

Honest William

“Here under sleeps the body of William Emerson who lived and died an honest Man. He departed out of this life the 27th of June Anno Dom. 1595 in the year of his age 92. *Ut sum sic eris.*”

— MEMORIAL TABLET IN SOUTHWARK CATHEDRAL, LONDON

What a century to live honest through!
Of capricious murderous monarchs,
disembowellings and burnings of heretics,
Protestant or Catholic by turns —
of whom many died honest but young . . .

Let us suppose, aged William, that seeing all
you chose inner emigration in the leaning
half-timbered shade of Tudor London;
that unfired by Luther or Copernicus
or the Thirty-Nine Articles, you quietly traded
in Raleigh’s noxious New World weed . . .

Whatever you did or believed
we may in our matching century
imagine your life one long evasion —
for how best get by, in any age or time,
but keep indoors, out of the sun?

So, to be generous, let this be your benison:
Peace to your dust, William Emerson,
whose honest best may have been to remain,
for his loved ones’ sake, a private man.

MICHAEL THORPE