Animals

The poet tells us that he feels more at home with animals than humans, whom he finds complicated and false.

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are
         so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
         the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
         lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.
So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince
         them plainly in their possession

I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?

WALT WHITMAN

[From 'Song of Myself' in Leaves of Grass]

Walt Whitman (1819–92) is a major figure in early American poetry. In an age when all poetry was rhymed and metrical, Whitman made a break with tradition and wrote a revolutionary new kind of poetry in free verse. He was a nonconformist in all respects, including his social life.

Thinking about the Poem

1. Notice the use of the word 'turn' in the first line, "I think I could turn and live with animals...". What is the poet turning from?

2. Mention three things that humans do and animals don't.

3. Do humans kneel to other humans who lived thousands of years ago? Discuss this in groups.

4. What are the 'tokens' that the poet says he may have dropped long ago, and which the animals have kept for him? Discuss this in class. (*Hint*: Whitman belongs to the Romantic tradition that includes Rousseau and Wordsworth, which holds that civilisation has made humans false to their own true nature. What could be the basic aspects of our nature as living beings that humans choose to ignore or deny?)

English is funny, because...
If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth?