

## Kip Zegers

### THE PROMISE IS

Old Whitman, walking across Fulton  
from the ferry he loved,  
turning north on Nassau  
those crowded blocks to Beekman  
and the "Phrenological Cabinet" of Fowler  
and Wells. This was like walking in  
to a complex and irrefutable promise:  
that the measure of his head  
defined the things his heart  
could be. Here authorities  
of science and the soul commingled.  
Here a scaffold for intuition  
and for politics as learned  
and eccentric as the age.  
Indolent Whitman, whose slowness  
became patience, but needed many sparks.  
Here was his passivity named "Adhesiveness,"  
and "Amativeness" the sensuality  
that slowly drew him out.  
The city sparked him  
like gasoline. It was a city  
of particulars, worthy of love.

When I stand at Beekman & Nassau  
I see Sneaker City, Donut Plus,  
the Stetson Clearance Center  
and an almost empty street of afternoon.  
I see clerks beached between  
the long noon rush  
and the five o'clock flurry.  
I know that waiting well,  
and we are out here now  
as we have always been,  
with nothing changed but the buildings,  
the fashions, and the air.

Does he still walk up  
the street that's at my feet,  
old Walt who promised to stay  
somewhere out in time, waiting?

He is invisible as summer air,  
as solid in my heart's eye  
as Nassau's foot-worn tiles.  
What I see around me is an afternoon:  
a thin boy calling  
to two women he knows,  
and they stop to talk,  
a young man at the wheel of a cement truck,  
electronic beeper tolling.

He backs into a tight spot  
with ease, his cement  
sent many stories up.  
A building grows over Nassau  
the way everything grows,  
from the inside, becoming intricate  
with particulars. Like afternoons  
gathering into afternoons to come,  
like this afternoon filling up  
and passing away. It makes  
a promise without guarantees,  
it is before me and behind me,  
underfoot and in the air.  
The promise is untranslatable,  
is still untamed. And missing it  
one place, I look another,  
walking encouraged, walking  
into time. It is as if  
someone were sharing his life  
with me, beckoning me on. I see  
an old man going into the subway  
at Broad & Wall Streets, disappearing  
in the dark. He takes the train now  
to Brooklyn.