

A Kroger in Kentucky

I imagine Walt Whitman with me
wherever I go.
Hovering over my shoulder
while I make a deposit at the bank,
sitting across from me at this table
right now, strolling into and alongside
my itch-grass childhood, long before
I knew him, flipping horseshoe
crabs right-side-up and turning
my nose at the fetid scent
of the beached red snapper.
Dockside I watch a manatee peak
from the murk and think, why
does this old man love me? And how
did he get Grandpa's name?

Walt's with me when I return to St. Pete to say
good-bye, gives my hand a mentor-ly squeeze
as we walk through the red brick roads of Old Northeast
and settle on a sea wall until the tide gives out,
jump down to the sand barefoot, avoiding
barnacles, picking up beer cans,
untangling lures from mangroves.
A soft, dead crab rocks in retreating waves.

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The plaque outside reads: *As for me
and my house, we shall serve the Lord.*
The hospice nurse comments on it.
You can tell by her tone:
she has faith. Walt winks at me.
He has faith, but he's got a sense
of humor about it. He tells me I have faith,
too, I just don't know how to designate it. No,
I say, faith in nebulous good is called hope,
at its most best. He laughs. Calls me cynic.

While we're imagining things: Love
moves like wind which moves like schools of fishes
through cedar woods as a single murmuring body.

Lately I've been thinking about the Vietnam War.
I could ask Nana about it, but I'm not

in the mood for vintage slurs. I could ask
Papa about it, but I'm not in the mood
for ghosts. I could ask Grandpa, but he got out
of being drafted cause he had rheumatic fever when
he was a kid. I can't ask my great uncle—
he was actually there. Walt was in Vietnam, folded
into ratty copies of *Leaves of Grass* that soldiers clung to
like Bibles. He cries about it, though, so
I don't like to bring it up.

In a Kroger in Kentucky, he shares
headphones with me as we listen
to Mitski, who's his favorite.
He says, *I used to do this all the time
with Allen, you know.*
I say, *funny, me too.*
He plucks avocados for me,
I introduce him to moonpies.

He's with me as reality
loses shape. He says, *you're real, Wylde.*
I say, *you're not, Walt.*

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It's not a pie, I explain. It's just called that.
I imagine he accepts this explanation
with a nod and follows me to the
self-checkout. I imagine he bobs his head to "Townie"
along the way.