A HOOSIER SONG OF WALT WHITMAN

It was like the pounding, recurring roar of the sea
I had never seen or heard deep in my Midwestern youth, but could remember from some other life. That slow, rhythmic song of a boy who stepped forth on a fish-shaped island and watched lamb foetuses push forth from the womb, lilac leaves sway in salt breeze, and the town drunkard stagger past the schoolmistress on his way home from a binge. That spiralling song carried all the way to my inland island in the hills of southern Indiana and hummed in my ears like the sea in a shell mysteriously deposited a thousand miles away. And when I went forth from my Indiana island and landed by accident on that child's Paumanok, I listened to the surf pounding on the shore, turned inland, and caught the voice of the boy who stepped forth to sing for the man who now looks back the songs of the people whose breath fills his lungs.

CAMDEN: A VISIT TO WHITMAN'S

finally got there, the light grey wood framed house with brick sidewalk; yellowed and stuffed with relics and images, the good poet's home—all the usual stories with cracks where innocence squeezes and breaks through.

in the study a glass case, filled with letters, his cane, the soiled white felt hat; in a corner a small joy, old leather shoes, worn and quite forgotten.

upstairs, the bedroom, the place where he died, dead books lie on the shelves neatly stacked in procession, across the room, on another shelf his knapsack, black with cracked straps, lying alone with the dust, hidden from direct view.

a touch there, a connection with him gone in the grave, the poems kept there, nursed, scorned, cherished on rambles in the woods. in the end, abandoned too, to lie on a dusty shelf, lifeless, dried and frayed.