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Transparencies

William H. Ford

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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

November 1997

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ABSTRACT

Transparencies

William H. Ford

The following work consists of seventy-eight sonnets, many of them arranged in narrative sequences or quasi-narrative thematic groups, and all of them gathered into an etymological artifice derived from the title. The various possible meanings resonating from the word transparencies--whose prefix indicates (depending on context) the prepositions across, over, above, and beyond; and whose Latin root pārēre, to show, suggests affinities to appearance and phenomenon--seemed to echo themes in the work and to provide a structure wherein its sometimes metaphysical, sometimes mundane preoccupations might be, as it were, musically reconciled. These orchestrated obsessions include a religious impulse to ground the word in the world (and vice versa), an aesthetic commitment to the imagination, a whimsical compulsion to deal ironically with "serious" subjects, a grudging acknowledgment of (the poet's) ethical shortcomings, and a celebration of the vicissitudes, vexations, volupté, and verities of contemporary life. As for the choice of form, the sonnet--with its metrical lines anchored in tradition, and its rhythms bellying with the winds of contemporary speech--aptly accommodates and expresses the tensions inherent in such themes, and proves its continued viability as a medium of poetic sensibility. The poet's gratitude to those eminent precursors who first Englished and enhanced the sonnet--and to their successors who have repeatedly vindicated the form before him--is here expressed in allusion, parody, imitation, and homage. In this regard, Transparencies serves as a shifting kaleidoscope trained on the history of an art.

Acknowledgments

To begin to acknowledge gratitude is to recognize only the crucial links in an endless chain of indebtedness. I cannot properly credit everyone who has made it possible for me to produce this work, but perhaps I can at least thank those who have directly contributed to my project. First, I would like to thank my friend and fellow writer Jon Frankel for his part in a literary and aesthetic debate that goes back many years (and many beers). Next, let me credit William Hathaway--a fine poet and something of a mentor to me--with encouraging me to pursue a Masters degree and backing me with a letter; and my dear friend (and former boss) Julie Copenhagen, and my former Drama professor Charles (Al) Carpenter, for similar offices. Many thanks are due to Patricia Verret and the Graduate Awards Office for their astounding gift of a Concordia Fellowship and International Tuition Fee Remission award, as well as to the English Department for accepting me into the program and awarding me a Teaching Assistantship. As for my own teachers, I am deeply grateful to my friend and advisor Gary Geddes for his example as a dedicated poet, for his guidance in the craft, for his wit and sense of humour, and for his tolerance--even appreciation--of my stubbornly metrical poetics and other prosodic eccentricities. Similarly, I thank Rob Allen for his exemplary poetry, and for putting up with my cranky and retrograde aesthetics; and John Miller, for deepening my acquaintance with Tennyson and Browning. Finally, heartfelt thanks are due to Susan Brown (whose sufficient praises exceed--daily--the power of poets), to the staff of the English Department, to Andras Ungar, and to my long-suffering classmates. My indebtedness to my parents, Ann and Howard Ford, is incalculable.

"Angel on Devon" is dedicated to Jon Frankel.

Transparencies is dedicated to Dinah Abigail Wayne.

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T R A N S P A R E N C I E S

I.

Transmigrations

Embarcation

Odd, at Sea

Anchors aweigh, I make from Academe
but drift, becalmed on Time's uncharted Ocean.
This sea of leisure seems an idle dream
to me, who has but vaguest notion
how to act the intrepid Argonaut.
Like some cartographer "gone round the bend"
I chart fantastic continents, and plot
a course no navigator would pretend
could bring his craft through even fictive straits--
between such wild, phantasmagoric shores
as I invent to lead me hence. What freights
my drunken boat but self-appointed chores?
Poseidon knows I have a list to port.
So freshen, Winds! And Fancy, take my part!

Decanting the Encantadas

He often felt estranged. He couldn't trust
his tongue to tap required codes. Securing
passage, he forsook his native dust,
himself a cipher in a bottle, touring.

Each wine-dark glass extended the horizon,
brought image of discovery, a word
by semaphore or signal lamp apprising
him of pleasant lands. Star signs were toward.

But sextant, compass rose and star demurred:
mere mariner turned peregrin, a bird
for that enchanted archipelago
where mutant strains of finch and tortoise grow
to manifold or slow, dark, monstrous shapes
that beckon, welcome him from sea escapes.

Invocation

The gods of transport do not smile on me:
like that resourceful Greek I go half-cursed,
the one god's patsy, the other's pet. I must
with stoic oar ply my philosophy
while through wild reefs of the demi-damned
I make for Ithaka. I'm wrung with worry.
Time's overabundant, or it's tight-crammed;
my soul, split, now must loiter, now scurry.

Once suckered to this scourge, let me be succored.
As airport time ticks fast away in taxies
(in terminals, interminable), tuckered
out with temporality, what I ask is
every wretched, wandering hero's plea:
bed, to collapse in. And Penelope.

Approach to Dorval / Ground Transport

1.

If Heraclitus lived in Montréal
this year of our Lord 1997,
he'd find his epigrams were not misgiven:
you can't step in the river, or Dorval
Airport, twice. Anticipating chaos,
I glide the Metro to the autobus,
mentally preparing for the fuss
of functionaries, mindful that the playoffs
in Chicago (basketball: this Bulls
shit five years running) likely will confuse
my issue at O'Hare, where things bemuse
me any given day. A flock of gulls
perching despondently at Lionel-Groulx
await the airport bus. I join the queue.

2.

In back of the bus, among the mostly sullen
riders, I sit and try to look cheerful.
After all, I'm off to visit Dinah,
summoned to the kitchen I know to ply
the old banjo, my tinkling poems--fallen
on good times at long last, and I'm careful
to address my thanks to Fellowship, that manna
from academic heaven. I'm gadfly,
gadabout, courtesy of Canada.
A well-dressed man in broadbrimmed hat and dark
complexion, Asian features, now enquires:
You teach at l'Université Concordia?
Since he found Jesus Christ, he has some spark
of vision, sees by light of holy fires.

3.

I tell him I don't doubt it, and I don't.
Reserving judgment in such matters seems
the wisest course; this apt apostle won't
profit from my skepticism. Dreams
prove true as often as hypotheses
from other quarters; anyway, he's right,
and nothing on my bags or person keys
his vivid intuitions: second sight.
I ask him where he's from: British Guiana,
home of Jonestown cultists, suicides
(he mentions) and we shake our heads. He prides
himself on his gift, buttonholes me on a
long bus ride with tales of his clairvoyance.
I couldn't say I felt the least annoyance.

4.

We lurch through uninhabitable regions,
threading cloverleaves, through underpass
to overpass, decrepit viaducts
of gray, decaying concrete. Wheeling legions.
Each in seeming catatonia conducts
his automobile through the stunted grass
and weeds that stake their claim along the margins;
each colludes in sacrificing space
to purposes of changing place, abstracts
from space a mere utility, a function.

A trail once trampled flat through ancient forest
was, at least, still useful to an ant.
How inhospitable this path: the surest
route to nowhere for animal or plant.

5.

I chat with Victor, aptly named Indian
of shaman ancestry (my guess) who came
from shrinking forests South American
to work in Montréal hotels. The shame
of missionary zeal? No victim, he,
who gained the favour of the white man's god;
he seems a sage, of sorts. No doom will be
forthcoming, forecast grounded by this rod
to heaven's bolts, for I've been kind--worthy
of a warning, surely.

Or do I presume?

Still unenlightened, a handshake and a smile's
my sendoff: I must travel many miles.
But I won't forget this friendly, swarthy
seer, whose gift all cultures can assume.

6.

Step off the bus, on foot again. It gives
the brief illusion of self-confidence
to a traveller at the mercy of machines
he can't control or understand. Look for
the proper entrance: not the maple leaves,
the other one, the stars and stripes. By chance
I get it right, and, following the signs,
attend Air Canada, bring up the rear
of yet another queue. Passport that proves
my nationality in sweaty hands
whence tumble also tickets, declarations
for the customs man. Clerk says: Wrong counter.
What revelations are at hand? What next?
New signs: I try to read this airport text.

7.

With much ado, as always, about nothing,
a reconfigured labyrinth I thread:
one migratory bird at risk, missing
my magnetic sense of north, dead
reckoning deficient, deprived of star.
I check my watch: Thank God, it's not too late.
Bare corridors. What happened to the bar
that used to be here, just before this gate?
Ah...relocated, renovated, slick
motif a spin-off from some TV sitcom.
See our web-page: Cheers @ drink dot com.
Without this haven, though, I'm up Shit Creek.
My change, once segregated in each pocket,
mixed up in one now. X-rays! Scotch? They stock it.

8.

I wonder, sipping scotch, about the ground.
Will I ever get off it? Having done so,
will I return to terra firma, sound
and safe? I've pictured many deaths, but none so
terrifying as that plunge, seatbelt
secure and screaming, to a pleasant field
or placid sea made strange. Un autre? Heartfelt
thanks, merci beaucoup. I watch her wield
the bottle like the pro she is. She must
be quite accustomed to the look of fear;
I keep mine looking inward, so I trust.
I throw the shot back. Still time for a beer.
Well-oiled, and pleasantly confused, I deign
to show up at the gate, slouch to the plane.

9.

Smiling to the stewardess and cabin
crew, I penetrate that cylinder
to window seat at 19-A. I wonder
at my diffidence to what might happen
in a quarter hour hence, windshear
enforcing gravity with ion fist,
or stress-fatigue, in a bolt inspectors missed,
dropping an engine to the sky, while veer
ourselves toward inexorable earth.
Qué será será. Some shots of booze suffice
to render these mishaps remote--advice
to those with too refined a sense of worth.
I buckle up and hunker down, ignore
life-saving demonstrations. A crashing bore.

In Transit / Gloria Mundi

1.

A blur of tarmac, then the steep ascent:
the ground gives way, recedes in rapid lapse
to miniature scale, but of vast extent.
West Island neighborhoods and housing tracts
decrease velocity and seem to drift
and swim in flat blue smoke; the river, too,
a flat blue smoke of wrinkled glass
as my horizon widens and I lift
through shreds of spectral cloud. The blue
obscures all distance; a pervasive gas
engulfs the globe in its ethereal flame:
Creation burns within my window's frame.
No longer earthbound, I inhabit air.
I make this window seat Donne's everywhere.

2.

Suspended, I'm reminded of a climb
in younger days with my best pal, Padgett.
Obsessed with cliff and bluff, we'd clamber up
a shaley outcrop, some protruding lime-
stone crag or palisade, to one thin ledge. It
didn't matter if we reached the top
or how we'd get back down--but, bare-handed,
sneaker-shod, we'd scale--sometimes get stranded
on--the cool rock's face.

What a mistake:
paralysis of fear would, hemlock-style,
work up the legs; immobilized, we'd quake,
questioning space until, after a while,
necessity and unaccustomed valor
accomplished our descent in sweat and pallor.

3.

The daring of it, though! The sheer bravado!
In our time of technological prowess,
with the gods now incommunicado,
mankind assumes the mantle: the divine, no less.
That time da Vinci dreamt of Daedalus
--who, emulating birds, escaped a maze--
was born, I fear, another Icarus.
Once airborne, though, I crave the dangerous;
my preflight jitters represent a phase
in life, as history. Terraqueous
enchantments amaze me; I can only praise.
This feat of flight I deem miraculous:
my fear in fascination finds its cure.
To cross Ste. Catherine's sometimes less secure.

4.

Like a child before a big-screen TV set,
I sit transfixed by images, with pen
and pad in hand: I'm wired to interpret
every referent to its signified
and further (working backward up the line)
until I've "fixed" each image in a sign.
My English hardly prior: visual, then
pre-verbal gnosis--Derrida aside
(whose grammar's not Saussure, though post-Saussurean)
and barring Roland Barthes (who coyly dared
to sever sriptor from his scripted line).
The world is re-presented by the word.
Not bullied, nor abolished (God forbend),
some Logos speaks through me: Word Without End.

5.

Observing from ascending eyrie all
this eidolon and topos, teeming planet
sired by a star the ancients hailed as Sol,
I marvel at these hieroglyphics on it.
Signs of life, self-evidential structures
compose a texture I can read from space,
the text of Earth: the record of her creatures,
her prehistoric metamorphosis
and birth in fragmentary fire. A starshape
cast off from a star: orphaned, bereft
of self-sustaining flame, critical mass;
hot coal, inside out. From glowing gas,
a coalescing lithosphere that left
these signs a language in the landscape.

6.

The horizon an encircling range of cloud
in sunshot amber tones of afternoon;
below, the sheer expanse of air, with vain
frivolity of cloudlets on parade:
my view of earth is unobscured, despite
blue smoky tones and green. The Ottawa
to northward (I fly west); and out of sight
enlisted St. Lawrence strays. Now quadrants draw
apart the land in plots, all circles squared,
while tributary streams sidewind the grid
enroute to those great rivers. Not sacred,
as for Iroquois or Huron, but much scarred
the hardbound land with use. No earth-enhancer
her transplanted, Cartesian geomancer.

7.

And yet, these plats are garden plots: nine bean
rows here, and there the alien corn (true maize
a native: hybridized now, soon a clone).
Here's no great sin, nor trespass, I suppose.
A tribe becomes a nation (though I own
this time, no cornucopia defrays
the debt the immigrant invader owes
original inhabitant)--seed's sown
a millionfold to feed a thousand cows.
The stewardess hands me a sandwich, "lean."
All eaters of raw flesh: we African,
we Asian, European, Esquimaux.
Though born of these, I'm no barbarian.
No thanks, I say, I'm vegetarian.

8.

The ravings of a man whose metred feet
are manifestly not upon the ground?
A rapture of the deep upon a height,
the height of folly on a flyway found?
Dasein's affliction, dread? A head made light
by gases rarefied as they expand
in stream of consciousness? Now it's too late
to risk the bends, abort the dive; descend
to earth. In Derri/Dada logic I
jump to conclusions, rash, undisciplined.
A private language by myself re-nouned,
re-verbed? Re-visioned by my private eye?
The clue to my word's worth is in its root.
I'm Sherlock Holmes: Watson! The game's afoot!

9.

Distracted by reflections: my own face
superimposed upon the view. This glass
porthole puts me at one remove from sight,
and sight once more removes we-know-not-what
ineffable--called noumenous by Kant.
We would express things-in-themselves; we can't.
So runs the argument, but we forget
the wisdom of the Gita: Thou art That.

Words like a blade cut through the Gordian knot
entangling Western folk in their loose ends
of Self and Other, Mind and Matter, Soul
and Body, Word and Thing. One who pretends
to apprehend a world, to wrest control,
will fail. Be still. You must have faith in it.

10.

I trip thin air, tightwire trajectory.
I may as well indulge my fancy further
entertaining words. Refractory
impedimenta to the marriage? Or the
yenta to that yearning of true minds
for transcendental blending, tie that binds
the intellect to its intelligence?
No matter; I've a mind to take a chance,
suspended anyway between the earth
and infinite, eternal ether--the
Ground of Being being of the ground,
and Being one with the Nothing all around.
An all-around conundrum. I'll have some fun:
articulate my answer in a pun.

11.

Where is the bloody ground? It's disappeared.
I've finally arrived: Cloud Cuckoo Land.
The deconstructed air where Swift's savants
hold down their chairs on cumuli untethered
to the common world of crude phenomena;
where "presence" is politically denounced
and reason is a "ploy" (it is pronounced)
whereby the written word is sore oppressed
by crass, conspiratorial, confessed
bourgeois who back the University
with "bankrupt funds of false authority"--
that same authority they wish they had,
and getting (by a sleight of Rand) are glad.
And these are but the prolegomena.

12.

Après ceux-ci, le déluge. So I think.
An old cliché, I know: some blind curmudgeon,
once ripe for riot (now rotten, fond of drink)
takes up at last the knobby club to bludgeon
those whose crime was to have carried out
his program to its logical extreme--
reductio ad absurdum, beyond doubt.

No minion of the Ancien Régime,
I beg to differ. I'm no Metternich:
I give a damn about the Poor, Oppressed
Minorities, Women. The rhetoric
is what I hate: the language is distressed.
In barren regions, where the wind is high,
the lichen hugs the rock. I risk the sky.

13.

Deprive the word of specificity:
a surd remains, all ambiguity.

Deny the word a referent in the ground:
an arbitrary phoneme's but a sound.

Decry the principles of logic, reason:
all writing's mere rhetorical confusion.

Defy dissent to offer its critique:
a claim of special status for a clique.

Debunk discredited ideologues:
a counterfeit rebel knocks down straw dogs.

Deride all opposition as the dupe
of "logocentric" speech: a graceless coup.

Deconstruct a language word by word:
opinions all seem facts; all facts, absurd.

14.

Jacques Derrida, le philosophe de Glas,
announced a bug--or something--up his ass.
Conceiving politics the frame of all,
quidditas et terminus, this Gaul
usurped the Margins of Philosophy,
ejecting from that vast, lunatic fringe
some Anarchists and Marxists. To unhinge
deception's doors from log(os) jambs, to free
écriture from écrivain, the ink
ran rivers from his pen and Powerbook,
requiring reams to prove words now a joke.
It seemed no longer nécessaire to think:
De la grammatologie had never been,
and but his brain had glean'd his teeming pen.

15.

Ye fertile clouds and mists, receive the seed
engendered forth in my intemperate screed!
Now rise into a mighty thunderhead,
conceive that vap'rous anvil, dark and dread,
whereon the lame, indignant god might hammer.
Give vent for me, ye winds that howl and yammer;
blast the furnace; blow prodigiously!
Help forge the rod to beat mine enemy.

Thus exhorted I the clouds, the winds;
Hephaestus too, I with imploring looks
invoked for aid in Battle of the Books--
a modern twist on Ancients versus Moderns.
I woke; the earth appeared. I wept for joy.
'T was but a dream: that old poetic ploy.

17.

What lakes are these? This origami map
resists all my attempts to make a plain
surface of the area I need,
but, finally subdued (the flap and clap
of paper to the lap, the look of pain
on face of neighbor), now the sectors read
to me their roll of names. Ontario,
of course (too far away to see just now),
and words bequeathed by natives long ago,
now dispossessed by French and English powwow:
Mississippi (so far east?), Canoe
(original Carib, through Spanish, French),
Kashwakanak and Skootamatta, too;
Kashagawigamog, Saugeen (north branch).

18.

The print is thin and blue; I scowl and squint.
The Madawaska River, Lake Canonto,
Calabogie Lake, the Bay of Quinte
(sounds French), Lake Weslemkoon (sounds Dutch), Stoco
Lake Catchacoma (!) and Lake Kasshabog,
Kamaniskeg and Mississagua Lakes,
Muskoka and Scagog, and Lake Kawag-
ama, Lake Kahshe, Kishlong. (My right eye aches.)
The catalogue continues, en Francais:
abandonné longtemps le Lac des Deux-
Montagnes; mais, j'ai viens de trouver Rideau
(le nom pour trois grands lacs, canal, et fleuve).
Je cherche les noms des aventuriers--
ils n'existent pas hors des Etats Unis?
Doré, Bonnechere et Papineau, et Groulx:
Doré, I know. Le reste? Moi, you could fool.

19.

The English names: Bob's Lake stands out, for one; near Devil Lake, and Desert; Hungry Lake, Black Donald (Scottish, surely); moving south to Crotch Lake, Lingham Lake (but farther north, Britchless, Beaver); Salmon River, Camden Lake and Percy Reach, the Trent, Rice Lake, Anstruther Lake, Eels River (at its mouth Buckhorn Lake) and Sparrow Lake, and so forth. Sturgeon River flowing south from Sturgeon; Canal, Dalrymple, Balsam, Crystal, Pigeon.

Suddenly a shore spreads out to show the southern stretches of an azure Simcoe. Glenn Gould posed on the ice there, took a bow. The image haunts the "Appassionata" now.

20.

What's in a name? These change; the earth abides.
At five and thirty-thousand feet we reach
the apogee of our parabola;
almost in orbit, seven miles high,
I contemplate the earth seen from the sky.
These visions are the incunabula
of thought, and thought's a state of mind would teach
us words. So word from thought of world derives.

As music (to attuned, well-tempered ears)
expresses in shaped sound affective tides
--the ebb and flow of currents in the heart
wherein the laws of language have no part--
in echoes of their form, and much besides,
so words transcribe the music of the spheres.

21.

In love with words, I leapt beyond the ledge
of fact, onto the insubstantial air
of things abstract. But now it's time to hedge
my bets. I'll go to ground, fox on a dare.

I fix my sights on Hamilton, a city
on the verge of water, air, and earth,
where merge Ontario's humidity
and industrial precipitates, but with
a mystic charm lent by the afternoon:
the elemental fire fresh from the sun,
twelve minutes travel time across ecliptic
space. As revelation glads a skeptic,
even Hamilton's not all that bad
illumined by the flares of solar god.

22.

Below, Euclidean planes. An interlaken
land of flat fields, farms far-flung
across alluvial plains. Three interlocking
lakes rack this peninsula among
them: Huron, Erie, west Ontario--
Georgian Bay and Lake St. Claire chip in--
they're fish bladders; cow stomachs; abdomen
of wasps; a loose corsage, posie or bow
pinned to the breast of North America;
four fig leaves failing to conceal the droop
of Michigan.

Above, we pitch and yaw
through flocculence of clouds: a sudsy soup.
Anticipating landfall, I can see
no land. But still, seascapes look good to me.

Approach to O'Hare / Two Rivers

1.

Just off the port beam where I sit: Chicago.
Lake Michigan astern; ahead, O'Hare.
Some thousand feet remain to our descent
through turbulence of milky cloud; a flag of
wrinkled stone appears (the nimbus rent)
in turquoise overcast with coal; and there
upon the shore, a sharp geometry:
as if a colony of minerals
had fructified in crystal clusters. See
those two rivers, issuing through the walls
and towers of black and buff and gray? The one
a dusty trail, streaming with shiny-backed
scarabs, each way relentless, driven on.
Grids of filament hatch the riven tract.

2.

Athwart the grid, oblique, then sinuous,
the other river: glassy, gleaming when
the sun leaks through the canopy, and then
reverting to a slate of tenuous
turquoise, flat as flags, the sun cut off.
Obligingly, the DC-9 now banks,
metallic wings and ailerons roll off
to give, in broader glimpse, the ground. Now banks
contend with concrete, but as the North Branch
struggles free (the Loop left to its dust
and geometric straits)--gathering greenest
weeds: a river, no longer just a trench.
Wearing woods now, in the greening Spring.
Free. Snubbing parking lots. Meandering.

3.

Next day, you and I on park promenade.
Fine weather, mid-May zephyrs fan the leaves
just out, confining buds outgrown: sweet shade.
Chicago River's north branch gently weaves
upstream through streets, a channel strictly free
not yet, but garnering its nature to
itself as granted by relenting, tree-
loving citizens of Ravenswood who
set aside this River Park. We find
a woodchip trail and prowl beside the stream.
The wind is right, the woodchuck doesn't mind
us as he takes his constitutional
through bluebells on the bank. It's like a dream
to us, wintry and institutional.

4.

We shake off all that dust. The river glides
through glades, and slips between willows
where we stop, in silence, to watch the birds
that flit, almost invisible, like dryads.
What's that, you whisper, just above the shallows?
See that twig? No...there! We bandy words
like Warbler, Redstart, Vireo, Flycatcher--
Linnaean categories: would-be springes
set by rubes to snare shape-shifting nature
in rigid toils. But overhead, a jet
tracks through the sky; its engine noise impinges
on our idyll. Perhaps some high poet
gazes down on us from his steel bird.
Could he describe us? Can he find the word?

5.

We stroll southeast on Lincoln Avenue.
From Ravenswood, the towers downtown amaze
me: black skyscrapers, white ones, breach the haze
and seem a crystalline mirage. To you
it's just "ho-hum", I guess, but something piques
my wonderment. This asphalt river seeks
its source, its asphalt sea, its Venice. Do
its currents flow both ways? Then double birth
portends: one of the sea, one of the earth
around it, green and flourishing, and new
always--while the sea of asphalt, ancient
as the memory of children, prescient
as old curbstones, blinks, and never knows
that river: whence it comes, nor where it goes.

6.

We thread a path among the dunes, the lake
a presence, vast and gray, beyond the crest
of sand and scrappy grasses--out of sight,
for now. What stunted trees this wilderness
can boast look dead, their gnarled trunks are black,
the bark broken and charred; torn sleeves of schist
now cling, detach--nothing to insulate--
cylindrical as shards of bottle glass
smoked in fires at the local dump.
The naked shanks of wood like weathered bones
await the ministering winds, the rains
of autumn, winter's lively ice, rank damp
of spring. Transfiguration works the old wood out.
Meanwhile, from superheated seeds, new saplings sprout.

7.

The rocks worn down by waves are stones
as fine as gems. We comb the beach for them,
my trousers rolled (too late), your dress hiked up
(my joy). Our wet sneakers, damp and sandy socks,
abrade, annoy (we'll take them off). The bones
of Mother Earth, so Ovid said. I am
delighted with these relics, want to keep
the finest specimens, fill up my socks.

From rocks to stones to gems. And back to sand
and sediment. Mixed metamorphosis
as circular as one could wish. Thesis,
antithesis--the dialectic hand
of God, and so on.

But metaphysics pales.

Hey, look! Chert, granite, quartzite! Smooth, red shales!

8.

The word is grafted to a thing: a name.
Enjoin it to the root of things: the beat
of heartsblood audible at once, the claim
of nature musical and strong, complete
and cyclical. Husband this tree for fruit.
Not only for the work, the gardener's hands
so delicate and blistered first, the brute
bark roughing up the whorls, demands
of weather darkening the skin--all that
the tree endures, likewise the hands.

Wield rings
like hoops of fire. Conduct the sap, sharp at
season's start, year's end. For these are holy things.
Two rivers flowing from a single source
unite bark, wood and root; bed, bank and course.

II.
Transfigurations

Angel on Devon

1.

I saw this plastic bag lift in the heat
just past the corner: Western and Devon,
northside Chicago, West Devon the street.
I don't know what it meant, but I'll write on
until I do. The street is flush
with Hindu grocery stores and Kosher delis,
Middle Eastern markets. In the crush
of people, sons and daughters: Haifa's, Delhi's.
So, right between Gandhi Electronics
and Mehrab Zabiha Meat and Grocery,
this plastic sack ascends in brisk cyclonics
past neons advertising hosiery
in Urdu (from Milan) and Hebrew prayerbooks.
Try as I might, I couldn't find a Starbuck's.

* Devon, on the Northside of Chicago, is pronounced with the
accent on the last syllable.

2.

White as a wisp, or sooty albino pigeon
(what we might, in courtesy, call doves)
leaving its fellow sadsacks of the ditch in
muddy crumpledness, this Osco bag loves
flight so much it leaps into the air.
Not leaps so much as levitates: a flake
of ash hovering just above the fire
that forged its frail, its brittle feather.

Blake

conversed with angels, so he said. He knew
the fragile demarcations between soul
and solid. Transubstantiations clue
the mind to mystery: witness this coal,
caught up in Coriolis force, alight
on heaven's currents, flaming, out of sight.

3.

You must be kidding! (I hear you complain.)
You are no prophet, and comparison
of plastic bags with angels isn't sane!
It's one thing to see them caparisoned
in silver light, as recreated on
TV, but quite another when in plain
sight--in broad daylight!--you have envisioned
seraphim in trash. Such conceit is vain
in the extreme, and silly. Do have done!

Well, yes. I must admit I do have Donne
in mind, and Christian Morgenstern, whose brain
most metaphysically worked. Disdain
his sandwich paper who will, that harkened
to life: our fancy is not moribund.

4.

Nor will I submit to the plain facts.
For nothing's plain, except to some blockhead
who insists on things and things alone. Once said,
"No ideas but in things!" redacts
to the discredit of imagination,
despite that petroclastic saxifrage.
But Williams' poem is its own umbrage
and its own transcendent refutation.
Too bad a whole poetic generation
took it for pronouncement of a sage,
as he himself was taken for the mage
of the material.

Good reputations
suffer while the plain is all the rage,
but I'm with Blake: Be quit, Soul, of your cage!

5.

Coming back to Western and Devon,
we note a slight mirage. We say a thermal
incline draws air upward. Epidermal
membranes, such as polymers, are prone
to quick reaction. Plastic bags weigh little:
this one, lifted by wind into the middle
air (once denized by spirits) keeps on
rising in a spiral: clockwise, normal
to a northern hemisphere. Formal
calculations plot its flight.

Long gone
the ghost from the machine. No golden bough
gives passage to the flesh; the widowed bone
remains. No Ding an Sich can solace now,
nor ever has been Paradise enow.

6.

But who am I fooling? Not you. Not myself.
Though a plastic bag may prove plastic enough
to form my figment, figment lacks the stuff
of stuff: mere fictive matter, quite a lapse
from matter of fact. Not stuff of stuff, perhaps;
still, maybe here's the stuff of soul. My truth
seems bluer, though my fiction be uncouth.

O pale afflatus of a whim! Elusive sylph
in artificial skin--by wind without,
hot air within, begot, beset--what gives?
How comes this impulse to pretend what lives
in my imagination lives without
it, too?

(Inadequate, I seek myself in it;
so disbelieve in the inanimate.)

7.

In cooler afternoon, I walk Devon.
The wind that whirled a plastic bag aloft,
and worked "a miracle of faith," is gone.
It's possible my intellect's gone soft,
but fantasies like this give me a lift.
As Dr. Williams said, "Invent!" The mind
supplies a fictive soul where others find
a naked nothing in a plastic shift.

The moon, full face, beaming, appears to float
above rooftop antennae, neon signs,
dark snags of telephone and power lines.
The Man in the Moon? Or just a delicate
soap bubble, on whose iridescent sphere
a vision swims of everything not here?

III.
Transactions

Death and Taxes

1. Taxes

A cold and drizzly day, and me on Western
waiting for a bus. I brave the gray
to fetch my tax returns, prepared for me
by my saviours, C.I. Payd.

You oughtta learn
to do them yourself, save a buck, my father'd
say, though I've done it thirty years myself.
Living in Montreal, I can't be bothered
glossing intransigent text to determine such pelf
as the IRS may deem subject to tax.
A nation of accountants, so they'd have us.
I, for one, refuse the role. I'm lax
in acquiescence to the modern.

Save us,
Lord, from all this petty dreck and dearth,
lest poverty come over all the earth.

2. Death

Too bad no agency can help us, who
might interpose a broker, one that counts
in precincts of infernal revenue
as well as heaven's vaults. Our last accounts
threaten dire bankruptcy, the gaping maw
of hell for debtor's jail. Scribes take account
--and all has been reported, since, by law
of Karma, debts accrue (and pleasures count)--
of each expense of spirit that we dream
will buy a drink from the eternal fount.
We never know what we've really bought. Mount
we unto the sky? Will Time redeem?
Our best predictions are of no account:
refunds we know naught of, nor the amount.

3. Transfiguration

Death and Taxes: onerous transactions,
inextricably linked. Getting and spending
we lay waste our powers and our purse, blending
twin scenarios whence governmental factions
contend for what remains of corpse and coin.
Responsibility's laid to the Powers
to keep account, but the waste is laid to ours;
and reparations, if we are to join
the solvent hosts, must in good faith be made.
This rule applies across the board, in creeds
professed by Christian, Muslim, Jew: delayed
end of estate. It all comes down to deeds.
We like a loophole lie, enhance our ration,
but jeopardize our last transfiguration.

4. Inquisition

You can't believe quite everything you read concerning death, the afterlife, and such. Just who presumes to know? It seems too much to ask that our quick lives resume at speed in sundry ill-defined Elysiae-- dumb, undiscovered countries of desire hallowed and ballyhooed by history's choir of cacophonous voices.

FBI

and Treasury agents have, I think, no stake in this--at least in their professional capacities: to guess who's on the take exhausts the craft of the confessional, still more the third degree. But shall we wake emparadised, confirmed transgressional?

5. Because I Could Not Stop for Death...

Indeed, we're so original in sin
it's doubtful any god would let us in
to spoil the precincts of his joy.
Jehovah fall for that transparent ploy
wherein the dying sinner makes amends,
repenting him of years (three-score and ten)
spent arrogating to himself the attributes
of Deity? Our common sense refutes
the justice of divine machinery
that taxes death: it makes a mockery
of all our suffering.

I dream no saviour
sanctimonious. A friendly driver
curbs the Western bus and, unafraid,
I just produce my token: "See? I paid."

Conversations

No Place, Like Hume

Philosophers, psychologists, and mystics will dispute, until the "hows" come home, the nature and existence of the soul--inside the window of the eye, that "me" we love and foster up from cosmic orphanage, and soon recruit for heaven's old-folk's home. The soul's reality is moot: the Buddha claims it's but an aggregate, and David Hume concurs; but whence this aggregation? Does it not presume some grain of sand, some irritant provoking absolute undifferentiated Mind or Matter to refute the differentiation by encasing it in pearled opacities whose loveliness it takes to be the world, or fleshing it, as raindrops, in a prism to delude? I find it hard to do without some concept of the soul, however grim: if not the content, then, at least the hole.

Caritas Volucribus

Out of seed for les pauvres oiseaux sauvages.
Forlorn, the sparrow sentinel looks on,
and one coal-coloured pigeon, his menage
of doves now eaved or raftered somewhere. Wan
the sky this morning; darling buds do shake--
rough winds and chilly temperatures put Spring
at risk. Bespattered windshields, wipers, speak
of nimbus in the middle air.

The thing
is, I'll have to roust myself from my roost
to venture forth, to walk abroad through cold
and damp, my feathers ruffling in this worst
of May's bad moods. Put breakfast on hold.
St. Francis took some pains to feed his friends:
intentions selfless well become their ends.

The Preservationist's Apology

[A poem for city planners, like Dinah, to recite
by way of explanation for imposing Landmark Status
on private property, restricting its use or misuse]

In precincts fraught with feline predators,
each mouse retains his cautionary tale.
Likewise, each city from developers
defends its heritage, and must not fail
to heed, beside the letter of the law,
such precedents as guide the use of plats.
Good planners know the lore (and each old saw
the building trades employ) as mice know cats.

Contest our finding as you will; you grouse
in the capacity of tim'rous guest:
As poet Robert Burns was heard to say
while plowing up, regretfully, the house
late excavated by a mouse: "The best
laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley."

Boatsong / Birdsong

This blithe boatsong, Chopin's great Barcarolle,
conveys my heart beyond Venetian streets
of moon and black, stardappled waves, as Keats'
"immortal Bird" led him a dance through all
the moods that make "Ode to a Nightingale."
But Keats was negligent: her song addressed,
he failed to tempt the bird into his nest.
The vision, unassumed, began to pale.

Donne said what's mixed unequally must die;
therefore, my love of song and song may rest
eternal, echo in my chambered breast
quite unattached to aught except to me.
That music is not fled. "Deceiving elf"
and boatsong, both, I mix with my sole self.

IV.
Transgressions

To Your Heart's Contempt

1. Its Frequency

No matter what you try to do in life
or how you try to do it, someone else
will say it's not worth doing, or contend
your way of doing it proves you more the fool.
Oh, not outright, of course. Few folks will laugh
in your face (or so you hope); they'll play you false
in some opinion meant, you understand,
for other ears (or eyes) than yours. You feel,
nevertheless, the sting. You stand aloof
from all affinity lest you repulse
some wit you would befriend, win over. Toned
down to the common frequency, you fail.
The harm is universal: none's exempt.
And no one's blameless of the sin, contempt.

2. Use of the Snide Rule

Not without sin, I dare to cast a stone.
It could be, though, that those who've sinned the most
have come to know its consequences best.
At least, that jibes with Karmic Law. It's known
what goes around soon comes around to plague
the perpetrator; he who evil wills
receives; an acid rain poisons all wells;
(and poets spooning morals will gag
on their own gruel).

I'm trying to make a point:
each time we denigrate another's works
--of trade or alms, artistic, spiritual,
of planetary scale or trivial--
we stop the breath of life. Our snide remarks
subtract a sweet. The air receives a taint.

3. A Proper Amour-Propre

But should we, therefore, never criticize?
Not what I meant. I'm speaking of a tone
of voice, an arrogant insouciance,
a quintessential hubris: love of self
that, heeding only its own bottle-elf
(that falls and rises in recognizance
of its position vis-a-vis your own)
decides, on that relation, to despise
your efforts.

Thus, if accolades you would
receive, lay low: the plains let no piques pass.
All of which is just to say some ass
makes you look bad to make himself look good.
Our mothers said it best when we were young:
You can't say something nice? Then hold your tongue!

4. Trading Bonds. Taking Stock.

Just let me clarify the point I meant to make. (I'm talking to myself, of course.) I mean to say we needn't feel remorse for what admonishments we've kindly lent, as long as kindly meant. But once we've rent the empathetic bonds of trust, we force a negative reaction on the course of trade, whose rank accrual's never spent, whose debt is never paid.

In that event, though chastened brokers shout themselves quite hoarse to stop the bull stampeding through the Bourse, no bid can be withdrawn, the message sent. Contempt, once circulated, can't be cashed until the check's returned, the market crashed.

5. Sage Advice

But can I take to heart my own advice?
Abjure contempt? It's doubtful, but one tries.
I've read by sinners hurts are best ignored,
yet Christ comes not for peace, but with a sword;
and "Vengeance is Mine," likewise saith the Lord.

Let violence--gods' or mortals'--be deplored.
Thus, Buddha: Do no harm. That Jesus cheek.
The earth is their inheritance, the meek
(by which translation "timid" isn't meant).
Contrariwise, the meek are truly strong
in passing up the urge to punish wrong.
The point is clear: the Ego must relent.

I vow to heed the venerable sages:
pay more respect to peoples, classes, ages.

Pull Down Thy Vanity, I Say Pull Down

1. Surds, Surds, Surds: I'm So Sick of Surds!

Perhaps I'm too presumptuous of praise.
Whenever I have triumphed, fitting words
To vagrant thoughts, or wrought the golden phrase
In strict proportion to my heart's true chords;
Against all odds, when I myself amaze
By lines in which the meter so accords
With mind and matter that a tearful haze
Envelops me, as, reading my own words,
I weep and thank The Buddha, Tao, The Lord,
Then run to her, remarking my own merits--
As if I were regaling her with surds,
She seems perplexed by something untoward;
Aghast, as at a bucketful of turds.
So be it! I anoint thee with my merdes!

2. The Gulf of Milk's Ego

Am I some egomaniac to think
somebody else might joy in what I write?
Perhaps these poormouth poems truly stink--
and should be shelved, dishevelled, out of sight.
She has a point, no doubt, in failing to
encourage my conceit, perceiving how
sufficiently I praise myself--I, who
seldom hear praise from elsewhere.

Meow

meow, the kitten cried, begging for milk.
But I have all the milk I need: my Self
is what requires to be fed. Its ilk
have been responsible, their greed a gulf,
for all the fallen angels on the planet.
I feed it now my sacrificial sonnet.

3. When I Have Fears

I would be damned annoyed among the dead
to go, no book of poems to my name,
no nymphs bereft, no laurel-crowned head.
Though I had penned as well-appointed leaves
as some to whom the Muse her charms displayed
in T-shirts, or in psychedelic weeds--
because to me she came well-dressed no fame
attend me, no libations for my shade
to drink (far rather I would drink them now!),
no hecatombs (nor sacrifices made
not of ox, please, but vegetarian chow)
at smoking altars where I'd lurk...!

Alas,
anonymous and shy, I'd flit and shrink
among poets whose best leaves seemed but grass,
swallow my pride (their pity), wince at each wink.
At this rate, since I haunt the doors of mortals,
best envy not Elysium its portals.

4. Rare Prayer

Please
Lord,
seize
Ford.

Take
him!
Break
him!

Throw
some
light
so
come
right.

5. The Prayer
Well-Donne

Batter
my heart?
Butter
that part

ever
to boast,
and roast
over

a hot
brazier.
Crazier,
who not

unlearn
to burn.

v.
Transports

Humouresques / Grotesques

Vertigo

Maps crowd the walls of my provincial place
like windows in some circumnavigating
plane, or planet-gazing satellite, or space
shuttle's outpost lookout, weightless freighting
me--and dangerlessly--round the globe.
A vertigo sets in, though. As the scale,
the breadth of view increases; acrophobe
and acrobat contend within my frail
armchair traveler's psyche. Bold space-walker
dreams his drop to death in Iowan
cornfield, winedark Aegean: Icar-
us descendant, disappearing. No one
guessing how he shrank into the gulf,
free-falling from his continental self.

Dolor

Not falling for his world, fell from himself
the tender toys of his affection. Girls
he garnered in the storm-fed spring got off,
like sunspent marigolds their stalks, when chills
of autumn touched his hot philosophy.
Most musicks from his humours took a damp;
the roisterings of his youth prepared to flee
the onset of the law and foundered to a swamp,
got stuck and sank up to their necks. His wine
turned rancid in the ground glass of his guts,
sweet balm of tears but lately come to brine
his wounds. He'd quit: no ifs, no ands, no buts.
Yet if--and doleful did he speculate--
no women, wine, nor song...then what? Regret.

Panic

No women, wine, nor song--but what regret
now fueled the fire of life! Thus, all romantic
ramified the range of rich debates
beyond his reach, while propositions antic
issued from his desperate logic. Templates
from outworn creeds he set upon his panic,
carving but the germ of fear. The Fates
piled up inconsequential fruit. Manic
in his lust for Truth, he made complaint,
put his whine, whim in, and sawing in this wise
restored the lack wherefrom he felt so faint.
Discerning dimly in the wings his Muse,
he came to take direction like a pro.
Damn your torpedoes, Pan! On with the show!

Malice

Another ars-hole savages my stuff!
What's my response? I turn "the other cheek,"
sure, but not "over a new leaf." A bluff.
Smug bastard! That snobbish canard (foul beak
badmouthing metric, quacking wise at rhyme).
Traditions of a thousand years need no
defense from me. Drop dead, duck! I've no time
to stuff you straight. Goddamn! (I bleed, though.)

What's this? Your message on my telephone?
You say there's something in it, after all?
Apologies for tactlessness? I've won
you over, I'm that conversational?
Coolness to candor has its recompense:
where there is not malice, there's no offense.

Paeans, Pianistic and Statistic

A Paean to the Piano

Most delicate machine, steel drum of strings:
exquisite harp inhabiting a heart
of wood, both anima et corpus of an art
true-tempered to the central nerve of things;
interpreter of all that passion brings
to bear on our imprisoned, temporal part;
soul's navigator, whose hermetic chart
unshoals the coast where still one siren sings;

Miraculous machine! Maker of moods,
whose keys connect to where the action is,
where twenty-four from eighty-eight unlock
the good vibrations, wrought--of wires, woods
in tension pitched--to angst and ecstasies:
Rachmaninoff, Beethoven, Brahms and Bach.

A Lively Liszt that Nothing Could Deter:
Piano Masters in Pentameter

Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin,
Prokofiev, Moussorgsky, Borodin;

Claude Debussy, de Severac, Fauré,
Saint Saëns, Ravel, Poulenc, et Chabrier;

Bach, Mozart, Robt. und Clara Schumann, Brahms,
Franz Schubert, Beethoven, die Mendelssohns;

Soler, Granados, y las dos Scarlattis,
Manuel de Falla, Isaac Albeniz;

MacDowell, Griffes, Foote, and Amy Beach,
Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Scott Joplin, George

Gershwin; Edvard Grieg, Stenhammar, Jan
Sibelius; Rossini; Hummel, Haydn;

John Ireland, Field, Benj. Brittain; Couperin;
Janacek and Dvorak; Liszt; Chopin;

Past masters of the pianistic art,
whose kindred spirits hammer at my heart.

*Piano masters: that is, keyboard masters, where these
predate the invention and perfection of the piano.

The Archetype in Bed

Icarus Down

A pretty girl is like a malady
that briefly flares in times of darkest moon;
eclipsing sense, when, naive as Don Juan,
the mind mistakes redress for remedy.

Scratch a misogynist: what's the result?
Romantic mama's boy: wax wings to melt
of maidenfire, downdripping in tumult
of tears, wax taper in love's muzzy smelt

plunged then into Aegean seascape, drown'd.
The birdman upside down, in it up to
his ankles, perching on the scalloped, blue
crust of air. The bright refinery unbound

recedes, vertiginous, toward breathless black:
where the Big Bang nods to the Doomy Crack.

My Cosmogony

As shadows stretch before the haloed sun
and point thin fingers, sabotage and mock
the light that figures form where there was none,
I crouch before her. Now my soul's in hock.
She wears a different face at every sunset,
and though by day I strive to recognize
the Devi burning there in her disguise,
my light's eclipsed by dusk. While shadow puppet
strings ensoul my capering marionette
(affixed to my own fingers by self-treason
of my artifice), I seek a fine frisson
and rack myself: by puppeteer beset,
by puppet compromised; Misogyny
my comic dance, Eros my cosmogony.

The Archetype in Bed (or, The Freudian Slip)

That black-lace slip you bought ("daywear" it's called,
as if you'd wear it on the street at noon!)
so agitates my spirits, I shall soon
be up and howling at the ample moon
who shed her gown of clouds just now. Enthralled,

how can I sleep? Your moonlit thigh exposed
below a lacy hem, your curving hip
(convenient for a lover's languid grip)
now disappearing, still beneath your slip
retains its slinky shape. Your trunk disposed

half-prone, half-supine, twisting at the waist,
reveals the best of both worlds as your breasts,
derrière, disport through lace. Christ! No man rests
beside such treasure sleeping sound and chaste.

Alarums, Monday Morning

Wind last night, then rain--some hail. No sleep.
Though I love the approach of a storm, the atmosphere
alive, cool fire and ozone on its breath,
the leap of lightning through the gulf and first
flung raindrops' scattershot on glass, hard burst
of cloud in unseen sheets, percussive wrath
punctuating all the swirl and stir
of leaves in the dark, the chill along the nape...
I pictured you at six, the radio
a rude intrusion to a dream regained
at last, the clamour of the storm now past;
the windowsills awash, the tempest-tossed
geraniums, windfallen cactus, ruined
windchimes strewn across the patio.