



*Max Schott*

# Keeping Warm

Essays and Stories

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Selected Essays and Stories

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2004 | John Daniel & Company  
McKinleyville, California



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## No Luck

Not long ago my father pointed out to me that people, if something bad happens to them unexpectedly, will almost always start talking afterward about how lucky they were—lucky that it wasn't worse.

It's so, isn't it? If your brakes fail and you end up in your car in somebody's living room—still alive—you consider yourself lucky. While on the other hand, if your brakes simply fail and you have to get your car fixed, you may very likely consider yourself unlucky. It doesn't make logical sense.

If a brick falls out of the sky and “only” mashes my foot, my mind will very quickly and not very rationally divide the event into two parts. That a brick should enter my life I accept after the fact, as a given. But instead of accepting the fact that it missed my head as another given (or as part of the same one), I see it as good luck. Why so? My father didn't say why. But he at least managed to make our ordinary way of behaving look pretty foolish.

Anyhow, afterward, with that much light thrown on the subject, I figured I would no longer be quite as foolish as I used to be or as other people are. The next time I, or as it turned out, we, escaped with minor wounds from some random catastrophe, I meant to very reasonably curse my luck. Or if I couldn't manage that, at least I'd have enough sense to keep quiet.

It didn't work, of course.

What happened was this: A resilient young friend of ours, and of our daughter, was walking with our daughter. As they were

## The Leveler

Chaucer from time to time expressed considerable skepticism about the unknowable. “A thousand tymes have I herd men telle/That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle.”\* But at the end of his life he prayed publicly for grace, grace to be able to “be-wayle (his) giltes,” and so to be one of those who “at the day of doom shulle be saved.”\*\* At that moment he believed in an after-life and may have feared hellfire more than death itself.

Unlike Chaucer, Samuel Johnson believed persistently in eternal punishment or bliss, but unreasonably feared only death. His feelings contradicted his belief, but he didn’t deceive himself about what he felt, and also chose not to deceive his friends.

These are virtuous men. To discover contradictory or incompatible feelings in yourself, to admit them frankly and see them clearly, is a virtue, part of self-honesty. And when religious faith or convictions and the fear of death are at issue, obviously the stakes are high.

But Whitman, I think, when he says at the end of *Song of Myself*

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then...I contradict myself;  
I am large...I contain multitudes.

---

\* Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, first lines.

\*\* Retraction—end of *The Canterbury Tales*.



is trying vaguely to excuse only an inconsistency in his *argument* (*Song of Myself* does contain a persistent and insistent argument, asserting in particular and often, that death is benevolent) by claiming for himself an admirable and frank inconsistency in his *feelings* (“I contain multitudes”).

This kind of mild, self-deceiving slipperiness is typical of Whitman—the combination, maybe, of a lazy and willful intellect with a sort of generous good nature. I don’t know whether I like Whitman. Sometimes I do, I think, but I know I find it hard to admire him.

Looking back at *Song of Myself* with the subject in mind, I’m surprised to see how much time Whitman spends talking about death. (It occurs to me that those people who really aren’t afraid of death probably spend very little time thinking or talking about it, cheerfully or otherwise). Some of what he says just sounds like wishful thinking, or if it isn’t, at any rate comes off as ludicrous assertion:

The smallest sprouts show there really is no death (37)

I do not know what is untried and afterward,  
But I know it is sure and alive and sufficient.(86)

Ineffable grace of dying days! (!) (89)

God will be there and wait till we come. (90)

No array of terms can say how much I am at peace  
About God and about death. (93)

And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality,  
...it is idle to try to alarm me. (94)  
(The ‘bitter’ helps to place and save this, though).

And as to you corpse...(94)

Such passages aside, Whitman does often manage to make me feel, momentarily at least, that death is a rather comfortable fact of life. If we can merge with the rest of humanity while we’re alive, if our most important feelings aren’t personal or individual, then a personal death becomes a minor incident in the course of general

human and non-human life. Tolstoy argues this with great intellectual vigor and clarity. Whitman doesn't argue it very clearly but oddly enough is more convincing. Tolstoy convinced himself eventually that he could deny the individual in himself (finally, if I remember correctly, he wouldn't even play cards—it stimulated his egotism, he wanted to win; or ride a horse or a bicycle—the peasants couldn't, why should he?). The hugeness of his self-deception (his ego did not diminish) and the absoluteness of his self-denial is fascinating and instructive. Whitman, though, it seems, really was able to merge and loved to, and is able to make that-which-we-all-share sound like the most attractive of all available experience:

Mine is no callous shell,  
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.  
I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,  
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as  
I can stand. (62)

There are hundreds of instances of this kind of pleasure ("Who need be afraid of the merge?"). It's attractive, and equally attractive is the prospect of throwing off (among other things) a large part of the burden of consciousness:

People I meet...the effect on me of my early life...  
of the ward and city I live in...of the nation,  
The latest news...discoveries, inventions, societies...  
authors old and new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments,  
dues,  
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman  
I love,  
The sickness of one of my folks—or of myself...or  
ill-doing...or loss or lack of money...or  
depressions or exaltations,  
They come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am (35)

As long as one doesn't think too much about what kind of life this would be, it sounds attractive—we wouldn't, most of us, like for long to be rid of the world, but we often feel as if we would, and Whitman offers himself as a persuasive example:

What is commonest and nearest and easiest and cheapest  
is me. (44)

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend out-  
ward to them.

And such as it is to be of these more or less I am. (48)

I resist anything better than my own diversity. (49)

From here—from this community of feeling and experience—the step is short to:

And I know I am deathless,  
I know I shall not pass like a child's curlicue. (52)

or

I laugh at what you call dissolution (52)

or

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass  
I love. (96)

To be in any form, what is that? (61)

In the same way, or by the same logic of feeling, all this oneness of experience and escape from the ordinary attributes of self leads to an idealization of that other great leveler, sleep ("They are all averaged now"); and from sleep to death, too, is in Whitman's world a short step, or sometimes, as in *The Sleepers*, no step at all:

The sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed;  
They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east  
to west as they lie unclothed. (124)

The peace and beauty of sleep is the peace and beauty of death, or so I feel, for a moment, reading these lines. And when Whitman says soon after:

I know not how I came of you...but I know I came  
well and shall go well. (125)

it's only the fact that he says it that makes me remember that I  
don't believe it.

*For Al Stephens*