

Sharon Cumberland

ON BROOKLYN HEIGHTS PROMENADE:

Speaking to Whitman's Voice in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

1

I leave the heat of summer in my room to pace the deck of the
Promenade;
it sits like an earthen ship anchored in the harbor, poised
to pull away from bedrock into the sea.

We passengers promenade—children on skates, joggers, parents,
lovers;
old folks sit by the rails gazing at Manhattan's squatting towers.

The scene appears to pass quickly, as if our solid ship moved
forward—
cargo ships, tug boats passing us by. We stand at the rail—
there's the ferry, there's the Battery, there's the Statue of Liberty,
before we face our future in the open blank of sea.

A wedding party poses by the rail for pictures: six pink-ruffled
girls,
excited, expectant; they flutter with their lily and forget-me-not
bouquets.

Impatient groomsmen step aside to smoke, anticipating
celebration: drinking, and the dancing yet to come.

I watch from a bench; I wonder what the billowing bride, her wide
skirts
lifting in the tidal breeze, has launched with her groom.
What will come of that look, beyond happiness?

2

I am the "other" you spoke to, the one who looks back on you
because you looked forward to me, forward over flood-tides
and currents of time.

You are grass, O Self Who Sees, as I—who live momentarily—
will be grass as well. Our port holes looked out
over the same Brooklyn channel, the same human parade—yet not
the same.

Masts no longer bristle where Manhattan meets the sea:
Behemoth structures dwarf a shoreline bare of sail.

3

The same, yet not the same. What else, then, lies between us?
Nothing individual separates us, nothing human:

We have the consolation of friends, cycles of love, satisfying
work of mind by thought and music;
we have the friendly thump of a dog's tail marking our repose.

We gaze over the rail at our faces in the water, shift our focus
and see the lovely arms of seaweed, and fishes under the water,
see the fish swimming through our images, rippling in the water.

Everything you felt we feel: our pride, confusion, shame, elation;
you knew us well, like a brother to the friends, a lover
to the lovers, Self Who Sees.

What, then, lies between us? Time, place or distance, what can lie
between us? This: the uncertainty; this uncertainty of others.

4

Something has gone wrong. Our continuity is breached, like a leak
in the gunwales: we're shipping dirty water and our ballast has
shifted.

There is a great blank in our future, like the blank of open sea.
We must look back to you, because we cannot see beyond the
prow.

We are due to finality: not the individual tragedies—the crushed
head
or spill of priceless blood your hinged knee stooped to—

but ignoble, total blanking out: there is no honor, anymore, in
conflict—
our tools expand beyond imagination; our passengers are dancing
unawares,
dancing and strolling on the slanting deck.

We need your Captain, gone to grass.
We need his melancholy knowledge, the maddening awareness of
the open eye—
our mainsail is unfurled in the storm: we must go down.

Live, old life, we call into the gale! Our voices are swept behind us;
we cannot hear ourselves, nor can our captain hear.
Our cheeks balloon with poisoned air. What shall we do?

5

Unfortunate bride, gazing with love and pride at your groom,
your pink hopefulness avails not—not your child, yours will not
lead us
from the dangerous rail:

We are overboard already, and your unborn child is tumbling,
tumbling slowly
over an edge your parents and their parents fell from long ago;

Only the length of the fall is unknown—which generation will fail;
when will the seas wash over us?

Not yours, but another woman's baby—brown eyed, naked—in the
last
fresh place, hiding in secret from poisoned air—

too far for tainted water to travel uncleaned;
too poor for any power to care for its tiny foothold;
unstung and unspoiled by sea nettles of commerce—the wanting,
the selling;

Another woman's baby, hiding like a clam or snail in a tidal pool—
this tiny cargo with its priceless blood will fill the ruined world
with others, and fresh others.

6

And you, the Self Who Sees, you may see your mast-hemmed
world again,
a score of hundred years ahead, when our ruined land has yielded
to a new wilderness, another rising.

We must bid this ship of grass farewell, try to stash a treasure
in its flooding hold worth saving—
a relic or a skeleton remaining when the flesh is washed away.

We have our place in the dress-parade of history—the rise and fall,
like pitching, moon-pulled waves:

You rode the rising peak, the flashing top of promise;
we ride the trough, slide into the ditch, the inexorable ditch of
decay.

Margaret Stuart

LAUNCH PAD

a giant stands astride coquina beaches
on cape canaveral, a hypocaust
beneath his feet is hell, a terminal
en route to heaven, where would-be travelers
may book expensive reservations
for hyperborean polemic tours.
created by other giants with minds
of steel, symbol of art and science years
before his time, patrician host for space ships,
patient sentinel enslaved in duty,
as bound as was prometheus but without
a hercules to cut the nuclear chains.
in vain he offers flaming gifts in lieu
of flight beside columbia.