

The Absolute Walking Its Planks: Searching for C. K. Williams

By Chuck Guilford

To read C. K. Williams' early poems, now that his later work, especially *Flesh and Blood*, is available is to be struck hard by the struggle of his poetic genius to locate its idiom and its telos. For while individual poems in the earlier collections sometimes struggle self-consciously for spectacular effects or more frequently open outward into striking psychological landscapes, it is the gradual emergence of a complex and comprehensive poetic vision which is finally most compelling.

From this longrange perspective, the most notable achievement of *Lies* (1969) is Williams' reconstruction of interior monologue into an idiom that transcends personal psychology, re/presenting personal experience as an engrossing drama of fragmentation and reintegration. so that while speaking ostensibly to himself about issues generally kept private, Williams manages to find an idiom that transcends the merely personal. Yet out of the particulars of personal experience, he reconstructs a state of mind we all have known:

There is a world somewhere else that is unendurable.
Those who live in it are helpless in the hands of elements,
they are like branches in the deep woods in wind
that whip their leaves off and slice the heart of night
and sob. They are like boats bleating wearily in fog.

("Dimensions" 1-5)

Wait a minute . . . "wind/that whip"? Is this a basic problem with grammar, or a typo, or what? It's hard to know for sure. Perhaps "woods in wind" or simply "woods" is the subject here, but just for a second the dislocation causes doubt, and we, as readers, are whipped by the same wind, whipped into an alien country we have always called home:

And sometimes one of us, losing the way,
will drift over the border and see them there, dying,
laughing, being revived. When we come home, we are half way.

Our screams heal the torn silence. We are the scars.

("Dimensions" 16-19)

And it is in his growing trust of this dislocation, his willingness to follow it, that Williams begins to find both his voice and his vision. While many poems in this first collection could be passed off as conventional surrealism, the best, such as "Dimensions" or "On the Roof," reveal a person searching

desperately for something to say, and for a way of saying it, some subjective correlative to the objective realities that press against him:

Because even if I talk
into my fist everyone hears my voice like the ocean
in theirs, and so they solace me and I have to keep
breaking toes with my gun-boots and coming up here
to live--by myself, like an ariel, with a hand on the ledge,
one eye glued to the tin door and one to the skylight.

("On the Roof" 7-12)

Seen in this way, as they can be only now that the later work is available, Williams' early poems clearly reveal the struggle of his poetic genius to locate its idiom and its telos.

This fragmentation or splitting of the self ("one eye glued to the tin door and one to the skylight") is a central theme in the collection and is especially evident in "Halves":

Halves

I am going to rip myself down the middle into two pieces
because there is something in me that is neither
the right half nor the left half nor between them.
It is what I see when I close my eyes, and what I see.

As in this room there is neither ceiling
nor floor, not space, light, heat or even
the deep skies of pictures, but something that beats softly
against others when they're here and others not here,

that leans on me like a woman,
curls up in my lap and walks
with me to the kitchen or out of the house altogether
to the street--I don't feel it, but it beats and beats;

so my life: there is this, neither before me
 nor after, not up, down, backwards nor forwards from me.
 It is like the dense sensory petals in a breast
 that sway and touch back. It is like the mouth of a season,

the cool speculations bricks murmur, the shriek in orange,
 and though it is neither true nor false, it tells me
 that it is quietly here, and, like a creature, is in pain;
 that when I ripen it will crack open the locks, it will love me.

This spectral haunting of the self by a presence that can only be known as absence, an elusive quintessence that is both terrifying and magnetic, dimly felt but never grasped or truly known, animates and binds the colliding images so that they work together even as they fight against each other. The effect has roots in surrealism, certainly, but also in the radical conceits of Donne and the Metaphysicals, who sought a poetic style in which human consciousness could forge the random and disparate elements of experience into a unified vision. For Williams, however, the struggle is seen primarily in psychological rather than religious terms, and consciousness is something much more complex and encompassing than mere reason. And so, if the poem is reminiscent of Donne's "Batter my heart, three-personed God" it is also very far from that poem in both sensibility and style. Just how far, however, cannot be seen until the poem is viewed in the context of Williams' later work.

I Am The Bitter Name, published in 1971, is an intensely political book, and in that respect an abrupt departure from Lies, published two years previously. Yet the book is a departure in other less obvious ways as well, for while the almost Daliesque surrealism remains, as in "The Nickname of Hell," these poems seem to burst forth urgently. They are not coaxed into being, but born of necessity. Also, and I believe this is important, Williams reaches much more directly into the realm of the profane for his central images and metaphors. In doing so, especially in combination with his expressions of horror and disgust at war and corporate greed, he runs the risk of lapsing into mere sensationalism and irrationality. A lesser poet might have

done so. Yet if these poems are irrational, they are so in the good sense. That is, they step beyond the merely rational to expose its limits. If their profanity sometimes seems sensational, it is because Williams understands, like Blake, that the sacred and profane are two halves of a whole, that no vision of life can be complete unless it takes both into account. As he asks in "In the Heart of the Beast," "if there was a way to purify the world who would be left?" (3: 8)

At the core, this collection is not a political but a religious statement, in the tradition of The Book of Job or of Hopkins' "terrible sonnets." Sometimes an argument, sometimes a complaint, sometimes a benediction--the book swings rapidly, even violently, from one attitude to another as in the three poem sequence of "The Little Shirt," "Clay Out of Silence," and "Innings," each of which approaches spiritual concerns from a different but relatively coherent perspective. Yet the cumulative effect of all three is jarring. In "What Must I Do to Be Lost?" Williams leaps rapidly between images that suggest a broad range of emotional responses. This startling succession of images combines with a lack of punctuation and wrenched syntax to produce a hard-driving rhythm that is simultaneously compelling and disorienting, until sound seems hopelessly at odds with sense, if there is sense here at all. Given the poem's title, however, this confusion can be seen as part of a necessary process, the process of becoming "lost," which itself cuts two ways: lost as abandoned, not of the elect; and lost as in the death of self, the dying of the ego, the individual will, into cosmic wholeness. Here, as in so many of the other poems, the language balances horror and despair against peace and hope, unable to reconcile or transcend the polarities:

love pony darling let
 me be fields mines dry ditches
 my animal opens I
 sway I thrust aimlessly nothing
 is mine here
 take the knife I can't here
 swim in the thick break
 me darling
 I am in like a root
 meat

("What Must I Do to Be Lost?" 15-24)

From this fundamental dilemma, this root sense of estranged spiritual longing, the other poems radiate outward like tendrils, extending into dreams, family, sexuality, politics, friendship--drawing all of these concerns, and others as well, into a collagelike pattern of correspondences and interrelationships.

A full discussion of this collection, one that would do justice to its boldness and complexity, would require a book in itself, and a substantial book at that. Not only would such a book have to explore the underlying theology of the poems, a vision compounded of "the hindu . . . the hebrew and the iliad" ("The Rampage" 2-3), but the ways in which these traditions have been transformed and personalized by the political and psychological pressures of the nineteen sixties. In addition, the technical sophistication of many poems is dazzling. "Then the Brother of the Wind," for instance, despite its lack of punctuation, can be read as a single sentence built out of an intricate series of parallel constructions, each anchored by a key term repeated with a slight twist so that the syntax provides a sense of grammatical satisfaction, even while the metaphors defeat understanding and pronoun referents become increasingly hazy. Then in the final stanza the poem turns on itself with a startling image that echoes backward through the confusion to the second stanza and beyond that to the first line, providing a sudden conjunction of grammatical, intellectual, and emotional closure:

we'd still break like motors
and slip out of them anyway like penises
onto the damp thigh
and have to begin over

("Then the Brother of the Wind" 17-20)

After such intensity, and especially after the brutal vision of "In the Heart of the Beast," The Lark. The Thrush. The Starling. (Poems from Issa) comes as a peaceful and gentle counterpoint. The extent to which these are direct translations of Issa (1763-1827) is difficult to determine. One poem is clearly based upon the burning of Issa's house shortly before his death

in 1827, and another appears to refer to the untimely death of Issa's beloved daughter, Sato, but the idiom is contemporary American, as are many of the sentiments. Clearly, the poems are not literal translations, but rather translations of a whole sensibility and culture. To encounter these poems at this point is to feel as though a great storm has passed, leaving behind destruction, yes, but also a hard-won tranquility. The poems move with deft precision and quiet grace. Figurative devices, especially, the bold conceits of I Am the Bitter Name, take a backseat to clear, precise diction. Perplexity and anguish are replaced by wonder and reverence. Punctuation returns. It is as though Williams has broken through doubt and dissociation to a calm, Zenlike way of living in the moment--alive and accepting.

Like so much of the best of this kind of poetry, however, the apparent ease and simplicity are deceptive, as is the suggestion that this is a collection of individual poems rather than a single extended meditation. For while it is true that each poem has a waka-like autonomy and integrity that could allow it to stand alone, it is also true that each piece depends on the others, and on its place in the overall sequence, for much of its force. Thus, they appear to be linked sequentially in the manner of renga. The last poem, "Did I write this" for example, could not have the same force in the middle of the sequence; the second poem, "I sit in my room," could hardly have come first. In fact, individually, these poems, despite their penetrating insights, offer only brief, intriguing glimpses rather than opening up a whole way of seeing. Read in sequence, however, they play off of each other and build a loosely connected web, touching at one point upon kneading dough:

So
mucked up with
kneading
dough she is

she has to use
her wrist to
push her hair back
from her eyes.

at another point upon meditation and language:

Listen carefully.

I'm meditating.
The only thing in my mind
right now
is the wind.

No, wait . . . the autumn
wind, that's right,
the autumn wind!

at another upon killing a cockroach:

What a sound his
shell made, that

big cockroach! Crack!
like a churchbell:
Crack!
Crack!
Crack!

Finally, we may be tempted to wonder, as he does in the final poem:

Did I really write this
as I was
dying?

Did I really
write
this?

That I wanted to thank
the snow
fallen on my blanket?

Could I
have written
this?

How different this is from Williams' earlier work, and yet how appropriate-and how impossible

without that earlier work.

In an important sense, The Lark. The Thrush. The Starling. is less a departure for Williams than a crucial point of transition. It is as though he has finally taken a very deep breath, settled down, and begun to find a stance and a voice that can carry him forward beyond the abyss that he seemed to be falling through in I Am the Bitter Name. It would no doubt be an over-simplification to attribute this entirely to involvement with Zen, but nevertheless, he does appear to have experienced a significant spiritual breakthrough between I Am the Bitter Name and With Ignorance.

With Ignorance, published in 1977, does veer away from minimalism, back toward the complexity and inclusiveness of earlier collections but, as the title implies, with a new humility, and as significantly, with a deeper and stronger sense of self--no longer the lonely, fragmented ego casting desperately about for, yet simultaneously rejecting, solace, but the deeply felt sense of participation in a drama at once absurd and holy, reality and illusion. He has also found a longer line and a new idiom, combining narrative with interior monologue. Taken together, all these developments enable him to sustain a longer poem and yet keep at its center a controlling and unquestionably authentic voice.

These qualities are evident throughout, but perhaps nowhere more so than in "The Last Deaths," a poem I wish I could quote in entirety. In fact, the whole question of how to discuss these poems is extremely problematic. On the one hand, they are much more direct and straightforward than the earlier ones, and so require much less explication. At the same time, they are so sophisticated rhetorically and so rich in imagery and human understanding that, despite their length, one wants to savour every word. "The Last Deaths" begins casually, even prosaically, "A few nights ago I was half-watching the news on television and half-reading to my daughter" (1: 1). It goes on to recount a bit of the book's story, intercut with glimpses of the news, punctuated by Jessie's (the daughter's) question, "What's the matter with her? Why's she

crying?" (1: 8) Next, the speaker interrupts himself to explain, "I haven't lived with my daughter for more than a year now and sometimes it still hurts not to be with her more . . . I don't see her often enough to be able to know what I can say to her,/what I can solve for her without introducing more confusions than there were in the first place" (2: 1, 3-4). He retells a story about acquainting her with the concept of death, reminding himself of how hard it is for her to come to terms such matters, and yet how much she needs an honest and clear explanation of this incident she has seen on television--a woman wracked with grief because her husband and children have been slaughtered by soldiers. Unable to speak frankly to Jessie, he speaks to himself in an interior monologue:

These times. The endless wars. The hatred. The vengefulness.
 Everyone I know getting out of their marriage. Old friends distrustful.
 The politicians using us until you can't think about it anymore because
 you can't tell anymore
 which reality affects which and how do you escape from it without
 everything battering you back again?

("The Last Deaths" 25-28)

He imagines himself addressing her, speaking the tangled truth as he understands it:

Last night while you and that poor woman were trading deaths like
 horrible toys,
 I was dreaming about the universe. The whole universe was happening
 in one day, like a blossom,
 and during that day people's voices kept going out to it crying, "Stop!
 Stop!"
 The universe didn't mind, though. It knew we were only cursing love
 again
 because we didn't know how to love, not even for a day,
 but our little love days were just seeds it blew out on parachutes into
 the summer wind. . . .
 and whatever our lives were, our love, this once, was enough.

("The Last Deaths" 40-45, 50)

Finally, the poem's statement is affirmative and redemptive. It is characterized by a sort of innocence even, but an innocence tempered by fire, far removed from, and inaccessible to, the

naivete of childhood.

Perhaps the best way to capture the flavor of this collection, however, is not to examine individual poems, but simply to quote a few opening lines:

If you put in enough hours in bars, sooner or later you get to hear
every imaginable kind of bullshit.

("Bob")

This is a story. You don't have to think about it, it's make-believe.

("Near the Haunted Castle")

When I was about eight, I once stabbed somebody, another kid, a little
girl.

("Blades")

Again and again. Again lips, again breast, again hand, thigh, loin and
bed and bed.

("With Ignorance")

From each of these points, Williams launches into a poem that is as much meditation as story, as much a consideration of how we know as a revelation of what we know.

Tar (1983) offers an extension and refinement of the themes and techniques introduced in With Ignorance, rather than a radical departure. Still relying upon the longer line that served him well in the previous collection, he continues to work primarily with narrative monologues, and as in With Ignorance, he concludes the book with an extended poem of sustained reflection and speculation. To note that the similarities between these two collections are more numerous than between any two other collections, however, is not to diminish the importance of Tar. Besides containing several remarkable narratives--"The Gift," "The Color of Time," "Combat," "Still Life," and "The Gas Station"--in "One of the Muses" Tar offers an invaluable personal exploration of Williams' relation to his poetry.

Part biography, part psychology, part literary theory, "One of the Muses" resembles, on a

much smaller scale, Wordsworth's The Prelude in the way it attempts to trace out the various forces that have shaped the poetic sensibility, while at the same time demonstrating those forces in action in the poem itself. Beyond this general similarity in intent and method, however, the two works are as different as the poets who wrote them.

Williams' two epigraphs, taken from Plato and Wittgenstein, announce at the outset that this poem is concerned much less with biography than with the spring from which the poetic impulse arises. That Williams conceives of this well-spring as a sort of ungrounded absolute reality is not particularly surprising, given the spiritual longing that animates many of his strongest poems. Nevertheless, to speak intelligently and comprehensibly about such ultimate concerns remains inordinately difficult. How does one speak of the formless? Williams' answer is to adopt the conventional symbol of the muse, or more specifically one of the muses, as a symbolic representation, pointing beyond herself so that as Wittgenstein says, "language suggests a body and there is none":

Here in a relatively stable present, no cries across the gorge, no veils
atremble,
it sometimes seems as though she may have been a fiction utterly, a
symbol or a system of them.
In any case, what good conceivably could come at this late date of
recapitulating my afflictions?

("One of the Muses" 2: 7-9)

His answer to that question is simply that "it's to be accounted for, that's all" (3: 7) And in the process of giving this accounting, Williams presents the evolving relationship with this muse much in the manner of a love affair, from her first appearance to him in a period of spiritual doubt, through their soaring consummation which "came to seem a myth, a primal ceremony" (5: 3), followed by doubts and misgivings, her disdainful turning from him in silence, the intermittent returns when she "left her cleft of reticence ajar: a lace, a latticework" (8: 2). As his relationship with her deepens, he grows increasingly frustrated by the disparity between his

needs for her and her cool remoteness, until anguished and bereft, he turns back upon himself:
Wherever I did find the strength, half of it I dedicated to absolving
and forgiving her.
Somehow I came to think, and never stopped believing, I was inflicting
all my anguish on myself.
She was blameless, wasn't she? Her passivity precluded else: the issue
had to be with me.

("One of the Muses" 12: 1-3)

More and more consumed in abandonment and guilt, he begins to exhaust his internal resources until he feels himself going mad, and in his madness experiences the birth of a second mind (it is interesting to read "Halves" and "Then the Brother of the Wind" in this context), which troubled as it is, offers a sort of metaperspective from which he can view his original "sane" mind:

I knew already that my other mind--I could hardly recall it--had
a flaw and from that flaw
had been elaborated a delusion, and that delusion, in its turn was at
the base of all my suffering,
all the agonies I'd been inflicting, so unnecessarily, I understood,
upon myself.

("One of the Muses" 16: 1-3)

From this new perspective, he begins to construct a new epistemology, one in which he is truly a creator or maker of reality rather than a mere scribe recording sense impressions. The result is an exhilarating sense of power and fulfillment, until even this leaves and he arrives in a new place:

Somehow, I knew I'd touched the very ground of self, its axioms
and assumptions,
and what was there wasn't what I'd thought--I hadn't known what I'd
thought but knew it now--

("One of the Muses" 19: 4-5)

He returns to himself feeling shy and somewhat estranged, but sure and trusting, recognizing that the muse is now gone for good and that he will have to make his way without her. The earlier sense of abandonment and desolation has also gone, however, replaced by "the

certainty that something was attained" (24: 1).

Finally, in a startlingly beautiful conclusion, he speculates that she may be the poetry itself, "what she herself effected" (25: 3)--both cause and effect, that which is embodied in language and that which language can only suggest, "precisely scored--no rests, diminuendos, decrescendos--silencing, and silence" (25: 9).

In many ways a reflective analysis of the pressures and discoveries that have shaped his poetry over the twenty years covered by this volume, "One of the Muses" can also be seen as an interpretive key to the poems. It offers a reconstruction of Williams' journey into and beyond the self. Yet, in many ways, it is incomplete, necessarily so, for the terror and magnificence of this journey, the horror and beauty, lie in the traveling--and finally in the courage and imagination of the traveler. "One of the Muses" may serve as a roadmap into this strange and magnificent dimension, but it is only that. Those who want more than a roadmap, will have to read it all.

Flesh and Blood

In *Flesh and Blood*, Williams offers both refinement and departure. As in earlier collections, he moves freely between the mundane and the metaphysical, but now appears to do so in concert with rather than at the mercy of some "muse" or daimon beyond his control. The long lines and discursive style characteristic of *With Ignorance* and *Tar* remain, but are now held firmly within the bounds of an eight-line unit--sometimes comprised of an individual poem, sometimes part of a multi-poem sequence, sometimes eight-line stanzas within a single long poem. Within this consistent eight-line unit, Williams composes in open-ended, speculative sentences that play with syntax, semantics, and sound as they search out their arc of completion. The result is a kind of tempering, at once strengthening and seasoning the work with hard won spiritual, psychological, and technical assurance.

Although the book's three parts share obvious surface resemblances in voice, subject matter, and form, each section has a dominant signature, or motif. Part I, by far the longest,

ranges widely over a variety of subjects from "Fast Food" to "Drought" to "Religious Thought." Despite an occasional pair of complementary poems ("Snow: I" and "Snow: II," for instance) or a more loosely knit group ("Artemis," "Herakles," "Medusa," "Midas"), the poems do not connect tightly but rather play upon or against each other with collagelike juxtapositions: the concrete against the abstract, the personal against the political, the tragic against the comic, the beautiful against the grotesque. This apparently casual, almost random movement among disparate themes works as counterpoint to a regularity of form that might otherwise become oppressive.

Yet the form, due to its very regularity, becomes almost invisible, a stable undercurrent to the pointed observations of the ordinary drama of everyday reality--the woman on the subway with hooks for hands, the lesbian couple in the park with their daughter, Bishop Tutu's visit to Reagan at The White House, the nature of Modernism, the magnificent terror of divine madness. And it is this last, this terror--at once compelling and overwhelming--that sounds the dominant theme of Part I. "Religious Thought" captures this feeling well. The title, for instance, can be read in at least two relevant ways: "Religious" may be meant as a restrictive modifier, suggesting that of all one's thoughts some few may be thought of as religious and that those few are about to be discussed, or the modification may be non-restrictive, in which case the title would imply that "Thought" itself may be a religious activity, an encounter with the incomprehensible:

Beyond anything else, he dwells on what might inhabit his mind at the
 moment of his death,

That which he'll take across with him, which will sum his being up as he's
 projected into spirit.

Thus he dwells upon the substance of his consciousness, what its contents
 are at any moment:

good thoughts, hopefully, of friends, recent lovers, various genres of at-

tempted bliss. (1-3)

...

His secret is the terror that mind will do to him again what it did that
un-forgivable once.

Sometimes, lest he forget, he lets it almost take him again: the vile
thoughts, the chill, the dread. (7-8)

Precariously balanced between affirmation and negation, he is drawn in both directions, wishing to choose affirmation yet knowing that the other choice is equally profound and compelling. The poem clearly hearkens back not only to "One of the Muses," but to "Halves":

because there is something in me that is neither
the right half nor the left half nor between them.

It is what I see when I close my eyes, and what I see. (2-4)

...

and though it is neither true nor false, it tells me
that it is quietly here, and, like a creature, is in pain;
that when I ripen it will crack open the locks, it will love me. (18-20)

And perhaps a ripening *has* taken place, for although various poems skirt the edges of that terror, letting "it almost take him again," they do not plunge into the abyss. Instead, they probe, almost toy with the terror of seeing too deeply and speaking too clearly. A tension that could otherwise become unbearable is characteristically de-fused--sometimes, as in "The Body," with sympathetic humor, sometimes, as in "Blame," with "a gesture of just-fathomable irony." "Dawn," the final poem of Part I, explores the texture of a particular morning, a brief interval of "mist" and "sea fog" in a time of "unwavering heat" and "overpowering sunlight." For the briefest moment, a bit of the sea fog gathers in the branches of "the drought-battered spruce on

its lonely knoll." A sparrow lands, "swaying precipitously on a drop-glittering twiglet." It is joined by a another bird, then a third, unseen but singing out of "that dim, fragile, miniature cloud," which is already burning off in the stark light of day. Like the poet himself, that solitary spruce hangs on to life, and for an instant at least is inhabited by an obscure spirit that fills its weary branches with song.

The thirty three poems in Part II are gathered into five groups: "Reading," "Suicide," "Love," "Good Mother," and "Vehicle." Grouped thus, individual poems are much more tightly knit into sequences than those in Part I, so that they maintain their autonomy while also functioning as part of a larger whole and offering chances for more extended exploration of a subject than would be possible within a single eight line poem. The three poems on suicide, for instance, offer varied perspectives on that final and irrevocable act of self-destruction. The first poem, "Suicide: Elena," reflects on the death of a former client in one of Williams' psychotherapy groups. Clearly moved by the suicide of this thin, vulnerable fourteen and a half year old girl, Williams asks a boy if he knew her, only to have the boy correct his mispronunciation of the girl's name, thereby underlining the sense of helplessness and distance. "Suicide: Ludie," second in the sequence, stretches the distance even farther. A payphone is ringing. Williams answers. A voice asks for Ludie. When told "there isn't anybody around here," the voice replies, "Well, what am I supposed to do? What are you supposed to do when somebody's gonna kill herself?"/ "The police. Where does Ludie live?" "That's the whole thing, she don't *live* where she lives." And so the poem ends, offering a shallow kind of ironic satisfaction with its play on "*live*," yet undercutting this with a deep sense of isolation and helplessness.

Finally, "Suicide: Anne," dedicated to Anne Sexton, attempts to work toward an understanding of the forces, the needs and pressures, that might drive a person to take her life:

Perhaps it isn't as we like to think, the last resort, the end of something,

thwarted choice or attempt,
 but rather the ever-recurring beginning, the faithful first to that very
 image of endeavor,
 so that even the most patently meaningless difficulties, a badly started
 nail, a lost check,
 not to speak of the great and irresolvable emotional issues, would bring
 instantly to mind
 that unfailingly reliable image of a gesture to be carried out for once with
 confidence and grace.

If this poem does not adequately settle the difficult, perhaps irresolvable issues raised by the previous two, it does provide a sense of closure to the sequence. The same isolation that leaves us feeling so distraught and helpless when confronted by a suicide accentuates both our fundamental aloneness--our final inability to comprehend the full range of another person's needs, desires, and motives--and also our need to try. The bungled conversation with Elena's friend, the desperate phone call about Ludie, the shape of Anne Sexton's mind and heart in a body of poems--all help in different ways to fill that need for community and understanding but are all finally inadequate, "as though the pestering forces of inertia that for so long had held you back had ebbed at last/and you could slip through now, not to peace particularly, not even to escape, but to completion."

As in other sequences, each poem resembles a window through which the reader is permitted to look in on an event or phenomenon from different angles, gaining each time a fuller understanding, but realizing all the while that the subject in its totality remains slightly elusive, that only by being both inside and outside the room while simultaneously looking through every possible window could the phenomenon be fully apprehended, if even then.

In Part III, Williams continues working in an eight line unit, but here the sequence is

bound so tightly together that the eighteen pieces come together into a single long poem, "Le Petit Salvié," an elegy for friend and fellow poet, Paul Zweig, who died in 1984 after an excruciating battle with lymphoma. The parts are interdependent, relying on each other and on their place in the poem's overall movement for most of their force. A few, such as numbers 8 and 9, may be sufficiently self contained to stand alone, but even these gain resonance when read in the overall context. Still, the interdependence is a matter of degree, and raises questions about the point at which a tightly knit sequence of poems becomes an individual work.

"Le Petit Salvié" is both a deeply felt personal tribute and an extended meditation on human mortality. The central fact of Zweig's death lends concrete immediacy to thoughts that might otherwise seem abstract and remote. Conversely, the meditative speculation contextualizes and universalizes the personal grief. In many ways, therefore, the working-through of that grief serves as a fundamental organizational principle. From memories of Zweig's final days and even moments, Williams shifts the focus to his own sense of loss and doubt: "In my adult mind, I'm reeling, lost--I can't grasp anymore what I even think of death./I don't know even what we hope for: ecstasy? bliss? or just release from being, not to suffer anymore" (6. 1-2). The impact of Zweig's death upon those closest to him, Vikki Stark and his daughter Genevieve, is set against Williams' growing growing sense that in a way Zweig is *not* dead:

If you're accessible to me, how can you be dead? You are accessible to me,
therefore . . . something else.

So what I end with is the death of death, but not as it would have been
elaborated once,
in urgencies of indignation, resignation, faith: I have you neither here, nor
there, but not not-anywhere:

the soul keeps saying that you might be here, or there--the incessant pas-

sions of the possible. (13: 5-8)

The loss is real, the grief is real, yet so is the reality of having once been touched by Zweig's life, the continuing presence of his memory, of his work:

There are no consolations, no illuminations, nothing of that long-awaited
flowing toward transcendence.

There is, though, compensation, the simple certainty of having touched
and having been touched.

The silence and the speaking come together, grief and gladness come to-
gether, the disparate fuse. (16: 6-8)

However we may construe these disparate--as life and death, grief and joy, abstract and concrete, relative and absolute--their fusion offers a resolution to the loss expressed earlier, as well as to the poem:

Farewell your dumb French farmer's hat, your pads of yellowed paper, your
joyful, headlong scrawl.

The coolness of the woods, the swallow's swoop and whistle, the confident
call of the owl at night.

Scents of dawn, the softening all-night fire, char, ash, warm embers in the
early morning chill.

The moment holds, you move across the path and go, the light lifts, breaks:
goodbye, my friend, farewell. (18: 5-8)

All citations are to line numbers, not pages.