

Michael Rumaker

YET ANOTHER POEM ADDRESSED TO WALT WHITMAN

For my father, who worked in it

Walt Whitman, as I ride over the bridge named  
for you  
I wonder what you would think of this sprawl  
with its acrid stinks  
I wonder what you would think of the buck  
twenty  
they charge to cross over the bridge  
that bears your name only  
Even the birds have a feeble tweet  
in this greasy air  
and the few trees have a choked and stricken  
look  
Walt Whitman, nearly everybody in Philadelphia  
still reads the Bulletin  
Just think of all those citizens  
reading your poems instead  
this couldn't have happened  
and this poem wouldn't have had to happen  
Imagine the citizens on either side of the  
Delaware  
reading your poems  
and rising up with such a cry of joy and rage  
streaming out of the subway tunnels  
tearing down the cracking plants of the  
refineries  
dousing the oil waste torches that befoul  
the air  
  
I think of the cold sparkling days  
you rode the ferry back and forth  
between Philly and Camden just for the happy  
hell of it  
Now I can't see through the air  
my eyes burn with chemicals

I feel holes being eaten in my nose by  
the air  
I think of you walking down Laurel Springs  
singing to the birds  
Walt, you won't believe this  
but the birds here are all sick  
They've put up new streetlights  
to protect us from each other  
Light like sunlight through a dense smoggy  
cloudcover  
but light so artificially bright  
the birds think it's day  
Walt, I've seen sparrows -  
what would the world be without sparrows! -  
at midnight hopping in the branches of trees  
under these lights,  
poor-looking sparrows,  
their feathers sticking out in all the  
wrong directions  
making neurotic sickly chirps no bird  
could genuinely be proud of  
and with the frenetic darting about  
of the over-fatigued and directionless  
Night's been turned into a ghastly day  
and the birds don't sleep right anymore  
and they don't sing right  
What do you think of that, Walt?

And you should see what they've done to  
Timber Creek  
which you liked to walk along  
and shout Homer and Shakespeare  
at the top of your lungs  
and jump in the creek and swim in it  
and afterwards beat yourself with branches  
to scourge the poisons in the blood and restore  
the blood to singing surging health,  
flailing and yelling more poetry to the  
treetops -  
now that must've been a delightful and joyous  
spectacle for the birds of your day  
Walt, it's now a flat dead cesspool  
so thick with the sludge of pollution

even the wind can't ripple it  
even the sun can't shine it up, at all  
Walt, it's appalling what's been done  
in the short time  
since you went arm-swinging through this  
country  
I'm truly sorry that I have to write this  
poem about it  
but in me are memories  
the firmament is in the roof of my head  
and dancing partner of it  
O old and youthful gay sailor of the in and  
the out  
who knew what makes us one with it all  
who breathes and shouts and is tender in my  
blood  
I report this to you,  
Grandfather and repository of the national  
health,  
this seedling's been hit with the hot  
and gorgeous  
sun of your poetry,  
and the Great Spirit, who makes me sing with  
crickets  
in winter,  
smokes vibrant with blood