

Walt Whitman: Song of Myself (1881 version)

1

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their
parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

6

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more
than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green
stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

SONG OF MYSELF

2

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see
and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegeta-
tion.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I
receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon
out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for
nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and
women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken
soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
 And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
 end to arrest it,
 And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

15

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles
 its wild ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their
 Thanksgiving dinner,
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
 The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
 The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
 The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and
 looks at the oats and rye,
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
 (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's
 bed-room;)
 The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
 He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;
 The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
 What is removed drops horribly in a pail;
 The quadrone girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods
 by the bar-room stove,
 The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat,
 the gatekeeper marks who pass,
 The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him, though I
 do not know him;)
 The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,

The western turkey-shooting draws old and young, some lean on
 their rifles, some sit on logs,
 Out from the crowd steps the marksman, takes his position, levels
 his piece;
 The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,
 As the woolly-pates hoe in the sugar-field, the overseer views them
 from his saddle,
 The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their part-
 ners, the dancers bow to each other,
 The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks to the
 musical rain,
 The Wolverine sets traps on the creek that helps fill the Huron,
 The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm'd cloth is offering moccasins
 and bead-bags for sale,
 The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut
 eyes bent sideways,
 As the deck-hands make fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for
 the shore-going passengers,
 The young sister holds out the skein while the elder sister winds it
 off in a ball, and stops now and then for the knots,
 The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago
 borne her first child,
 The clean-hair'd Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine or in
 the factory or mill,
 The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the reporter's
 lead flies swiftly over the note-book, the sign-painter is letter-
 ing with blue and gold,
 The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper counts at his
 desk, the shoemaker waxes his thread,
 The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers fol-
 low him,
 The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,
 The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun, (how the white
 sails sparkle!)
 The drover watching his drove sings out to them that would stray,
 The pedler sweats with his pack on his back, (the purchaser hig-
 gling about the odd cent;)

The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock
 moves slowly,
 The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,
 The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy
 and pimpled neck,
 The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to
 each other,
 (Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)
 The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great
 Secretaries,
 On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined
 arms,
 The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut in the hold,
 The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and his cattle,
 As the fare-collector goes through the train he gives notice by the
 jingling of loose change,
 The floor-men are laying the floor, the tanners are tanning the
 roof, the masons are calling for mortar,
 In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the laborers;
 Seasons pursuing each other the indescribable crowd is gather'd, it
 is the fourth of Seventh-month, (what salutes of cannon and
 small arms!)
 Seasons pursuing each other the plougher ploughs, the mower
 mows, and the winter-grain falls in the ground;
 Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by the hole in
 the frozen surface,
 The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes
 deep with his axe,
 Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-wood or pecan-
 trees,
 Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river or through
 those drain'd by the Tennessee, or through those of the Arkan-
 sas,
 Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahooche or Al-
 tamahaw,
 Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great-
 grandsons around them,

In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after
 their day's sport,
 The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
 The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,
 The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps
 by his wife;
 And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
 And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
 And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

16

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
 Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
 Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
 Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is
 fine,
 One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the
 largest the same,
 A Southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and hos-
 pitable down by the Oconee I live,
 A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade, my joints the lim-
 berest joints on earth and the sternest joints on earth,
 A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deer-skin leg-
 gings, a Louisianian or Georgian,
 A boatman over lakes or bays or along coasts, a Hoosier, Badger,
 Buckeye;
 At home on Kanadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fi-
 sher-men off Newfoundland,
 At home in the fleet of ice-boats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
 At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the
 Texan ranch, Comrade of Californians, comrade of free North-
 Westerners, (loving their big proportions,)
 Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all who shake
 hands and welcome to drink and meat,
 A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,
 A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

(The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place,
The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their
place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.)

17

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they
are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to
nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are
nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This the common air that bathes the globe.

51

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute
longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with
his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my
gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.