

Roger Mitchell

TO WALT WHITMAN ON AMERICA'S BIRTHDAY, 1978

Walt Whitman has just walked into the room,
and for a moment,
though everyone is looking at him,
no one goes forward to greet him.

It is Walt Whitman, after all,
and what could we possibly say to him
or he to us
that we wouldn't find embarrassing in the morning.

Luckily, someone rescues us from the silence,
someone I know vaguely,
was introduced to once at a function much like this one,
have said hello to in the elevator once or twice
but who works in another department
and so will become someone I greet
less and less over the years
until I do not recognize him at all
and he returns to being someone
I never met.

This person, this someone,
whose name even now escapes me,
asks Mr. Whitman if he would like a glass of sherry.
It is that kind of function.
A waiter in a white coat
who is also a graduate student in economics
appears with a glass of sherry.
Walt Whitman is too stunned to say thank you.
He drinks instead,
looking into the glass.

The person, the same person,
asks several questions.
He wishes to put everyone at ease.
Walt Whitman is already at ease.

He does not hear the questions.
He drinks his sherry, rather quickly,
puts the empty glass in his coat pocket
and leaves.

When he is safely gone,
we all have a good laugh
at that one.

B. Z. Niditch

WALT PASSED BY

we boys
don't pity us
Walt passed by
the wounded of the undeclared war
shining sun on blood and murder

surprise us
come and comfort us
pour no salt into my body
offer us only love of union
between brothers in civil war

it's hell
waiting for a clear word

Walt passed by