

I Am Looking for You

From the train window,
Rattling away from your bones, with that tat-tat-tat-tat rhythm interrupting the
irregular beats of my Modern American Verse straddled across my thigh,
I wonder, Walt Whitman, if your atoms still dance in the murky morning sunshine.

I shut my finger in the verse.

Modern American Verse. Are you kidding me?

Billy Collins. Donald Hall. Louise Gluck.

I have no time for you now, you poet-angels.
The urge is too dear.
The dark is too abiding.
The avenging angels are gathering.
To move forward, I drift backward to your original energy.

“Next stop, Ferry Avenue, Camden.”

I close the medicine cabinet on my drug of choice
And gaze with sober, original eyes, through that grimy portal where I am safe:
Out there I see the horrors of our own war-ravaged St. Lo,
Our modern bloodied lanes of Antietam and Gettysburg,
 the bodies no longer stacked so carefully all at once in one day, or three.
Our charred remains of Dresden,
The skeletal outlines of Coventry,
The evaporating ghosts of our Hiroshima;
The Outlines of chop-shops with tire-towers and bared-wire,
Those tireless R.I.P Fords and broken bonnets and back-seat sex parlors
Where anything goes for the small price of a generous donation.

I see the Asian take-out boutiques, the restless boys in baggy clothes,
 huddled for warmth, brotherhood against death that breathes with brutal
 serenity on the flames that lick at the Four Coroners of Man
The fair Trade Winds never quite reach the Doldrums here
Where the City decays not from German bombs or al Qaeda hate or American
Apache War Machines, but with something as destructive, illusive.

I am looking for you in the crumbling buildings,
 the wandering, restless civilians amidst the bric-a-brac paraphernalia
 of Lady Liberty without a dress, without decent shoes, without her light,
 without her panties, standing alone, shivering naked on the cement canals of
 Haddon Avenue, Mt. Ephraim Avenue, Martin Luther King Boulevard,
 and Kaign Avenue.

I watch as these restless souls step over her as she's passed on the curb.

I am powerless.

I cannot help them as they defile you with cell phones, jism, broomsticks,
Converse sneakers, clubs, and sneers.

I cannot do for her what you had done for so many like her who needed that voice,
that hand to soothe away the blood that coagulated around their conscience.

I am no prophet. I am no nurse. I am no poet angel or stately orator.

I'm no politician who politics from the safety of the State House in air-
conditioning sanctity – hermetically sealed from reality of the millions who
toil in the wreckage of post-Industrial America.

“Heal thyself” is easier from foaming hot bath and Senate health care.

I can only see.

I cannot smell the hunger from the baby's mouth that drains the dregs
from that once blue bottle.

I cannot hear the nightmares of the child who dares not run for milk for fear of
cannon fire from the neighbor.

I cannot taste the Kung Pao chicken that drips in the drains of all-night halfway
houses.

I cannot touch the cracked hands of the homeless who wander the environs of Rand
Station for the hope of a handout from a dazed Rutgers student – or from a
comotose XTU concert attendee who woke up all blazed and
bedraggled without his pants and humility.

I cannot fathom the thousand and one miseries in a city so ravaged
and so forgotten and so close.

Who can kiss these children goodnight? Can we still count them as children?

That's why I'm looking for you, Walt Whitman.

I'm looking for answers that will save not just the city, but ourselves in this circus of
accusation and annihilation when we offer congratulations when we destroy one of
our own brothers, red and blue, black and white and brown, on the streets, on CNN
and FOX, and on the Capitol steps.

I see the horrors from afar, but now I get off the train at City Hall.

My appointment in Philadelphia can wait.

I walk as one unacquainted with the day

The sights as foreign to me as Bangkok or Katmandu.

Yet this is the city of my birth, the city of your death,

And we share a bond more than just our name – and yet I am a stranger here.

There was no strangeness to you. Didn't you cradle the prostitutes in your arms, the drug addicts, the crazed, the sterile, the hustlers, the lawyers, the doctors, the mothers of masons, the fathers of freeloaders

And were you not shocked at the silence?

As Wilde said, "Nothing human is alien to me."

But was Oscar Wilde a liar?

Am I that limited in sense experience?

Here, everything is alien to me.

Could this be my state? My country?

A city just a few zip codes away from the leafy address of my own home of five bedrooms, and three and half baths, and tulips and blue jays and sweet gums and blueberry bushes and bouquets of sweet basil of three varieties for a nightly smorgasbord of pesto and chicken and salmon on the grill with walls of weighty tomes anchoring the walls of my sheltered abode of granite countertops and fireplaces and Waterford lamps where my kids sleep soundly after reading the classics – or a poem by you, oh, sweet, Bearded-Bard, and after praying to a God they know exists because comfort and security have always reigned down with gentle kisses and hugs goodnight.

I walk nervously down 5th Avenue to East Camden to the home where my dad lived as a child and young man – to that old printing shop that smells as real now as it did then, redolent of the smoke and the fire of the Industrial Age when men with rusty hair in rolled up dingy shirts smoked cigars with cracked hands and black-tipped fingernails in concrete bunkers; back then the shop seemed liked hell to me. The sounds of the press. The omnipresent blackness of ink smudging the pallor of Pop-Pop with that pipe. And there is my father, slim, short, acne-scared, handsome in his naiveté, working instead of playing ball, dreaming of freedom from the rigors of the printing press – the press his Sisyphean boulder that he will shoulder for his entire life. And perhaps he should have been happy with that burden, that gift, of a chore that allowed him to pay the bills – and the child support.

I pass by Northgate Park.

The flotsam and jetsam of Modern America befoul the grass that you glamorized
as the Democratizing Emblem of the Land
Kentucky bluegrass, Bermuda, fescue, St. Augustine

Brown-no-longer Milky Way wrappers, Marlboro packs, dull yellow Whopper paper, dented Sunny D bottles and milk bottles and soiled baby diapers. Now the foul spirits of week-old whiskey drip from discarded bottles. Colt cans with must and broken lager scatter amongst the grass.

Mosquitoes multiply in the fetid pools of tossed tires underneath the willow
that looks much more haggard than Ralph Waldo Emerson intended in his

sweeping prose of Nature. A million tiny grasshoppers scatter with each
footstep – or am I The Will of Zeus dislocating and disorientating the locusts?

The tennis courts have not heard the wrack of a racket for decades –
only the cracks of time filled with ragweed.

I see no youth on the swings.

I see no romance on the park bench with a blushing boy slipping his hand to a
tender maiden.

I see nothing in the park that connotes a park.

It's as if the word here has taken an Orwellian spin around the broken tire swing
And we have entered the ironical world that Miranda would have dreamed
if she dreamed in nightmares, oh, Brave New World.

But I know you must still be here.

I am looking for my father in the streets of the 1950s now, walking home from
Woodrow Wilson. The Ben Franklin Bridge has long been opened, like a syringe
draining the vein of jobs to that addict the water. The Walt Whitman Bridge will also
open, draining more aqua velva veritas from this place you called home, draining
trained workers and talent and money and the children of tomorrow's children to
The City of Brotherly Love and to the fashionable Zip codes beyond where children
like my sweet girls will attend Newsweek's Top Schools without fear and learn and
attend college and build lives. But the print shop is gone.

I am a nervous white face, unarmed and powerless,
My only power coming through in a torrent of nerves and words,
And I am that stranger in a strange land.

I am not here to buy the white nectar of Nepenthe or the speed of Mercury.
My drug is poetry – the poetry of understanding, the poetry of empathy, the poetry
of motivation.

Oh, how quaint and endearing; poetry, after all, cannot fill your body with fruit and
fiber or eradicate the cockroaches from the cracks in your bedroom as you study
with crack crack-crack smack of gunfire from the fire escape where yet another one
of your classmates lingers in a pool of wasted spirits.

Who will wash his hands in his blood?

Who will show me their fingers dripping in blood?

Who will bring me a washbasin?

Who will weep over your grave, already strewn with weeds and debris?

Who will remember you when you are gone?

How could the love that made you not keep you?

Is it even love that makes us?

I am not here to cover the story of yet another murder.

I am not a social worker.

I am not a teacher who enters The Fifth Circle to do my duty for The Common Good
and God.

I am not righteous.

I have no faith except the faith of the Word,

my faith in You,

And in the Everlasting Divine of What I Touch I Make Holy

Just like you instructed me.

I am not here to take photographs for *Life* magazine about a third world country.

I am here as an archeologist, perhaps, finding clues of what you may have left

behind – a chalice, perhaps, from a last supper, your last supper,

that I could fill and deliver to the rudderless masses

whose only dream is to make it through the next day.

Along State Street I see old folks, friendly all, sitting on stately decayed porches in
frayed lawn chairs, debris that has long been washed up on the beach and who
seemed content to stay and dream of the water that used to nourish them. But I do
not talk to them. The houses here seem nicer than ones I know I'll soon encounter. I
nod and they say, "Good morning," and in that smile I see a seed of you.

Perhaps that's all it takes, a seed, a smile.

But seed is only potential: a forest locked within solid walls of fiber-thinness.

I turn north and pass along Bailey Street. I pass by a burnt-out building, the limb of
an oak violating the sanctity of the window. The roots of a huge maple dismantle the
front porch of one home. I kick scattered glass. The tattered remains of yellow police
tape flutter in the breeze like ribbons from birthday party.

I see a woman on the stoops of crumbling concrete steps, nursing a baby in a pink
blanket. She can't be more than sixteen.

She should be at school, studying Calculus, reading Hamilton's The Federalist
Papers, writing her own papers concerning Loose Constructionalist and Strict
Constructionalist Constitutional Theory; and perhaps if she had been born in a
better Zip Code;

She would be on the debate team winning against Princeton; or championing
the rights of Syrians in Model U.N. up at Rutgers, winning scholarships with dreams
of diplomatic ventures across the world.

But her face at sixteen already seems drained and old.

She needs the cup that touched your lips.

She needs the thrush that sang outside your window.

She needs the green grass underneath your feet.

She needs bananas and whole grains and chickpeas pureed with Tahini and
olive oil and garlic to make a balm that will sooth her belly.

She needs tools, but all she has are her small hands, her tender breasts for
her child, and a fifth grade education and dreams that she cannot dream because she

doesn't even know such dreams exist except on television and in movies she cannot afford.

Study – stay away from the bullets!
Concentrate – stay away from the crime!
Be self-reliant – raise yourself right when the world is wrong
Have dreams – even when life is a nightmare.

She does not see me.
She only looks into the eyes of her baby.
And what does she see in those eyes?
What songs could she sing to her sweet child?
What life will the baby inherit?
What country will the baby enter,
 Negotiating a tightrope of silicon and floss a mile high with no net.

In her horror she must think that the world is an abortion,
 Or an unsuccessful abortion where to live without life
 And hope is much worse than simple blackness,
 A void that was never even conceived.
 And God is either impotent because He cannot save her from misery
 or malevolent because He could intervene but keeps His hands away,
 declaring, "Feed yourself!"

I pass through the city as one unobserved,
And yet my strangeness here must be as strange as if I possessed purple skin.

I hear the bass and the beats and all the silthy-toves and Goo-Goo-Go-Joop
 and shish-boom-bah as I walk through the streets,
 wondering when a car will stop and ask me to get in.
 Or stop and ask if I want some Lady Gaga
 or Happy Horse or Yellow Submarines.
 Or stop and ask, "What are you doing here?"

But they don't see me as acutely as I believe I see them.
I am a ghost to their reality.
I expect to be knifed or kidnapped or robbed,
but why must I believe I am that essential?
I am inconsequential,
just like you are inconsequential to the toil of daily living.
Am I an entrepreneur? Am I offering jobs? Am I offering a way out?

Crossing the bridge on State Street, the creek below and the Delaware close, the trees and the open space, an oasis that quickly transport me to a fantasy Arcadia, I feel the need to deliver The Good News, the news of Educated Mind.

As a Great Educator of Youth, I want to hand out boxes of Baldwin and Ellison and Hughes and Hainsberry and Cullen and Claude McCay and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Alice Walker and Toni Morrison and Pablo Neruda and Carlos Fuentes;

I want to teach underneath that elm over there about Self-Reliance and Plato, The Oversoul and Cato, the Transparent Eyeball and Poe's Fortunato,
But who am I kidding?

Why do I know so much more about The Middle Passage, the life of Olaudah Equiano, the narrative of Frederick Douglass, the confessions of Nat Turner, and the beats of the Harlem Renaissance? I have the News of the World, and the keys to freedom, but who wants to listen to me? Who am I?

If the world never listened to you, who would want to listen to me? Did your poems stop the bullets at Manassas? Do our tears stop the violence? Would civil disobedience stop the Panzer-Men?

I head north along River Avenue through Cramer Hill. To my right is more Industrial Blight – a huge field of brown. In two hundred years perhaps Romantic Poets would linger about the decayed walls and climb through the rambles and the vines and write rhymes to Old Tymes and paint soft golden tones like Turner and call it "Cramer Hill, Restored."

In the streets I pick up the headlines on discarded newspapers, wind-pinned against aluminum fences: flattening out the papers against my leg I read:

"Two Grisly Child Murders Prompt Crackdown on PCP"
"Camden Man Gunned Down on City Street"
"Attack victim remains upbeat after violent incident"
"Authorities Identify Victim in 1 of 3 shootings"
"Camden School Board Votes Down All Hope Proposals"
"4 charged with animal cruelty in Camden"
"Slaying continues Camden's record homicide pace"
"Camden Man sentenced for double slaying"
"Students hurt in Camden school bus crash"
"Was wet behind Camden attack"
"Mother decapitates her son"

Then I see my photo in black and white, buried on page A21 of The Philadelphia Inquirer:

"Cherry Hill man explodes near father's old home in Camden."
And here is the lead: "On a bright, brisk Monday morning, WTB, a Cherry Hill resident and South Jersey native, of Camden, the Son, was walking along River Street, when he suddenly exploded. Authorities are baffled by the bizarre episode."

Spontaneous combustion of the nervous system has
been ruled a suspect.”

I head down 27th Street. I cross over Conrail train tracks.
I wonder, in a fit of despair, whether it would be better for a vast Diaspora;
To order the eviction of every resident and child in a modern day
Trail of Tears with cash in hand to relocate to other sections
of America where there
is less murder and less fear and more hope,
And call in F-16s and F-106s and Heavy Bombers and Drones
And level the city with cleansing Old Testament Fire so that
new roots can grow from the ashes of old

I know this is obscene, but in the bright of day it all makes sense –
Separated is safer than penned in.

But I cross the new baseball fields at the end of Pleasant Street. I run the bases my
father should have run. On 31st and Rowe I'm in a new development that seems like
more than a seed.

I head toward 34th Street. I have the old address, but nothing looks the same.
I leaf through his yearbook from 1964. In two years he would join and Air Force and
miraculously avoid the Vietnam War and continue the printing trade in Baton
Rouge. At a dance he met my mom, married as two virgins, lived on Rand Street in
Camden and then a Camden cop my mom dated after her divorce who was not as
lucky to avoid Vietnam told me that there was a murder in our old apartment, and in
that windowsill there's a picture of me crawling, and in that window a young boy
was murdered. And I stop in front of the old house with a porch I do not recall. I only
recall the old steps inside and the smell of pipe tobacco, and I thank Daddy for
leaving Camden in The Great White Flight of 1970.

I head west along Federal Street. I pass by St. Joseph's Pro-Cathedral. I was baptized
there, but somehow God did not hook me then, and does he hook me now?
Really? Amidst all of this?

I get requests for donations every year ever since I requested copies of my baptism
for my marriage to an Irish- Catholic girl who wanted to remarry in the church, and I
was more than happy to oblige because I admire faith and hope.

I stop for a Diet Coke at Westfield Pharmacy, still looking for you.
Are you getting a shave at the Latin barbershop?
Tax advice at Jackson Hewitt?
A dinner at Crown Fried Chicken?
Or a burrito at San Lucas?
Or a check-up for herpes at Cam Care Health?
Holding a rally at Labor Team USA?

Are you getting into black sedans with shady men?
Are you helping that young girl with the stroller?
Are you standing on the corner like an axis,
 looking at the universe revolve around you?
Are you teaching astronomy at Dudley School?
Are you loading trucks at Ace Auto Parts?
Are you extinguishing the fire at 17th and Federal?
Are you baking crack in back corners and basements?
Are you connecting with the stormy dynamos of youth, tapping and dabbing and
swinging with the wilds of youthful abandon, knowing the end is coming, but blazing
a path of light while life still flickers?
Are you raging, dear one?

Do you know I am looking for you? Why isn't anyone else? Do they know you exist?
Are you on Facebook? Twitter? Jersey Shore?
Are you on You Tube? Are you teased on Formspring?
Do you have a reality show? Corporate sponsorship?
Political Action Committee?

Perhaps I saw you at the gas station weeks ago, near Christmas.

I once stopped on my way home from the Ikea in South Philly with my Mazda minivan low on gas. My wife and girls were inside along with my nervous mother-in-law. It was night. I missed my turn for the Admiral Wilson Boulevard and wound up in Fellugah. I slipped my credit card behind the window and the guy on the bench reminded me of you with the beard and the friendly eyes and the grizzled girth of manhood. He asked me if I was lost. I said I was trying to get to Cherry Hill, and he said, "Cherry Hill is nice. Camden sucks. Get out of here." And then a black youth appeared and handed the man his phone for collateral so he wouldn't fill up his sedan and book. He seemed like a nice kid. It seemed unfair that I was safe in a matter of two minutes once I crossed over Rt. 130.

Now I crossed over Cooper River and under Rt 30. I recall attending a wedding near Our Lady of Lourdes for my friend Jim who was the manager of The Holiday Inn when I worked there as a kid during college. My wife and I were the only white people, and I was nervous, or course, but there was no need to be. For some reason my wife and I were treated like royalty, and this one couple offered their seats to us at the table in this tiny, orderly row home and it seemed surreal. For our time there at the wedding I think I found you, in those vows, in that second life of my friend who had seen his time in hell with addiction. But lives being busy, and orbits being orbits, it was the last time I saw him.

I hate orbits. I hate gravity. I hate momentum.

And now I staring up to the restored Lady at Lourdes – she had been struck with lightning. Did you do that as a sign? I wonder what room my mother gave birth. It

was there I breathed my first breath. Call me “of Camden, the Son,” but what of Camden do I have, except memories that do not exist except in photos, and the poetry of you?

I walk further, towards the river.
An ambulance blazes passed me towards Cooper Trauma Center.
I can guess the headlines for tomorrow.
But somehow the headlines still shock me.
I see signs of redevelopment plans, a renovated building to house a museum to Camden’s past as a ship builder.
Let us not just dig up ghosts.

I stand outside your house.
Why couldn’t you have chosen Haddonfield or Merchantville or Princeton or Society City in Philly? It would seem more fitting for America’s greatest poet than Camden.
Inside those walls of yours a garden exists of lilacs.

A student of mine won an award and read to those not from Camden who savor poetry. Outside I was accosted by an inebriated man who wanted payment to watch my Honda Civic. Of course you instructed to give alms to everyone who asks, but I did not give this man a dime because I knew he would buy more booze that wafted from his breath and dripped from his red eyes, and I felt like a hypocrite when I was in your house and I heard the words of my gifted students in that sanctuary of poetry and beauty. And when I saw the bed where you died, I thought I would feel your ghost, but I didn’t.

It’s not in the things that remind me of you, Walt Whitman. Has our nation seen its moment flicker? Is what separates more now than what unifies us?

I know you donated your brain to science, and someone, as the legend persists, your brain never made it to Philly. So perhaps I’ve been looking for your brain, but you didn’t donate your brain to science, you donated your soul to America. The belief that America is the world’s best chance for survival: a true beacon of liberty.

Have we exported Camden to the world?

I had never been to your grave. I heard it’s lovely, and you spent much time designing the crypt at Harleigh. I know I won’t find you there either, but still I walk there in my mind, while on the train the whole time, passing through the world all too quickly, I know exists but clueless as to its real existence, and I want to offer my own sprig of lilac to your belief in the power of the individual and to citizenship, to love and healing, to silence and mourning; a sprig of lilac to a city that I left, that many have left, either willingly or through the trigger of a gun.