

RETURNING TO PAUMANOK

*And I will make a song for the ears of the President, full of weapons with menacing points,
And behind the weapons countless dissatisfied faces*

—Walt Whitman, 'Starting from Paumanok'

Across six lanes, the setting sun blazes in plate glass
below the tubular pink of storefront signs.

Foodtown Massapequa Nails Urgent Care

The air is thick with the smell of gasoline,
burgers, warm asphalt and sea salt.

I walk in the ditch beside the highway
with the stitched line of the railroad to my right
beyond the switchgrass. Flip-flops slap my heels.

Haste on with me, Walt.
Point your beard to Manahatta
and fill my head with your chants. I will tell you
what we've done to your beloved country.
O where are your songs for the ears of the President?

Haste on with me, Taukus, legendary walker.
Plant your stick in the sand
and tell me the ways of the Montaukett
and how to cover 50 miles in a day.
O where are your children's children and their children?

Haste on with me, my Younger Self.
Put your small hand in mine and run
beside me. Show me what's untouched
by the seven-year renewal of our cells.
O where are your brothers, your father, your mother?

I place my feet carefully and watch the soil
for rusty cans, broken shells, the currency of conch
and quahog. Then the hot breath of a car pulling up

beside me. The driver leans across. We talk
before he takes his mirrored smile
to the horizon. His words slap my heels.

You broken down?
You broken down?
You broken down?

THE FLÂNEUR
or THE OBSERVER OBSERVED

Not a dandy with a tortoise on a lead, not he,
but a gentleman exemplar of his breed is he.
An incognito prince
far from drawing-rooms of chintz
for the boulevard's a home to him indeed, says he,
yes, the boulevard's a home to him indeed.

He's a roving connoisseur of town and city, while she
may be plain or jolie laide or pretty-pretty. Ah, me!
If she's strolling on her own—
if she's clearly all alone—
she's a girl who walks the streets, and such a pity. Yes, she
is a girl who walks the streets, and such a pity.

So he botanises faces in the crowd, and we
are fascinating specimens allowed, says he,
in his register of vagrants,
their common name and fragrance,
each cultivar and epithet allowed—*mais oui!*—
each cultivar and epithet allowed.

