

Poems by Cody Walker

Update

My latent superpowers, well, they're back:
obliterate a marriage with my mind;
bewitch the president, that lying sack
of—Cody! Take it slow. In time I'll find

—please note, I'm speaking as my therapist—
the equilibrium that time affords.
I've also rerouted (I have a list)
(1) my neural pathways and (2) some fjords.

America's a country for the lonely,
the loony. Whitman said it years ago.
Remember, he could fly and he was only
an editor, a wingéd bearded schmo.

My powers have increased a hundredfold
since you left. Maybe a thousand-, all told.

The Cheney Correspondence (Selected)

Dear Dick Cheney,

Today I could barely leave the house. I flipped through magazines; I ate crackers; I checked my email (a lot). Do you sometimes feel that things are both important and unimportant? Now I'm at a coffee shop, but the day's basically over. Imagine being forty, but still feeling like a character in a sketch. Hope all's well with you.

Yours truly,
Cody Walker

Dear Dick Cheney,

When I was younger I wanted to be a baseball player. But I can't remember whether I loved baseball, or whether I just wanted everyone to love me. A confession, then: I still want everyone to love me—blindly, entirely, without sense or reason. Even you, whom I've regularly excoriated.

Fondly,
Cody Walker

Dear Dick Cheney,

I'm going a bit bald. Other than what it portends—dotage, death—it doesn't bother me. I'm also getting fat, which does bother me. Have I told you how beautiful I find most women, especially from a distance? I keep circling back to this line from Whitman: "What real happiness have you had one single hour through your whole life?" I hope you won't be too offended if I say that I have difficulty picturing you making love to Lynne, or to anyone, but I can easily picture you in a bathroom at three in the morning. I don't know how people picture me. Maybe with a pen, and a clutch of flowers, and bile in my throat.

Warm regards to you and your family,

Cody Walker

All Poetry Is Political

Arnold Schwarzenegger
stepped on a beggar
woman, then gave her a signed photo
of himself and Gary Soto.

Carolyn Forché
sat in a bookstore café,
practicing her thirty-yard stare.
Because: spies, everywhere.

Walt Whitman
didn't hire a hit man
nor blubber the words "heckuva job"
when—Hey, what's that thingamabob?

Dude, that's my heart!
And the funny part
is that it's half dead with fear
and half Edward Lear.

Dirge

Hooray for the dead! Walt Whitman!
Einstein! And the soon-to-be-undone:
Madonna; you; me; everyone.

Hephzibah Cemetery / April 1889

“Tho’ always unmarried I have had six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes to me occasionally.” – Walt Whitman, in a letter to John Addington Symonds, August 19, 1890

Hephzibah means my delight is in thee,
but that light is gone, Walt, that light’s been snuffed
by the rain clouds. The headstones warp open,
they’re plundered by snakes—Zanna half-saves them
with chalk rubbings. Why come to Hephzibah?
the magnolias moan, with their sickly
sweet blossoms I taste in my sleep. Why spread
dumbstruck ashes at the creek’s fat mouth?
Why do anything, Walt? It’s a direct question.
Zanna sends you love she doesn’t have
to spare and decorates our tent with epitaphs.
“Dead forever” reads her grandmum’s—sadly
I’m lying. Write me some way to recast
this sky, rub the clouds to blue slate, wring pulp
from the sun. Let jackdaws be mourning doves,
let mourning be delight, let ashes be snow, dust
sweet enough to eat. Make me take back
the comment no love to spare—Zanna’s
a copperhead angel, a sage-mouthed blossom,
something to press against in the rain.

Wrecked, moored in Georgia,

Caleb

Natchez / December 1889

We’ve camped for a week under a black
cottonwood. Colors are unraveling, Walt,
growing phantom deep like the river
which is raw silver, icy silt, a boy died in it.
We got here the day the sternwheeler sank,
we saw the flag officer frantic,

we saw mud-skinned men drop nets
as the sun set over the staggered bluffs—
there was nothing to do, we turned away.
All week Smoke's lolled in the cottonwood's
gloom, a river-god guarding Zanna
from the rip current. Or I'm wishing this,
Walt, because the nights are the same,
because Zanna pours the water of the drowned
boy down her shoulders and I sweep it
off her body in the bone-white moonlight.

Adrift in Mississippi,

Caleb

Chicago / June 1891

I wrote you a long letter last week,
then threw it in the lake. It ended
Your optimism is wrong, it alone
sustains me. We're sharing a Van Buren
shanty with a masher named Carl
who fingers forty-rod whiskey
and scones from wholesale houses.
Zanna went with him and stole a ham—
a seven-pound ham, Walt, stuffed in her coat.
Each morning I tramp to Jackson Park,
lug girders with six thousand workers.
A wheel's going up—it'll eat the sky,
it'll laugh and spit corpses on the lakefront.
I come home at night and find Zanna drunk.
Carl is eating codfish in a corner.
The Exposition lamps leave our eyes burning—
I clutch Smoke, I know that wheel will crash.

Bedraggled in the White City,

Caleb

Camden / June 1892

This is the letter no one will see.
This is me in your house, Walt—thirty blocks
from your grave. This is six in the evening,
Mickle Street light, Smoke and Watch raving
like syphilitics in the yard. This is my
heartbreak coda, my withered Why?, my stormy
yawp, my deluge off the Delaware.
I can tell you two things: one, Zanna gone
isn't Zanna canceled . . . and two, I have
no boots. I've worn them through. You understand
the problem. In a dream, you, Zanna, Smoke,
and I floated over this city. You read
us poems. I've never properly told you
what a great poet I think you are.
Beneath us, men fixed bicycles and drank
steam beer. Women brought the sun up. We watched
this, Walt, in untranslatable wonder.

Packing my bags before the appraisers come,

Caleb