

Walt Whitman

(May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse. His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality. Born in Huntington on Long Island, Whitman worked as a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and—in addition to publishing his poetry—was a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War. Early in his career, he also produced a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842). Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money. After a stroke towards the end of his life, he moved to Camden, New Jersey, where his health further declined. He continued expanding and revising *Leaves of Grass* until his death in 1892. The collection was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American epic. He died at age 72 and his funeral became a public spectacle. (adapted from Wikipedia)

I think “the steep/core of things” is the same place as the world of objects, but seen from a different position, from a heightened or privileged vantage point. That’s what that poem reaches toward, the gift of a moment of being poised at the brink of that other perspective, seeing a little beyond the limits of ordinary selfhood...I think art makes steps toward that sort of perception—something broader, more generalized—all the time, but you can’t stay in that perception, can’t live there. Maybe if you’re Buddha...The most beautiful account of this worldview I can think of is Section Six of “Song of Myself,” in which Whitman gives us all those metaphorical equivalents of grass, then finally settles on describing it as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” That figure launches a matchless meditation on materiality, a consideration of how glorious it is to be in circulation, as matter, and how this is different than anyone had supposed, this participation, and—in what might be Whitman’s finest moment—“luckier.” The marvel of this passage is that it both does and doesn’t step away from the world of things; we are matter, and will always be, and if one stands at an appropriate distance, there is no more joyous possibility. –Mark Doty

Mark Doty

(born 8/10/53) Hailed for his elegant, intelligent verse, Mark Doty has often been compared to Walt Whitman. Doty has won a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Whiting Writer’s Award, the T. S. Eliot Prize, the National Poetry Series, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, the National Book Critics’ Circle Award, the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for first nonfiction, and the National Book Award for *Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems* (2008). Reginald Shepherd, in a review [of *Fire to Fire*] for *Publisher’s Weekly*, noted that “unlike his contemporaries, Doty has never eschewed beauty. Indeed, beauty, its unlikely, often unexpected, yet constant recurrence and its elusive fleetingness, is central.” With that emphasis on beauty Doty brings an attention to the particular, and a deep engagement with the world. Shepherd concluded: “The poems combine close attention to the fragile, contingent things of the world with the constant, almost unavoidable chance of transcendence, since ‘desire can make anything into a god.’” Or, as Elizabeth Lund put it in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Mark Doty holds a magnifying glass to his subjects. He uses language as a way to highlight a moment, elevate it, and unearth hidden depth and meaning.” (from poetryfoundation.org)

Sunday, March 30/Mark Doty

A Display of Mackerel

They lie in parallel rows,
on ice, head to tail,
each a foot of luminosity

barred with black bands,
which divide the scales'
radiant sections

like seams of lead
in a Tiffany window.
Iridescent, watery

prismatics: think abalone,
the wildly rainbowed
mirror of a soapbubble sphere,

think sun on gasoline.
Splendor, and splendor,
and not a one in any way

distinguished from the other
--nothing about them
of individuality. Instead

they're *all* exact expressions
of one soul,
each a perfect fulfillment

of heaven's temple,
mackerel essence. As if,
after a lifetime arriving

at this enameling, the jeweler's
made uncountable examples,
each as intricate

in its oily fabulation
as the one before.
Suppose we could iridesce,

like these, and lose ourselves
entirely in the universe
of shimmer--would you want

to be yourself only,
unduplicatable, doomed
to be lost? They'd prefer,

plainly, to be flashing participants,
multitudinous. Even now
they seem to be bolting

forward, heedless of stasis.
They don't care they're dead
and nearly frozen,

just as, presumably,
they didn't care that they were living:
all, all for all,

the rainbowed school
and its acres of brilliant classrooms,
in which no verb is singular,

or every one is. How happy they seem,
even on ice, to be together, selfless,
which is the price of gleaming.

How do you shape your life to be “multitudinous”?

Doty suggests the mackerel’s togetherness is “selfless, which is the price of gleaming,” giving us a new way to look at being “one of the crowd”; are there places in your life where you feel like one of the crowd? Could you transform that into a feeling of being part of a shimmering collective?

Monday, March 31st/Whitman

We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd

We two, how long we were fool'd,
Now transmuted, we swiftly escape as Nature escapes,
We are Nature, long have we been absent, but now we return,
We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark,
We are bedded in the ground, we are rocks,
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side by side,
We browse, we are two among the wild herds spontaneous as any,
We are two fishes swimming in the sea together,
We are what locust blossoms are, we drop scent around lanes mornings
and evenings,
We are also the coarse smut of beasts, vegetables, minerals,
We are two predatory hawks, we soar above and look down,
We are two resplendent suns, we it is who balance ourselves orbic
and stellar, we are as two comets,
We prowl fang'd and four-footed in the woods, we spring on prey,
We are two clouds forenoons and afternoons driving overhead,
We are seas mingling, we are two of those cheerful waves rolling
over each other and interwetting each other,
We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, impervious,
We are snow, rain, cold, darkness, we are each product and influence
of the globe,
We have circled and circled till we have arrived home again, we two,
We have voided all but freedom and all but our own joy.

What does the poet seem to think has “fool’d” the “we” in the poem?

What is Whitman’s vision of death?

How does Whitman’s description counter, amend or enhance your own vision of death?

“Joy” is the last word of the poem. Is that the word you expected? Do you sense joy throughout the poem? How does joy infiltrate your attitude toward prayer?

Tuesday, April 1st/Mark Doty

A Green Crab's Shell

Not, exactly, green:
closer to bronze
preserved in kind brine,

something retrieved
from a Greco-Roman wreck,
patinated and oddly

muscular. We cannot
know what his fantastic
legs were like—

though evidence
suggests eight
complexly folded

scuttling works
of armament, crowned
by the foreclaws'

gesture of menace
and power. A gull's
gobbled the center,

leaving this chamber—
size of a demitasse—
open to reveal

a shocking, Giotto blue.
Though it smells
of seaweed and ruin,

this little traveling case
comes with such lavish lining!
Imagine breathing

surrounded by
the brilliant rinse
of summer's firmament.

What color is
the underside of skin?
Not so bad, to die,

if we could be opened
into *this*—
if the smallest chambers

of ourselves,
similarly,
revealed some sky.

One of the things that Doty does here is take an object that is like “a wreck” and imagine it fully, in the state of living and of death. The crab shell is not entirely beautiful until we discover its “lavish lining” much like the “smallest chamber” of ourselves. What is the color of your smallest chamber? How would you describe it?

One thing Doty does here is give the object (the shell) a new weight by connecting it to the human experience. Are there objects that you’ve collected or seen that, if you were to mediate on them, would become symbols for some aspect of your life? How might that experience connect to others? How would you articulate their beauty to someone else?

Wednesday, April 2nd/Whitman

Miracles

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,
Or stand under trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night
 with any one I love,
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet
 and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.
To me the sea is a continual miracle,
The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—the
 ships with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?

What is your definition of a miracle?

How do you respond when someone speaks of miracles?

What do you think of the miracles Whitman offers as examples?

“Stranger” is the last adjective in the poem. How do you think Whitman wants us to respond to that description?

Thursday, April 3rd/Mark Doty

No

The children have brought their wood turtle
into the dining hall
because they want us to feel

the power they have
when they hold a house
in their own hands, want us to feel

alien lacquer and the little thrill
that he might, like God, show his face.
He's the color of ruined wallpaper,

of cognac, and he's closed,
pulled in as though he'll never come out;
nothing shows but the plummy leather

of the legs, his claws resembling clusters
of diminutive raspberries.
They know he makes night

anytime he wants, so perhaps
he feels at the center of everything,
as they do. His age,

greater than that of anyone
around the table, in a room
from which they are excluded,

though they don't mind,
since they can carry this perfect
building anywhere. They love

that he might poke out
his old, old face, but doesn't.
I think the children smell unopened,

like unlit candles, as they heft him
around the table, praise his secrecy,
holding to each adult face

his prayer,
the single word of the shell,
which is no.

How is God reluctant to show his face—as in stanza 3 of this poem? The children in the poem seem to accept the turtle's "no" in ways adults can't. What can we gain from the position of the children in this poem?

Is Doty suggesting that we should find our God in hidden places? And that perhaps God is smaller rather than bigger (i.e. he comes to us as small as a turtle rather than something large & luminous)

How do we maintain our childish knowledge, respect, and wonder for God?

Friday, April 4th/Whitman

Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night;
When you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,
One look I but gave which your dear eyes return'd with a look I
 shall never forget,
One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach'd up as you lay on the ground,
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle,
Till late in the night reliev'd to the place at last again I made my way,
Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son of
 responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene, cool blew the
 moderate night-wind,
Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the
 battlefield spreading,
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night,
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I gazed,
Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your side leaning my
 chin in my hands,
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you dearest
 comrade—not a tear, not a word,
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier,
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole,
Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall
 surely meet again,)
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and
 carefully under feet,
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his
 grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited,
Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night and battle-field dim,
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day
 brighten'd,
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

The context of this poem is era/event specific (a Civil War battle, a dying soldier), but how might the emotions of the poem illuminate our lives?

The speaker calls the soldier “my son.” Why is this important?

The word “strange” is in this title. How does it fit with Whitman’s earlier use of that word?

Saturday, April 5th/Mark Doty

Brilliance

Maggie's taking care of a man
who's dying; he's attended to everything,
said goodbye to his parents,

paid off his credit card.
She says *Why don't you just
run it up to the limit?*

but he wants everything
squared away, no balance owed,
though he misses the pets

he's already found a home for—
he can't be around dogs or cats,
too much risk. He says,

I can't have anything.
She says, *A bowl of goldfish?*
He says he doesn't want to start

with anything and then describes
the kind he'd maybe like,
how their tails would fan

to a gold flaring. They talk
about hot jewel tones,
gold lacquer, say maybe

they'll go pick some out
though he can't go much of anywhere and then
abruptly he says *I can't love*

anything I can't finish.
He says it like he's had enough
of the whole scintillant world,

though what he means is
he'll never be satisfied and therefore
has established this discipline,

a kind of severe rehearsal.
That's where they leave it,
him looking out the window,

her knitting as she does because
she needs to do something.
Later he leaves a message:

Yes to the bowl of goldfish.
Meaning: let me go, if I have to,
in brilliance. In a story I read,

a Zen master who'd perfected
his detachment from the things of the world
remembered, at the moment of dying,

a deer he used to feed in the park,
and wondered who might care for it,
and at that instant was reborn

in the stunned flesh of a fawn.
So, Maggie's friend—
is he going out

into the last loved object
of his attention?
fanning the veined translucence

of an opulent tail,
undulant in some uncapturable curve
is he bronze chrysanthemums,

copper leaf, hurried darting,
doubloons, icon-colored fins
troubling the water?

How does his use of the brilliance of the fish anchor us to the earth as an expansion of the hereafter?

The most poignant moment in the poem comes when the dying character says, "Yes to the bowl of goldfish." Why is his answer so important? What would you say?

You've known people who have faced death—how did they go out? Is it better to go out in brilliance, fighting for connection even to the end? This poem could also address any difficult moment/phase one might be going through, where does hope for Doty reside?

Sunday, April 6th/Whitman

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

On what is the speaker's *thread* going to "catch"? Does Whitman give us a specific?

Noiseless and *patient* describe the spider. Are these compliments? How do they compare to the speaker? To you?

Whitman uses the word "soul" twice in the second stanza. How do you think he defines soul? How do you define it?