daughter?
I always thought I would have made a great
Mother myself.

HOPKINS: I agree. Your hair
Is mother-hair. Womb-white.
Long as moonlight trailing earth's Shoulder. But I went further, said
(Heaven seems to perfect the memory!):
"As he is a very great scoundrel,
This is not a pleasant confession.
And this also makes me the more
Desirous to read him and the more
Determined I will not."

WHITMAN: "Scoundrel"?
Do I have to put up with an eternity
Of insults? I'd rather be ignored in hell.
I never liked priests, except a few
I met in the Civil War. When they saw
Me at bedside, the sick and dying
Press against my bosom, they forgot
What they'd heard about my book. That
Is To say, my life. But they weren't
Jesuits,
And they weren't English. My work had
friends
In England, some as true or truer
Than any at home, and I admire
Your queen (America needs a queen
To lead her, we've had enough of
Fathers, Father), but fresh and open
Spaces let my book breathe,
And that means it doesn't survive
Tight collars well. See this neck?
Sunburnt. Airbathed.
HOPKINS: If I did not
Embrace you, it was from too much love,
Not lack of it.

WHITMAN: Don't get Jesuitical
With me. I'll drop you in the pool,
Robe and all. Roughhouse is American.
You're half my age but thin and from
The looks of you bird-light. Does
every
Body here shrink so? I bet
You gave up eating the earth one Lent
And forgot to resume.

Chorus (of six swimmers):
Throw him in,
Throw him in!

HOPKINS: Don't do so
Before hearing more. Looking at you,
At your poems, at the idea of you
I constructed, I felt I was looking
Into a mirror, one fogged no doubt
By passage across the sea, but there
I was. I thought I looked good
In American garb, American gab.
The Society's secret: Gerard Manley
Whitman.

WHITMAN: I'll admit to envy
Of your middle name. Walter Manley,
Drop an "e" or not, would suit
My design. The brotherly curl of leaves.

HOPKINS: I know it suits. Gentlemanly.
You give new meaning to that term so
Important to me and my countrymen,
there
On your American frontier.

WHITMAN: Brooklyn
Isn't in California, but I'll accept
The compliment. Maybe. If your black
Folds aren't hiding an edge to your
words.

HOPKINS: My sympathies, though crossed with
fear's fine
Hatches, are deep. "Long live the weeds
And the wilderness yet."

WHITMAN: Has that no edge?
My book's Leaves of Grass, not Leaves
Of Weeds.

HOPKINS: I mean refinement soon
And dangerous to its own achieve marks
No longer where it walks. Wallows.
Sinks. Will disappear the sooner
For facing away. To rare air.
As these lads, raw, throw themselves
In, and down, they rise. To take
The rarest air, because it hags
Gravely--gulp--home. I mean
A lost commandment is, Thou
Shalt not murder Adam.

WHITMAN: But?

HOPKINS: But what?

WHITMAN: You said you once vowed not
To read me. That murders Adam. I
Fall. Would you murder out of love?
You haven't told me all.

HOPKINS: I would
Only dress him, to address him,
In distance, or the light wear of
measure,
Or even great fronds from his own
carden, great comfortable cloaks
Of green in which he could be seen
Anywhere, and be welcome, for to look
On him as he is, cloudclear and hotly
handsome, is to try to stare
Down the sun. Or say: too close
And we die. I keep him away
Just so far, to keep him by.
WHITMAN: Enough.

HOPKINS: Wait, Walt, what
Are you doing?

WHITMAN: Going for a swim.
I've had enough of your ungenerous
And squeamish, slippery, simply bad-
Mannered ways. You're the barbaric
One here. My yawn was a love-call,
Amatory, adhesive, on wing for a new
Order, a new man, unafraid
Of the universe, parts and whole.
Including
My parts. But you preach distrust
Of brother for brother. I'll shed these
Constricting cloths, loose as they are,
Right now. And when I drop my pants
We'll just see if you go blind
Or burn up like a piece of swinefat.

HOPKINS: Of course I was speaking metaphorically.

WHITMAN: Go dunk your metaphors, then. Here
I am. Head, shoulders, brawn
Of chest, rose-nipples I can feed
The world by, belly—slap it,
The sound is sound—electric fur,
Cock and balls swinging to a rhythm
Beyond numbers, the free verse
Of sex, thighs and knees, they take me
Over roads, and feet feel
The earth roll, the grass grow.
Now what do you say to that?

HOPKINS: "Glory be to God for dappled things!"

WHITMAN: A poem of yours?

HOPKINS: Yes, one
Of the finished ones.

WHITMAN: I present you
With my naked self, you give in return

A line from a poem. The difference
between us
Couldn't be clearer.

HOPKINS: But I praise,
Celebrate.

WHITMAN: From a distance.

HOPKINS: How else
Can it be? Those "placid, self-contained"
Animals you've written about so lovingly
Are too sunk in themselves to rise up
Far enough to praise anything. Unless
You say they praise by being. Then
who's
The Jesuitical one now? That rock, too,
Would so praise. Would you welcome life,
Or death, as an igneous hunk? I can't
Imagine you so static, hard.

WHITMAN: It's true I won't revise my title to
Hunks of I gn eos: Fragments Fallen
From a Man Mountain, but intimate praise
Is praise by doing. I loose my body
From hiding--

HOPKINS: "My heart in hiding stirred
For a bard."

WHITMAN: What?

HOPKINS: A bad joke.
We Victorians loved them.

WHITMAN: --and jump in!

Chorus: Welcome to water. There's always room
For one more.

WHITMAN: Glad to be here.
To roll and thrash, float, flash
And like a white whale blow spume.
This is better than returning as grass
Under a bootsole. I was right:
Dying is luckier than anyone supposes.
Father, you look lonely out there.
And don't tell me your great love
Of swimming keeps you out. I'm on
To your tricks.

HOPKINS: I admit the water
Invites. And I'll enter. But understand
You are the poet of good health, of
the robust
Physique, the soul to match, I
Never claimed to filter and fibre
Anyone's blood. How could I?
I couldn't filter and fibre my own.
This cassock hides my third wreck.

WHITMAN: There are no wrecks in these waters.
Only the sleek hulls of young men,
And one slightly battered, though
bouyant,
Barge.

HOPKINS: The Deutschland and the Eurydice
were ships
That sank. My poems about them sank
Faster. But my body began shipping
Water from the start. I was always
Frail. Or made myself so. Once water
Was what I didn't have: drank
None for a week. To win a bet.
To prove my will (if not my wit).
To teach my body to submit. It
Presented me with a black tongue.

WHITMAN: That's abuse of the body, not discipline.
I vowed in the middle of my life, forty
Years young, when I could see where
I'd been
And where I was getting, to inaugurate
A pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded
Body. No fat meats. No late suppers.
The purest milk. Light meals. That

Was my religious act. You wished
To whip yourself to heaven. You whipped
Yourself to an early grave. Dublin's
Waters were just an excuse.

HOPKINS: Viae Negativae à la Whitman, à la Hopkins.
Nine led to fainting in the confessional,
A wasting of the little I began with.
And my body bears witness. As yours
Displays your history of health. I dare not
Be so quick as you to show it.
I love the human body, in general
And particular. As figure of the world's,
As matter to tire in the fitting dress,
Appropriate and close, it becomes,
of a theology,
And as object, where the creation collects
Moving, and moving, winded to mind,
In-spiritus. I love his, and his,
His, his, his, his,
And yours. But not mine. Mine
Was no friend. We fought. To the end.

WHITMAN: Tom Eakins should be here. He'd
Patch up your quarrel in a hurry. I've
Been thinking of Eakins since I got here. Can't
Figure out why. He did my portrait.
A good one. Better than Alexander's. His
Made me look like a saint. That's your
Business. Tom painted a man.
I don't mean a sinner, I mean a mortal.
I was dressed, of course, but we joked
About his doing me in the buff:
Maybe sitting stiffly upright, formal,
Hands on knees, my beard my only
cover. How fine that would have been!
America's new poet, smiling in his skin.
We both knew we weren't joking, too,
But didn't admit it to each other. So.
America's deprived of that vision. The Good
Grey Poet keeps his shirt on. But
Eakins pulled the loincloth off his
Male model and lost his job. The young Philadelphia girls in Tom’s class, who thought That art was High Polite, screamed And ran to the authorities. Then to their mamas. Eakins remained steady through it all. Didn’t Blink. The artist’s eye. My words—You’re right, heaven does perfect The memory—could easily have been his: "It is a sickly prudishness that bars All appreciation of the divine beauty Evidenced in Nature’s cunningest work— The human frame, form and face."

HOPKINS: Dear Harry Ploughman.

WHITMAN: Who?

HOPKINS: A man in a poem of mine. So named. "Harry Ploughman’s Body" would have been more Accurate. Your words are like an abstract Of the poem. I studied him—muscle And shank, ribs, curls, and cheeks. Went as far as his "liquid waist" But not as far as Eakins. I had My Philadelphia in my Jesuit superiors.

WHITMAN: Recite it, recite it. HOPKINS: I will, I will, But later. We have all eternity to Exchange poems. Right now I mean To test the waters.

WHITMAN: Then I converted you? You’ll join my religion of brotherhood? Of Love, unchecked by the false god Guilt and his consort Fear, for the whole

Body of creation as kin to man And woman? I knew some. Winsome.

HOPKINS: Know I also have a Philadelphia Within. And my collar, if removed, clings. It’s just that the sun here, though never Not at midday height, and therefore Not sun, is hot. I sweat, like my Harry at his plough. I need a swim.

WHITMAN: Well, whatever the reason, it’s time You got in. Maybe your doing so Will drown the distance between us. Who Knows? We might yet go arm-in-arm Through this paradise.

HOPKINS: We might. But not By denying our differences. Together we form Our own pied beauty. All things counter Cost only praise of them. I hereby Shed robe, the rest, but not like a skin, An earlier life outgrown and discarded, More like wear, a way, gone Interior, deeper than show.

WHITMAN: However You spell it, it’s Hopkins in the raw.

WHITMAN & CHORUS: Hurray!

HOPKINS: If you’re cheering for the singularity of my single Private, as my hero Scotus,

SWIMMER #1: "Scrotum"— --Did he say

HOPKINS: who loved Acquinas enough To veer from him cheered, charmed by,
Univocal thing, any this
Distinct from the grand, omnivorous
That,
There's a chance for us. Union
Makes no sense unless those to be
One are no such thing at all,
Nor likely to be, either.

WHITMAN: Union?
Is that a proposal?

HOPKINS: No, merely the prevailing
Myth of this place.

WHITMAN: Sounds restrictive
To me. I work best without check
With original energy. Your Society
Taught you well the habit of being
Prevailed upon, but my Society
Was Myself. I like room, not rooms.
Nor a myth I have to conform to.

HOPKINS: Consider it, if not just rumor,
A kind of gravity. Which is honored
most
By failing to observe it. By, say,
Dancing. Each step defies the Law
Without which steps would be impossible.
Or by, say, this:

WHITMAN: Look, he
Dives, daring, into all this wet!
Not practiced, but like an amateur, amat,
He loves. There's hope for him yet.

HOPKINS: Help!

WHITMAN: What is it?

HOPKINS: This cold. It shocks. If
Sweetly. You didn't warn me. But this
Wreck still floats. For which I give
Praise.

SWIMMER #1: Did he say "race"?

CHORUS: A race!

WHITMAN & HOPKINS: Who, us?

SWIMMER #2: First one across
And back's the ace of this swimming
hole.

WHITMAN: Do you think that means Laureate,
Father?

HOPKINS: Why not? Let the water be words and we
Pull ourselves through to the last line.
Except I couldn't keep up. You said
Yourself you trained your body for years.
I only wished mine would disappear. Soul
Can't stroke. Still, if I can shake
Off this chill by a contest, I'm for it.

WHITMAN: Considering my age and your premature
Decline, we're evenly matched. Though
We won't set any records, even for here.
Who's to give us the signal?

Chorus: Ready,
Set, go!

SWIMMER #3: Oh, no, the small one
Seems to have swallowed his weight in
water
Getting off. The old man's a natural.
Look at them have at it, each in his
Own way. One hugs the water, and it
Hugs him back. The other measures it
Out, portion by portion, his arms
Moving to a rhythm that cuts across
The water's moves. Syncopated swimmer!
Now at the turn he's recovered and
challenges
The old man. Call them The Weather
And The Clock. They're neck and neck.
Now
They look at each other and grin. In 
mid-swim.
What's up? An agreement? A thrown 
race?
No, just a momentary nod. A sleep 
Or tribute to the other. But once 
again
Concentration's back. The water flies. 
Weather's beard whips, but The Clock 
Has a trick and holds his breath. Here 
They come! It's hard to see. They're 
churning 
Up a screen. In a rush, they arrive. 
It's 
A tie!

SWIMMER #4: No, it's Weather.
SWIMMER #5: No, The Clock.
SWIMMER #6: Ask 

WHITMAN: I think the water won. I'm tired.

HOPKINS: I'm sure I lost. I don't feel like 
The winner of anything. And I saw your 
hand, 
Walt, touch shore before mine. 
Not much, but enough.

WHITMAN: Manly honesty 
Requires I agree. But it also requires 
I confess I had an unfair advantage.

HOPKINS: The water's a member of your brother- 
hood and carried 
You partway?

WHITMAN: It is, and may have, but that's 
Not what I meant. I figured out 
Why Tom Eakins was on my mind. This 
scene

These swimmers are his. We walked 
right into 
His painting, "The Swimming Hole."
I saw it
Once—not in Philadelphia—and knew 
I was home. I've been at home 
Since I got here. Even in your sheltered 
Jesuit's world you must have learned 
About the help to a team playing 
On its own ground.

HOPKINS: I loudly cheered 
Many a Balliol rowing crew at Oxford 
To victory.

WHITMAN: Then you know. And know 
We'd have to meet once more, on English 
Ground, to be fair. These are American 
Waters.

HOPKINS: You are a sportsmanlike winner. 
And I can't argue about a painting 
I've never 
Seen. But granting these are American 
Waters, I'll also claim they aren't.

WHITMAN: Do you mean to say Tom Eakins has 
An English counterpart? I don't 
believe it.

HOPKINS: I mean this scene, though earthly, 
is not 
Earth. Did you forget, Walt, you died? 
Welcome to heaven, like it or not. 
Unless I've misread this place--my 
studies 
In theology at St. Beuno's, Wales, 
Could hardly have prepared me for such 
An afterlife—your body, its apparent 
Extension through time and space, is but 
A single, eternal point broken 
By some prism beyond our science 
Into an insubstantial, spread fan
Of present, past and future. As is Everything you see here.

WHITMAN: Impossible.
There, when I pinch him--

SWIMMER #1: Hey, old man!--

WHITMAN: He jumps. Ow! And pinches back. And what I feel for these rude youth Around us is substantial. Even for you, If you'd only relax. The swim didn't Warm you up much. Or is that because, According to you, the water's not water?

HOPKINS: I know Digby couldn't drown in it.

WHITMAN: Digby? Unless he had gills, he could.

HOPKINS: Digby Mackworth Dolben. My, Let me guess, Peter Doyle. The River Welland took him. At nineteen. I had Known him two years. Four years my younger, But that provided just enough distance To show how close we were. A convert, Like myself. Tenuous health. Sang No song of himself. In fact, once burned His hair off. Lit it with a candle. You wouldn't have approved of him. And He was the most beautiful young man I've ever seen.

WHITMAN: I would have approved.

HOPKINS: See that one wading out? I thought When I first saw him he was Digby. I had hoped it was he. Forever. But Digby had less flesh. As if The spirit crowded it off his bones.

WHITMAN: There you go again, setting the two Against each other like enemies. If these Are spiritual waters, they're also physical Ones, no illusion, and could drown your Friend again, or you for the first time.

HOPKINS: You're so enamored of your bulk--what Was it you wrote, "There is that lot Of me and all so luscious"?--you can't Admit your prized flesh has become A shadow.

WHITMAN: I can't, can't I? I'm Not a violent man, but if a dunking Can teach you this water's real, then A dunking it'll be. Boys, it's time For a little innocent American fun.

HOPKINS: In the name of . . .

CHORUS: Whoopee! We've got him.

WHITMAN: This is called, Holding Down Hopkins.

CHORUS: How long?

WHITMAN: Long enough for him to learn The dangers of this swimming hole. He thinks There's no harm can come to him here. He has to be taught, for his own good health, To respect water no matter where It is.

SWIMMER #3: I think maybe he's learned Enough respect. He's kicking pretty hard.

WHITMAN: Let him up then. We'll see if he wants To quote poetry now.

SWIMMER #3: You taught him Too well. You won't even get him To say his name for awhile.
WHITMAN:  Quick!
Lift him out onto that flat rock.
Thank Eakins for an emergency bed,
Whether he intended one or not.
I'll just sit here next to him
Till he comes round. I've done this
Too much. I'm once again at Fredericksburg.
And this young priest who loves me
But not well is my brother George
And many others.

HOPKINS:  Then two times,
And one timeless, merge here. I heard you.
Barely. Your voice comes through a mist.
You didn't quite flood me though you taught me
How to choke in heaven. I don't know
If I choked on water or it
On me. If it was in my throat,
I was in its. But I do know
That if I'm a soldier in your Civil War,
And thus American, you're also English,
A Jesuit, in fact, who sits beside me
On my deathbed. I said, "I am so happy,'" then nothing else. Bridges Told me what your friend O'Connor Called you, in his book. A good grey Christ. Who is, of course, my lover.

WHITMAN:  Bill went too far in praising me.
Christ never nearly drowned a man.
Though he did tempt some to walk on water.
But if his words for me can help you Live with one who likes best
The dress of the old Adam—though I do promise from time to time To put my clothes back on—I'm glad He said it.

HOPKINS:  I close my eyes and that's
My death. I open them, stand up,
And that's my resurrection. You're the first
Person my new eyes look on. Let
My arm around your shoulder, draped
In my Manley way, signify that.

WHITMAN:  And let the two of us now formally Add ourselves to Tom Eakins' composition, His version of Eden. Shall we stand Like two blades, bucks, a certain Tilt to our heads and jut to our hips To show our pride in sex?

HOPKINS:  Let's.

(All pose, the six young men as they did at the start, Hopkins and Whitman in such a way as not to fault Eakins' design.)