

Thomas Gardner: On "Dream Song 76"

? "Song 76" is a quiet resolution of Henry's despair about his father. If life comes to loss ("a handkerchief sandwich"), still Henry wants to taste it all. "You is from hunger, Mr. Bones," the interlocutor tells him. Now, he is able to manage that taste:

[Gardner quotes lines that begin "in a modesty of death" and end "by my knee."]

By "modesty" Henry means a smaller version of the death, a manageable joining with his father through art. (The play with ago-along-gone-one-agony in the word "agone" also seems to indicate distance.) Now, Henry is able to sing about death: "arm in arm, by the beautiful sea, / hum a little." If Henry's father left him alone, then through these poems Henry will join him: "?I saw nobody coming, so I went instead."

from Thomas Gardner, "John Berryman's Dream Songs," Chapter 1 in *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1989), 45.

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