

Louisa Zerbo

Professor Neuman

Literary Reinvention

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“Creative Response to *Song of Myself*”

Fragile bat wings still flit through the humid summer air which thickens as temperatures bubble up with each passing year. We wonder if it'll get *so* thick we'll have to move slowly, breathe deeply, and fragile bats will fall from deadly heights.

On sunny days, city parks fill to the brim with jovial guests too happy to scare off wildlife, so they coexist. Pigeons approach sandaled toes. Sparrows peck bravely at crumbs tumbling off of baked goods and rolling down picnic blankets to their pronged feet. Snakes slide through the grass and drape themselves across rocks. Dogs fetch balls into dusk, and across the street a slippery black cat sits in the bodega doorway and ignores political conversations that darken with the sky.

Sunbeams crawl up the walls of apartments with locked doors. Light creeps over a painting of oxen grazing contentedly in a field far away. Thrilled shadows dance over it; dancing people celebrate another year with food and music. The heat rises; the sky darkens. Dancing people celebrate the bats that still fly, the grass that's still green, dogs that still fetch. One of the dancers celebrates himself.

He's been decorated with birthday sashes and faced with flaming candles. He's splashing through confetti and dreaming up plans to drape himself over a lakeside rock like a snake.

Far away from stressful discussions, he'll listen instead to the whines of a pesky mosquito he's oddly grateful for. And when the sun goes down, he'll listen for the beetles and flies that bounce around his porchlight, and a far-off frog.

Even farther off, people sing their worries about the world – lyrics about attacks, assassinations, conflict between friends, and bats plummeting through the night sky. Listeners tap their feet to the melodic tones that backup their arguments. Frogs croak merrily, very far away. Listeners stay up later than they should, tapping their feet.

On rocky shores, blood travels quickly through veins. In the depths of luscious forests, voices are finally loud. In every town, in rooms with open windows, people write songs for themselves in deafening silence. Invasive wind pushes books open to blank pages and carries tense chords in from the voices outside.

*Song of Myself* is a celebration of the self and of the world's entirety. It's a reminder that there is a meaning for every living being, every action and event – and it's a reminder to find beauty in these things. It argues that everything is connected, deeply. It appreciates that. It is a celebration which takes shape in all moments, objects, and creatures.

Even otters play their role: one picks apart a living fish. He cradles it; his hands are nearly human, but his movements are animalistic. He gnaws at it viciously, ripping at its skin and sending flecks of flesh towards passing legs, clothed and wading ankle deep through the riverbank. They're headed towards the city, where nature tapers off into billowing smoke and towering buildings, and incessant talk of war. It makes the most restless feet look like they're standing still.

Today, another otter would do the same. They still cradle innocent fish, and tear them apart just as innocently. People still discuss war, and even live it like it's natural, to send flecks of ourselves soaring towards each other.

No matter who wins, or how, this talk never ends. It sends the world spinning through grief and pain, over and over, and still celebrations ramble on. *Song of Myself* is a reminder of this persistence of beauty, that it can still be found in the nastiest of things. Adjacent to nature, Whitman dares to argue that things like war can be beautiful too.

Like blades of grass that cling to the earth momentarily, in response to human touch: boots scampering through the field like scared rabbits. Here, voices howl like dogs in human pain. Hospitals brim with injuries, then letters.

Letters talk about many things, but try to avoid the topic of war. They talk about nature – how its delightful green stands out among unsightly scattered footsteps and dogish howls. Blades of grass spring up in recovery and wave to soldiers now clinging to the earth. Birds continue to sing even today, and in a neighboring forest, a bear peacefully searches for food through dense shrubbery.

Still, sacred bodies are attacked and torn limb from limb. Families are dismembered, lives are changed, and the world stays the same. Discussions carry on until they outlive their speakers. Old wars are remembered here, which presage new ones, and a cycle continues.