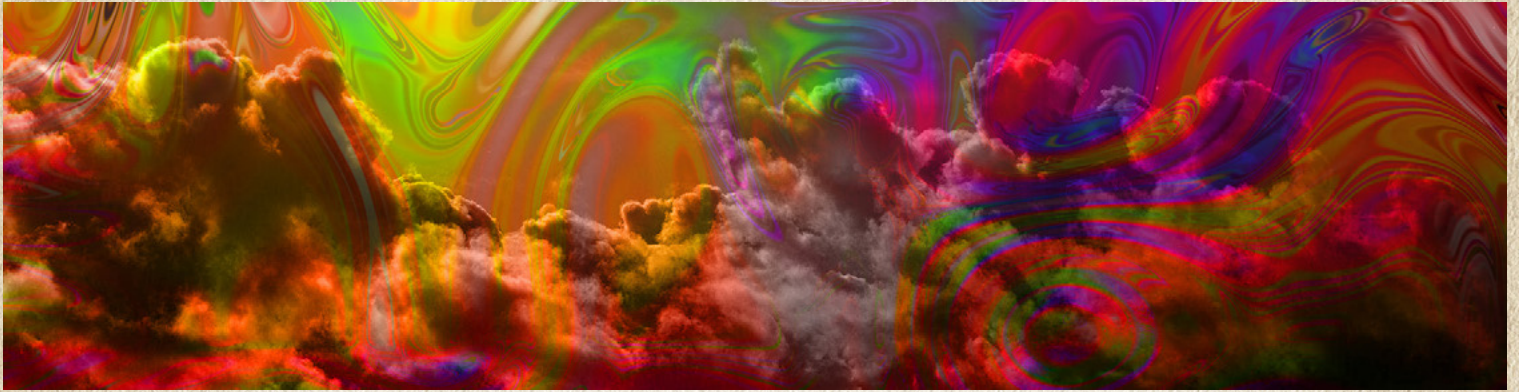


RHAPSODY IN A DARK TIME



We are living in a country that could easily sleep walk its way into an authoritarian state. It is already a place where violent clashes—on paper, online, and in the streets—remind me of no other period in American history more than the years just before the Civil War. I know that the only way to prevent this outcome is to organize and get voters to the polls, and to bring together people who still believe in championing the greater good, and who are willing to shed past grievances in order to work together. Understanding this urgency makes me wonder if the ecstasy of brilliant lyric poetry and avant-garde art is an unnecessary diversion, that the energy Calibanonline has always strived to achieve is not appropriate for our times. This quandary gets me thinking about Walt Whitman, America's greatest rhapsode. (By rhapsode I mean that he, like Homer, was both the composer and singer of his work.) Then I think about "Drum Taps," the poems Whitman wrote during his time as a nurse during the carnage of the Civil War. In a letter to his friend William O'Connor, he meditated on his Vision of America:

I am perhaps mainly satisfied with Drum-Taps because it delivers my ambition of the task that has haunted me, namely, to express

*in a poem (& in the way I like, which is not at all by directly stating it) the pending action of this **Time & Land we swim in**, with all their large conflicting fluctuations of despair & hope, the shiftings, masses, & the whirl & deafening din, (yet over all, as by invisible hand, a definite purport & idea)—with the unprecedented anguish of wounded & suffering, the beautiful young men, in wholesale death & agony, everything sometimes as if in blood color, & dripping blood. The book is therefore unprecedently sad, (as these days are, are they not?)—but it also has the blast of the trumpet, & the drum pounds & whirrs in it, & then an undertone of sweetest comradeship & human love, threading its steady thread inside the chaos, & heard at every lull & interstice thereof—truly also it has clear notes of faith & triumph.*

If Whitman could maintain his magnificent vision through that war and during its troubled aftermath, then there is a place for the high lyrical in any time, including our own. Rhapsodes like Whitman remind us what it feels like when we're free, why we want to stay in that ecstatic landscape, and the grief we feel when we're dragged back into the oppression of mundane corruption and atrocity. Is this freedom about flying, squeezing through a portal and exploding into ecstasy on the

other side? Or is this state—so hard to describe but immediately recognized when felt—immanent and ever-present in everything we see around us and in every action of our lives? Rhapsodic teslas leap through walls and swim through sunsets, redefining the waves of science texts, taking us to places that have been systematically denied to us by all the forces limiting us since birth. Those are the places we have sometimes denied to ourselves, even in our dreams. There is such joy in a dog running full speed in tight circles, then peeling off in a random direction, only to return to the joyous circle again. That dog is telling us more than we understand. The dog world of visceral and spiritual fusion is a world we could find our way into, if we only listened to the music and rhythms that would take us there. We could dance into the myth of our own true origins. Ariel can create celestial music, but Caliban can hear it, turn it inside out, flip the changes—as Thelonious Monk always did—and find the dazzling groove that is always obscured by the ordinary. We could dive into a word, any word, and watch it explode into its native colors. There is a universal holiness (as opposed to religious dogma) that is trapped in the sludge of our lives, and it is always trying to break through.

If any of us feels a lack of energy and focus, a sense that nothing can be done and that collective efforts are useless, just look at the activist students of Stoneman Douglas High School and the way they have responded to the Parkland massacre. The school was named after Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a women's suffrage advocate and early ecology activist. What I have heard from these students indicates that they have followed her example. The media commentators have been impressed by how articulate and bright the students are. I agree, but even more impressive is their determination and nerve. They are happy to "call

BS" on all kinds of authorities, including state representatives, congressmen, senators, and the president, and sometimes in face to face confrontations. They are not cowed by the blowback they have received. When challenged, they just redouble their demands. The corporate stampede away from the NRA is proof that they have already accomplished what most would have considered impossible.

We all need the fierce determination of the committed activist. Nothing else will save us from the catastrophe we are facing. But we also need the joy of that dog, as she blends motion, rhythm, bodily and facial gestures,

to lift herself into a hyper-state of energy and concentration. We need to dance that same dance so that we can gather many millions together to vote—at every opportunity and for every office—in order to take the "*Time & Land we swim in*" out of the darkness and into a new definition of light: the world this country promised in its earliest documents, the world that is now waiting for us to sing it into being.

