

THE CALLER OF BIRDS

1.

"walt WHITman walt WHITman"--
something a bird might call.
but you were the caller of birds
and once gave them voice,
letting them nest in your beard
until no one was sure
who it was that sang
or how you carried dawn like a backpack
into the city's night.

You who thrived
in the belly of a laugh,
the babble of a brook,
when you let your soul out to play for life
did you ever dream that so many
would romp with you,
that trees and bushes would grow jealous
of your growth?

You pulled like a magnet,
pushed a deep-furrowing plough,
prying away dead skins like a cancer
to find that germ under all,
that sprout you swallowed whole.

Earth was all the heaven you needed
and if the bluebird is not an angel
and an old oak the tree of life
then we dream like slugs.

2.

Swimming in the blue lake of summer
I think of you,
of young men floating on their backs in the sun,

their white bellies bobbing
as they souse each other with spray,
their mistress watching in silence
from her house on the hill,
longing for the homeliest of them,
the frailest.

When you said that you would wait for me
I had no idea how great your patience was,
like some old kind dog that still loves
to swim out to sea.

I ride your back, Walt Whitman,
your electric spine,
and find forests in my garden,
oceans in my thighs,
pools of fecund moonlight
in my daughter's eyes.

And you as you promised
beneath the soles of my boots;
in burgundy I sense your blood.
I shall carry you with me
like a small child's rock,
an old piece of string,
weathered tokens of myself
I give back to you now.

3.

I once wondered how you faced
the sputtering stars,
that heaping ashtray at life's end,
but I think I can see you
now at your dying--

a whiskery old man
raking the coals
of an ancient fire,
tired eyes grinning,
breath about to fade,
body sinking back into the arms
of a night so quiet
even the crickets whisper.