

Substantiation

I visited Fermilab once,
the first year I taught science
before I had ever seen a Gothic Cathedral.

Tabletops in the cafeteria
were decorated with bubble track photos.
Notepads and pencils stood beside the napkins and catsup.

Chalkboards framed the elevators
so ephemera could be captured
by fossil dust before the inspiration burst.

I rushed home to build a cloud chamber
for my adolescent students,
eager, I hoped, for the insight of detecting nuclear events.

I went to the grocer's for material:
A plastic container full of chicken livers would do
from an anti-haruspex point of view.
The quantum cat could have the livers,
we'd use the bowl.
A half pint of grain alcohol, too, the spirits transformed
by an ancient alchemy not for drunken visions this time,
but rather to construct a medium for our cosmic cloudlets.
We got dry ice from the ice cream man,
who in sublime temper suggested,
"It's so cold it burns."

Lost for years in an aunt's attic was a glow-in-the-dark alarm clock,
big bells on top, a key to turn the time, and a broken spring.
A speck of paint from the hands was all we'd need
and, of course, the correct arrangement of parts.

We watched the vapor trails crafted in the liver box.
I, in awe, pointed to them, filmed them in Super 8,
and admonished my students to look.

What did the students see--
the deep essence of Nature,
a devoted ritual of Science,
an obscure assemblage of Mercantile Phenomena?

I thought yesterday of our friend Father M.
who so far from Ireland
had carried holy water in whiskey bottles
to tend his flock in Africa.
Once, while preparing for an impromptu Mass
to be held in the woods of Missouri,
he had to make use of hot dog buns for the Host.
On the way back from the country store,
he said with the wry knowledge of the spiritual artisan,
"You know it works much better with flat bread."