

Transcendental Bouquet · *Richard Holinger*

ROBERT DANA'S *Yes, Everything* confirms the poet's gradual Romantic emphasis borne out in the ever-increasing narrative form displayed in his recent work. A long-time admirer of Dana's lyric poems, those elegant, tight-knit tapestries, I prefer his narrative poems that actively push a meaning that transcends imagery and form.

This shift from the early Poundian imagism of *Some Versions of Silence* (1967) is evidenced in the looser, more relaxed style of *In A Fugitive Season* (1979). Later poems, as in the title poem from *Starting Out for the Difficult World* (1987), foreshadow the present collection, their take on the nature of things suggestive of the mystical, marvelous, and sometimes hideous truth. Dialectic themes and paradoxical images get magnified in the present work: autobiographical narratives laden with surprises transfix the reader; a relatively new element of humor infuses many poems; a coherent theme and direction fuses the work as a whole. Poetic closure confronts life in all its guises unflinchingly, a camera that keeps rolling as a mother's arm is "blown / away" in Sarajevo, recording everything that must be recognized to secure a world vision that's true.

Although the title suggests this all-encompassing view, individual poems draw on tableaux of nature encountered personally. The dedication, "to my mother and father, whoever they were," is a feat of faith; as orphan, Dana gives something to two people he knows must exist (or have existed), but of whom he has no knowledge. The epigraphs that follow broaden this thematic frame: a quote from Larry Levis, "It is the unremarkable that will last," suggests a Judeo-Christian message, whereas Cortazar's "Yes, everything coincides" (from *Hopscotch*) promotes the Buddhist belief in universal unity and interdependence. Space and time thus defined encourages a re-consideration of our usual perceptions of spatio-temporal relations, invites a re-view of the universe as a composite of inexplicable contradictions that nevertheless makes magnificent holy/holistic sense.

Each of the book's three sections is introduced by an italicized poem. The first, "At Bridget's Well," contrasts the poet's wife, a "Pure tourist"

Yes, Everything. Robert Dana. Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1994. 69 pages. Hardback, \$19.95.

counting off Irish counties “the way the God-ridden / Irish count off beads,” with the poet’s sister, who, when she “married God, / she gave up all she had,” just as the sea, too, “slams shut against the shore.” The natural gets mirrored in the personal, the holy evoked by the secular, “plastic / flasks tipped with waters of miracle.” The poem’s final image recalls resurrection, not corporeal, but linguistic: “I want that Ireland of iron / winds, and peat fires / hissing like my small, grey / tabby, and poems like Yeats’s / raised up from fields of stone.”

The section’s first poem, “Hard Copy,” continues in this vein, time construed as “Each day / a pure copy of the last,” the speaker concerned about needing “more time than I can get.” With *carpe diem* urgency, the poet’s eye is invigorated in the poems that follow by a grandiloquent beauty inherent in the mundane and the minuscule. His vision—as well as ours—is enlarged, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in “Blue Iris,” bathing us in Blakean motif: “Yes, the long fall / of the / fine hairs of animals, / feathers, bare frames / of branches, the hearts of / burning stars— / / A billion years in an instant.”

The next poem begins, “Buddha sat under a sycamore / in full leaf beside the river.” Is it the Buddha or the tree in full leaf? The ambiguity reinforces the Buddhist symbology of the connectedness of everything. To be apart from the world while simultaneously an integral part of it is the position that the poet—along with others who imagine the same—is blessed with. The last stanza of “Welcome to Chester” emphasizes an ultimate synthesis of the disparate nature of things: “But I’m on my / way, like light, / particle and wave. / / I’m everywhere. / I won’t be back.”

“After After” concludes the first section, a description of the poet’s mountain climb with his in-laws, “Tiny figures, all / of us, in some old / Sung painting, . . . / understanding little / of what’s being said / by the billion-tongued / aspen, in the harsher / language of the sun.” Throughout the collection light and language bless the world, help us transcend our lot “where so / much comes to not / enough.” Not to fully comprehend nature’s language is understandable; what is necessary is that we listen for it, because “listening is the act / that holds the world together” (“Hard Copy”).

“Wildebeest,” seven poems that comprise section two, is introduced by “Genesis,” set where Dana lives, in Coralville, Iowa, where “the woman and the man, / naked and shivering,” watch the sunrise “amid the stunned animals.” Typing himself as Adam—and Coralville as Eden—anticipates the

East African sequence with a primitive, yet biblical aura (also established by the seven-day, seven-poem creation theme). The most narrative of Dana's poetry, "Wildebeest" reads like several short-shorts or prose poems, the dramatic tension between contemporary and ancient imagery helping weld story lines tighter than plot.

The light in Africa shines bright and fierce as the "black / Adam, and the woman / and the child" leave footprints "in stone. / Changing everything— / Yes, everything— / as we knew they would." The seventh poem, "Rat," calls to mind Lawrence's "Snake":

Forget myth. Forget any wisdom
your body ever sweat for. Forget
the desperations of poison. It's
none of these brings this rat
to water here, belly down into
the basin's slick curve, tail
lashed to the desk-lamp cord,
easy, easy among the larger animals.

Dana's speaker, unlike Lawrence's who stands by a desert water trough, sits writing in Iowa, imagining himself "alone at the / bottom of the sea; . . . / kelp-beds of trees / swaying like sleep in heavy / rain." He's descended to the depths of Prufrock's ragged claws, drinking in what he can, feeling "easy among the larger animals."

The final section's introductory poem, "Salt," accentuates in the tradition of Stevens and Williams the importance of recognizing "unremarkable things" such as "salt, / vinegar, and oil on my tongue." Sensitivity to a grandeur in the particular helps transcend immanent and universal loss, pain, and alienation. An orphaned bird, the murder of two Sarajevo orphans, and statistics like "one murder in every / eight, back in my old / home state, Massachusetts, / is a woman or a child" test the resolve that the speaker has in language and light. "Here and Now" addresses absurdity and existential angst most directly: "God / in whom I no longer believe, / I believe in this pliers / and screwdriver; in this / hibachi and its little / lotus of fire. I believe / in this. Here. And now." The poem acknowledges a Far Eastern culture that appreciates simplicity in the present, a contrast to the Christian's

anticipating a glory-filled life after life. "Yes, everything coincides," but only if you let it, only if you can see the connections.

With *Yes, Everything*, Dana flies in the face of deconstructionists who have decentered Romantics from Shelley to Snyder. Dana refuses to be dismantled; his collective vision convinces because its coherency mirrors his larger subject and renders the unremarkable remarkable. Thoreau teaches us that in order to amplify our vision we must simplify it; Emerson teaches us to look for the holy in the natural and the vernacular. Dana's motifs burgeon into a bouquet of these transcendental insights, revisioning, reexamining, and, triumphantly, reasserting their truths.