



Poem 26 from

Song of Myself

By Walt Whitman

That you are here—that life exists, and identity; That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse. — W.W.

Now I will do nothing but listen,
To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it.

I hear **bravuras** of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals,
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and night,
Talkative young ones to those that like them, the loud laugh of work-people at their meals,
The angry base of disjointed friendship, the faint tones of the sick,
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing a death-sentence,
The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the wharves, the refrain of the anchor-lifters,
The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-streaking engines and
hose-carts with premonitory tinkles and color'd lights,
The steam-whistle, the solid roll of the train of approaching cars,
The slow march play'd at the head of the association marching two and two,
(They go to guard some corpse, the flag-tops are draped with black **muslin**.)
I hear the violoncello, ('tis the young man's heart's complaint,)
I hear the key'd cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears,
It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.

He can't tune out the sounds of life, nor would he want to.

I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera,
Ah this indeed is music—this suits me.

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

He feels the mournful music in his gut. He tunes all else out and ingests it.

I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches such **ardors** from me I did not know I possess'd them,
It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the indolent waves,
I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,
At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.

Breathe! Breathe! when the music's over, life flows back in.



Hearing Walt Sing

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

So begins Walt Whitman's epic poem *Song of Myself*. Whitman (1819–1892) wrote of his breath, body, and soul, of earth and sky, man and woman. Even the tiniest blade of grass meant as much to him as the entire universe.

Whitman wasn't just writing poems; he was speaking to a nation he adored and immortalizing himself in its fabric.

In the following poem, Whitman listens closely to the everyday sounds that surround him. Listen in and you, too, can be connected to it all, and to Walt. For every atom belonging to him as good belongs to you. Celebrate and sing.

—Bryon Cahill

* vocab

- BRAVURAS:** brilliant performances
- MUSLIN:** woven fabric made of cotton
- ARDORS:** warm, passionate feelings