

# Four Poems

by [David Solway](#) (October 2022)



*Steel Workers*, Philo B. Ruggles and John Ruggles, 1939

## ***Men at Work***

*A civilization is built on what is required of men, not what is provided for them. –Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

*Women are always saying, “We can do anything that men can do.” But Men should be saying, “We can do anything that women can do.” –Gloria Steinem*

**I am watching** four separate work crews directly across the street  
engaged in leveling 237,883 square feet of city block  
in preparation for extending the local mall, already hugely impressive  
and soon to become gargantuan.  
Two great CATS are clawing up acres of earth.

Several tractors are scurrying about ploughing and scooping up debris  
and depositing it in corrugated dumpsters,  
which are then hauled away on 18-wheel flatbed rigs.  
A fleet of loaded F150s is delivering materials to every corner of the site.  
A 120 foot mobile crane is lifting long modular trailers onto the roof of the mall.  
Two Samvik 1500 tread-mounted Rockline Drivers  
are drilling through the surface parking lot to house pillars and girders.  
Water trucks are laying the dust clouds and hosing down the giant CATS.  
Refueling tankers come and go at regular intervals.  
Lengths of wide-girth polymer concrete pipe are being lowered into freshly dug trenches.  
A troop of men with picks and shovels, filing between the Porta Potties,  
are busy with the finer details, clearing up rubble and smoothing out the smaller protuberances of gravel and tussock.  
Others are perched precariously on ladders  
refurbishing the exposed facades with lattices of grillwork.  
Still others are dredging pools of liquid silt,  
hoisting and dragging thick plastic tubing and steel rods  
and unrolling bolts of rubber sheeting and bales of insulation.  
The foreman, wearing a mud-bespattered white helmet and carrying a clipboard  
scored with intricate notations like a page of music  
is in earnest conversation with two well-tailored gentlemen,  
whom I later discover represent the architectural firm  
that won the tender for the project.  
Soon even they are covered in grit and grime and gillings.  
This is the academy of effort and sweat.  
This is the real thing.  
This is what is meant by *Men at Work*.

## ***The Sparrow***

*And again with their wings against your windows ...* –Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, “Rima LIII,” *Book of the Sparrows*

**It sat on** the edge of the highway  
near enough to the landscaped margin  
to provide a touch of irony,  
wings folded the way a spectator  
folds his arms as if to gauge  
the contestants in any event.  
I slowed down for an instant, conscience  
on the brakes, expedience  
in the rearview mirror, then slammed  
the pedal to the floor. The car  
spurred wings and flew down the very  
same highway. It was only an instant  
but long and bright enough to reveal  
the blink in its bird’s-eye view from below.  
The small head turning calmly observed  
the traffic: no revving of feathers,  
stalled by a thunderous exit, it  
awaited the outcome as if uninvolved.  
I had good reasons for not stopping:  
the traffic, the bird was half-dead anyway,  
  
I had to get home before rush hour,  
what did I know about broken wings?  
Today I passed the bird again, now

tossed on a shore of gravel, abandoned  
like a small boat or a bottle  
without a note in it, wings spread  
like a crack in the windshield, as hushed  
and startling as a verdict.

### ***Rock Poet***

**He's a tubby** little guy with a lot of pizzazz  
and a love of layered reference—  
LOL, Dizzy Gillespie blowing lexical jazz  
and famous as Seamus. He detoured thence

into glitterati stardom and a thumb-down instrument,  
not bad for a busker, pretty good for a poet, hence,  
frolicking at Easter when it's actually Lent,  
he never lacks for confidence.

A tubby little guy who's dressed to the left,  
touseled and wind-blown, a real corker  
of bluster and glitz, yet classically deft  
in the role of Alceste at *The New Yorker*.

The maestro strums, a talent rather scant.  
The poet writes. He's good, but quite irrelevant.

### ***The Lover's Decalogue***

**Thou shalt not** raise thy voice against me, even if aggrieved or justified, neither shalt thou interpret nor assume pejoratively, for to be critical of thy lord, or to misprize or diminish him, is anathema and *nehushtan*.

Thou shalt not weep or moan or snore or fart in bed, for that is the prerogative of thy master.

Thou shalt not turn tenderloin to pemmican or jerky.

Remember what I say when I pontificate, to keep it wholly in mind.

Thou shalt tolerate my bad moods and honour my asymmetrical demands.

Thou shalt not bring up money issues to discomfit me.

Thou shalt not allow thy smile to become pinched and thy features to taper when thou art sulking or distressed.

Thou shalt not be cheeky but mild and forgiving, neither shalt thou put thyself forward to deliver ultimatums.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ass, neither with a glance, nor in a dream nor by an errant thought, for it is wearing wool and linen in one garment, which is *kilayim*.

Thou shalt have no other lovers after me.

## [Table of Contents](#)

**David Solway's** latest book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [Partial to Cain](#), appeared in 2019.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)