J. H. Bowden

THE WALT WHITMAN SHOPPING CENTER

The Walt Whitman Shopping Center of Cold
Spring Harbor, New York (I can't rhyme your way)
is large, it contains multitudes, Salut!
You know, I think Old Walt would like it there,
or like a lot of it, anyway, Old
Walt would. I have not seen you, yet can say
that I have seen you, everywhere: Beirut,
Rome, Cairo, Tokyo, Delhi, everywhere,
or if not yet (Ya-honk! I sound my horn)
then soon you will be there, with catalogs
that show three hundred and sixty-five aisles,
in fifty-two departments: cosmetics,
dog food, insurance, hair cuts, Magic Mourn
Crematorium (O Lucky Death!), togs
for children, women's stuff (Clean, yes,
clean, I'll
say you are clean!), counter girls--dark-
haired spics--
you are clean, washed all over--Amigos!
Cleaner than the girls in the magazines,
certainly, and pickets, I adore you,
je me vous adore, marching forth and back.
At the OB/GYN sign I go
in, see sixth month women abort their genes
(that you would not like); next door, corpses
(new)
are laid out waiting paint, and the steel sack.
This, here, is the stronger stuff you said
you'd jet,
Walt, and you have stronger still within you
yet.

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