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.