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LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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Tuning Inner Radio

Thomas P. Convey

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

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Thomas P. Convey, 1983

ABSTRACT

Tuning Inner Radio

Thomas P. Convey

Taken as a whole, this manuscript is quite diverse; one could easily demonstrate how a variety of personal changes and poetic influences reflect shifts in approach and technique. But that remains extraneous to the poetry itself.

Some earlier poems use speech patterns in different ways; in later work this approach is reduced to occasional usages of common figures of speech. Then the words become charged particles in a transmission from a mind to a steady state on the page. Other poems are directed to the causalities that led to this particular poem in this time and place. The paradigm of history becomes a method of discovery, as well as a source of material. Sources include personal and family history, obscure legends and other material considered ahistorical. These poems document the forgotten, in some oblique or non-linear way.

The poems are arranged (loosely) in chronological order: This serves a dual purpose: developmental sequence becomes fairly evident, and the poems fall into formal and stylistical categories which correspond to when they were written.

DEDICATIONS

To my parents, without whom I wouldn't be

here.

To the memory of my uncle Bruce Beatty, whose steady supply of cast-off library books made an avid reader of me by the age of ten.

To Richard Sommer, who helped me out of self-made holes, and pointed his sharp finger.

To all the friends who gave me both spiritual and material sustenance, especially in the final weeks of revision.

Thomas P. Convey

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HOT AND COLD RUNNING NEWS

Pale phallic mushrooms bloom
fullcolour Life-sized photo,
an embryotic cranium crusher.
on the TV news, palliative
shifts among the committed,
an entropy of opposites,
highway death and the Sunshine girl.

A blunt encumbrance on the mute
taxonomy of a standing
bureaucracy.

In future, avoid the global village.

Suspended animation, The
Hanged Man, prophecy.
Tribal fashion and the changing
faces of group dissent;
speeding locomotives precede
the birth of nations.

Whatever happened to the "masses"?

People brood in rooms at dusk
without a light, now
apathy rhymes with anarchy.

But unemployment figures
are still very high.

You cannot turn off
that dripping tap.

WEATHER REPORT

Chinook time in the West again,
when tiny grit blows a warm
false spring through February.

You were trying to remember the name of it
and couldn't let it go, so
you wandered alone as a crowd through the day.

Could have been
a special day, too -- started clear and blue
and stuck with it till dusk.

Back in your room,
the open pages of a book on the desk
flap the breeze, you
think of someone and your mod lifts
for a moment
twilight drains the air,
you can feel the snow melting
under your skin as you breathe.

DREAMING TAUTOLOGIES

R.D.Laing was laying on my couch
speaking in short, fast bursts
while I sat poised
behind his head with pen and paper.

The statement . . .

he said and paused,

'All forms point to the formless'

and here he struggled to put it into words,
is in and of itself a formless proposition!

Long pause, some heavy breathing;

The statement is pointless:

the finger is speechless!

And waving it in the air,

breathed

a truly transcendent sigh of relief.

But don't you see,

(I said)

we need everything even

and especially what isn't there;

nothing to claim

and no one to blame,

a somewhere even a single

finger makes its point.

INTERIM MUSIC

Waiting tables in restaurants
for others waiting for lovers
or taking lunches on expense accounts
with endless cups of coffee,
shredded matches and balled-up napkins.

Waiting for the check
if you please;
a tacky tip on a sticky table.

Waiting for the train
to leave the station, late to start
as you are early to worry.

Waiting for calamity the way
some would for the muse,
lying in wait and/or

Waiting to be Discovered.

THE QUESTION OF SCIENCE

Several Wide-eyed Hows Grazing in a Field:

How light becomes a catalyst
when you're poised upon a sneeze

How you always know the next thing
some people are going to say

How pigeons do it/how fish don't

How aging is ... accomplished

How yawns become contagious

But especially how are poems delivered

And how does this one end

(why will wait).

AN HOUR OF MEDITATION

Silence.

Endless billowing silence
cloaked in a shroud.

Immense dim cavity,
heavy with centuries
of ritual and stoic grandeur.

Walk up the center aisle.

Is it scale that distorts this distance?

Walk forever, no closer;
then suddenly the alter looms up,
you are under a dome.

Beams of light from overhang windows
thirty feet up around its base. Watch
notes drift for however long.

Is the bright emptiness
dissolving thought already, or
is this the beginning of blessedness--

contemplating slivers of light
with your mouth hanging open?

Pointed towers of Gothic romance;
perspective ending in a point.
The old iron cross hung over your standard castle,
elongated and stretched with a certain
attention to delusion.

Allusion to ascension.

Protection--

spikes set around the inner
sanctum of a chosen people.

Quite the glory days for architecture.
They don't build these anymore:
grandeur, status, the challenge of ideals.
Thousands devoted their lives; jobs
passed down through generations.
The pilgrims still overawed; see them
whispering and tiptoeing around
their antsized dignity,
clutching slick black cameras
for talismans.

All the flash and glory
of a people trained to humility
concentrated in one grand structure; encrusted
in the four-foot thick walls,

in the rows of spires and vaulted arches
swallowing corners everywhere.
Darkness falling but no moonlight here;
just the dim imprint of angels on the ceiling.

Quick image of yourself in photographic
negative from some Forties' movie--

soldier takes refuge in church,
leaves gun at door, finds
strength in prayer. Quick meeting
with priest on way out
for confession and absolution.

Then back to front

with renewed vigour.

Yours only ghostly encounters
in this hallowed hole.

Still less a hole
than a hollow hall where history hangs;
few such monuments left, and the rest
of history drops into holes
outside in the churchyard.

Then again
there are holes in history.

Been floating in the dust of ages

for perhaps too long;

what weight presses on you, my witness,
and makes your feet hurt?

The gods all seem quiet,
nothing here but icons and whispering
ghosts in the hollow hall.

Icons:

Christ on cross/bleeding wounds

crown of thorns/stigmata/shepherd robes

hands extended/brace flock

Virgin Mary same pose/crowned Queen
of Heaven/St. Francis with sparrows

assorted cherubim/seraphim

Whispers:

rustling cloth/congregation rising

from knees/bowed heads/murmurs

of response/let us pray/look ashamed

Tired of walking

through the holy relic,

you wonder about the whisperers, the living
wind of humbler histories:

metal staircases/recessed windows/narrow

hallways/coatracks/hands rummaging in closets

pulling away curtains/face in the window

people turning away/climbing steps

turning from windows/turning into their homes

The domestic story is more her story.

An inside story.

But as the family grows, the story
folds into the homes;
slides quiet into place the way
a book looks good on the shelf.

History needs its artifacts--
only the eyes that see it

change

the axis of the past
to a source of wonder
turned to stone
so long ago and far away.

Now you can send a postcard;
maybe you'll wish you were there.

REFLECTIONS IN THE NIGHT

This has gone too far for a good time
and quickly too, you can't help wonder
in bed later picking at your scab.

The receding hairline would look distingué
on anyone else, the belly
empty without the flattening ripples

you loved to see reflected.

Becoming victims of our appetites;
these days gesture hardens into pose

and sex with friends a quiet little joke
to cry over you go home
to sleep with your mythology.

Who needs the cold flash of gunfire
punctuating darkness
to know real life fears wider

and less direct. Smaller tragedies;
even vomiting is catharsis
but it does end quickly.

People say what
do you really crave; I mean
sure we're all getting older now
you ask yourself what comes after.

THE CITY RADIO ACTIVE

1. The city was delivered
(as the story goes) from the wilderness
to twins, who balanced
civilization on a set of hills
with great stone temples--
and so the jaws of law
loosed on empire on the world.

Now concrete is harder
and harder
to defend and/or avoid,
building on the past
obsolescence.

Building a grid from the air
to flo-form concrete rectangles,
metal Lego and glass until the eyes
tire of reflections.

This is no walk along the Appian Way
in your sandals, but
you can keep your history,
black boots riding up my heel.

A standing army is still
better than troops on the march.

The city today is so large
people are lost
frequently; some permanantly.

Lights flash on corners, traffic pours
in a distant river
you can't hear anymore
than a moving background of grey (or so).

Detonation of the mental grid-factor.

Demolition regurgitates waste
(history is bunk, right
Henry?).

we need a new/nomenclature of space/
need to look/again at the plans/if they/
exist/find out/remember/how the body was/
supposed/to fit/in it/

2. Caught in your manic concrete
beat and the dance of slanted grace;
I turn inside
a regimental poise
towering over swirling grit
blowing sheets of newspaper
funnel down long empty streets.
Heads sometimes appear
in a random window on the grid--
vertical
cuneiforms
of humanity,
white mice in a maze
where I stand waiting
for another face.
looking up
I have no words
you've heard them all anyway.

3. Spinning the dial on the way
out of town:
 a collage of billboards and neon
 lights bag ladies postcards.
 in bookstores waiting for the
 word pool halls bakeries buses
 demonstrations disorientation
 ice cream cones watching
 pretty faces passing stray
 cats metal walk-up steps
 to balconies people
 hang out of on hot nights
 the car washes and gas stations
 fire trucks roaring by
 with rubber figures affixed and
 garbage trucks those big trucks
 backfiring in the street
 make me jump bicycles
 drugstores windowdressers
 situating mannequins in display
 cases bars and restaurants galore
 foreign films (most are) live
 performance cheap sex
 peep shows strip shows
 men looking hard with shiny eyes

need loving man it shows
in muscle cars with heavy metal
music trying to beat resistance
down the gritty streets
the slippery streets
in sleet ing winter weather
forget walking
but the street vendors flower sellers
bums and artists all keep moving anywhere
but out to the suburban bungalows
in rows invisible overspills
of ennui now: what am I missing?

4. Tiny insect whine --

a frenzy of forest violins
follow my arm-waving
conducting madly as I go in
monotonous accompaniment
to animal sweat and blood
attraction of mosquitoes
and gnats -- not reciprocal.
Run inside to escape
the strains of desire so pure
you can't stand it.

Raising hand and foot these days

to spiders on the countertop,
beetles on the floor; only
moths flying at the light
stop me, shadows
flicker the sad obsession
of their grace; I cup
the dusty wingbeats in my hands
and toss them out the door, gently
as if performing a ritual.

Sounds collide and subside
on the other side of eyelids --
floating in the red and yellow spots.
the sun put in my head
while flies fuck in the bright heat
of day, and dragonflies rustle and dart.

Later in the city, living details
fuse with twilight; I flick a switch
and roaches scatter to the corners
of vision; distant sounds
register like bugbites on the skin,
an odd click in the phoneline,
muffled shouts and slamming doors
enter my awareness
like the sudden discovery
of yet another species.

5. Summer sun setting,

light
compressed and leaking colour
on the edge of cloudless sky
filters down through buzz
of a long hot day settling
in red glow smeared across
a wide horizon.

By the time you turn
to look
over there that beam
shimmering out over the lake
shrinks
into the sun
set another evening
in a life you know
it will set the same
way another day
though you won't see it

6. Clear night broadcasts

from a distant city
come kiss your tender solitude
with tainted lips,
those lewd old rhythms
of rock'n roll; you dance
alone around the room
in firelight.

ADVENTURE STORIES: Part 3

All bears are black
in the dark they melt
away like shadows slipping into dusk.
You poke the flashlight
beam into the bush,
as if to catch this way
a noise you heard (a fear you herd)
when you need to see around
the corners of your eyes;
bears will all follow
their noses back again.

Curious creatures, bears;
just the sight of one
is an event, a true-life story
to push domestic bliss
from wonder, put
the primal teeth back into fear --
bears inspire raptures no longer
familiar to the daily world
of auto accidents, illnesses; anxieties
surround the banality of death.

Even the scavenger bears that gather
around the rural dumps show
the mystique of a threat,
show their appetite for human
garbage, don't care
about the many ways of dying,
don't climb trees often
as fear is far away
and ritual beneath them --
so "red in tooth and claw"
they follow their own
runny nose and open mouth
until the day of falling over
dead for no apparent reason.

THE LEGEND OF THE LOON

Common loon. Great Northern Diver. Gavia immer.

(from Birds of Western Canada)

Most frequenters of our waterways and lakes are familiar with the long, loud laugh of the Loon. The loon has many other strange, wild notes; among them one beginning low, rising high, and then dropping suddenly. It is often noisy at night or just before a storm and birds frequently call to and answer one another across the water.

The full moon, reflecting
luminosity at the surface
of things; people in cities
enact tiny helpless passions
and dramas of tenderness,
oblivious to the cold pull,
but fighting it desperately.

The moon would sound just like a Loon
if the moon were full and bright
on a lonely lake at night.

The Loon will dive at a boat's approach
to surface minutes later
at a greater distance; from the boat
they can't watch the bird
that never misses a catch.

And the Loon laughs long and loud,
Penetrating to a deeper sense of solitude.

The Loon is a loner,

and lets the whole world know it.

But it is also said
each Loon is always the only Loon,
the black shadow of a full moon
shining onto a dark lake.

At night she cries
to join her bright double in the sky,
at morning when alone once again.

The calls echo and bounce
out over that sheer surface of dawn,
echo through the mind long after.

And the Loon laughs, exulting in her secret,
twin-faced as any moon.

TRAIN ON PLAIN

The dot at the vanishing
point becomes a line
growing smoothly into train
which carries its perspective
the speed arrival
moving thunder in a
huge sudden metal weather
where you are standing in the rain
the train in passing carries
memories of journeys
joys of destinations
riding inside a passing
train of thought now fixed
to coupled metal car wheels
lipped on rails nailed tight
to greased black ties
imbedded in the solid mound
of oily earth and stone.
passing trains in the past
roadbeds anointed in oil
over blood for the dead they keep
the sacrificial bones
of unknown Chinese Slavic Irish
under iron railway wheels

a stink of diesel
mixed with spray and steam
from a dream where you are standing
in the rain
with metal purpose pounding by
the moment stretching past the memories
an old one-armed switchman swinging
a lantern at a crossing
so many men with the train in their veins
retire and die
suddenly the train is past
and you come back
before the waning line discovers
the vanishing point and disappears
again you are here (standing).
Alone in the rain.

FUNEREAL WEATHER

I feel this is how the earth forgets,
even as I stand here
in the middle of winter to remember,
in this white land of vague borders;
even with my eyes shut tight

I see the drifted snow
against the fences by the road;
fences that mark property, solidly
square interests and esteem of families.

Even with the wedding ring
upon her finger, neck circled once with pearls,
it looks like nothing will ever move again
but wind in the trees and shadows
of shifting light,
even her body on a field of white
satin puffed around the head
and bolstered in the narrow box
we guided to the plot, a stark hole
pushed through snow and frozen crust
to deeper, steaming earth;
even with such careful
ceremony and solemnity interred,

her memories slip back into the ground
from where they came, back
to the shifting ground of endless seasons;
I hope her bones won't be too cold.

DREAM SONG

What can the matter be, oh

What did your mama see in that
 moon grown fat,

What did I smell in the tropical night,
What did I hear out there in the darkness,

What did I feel in the gun-metal morning,

What did I fear where colour is useless,

What do we want from impossible darkness
 we hope for our hope to come back

 within reach of
a night within moonlight so bright
and so twisted, silver and shifting,
so upside-down laughing;

What do we do when the forest ignores us
in our armour of metaphors, myths of deliverance,

When dragons fly treetops we murmur and shift

 where a jungle of faces
surrounds us in laughter;
you wake up clammy, and wrapped in a dream
elusive to remembering, lost in confusions
 you fear to forget.

A CRUEL TANGO

Moonlight throws a strange glow
on limbs entwined with shadowy flowers
rustling in the bed; softer than petals,
your mouth becomes a wish we cannot voice
and all your tears and laughter disappear
into the expanse of a moment unfolding.

Bodies abandoned to each other--
clasping creatures in a rootless garden,
in dreams where we are no longer alone,
no longer together: running from danger:
lost and naked, seeking cover,
far from the perfect landscape of bodies;
the smooth weather of tenderness has turned
into weaknesses; we stalk the night angles.

ELEGaic HYMN (WITHOUT MUSIC)

in memory of Sean Madden

suddenly one of us was gone
belonged to memory
to earth
to pain refusing to admit
belief when seeing his shadow
reflected only in each other's eyes
hard to look
and look away

sharing in this way what we thought
was tragedy
we spent too much time

clinging to each other
to pity/drugs/alcohol
staring at the wall
and determined alone
to suffer our way to purity
as if the idea of fate could save us
we were younger then

now too much time has passed

forgetting
yet I could go on again
describe his face his hair

what we did then

how we laughed together

his resemblance to another,

hero of youth more memories

but we can't go back

why bother

death is often large as life

why make it larger

this bouquet of words

these flowers gathered

are cut to fit my elegy

in the shape of an arch

over the years to mark one(ness)

the heart will remember

POTATO POEM

They were first called
staples because they stuck
to the insides, slow riders
on gravity and peristalsis.
By now I've eaten more potatoes
in my life than I could possibly carry.
And learned little more of them
over the years of meals--
habits take root in taste acquired.
They become what the stomach requires.
The stomach is never fooled.

Great-great-grandfather shipborn
en route to Canada among early
boat people,
a refugee from Ireland
of plagued potatoes.

Later reports of his gypsy/logger
mystique of high black boots
and gold earring,
running logs downriver from
the Kazabazua to the Gatineau;
his wife bore eleven children
of which six lived more than a year.

My great-aunt says her name is unknown,
supposing with a sad smile
the woman must have been Metis.

Grandfather on my father's side
born in Liverpool of a Belfast shipwright
and an English woman;
took off for Canada at fifteen
married a Rooney
one of the Ottawa Valley Rooneys
where in Bells Corners
a Gaelic lilt
still sings in their speech today.

My ninety-three year-old great-aunt
passed on some of the stories to me;
though bent like an old root herself
she keeps
more than she can ever tell
and she's told plenty;
enough for silence to rise
and fill in other mysteries.
Now she reads the paperback kind
at the rate of about three a week,
All her friends are dead now,
have been for years.

But still the question of origins
hangs in the air like kitchen smells
coaxing a hunger from curiosity.

In my family hungry mouths
were always filled
with, yes potatoes
(always lots for a second
helping, yes please)
axis for meals . . .
since I could swallow mashed,
and though the stories of ancestors
have trailed off
lost among the many memories
of stories from so many pasts--
most now buried
or forgotten in the chinks of busy lives,
I am still eating the only past I know.

In a hash brown or french fry,
even in a crisp salty chip
the taste of that tuber persists.
Mashed with butter or baked browns
do the trick,
or split or stuffed;
I now salute them all before I eat.

Cooked and served or sold at market

fine

but a root is still a root

a knobby node never quite round

it lays covered

with earth and studded with eyes

looking into the darkness,

growing downward

in a way

we never quite understand.

Perhaps someday I will convey my own.

STATION DRIFT

Prowling among my thoughts all day
and hanging in the air between
my body and the shadow
of your embrace; there is nothing
more substantial.

Since you are gone,
I mine the memory;
beneath the grand plans and gestures
a vein of feeling, a shining
liquid ore running between us.
I know it's there
under all the laughter
and the steady flow of talk
I don't remember.

I wasn't thinking of you
all day today,
don't want to fall into that sediment
of feeling and I hate
drinking alone.

Maybe you're out there wondering
what is material between us.

Or perhaps you thought you got away,
now caught in my mind
so loathe to mouthe the heart;

I can't even land a kiss
since you are gone now, and
you left behind this poem.

MAN OUTSIDE WINDOW

From beyond the edge of light
I watch you
From the darkness, standing
Silently to watch you
Sitting alone
As if you were there forever
For me you'll stay
With the lamplight your perfect halo
And a book on your lap.

You yawn and you stretch
Your animal pleasure
I shiver you moved.
For me I know
You move in me
You grow clearer to the eye.
I can't turn away now . . . wait.

No wait
Come back.

You were mine. My picture.
My perfect
Living joy.

STAGE WHISPERS

(Love in three acts)

1

Love happens, no one knows
why love just happens by on its own
while they are out walking,
the dog or something
then they are alone together
naked as lightbulbs
to syncopate the skin
with movements like sonatas
fierce embrace and poetry
trailing from the fingertips
scar to scar across once-blank flesh.

Then dancing perhaps
some flawless dream pas de deux
among the puffy clouds of course
embalmed in bliss they sleep
the sleep of angels
side by side
one inside the other.

2

But lovers always seem to wonder
about losing self in others;
the touch blunts a bit
and kisses start to cloy.

Love gets desperate
for room to breathe, so
love takes a stroll.

Then both ghosts escape
one night to groan about
the good old times in the summer
of marzipan kisses interspersed
with words-- sweet nothings
you understand all gone now
meanwhile the other two
are arguing ad nauseam
trying to shut out the meddling

phantoms of themselves;
so much depends on so little now,
the next few minutes will tell.

3

I forget how it ends.

But it does end; ..
ghosts don't play so well anymore
except in reworkings of Macbeth.
One thing is sure,
when you hear the tears and whiney voices
pleading for god

knows ~~it~~
then it's denouement,
love waves goodby with wings on.

OR: Love waving from the wings.

Exit. Curtain. The End.

Thunderous applause, standing ovation.

House lights go up. Applause continues
until the actors refuse to come back.

IT HURTS SO GOOD

There he was in my doorway
wearing his cool
cartoon shark's sneer,
private eyes
upon my disarray--
looking for a quick conviction,
no doubt; the weather report
came over our faces.

Then black clouds rolled up
to the bed like boulders,
where the quarry lay revealed
in the jerky, armour-clad moves
that soon wound to a stop;
later, shattered glass on the floor,
a brick-bound note with all your love.
I walked barefoot across the shards
for a view without reflections.

LIVE MASKS

The mask comes off
in darkness
there are no reflections
and no one saw you
dancing with your shadow in the pale,
moonlit street.

The mask comes off
in pieces;
when you couldn't breathe, you
had to break it, claw it
off, if only
to save face.

The mask comes off
when the face turns to stone,
and all that can change it
is weather-- slow aging.

The mask comes off
but still talks back;
what can you do but accept
the dilemma, and wonder
if someday you will remember
when love first (con)fused identities
as it always seems to do.

TRIBUTE

It shakes

It quivers and quakes

Dominates

It runs around in circles

Stands up on its hind legs

to sink its teeth in moonlit flesh

It whispers and it roars

Acts like a total bore

It always leaves too soon

or comes too late--

no not always

But it's not a party

And it's not a wake

Somewhere between us

It eats and sleeps.

You can be in it

And not know it

No one knows it

No it doesn't make the world

go around

It stops it.

Undervalued, overrated, base,

Sophisticated,

This dormant virus

We carry within us

Flares up and fills us;

Some are sick with it,

at this moment.

Others would deny it-- go ahead,

Say it doesn't exist.

Then it follows you may

require: to stay pretty

stay witty

die young or

at least quickly.

THE PLACE BETWEEN (IN PACE)

Think

of a wide, white expanse
without signs or places of rest,

lacking also
punctuation and sensible speech.

Now you are approaching the bridge,
which offers one choice.

When you begin to cross,

the bridge will speak
this way:

You make me real
in the passage
you may or may not remember
more than a feeling of
an image, or a vague
sense of loss at the end.

Bridges sometimes seem
to babble, or what runs
beneath and what surrounds
them does; steps
on the bridge beat
a soft, regular rhythm
like the here in the (heartbeat) now.

Bridges have impact, are
targets in warfare, link
the past to a specific future
with the length of a span;
the span of a hand
writing 'a bridge'
is one small part of someone's plan,
but it's not marked on all the maps --
this bridge is also a map.

I am (we are)
still crossing the bridge, but
it could end something like this
(for me) some day:
We start across together
not in lockstep, but casually
we step out from the bank
onto the structured; linear mass
suspended in the air over
water and over time;
we are crossing it together,
but I linger in the middle
to look down, and you pass
me by. You look back
from the other side, the bridge
is empty -- I had stayed
too long looking down, or

maybe I was never there,
never started across, so
didn't fall or jump (would I
really leave the poem
unfinished, or might that
make a better ending?),
like a dream forgotten
on waking up --
but the bridge still stands,
solemn as any epitaph.

Finally,
since you alone arrived
or were delivered, you
would be obliged
to make the appropriate ending.
Or you could decide
to forget it --
pretend it never happened,
no one would ever know.

THE RADIO TRANSMITTER

1. Telephone is radio in reverse:
 a one-on broadcast
 with no audience
 only obedience to the ring
 the phone rings the hand
 answers you say hello
 you do not begin to salivate
 you do begin to communicate
 trading impulses from the verbal-specific
 regions of the brain
 electrochemical stimulus/response
 translated into language, then back
 to teledata impulses
 then into words again, that's all
 mere words of all kinds:
 petitions pleas complaints
 seductions obscenities and business
 propositions--
 the verbal topography seems endless;
 anonymous
 as numbers and lethal
 as words can ever be--
 are you receiving?

2. Cities wired with rubber-coated
voices coming from synthetic webs
whole nations are talking
to themselves and others
are listening
when wires are not crossed
when time fills the gap
between mouth and ear
it makes the spark that keeps the motors
humming and the satellites in orbit
speak up
here reach out and touch someone
with a real live wire
you are charged
by the minute
no matter what you say
you pay
to play this numbers game

and that echo on the line: sometimes
remnants of another conversation
returning from some digital delay
drift past, transforming
the past to posterity
(monthly statements);

nothing is ever lost

just fades away

to come back one day perhaps

voices on a giant tape loop

on slow rewind, stretching out

to the far end of an orbit

around the sun, radio waves

on a cycle of eternal return

and the arrival of these signals some day

distorted into some new language

may convince the scientists to decide

it's messages from aliens.

So there is no reason to miss

your calls

answering is more than a service to others

it's your contribution to the future course

of history

but keep in mind

a busy signal is not a symbol or a sign

and silence is no more

than whenever you happen to pull the plug.

3. Sunday service/phone-in show:

With receiver firmly in hand,

listening to attendant humming

of the dial tone

awaiting the offering of a call,

point finger extended to dial

the numbers seven of them

in fervent hopes of celebrating

the mystery of speech

long pause as you wait to speak

between the lines

cast over still waters

before telecommunications

before conversation

the blind navigation of mute bodies,

ugly grunts and hand signals....

But lo, the ringing in your ears

breaks with a click

you voice leaps into your throat

but before you can utter

a single redeeming phrase

you are hanging on

indefinite hold

in telephone purgatory

with Muzak for cherubs on the line.

4. Greetings and bon mots.

A bit of business, arrangements.

Write from a large place,

said Richard then out of the blue

sky today, uh-huh it's sunny here too

-- so you can still see the tiny but --

expand your scope, I finished,

he wasn't using one though

sitting he said watching

the lawn out of view

of the ruined grain elevator

out the window of the receiver

(a two-way glass)

I can see his words quite clearly now,

the line that finally got through

itself: keep in touch.

THE SHUT-IN PROGRAM

Yesterday's People

(in memory of Patricia Melvin)

In good weather you can see them
almost anywhere; their strange
hats and baggy clothes mark
them, pale wrinkled refugees
from another age; they walk
slowly by themselves,
in pairs arm in arm
or on a cane through parks
and public gardens, libraries
and galleries (making the best
of the Golden Age); you might
see them shopping, or sitting
propped on benches as if waiting
for something you can't see.

These are the old
you look past or through
coming slow and wide
along a sidewalk,
plodding obstacles to the busy day
you're moving to meet, so step around

this witness, this living
proof of where life leads;
you have no time for stories
told slowly in faltering speech,
with wheezy breathing and a high,
cracked voice.

You heard all the stories already
from your own grandmother,
a heavy-hipped old woman always
shuffling around the kitchen,
always whistling, an empty sound
to a tuneless song she knew
helped pass the time
and blow hurry away.

With her you visited
your kinship: a family
tied in names and lives through each
generation of birth and death,
tied through callers and letter-writers,
the shelves of faded photographs
and the stories you had heard
so many times
you half-listened to humour

an old woman whose stories
became much more real only
after she was gone.

Does anyone ever find the time
to look so far ahead;
to see yourself standing
in an open doorway watching
the busy street and living
in a dream of memories, alone.
and living it all again
so slow and clear you would want
would have to tell
someone, and you would sit there
waiting for someone to tell
before it all slipped away....

THE PRIVATE EYE
ON TRANSUBSTANTIATION
(Today's speaker: Philip Marlowe)

7:45 AM Leaned in on glass but first
checked lock; leaving nothing
to chance. Ran keen eye up trunk
line from base-- no visible tip,
just sway in the upper branches.
Maybe trunk takes root in sky.
Seamless web of events going on
here everything looks totally natural.
Wind playing light on limbs
as gusts shift leaves up there.
Nice effect.

Limbs seem random
decisions on the stiff trunk
fringed with leaves
and shimmying a little
like a grass skirt on some
boreal hula' girl.

8:02 AM Sat down stiff-necked; mouth dry
from hanging open looking for treetops
Upper debris on desk by the window --
how many sheets complete a tree?

How much loose leaf. Could rake them
all into one neat pile for burning,
but killing poems such a private thing,
unlike forest fires and/or
chain saws. You'd think
they could comprehend
the beauty of the thing.

Beauty puts the poets
under arrest for illegally
stopping the mind. Even for
just a minute; I don't care
if it makes you feel better,
buddy. Next time use a Kleenex.

Trees sprout them too.

10:20 PM Several whiskies into the evening:

Recalled some old saw
about poems never as lovely trees,
etcetera. Invariably written
on a slice of varnished wood
and hung over the toilet.
You can scan a tree, but
you can't read it.
The poet drawn to reflection,
to perfection,
to the tree outside the window,

shivering in the wind and --
alright, that's enough
mooning all over the page;
next I'll be cutting one down
to drag inside
for hanging blinking lights
and shiny garlands on.
No respect.

ONE SPRING PLANTING

Two poets on an evening stroll
in a city park.

One says

to the other --

Listen. That tree is trying to speak.

I can hear its leaves whispering
and the low groan as it clears its trunk.

The other replies -- Trees can't
speak to us, but the wind relays
messages in the semaphore of the branches'
sway, and the ever-expanding spasms
of growth from tip to root
joins us to their mystery
right here at trunk level.

Yes, the sap is rising. I can feel it.

Back and forth they argued
for the longest time, calling
each other all kinds of names, and
each seemed to really know the innermost
feelings of this tree, any tree.

But neither convinced the other,
so they remained
rooted to the spot and unable to shut up.
When morning came they were gone,
in their place
~~two large weeping willows~~
which remain to this day.

;VIVA RADIO LIBRE!

Landlords are a breed apart;
a curious cross
between city seagulls
and rapacious climbing vines.

They never quite emerged
from the primordial slime;
landlords are ciphers for payment.

Landlords are fences
and overflowing toilets,
landlords are anal retentive;
their assholes are keyholes.
they look through at you..

To be a landlord is most people's aspiration.

We're moving out at the end of the month;
but sooner or later,
everyone does.

We check the writing on the wall;
they say home is where the heart is
but under lock and key.