

Steve Kowitz

A WHITMAN PORTRAIT

You know the portrait of him that caused such a ruckus,
the one in the caneback chair & the cardigan sweater,
& him with that thick white imperious beard
striking a pose so grave & heroic
you'd think he was Odin or Lear
or some crusty Old Testament prophet—
which is just when you'll notice, as finally everyone does,
the butterfly perched on his right index finger.
& then you can see that Walt's sitting there
under that rakish sombrero, grandly amused,
as much as to say how delightful to see her!
& what a propitious moment she'd chosen to call. . . .
You can guess how his critics stewed over that one!
They'd fling up their arms in maniacal fury
& swear up & down that the thing was a fraud: *It's nothing
but papier maché!* they would shriek, *a photographer's
prop!* A slander that, however transparent, everyone
simply accepted as fact, till just last September
when high-resolution spectro-analysis
proved what any fool should have guessed:
she was just what she seemed, mortal & breathing,
A carbon-molecular creature like us: *Papilio aristodemus*,
now all but extinct, golden-banded & blue-tipped,
the very swallowtail archeo-lepidoterists claim
could have been seen all over Camden that summer,
one of the millions scooting about
thru the woods & fields around Timber Creek Pond!
Only, for whatever odd reason, this one had taken a fancy to Walt.
When she wasn't flitting about in the fennel & parsley,
the neighbors would see her light on his wrist
or swing thru his beard or perch on his shoulder
like some sort of angel, or sprite, or familiar.
How he did it we don't know exactly,
but as the photographer set up his camera
Walt sat himself down by the open window

& hummed a few bars of Donazetti's *La Favorita*,
at which simple tune that bright little beauty
flitted in from the garden as if she'd been called to.
If it's true there exist fake butterflies cut out of paper & wire,
my guess is they belong to a later generation of poets.
In any case this one was made of the same stuff as we are—
felt pleasure & pain in abundance: lit first
at the broad brim of his hat, next at the tip of his nose,
& at last on his finger. Was greeted by Walt
with a gruff, friendly laugh as one of his cronies.
Astonished, the chap who'd been fussing about with his camera,
stuck his head under the dropcloth, tilted the tripod,
adjusted his lenses, & managed at last to trigger the shutter,
& that's how that plate with the silver emulsion
—transfigured thanks to that one stroke of light—
turned into this serendipitous portrait,
this singular flight of felicitous whimsy,
at once blithe & austere, majestic & tender:
Walt Whitman & Butterfly. Camden, New Jersey. 1883.

