

## Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall

A security-man who stood, arms crossed, outside the men's room (making sure that no one lingered) met my eyes with the same dispassionate gaze as a woman inside, kneeling to clean the toilets.

The faintly buzzing flicker of fluorescent light erased the contours of a place where strangers openly parade their sex. Efficient, silent, all ammonia and rubber gloves, she was in and

out of there in minutes, taking no notice of the pocket Whitman that I leafed my way through before others arrived. *In paths untrodden, / In the growth by margins of pondwaters, / Escaped*

*from the light that exhibits itself* – how those words came flooding back to me while men began to take their seats, glory holes the size of silver dollars in the farthest stall where no adolescent went

unnoticed. O daguerretyped Walt, your collar unbuttoned, hat lopsided, hand on hip, your sex never evading our view! How we are confined by steel partitions, dates and initials carved

into the latest coat of paint, an old car key the implement of our secret desires. *Wanted: uncut men with lots of cheese. No fats. No femmes. Under twenty a real plus.* How each of us must

learn to decipher the erotic hieroglyphs of our age, prayers on squares of one-ply paper flushed daily down the john where women have knelt in silence, where men with folded arms stand guard

while we go about our task, our tongues made holy by licking each other's asshole clean, shock of sperm warm in our mouths, white against the clothes we wear as we walk out of our secrets into the world.