Dilemmas
Dedication

For Mei-Yee
Dilemmas

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_Town Creek Poetry_: “Why I’m So Late”
FIRST SET: EXCLUDED MIDDLES

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit: “The bud disappears as the blossom bursts forth, and one could say that the former is refuted by the latter. . . . Their fluid nature, however, makes them, at the same time, elements of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which one is as necessary as the other; and it is only this equal necessity that constitutes the life of the whole.”
A DAGUERREOTYPE OF TEA LEAVES

One of Chopin’s nocturnes, number nine or up, thirty-two especially, not heard, not at all, but visible in the crated tin of the tea, the tilted cup.

Or most of Beethoven’s sonatas, only it cannot be number nine. One may infer this music mainly from the tea and the cup and the knot of brownish haze beyond the wooden bench, keys that have bled out into the faded bronze of the sky, sheet music blurred into the gut of the breeze, sepia clouds, coal veins vibrating in the Channel.

You are alone. Is that not news? But a lover now approaches. A floral dress pattern, perhaps flannel, early 1860s, grayish-tan, articulated by the outline of a flexed knee, a gray made slightly lavender by the leeching rhythm of mercury, residual brine of silver nitrate. Or else the lover is already present but has not been recognized. Present all along. Soon to become known, discernible as mere intent that narrows in elaboration from a vanishing point between the trellis and the sea, smears southward in arthritic arcs across the dark horizon’s joint.

If not a lover, a helpmate, kindred laborer. None will say enemy. But enemy. What is coming is, at any rate, the work of many hands, each one responsible for playing one disaggregated splinter from the frayed pianoforte, barely visible above Orion before sunrise every fall and early winter.
ENCOUNTERING THE CAPITALIST MUSE

At first, you mistake
her for an advertisement,
her long, blond hair tossed
wildly by an unfelt wind.
You look for the product
hovering in pastel holiness
above her shoulder, but,
finding only some ramshackle
buildings and busted rubbish,
eventually come to sense,
and, as she draws near,
observe how the wind, as
it troubles her hair, sounds
like a sluggish Gershwin song,
how her spinning eyes
like hubcaps turn both
ways at once. You learn
from her kisses to want those
words which carry the water
of chaos like blood-colored
wine in a breath of copper,
and believe in the power
of voices to sell what is
neither here nor there, nor
anything worth ever having,
CLEANING THE MERMAID

What to say of it, the fish part,
    that does not sound like
any fish: rough to the fingers,
difficult to scale, knife catching on hide,
platelets glancing off my glasses?

For it is hard enough anyway
    to hold it steady in the sink
without the soft voice in the ear,
the plaintive singing, the water in its lungs
echoing the faucet’s laughter.

I suppose it was that, and the easy
    reception of my thumb upon
its throat, that made me wonder
if there might be something, this time,
to feel sad about.
Assumes a previous occurrence to have recently transpired, which, of course, it has, and acts accordingly, averting danger, narrowed to a mindfulness of all that must ensue, having scant seconds, and a large heart, plunges through a miscellaneous aftermath of tilted lampshades and green shutters, sure of nothing, through brochures that advertise beach weekends and bikini-clad young women, but, but, no, it stays here to see justice done, has a beef with destiny, and just as things look darkest, just as things . . .
**What the World Is**

They told us just like
they tell everyone

in open gasping fields
in dim hot waves of sun

leaning sometimes on a hoe
leaning others on a gun

what the world is
what is done.

Beyond the hedge however
beyond the snapdragon

where the creek slows
where the waters run

between boulders wedged
between the bright cold beams of sun

we know whatever the world is
we have done.
TAROT DIVINATION

Where better to begin than with the girl in the grape arbor who holds up a hooded falcon?

Principle figure in a renaissance landscape, how would she look in a regular suburb, water-sprinklers instead of olive trees on either side of her, a tricycle at her feet?

As she sternly gazes at the bird of prey perched on her gloved hand, would she still represent “discernment,” “certitude,” in her period costume, or simply get a job, the tenuous cobweb meanings scattered by her breath as she tells someone her name, the bird having roused from her flustered hand, thrown off its hood, and fled to a rooftop antenna?
Dilemmas

GRIEVOUS ANGEL ON STATE ROAD 178

Not until I am ten miles, maybe twelve, outside Greenwood city limits do I remember that Emmylou sings duet with Gram Parsons on “Hickory Wind,” and it is too late.

I have already turned off toward Epworth, almost even with Simpson’s Auto Salvage. Already, I can hear the 1960s models honking through the rusted chain-link fence ahead.

I look to see if any footpaths have been worn to the Thunderbird since last time, and she enters, more cautiously than I recalled, unsure, perhaps, about what Parsons wants.

It is a live version. A beer bottle breaks near the microphone, and the shards of glass continue chiming as a waitress, I’m guessing, sweeps them up. Better than drums or bass.

Only now, as if she knows whose drink it was, does she breathe all her wind in the sails of the song. Ah, hell . . . nothing but pine trees and maples from here to Mays Crossing.
VERSIONS OF BRAHMS

Well, I only have so many,
and in the best of them,
by the Vienna Philharmonic,
the same woman coughs in the same place
every time, overlapping the oboes’ lingering
exit.

And it always startles me
as I wait for the entry of the violins.

I am the only one apparently.
For all the fifteen years
I’ve listened to this version,
everyone in the audience that night
continues staring politely at the stage,
as they do on the album cover, hoping
for the best.

But I’ve had it. I turn in my seat tonight
to look for her.

There is so little light below
the balcony, it is hard
to see her features; her dark brown hair
hangs partially across her face. But there she is,
her hand still covering her mouth.

She pretends to concentrate
on the music, but it is clear enough
she sees me.

She seems, in fact, to have been waiting
a very long time for someone
to turn like this, attempt a silent reproach.
For without much delay, she sweeps her hair
back and glares at me defiantly. What an
asshole.
NEW ORLEANS RAIN

This is the weather Bienville had in mind:
the Gallic overcast, the soggy desuetude.
Tourists drink in bars while residents lean idly

in doorways and windows, watching the place
dissolve, blur inward with reflected light,
fragments of forgotten jazz. The purpose

of noise, they know, is not the splitting blunder
of the saxophone but the pauses between thunder,
when puddles focus briefly before falling back to slivers.
ALICE AFTER KATRINA

Smaller? Larger?
It makes no difference.
The house bears no relation
to me any longer. The studs and plaster
soak up all the errant vapors, the fermented
exhalations, of my last, concerned
aside.

Following which, I pick a cricket up
and never speak again of egress or its opposite.

It rubs its wings together,
and I feel how water hurts itself
unendingly within the aqueduct,
discomfiture broken into multiple lesser
discomfitures that recombine and break again
as needed.

Even my bones, already
splintered beyond certain grasp,
continue snapping on themselves;
I reach with only sinew after central aspects
of the soul’s intestine, clutching inward.

Thumbs over thumbs
fetch deeper and deeper
for indices, footnotes, dim variants
of gowned light, chess pieces, that warp away
as if descending through dark water. Everything
turns to this one task in the end, arcing always
into voids through which a point of light
is falling.

A few billion years later,
I find myself sitting
at the kitchen table; I have still
not lifted my cup, and the sunlight lingers
where it was above the windowsill, spreading
a small fan of warmth across my swollen
fingers.
Now What, Genius?

Who will change the world's bandages
now that the Black-Faced Honeycreeper
is extinct? The White-Eyed River Martin?

The Carolina Parakeet? Who will plump
the world's pillow and pull its pressure
stockings up to its knees and organize

its pills in compartments labeled M, T, W,
TH, F, SAT? The Koa Finch? The White-Winged Sandpiper? The Slender-Billed

Grackle? The Cozumel Thrasher? Crap,
why don't we toss in a Pterodactyl while
we're at it? Oh yeah, and a compartment

with a radiant yellow smiling sun on it.
Well, it won't be the Black-Faced Honey-
creeper, baby girl. The Black-Faced Honey-
creeper is done flying down from the Gum
Myrtle Tree every time the world coughs or
accidentally rolls over on that stupid button.
The people would look awkward too, fearing to risk movement in a lawless foreground of confused perspectives, tangled points of view, uncertain, even, whether to walk toward the eye-level spread of fruit or simply put their hands out for the purple melons. They too would stand, stockstill, feigning a fixed center of haloed saints to set their eyes upon, averse to acknowledge or condone the disarray that drenches them, the sickening tilt and sway of a fallen world that is never far enough away.
**Trees, Forest, etc.**

Hard to tell from here, with the wind leaning
on the pine boughs and the light so broken,

who’s up there by the fallen Boxelder. There
are not two friends in twelve, fifty years into it,

who would lift a foot across that log to see me
on the other side. One of them, if I remember

rightly, is out in Idaho, legs tangled in the legs
of Plato, rolling and laughing like a hoplite

in winter wheat. Hard to tell from here, with
shadows broken and the pine boughs leaning

on the wind, who it is up there, resting a foot
on the Boxelder. I suppose I’ll stand here one

more minute, just in case, maybe two. But I’d
be damned sure who’s down here, if I were you.
Spaces that do not fit with any solid objects, 
nor provide adequate electrical outlets or lighting. 
As if one desired to walk from the sewing room 
at Monticello into the kitchen pantries without 
passing through the central hall. Spaces separated 
from each other by other spaces and long silences 
that end with awkward silences. The way the Sea 
and Air section at the National Museum of Air 

and Space overlooks the Gemini VII capsule 
at the bottom of the escalator. And the voice down 
the central hallway from the kitchen changes 
nothing. Spaces filled with memories of cardboard 
boxes filled with Christmas ornaments and obsolete 
receipts and cardboard. Not even the voices 
of James Lovell or Frank Borman from orbit. 
Spaces between letters in misspelled words that 
do not fit with other words in serviceable sentences 
and, so, develop no ideas or themes, provide no context or supporting evidence. Like that time 
we carried a picnic out to the middle of the Reedy 
River, jumping from stone to stone, waiting on each 
other in turn, extending hands to help, debating 
which stones would work best, and left the soda 
in the trunk. Spaces between strands of hair. Spaces 

between strands of hair that hang from separate heads 
and move toward each other rapidly in lust or anger, 
wishing to shape themselves around desired objects 
or destroy the objects they detest. Whether upside 
down above the Indian Ocean or pausing to hear 
a voice from the kitchen. Spaces between tongues 
and fingers stained with the desperation of other 
spaces that do not fit with any solid objects.
UPLAND FORK

Why anyone would come this way, where ferns confuse the pilgrim with perpetual displays of furled unfurling, and the sunlight yearns for shadow from the perch of its own rays, escapes me. Evidence of their passage stays, nevertheless, once the final footprint turns and, losing faith, stumbles back toward the bay’s calm waters: torn clothing, echoes of a lantern’s light still clinging to a sandwich crust. A few went further, maybe, but left no advice that would be helpful where the sandy loam gives way to rock. Don’t ask me how or who. Tellers of such stories, those who tell them twice, remember less and less the way back home.
**Why I’m So Late**

A very slow vine was not yet finished
climbing the last deliberate centimeter up my spine,

and the pearl-black flower that finally
blossomed, withering behind my face before it fully unfolded,

made several goldfish circle back, deeper
than usual, before drifting forever into the bridge’s shade.
Something buzzes hip high under my arm
the instant I open the door. Something
black with blackish fuzz and a blue-black
panoply of golden spikes, maybe best
understood, I now think, as a type of broken,
yellow banding, buzzes in from the sun’s
glare. So I stand, staring at every shadow in
the hall, listening, at the ready, but find
nothing less dark than the rest of my house
nor anything louder than me leaving it.
LEARNING CURVE

As I open the car door,
    you pause, pulling at my hand.
        There was a butterfly today.

So I kneel to hear about it,
    knowing how much you love them,
        the colors of their wings,

how they fly, how one
    of them sat next to you once
        while you drank your apple juice.

But the usual question,
    what color was it, falls flat. You
        look away at the trees, worried.

Yellow and black, you offer
    after a while; yellow with lots
        of little black circles and one big

black circle in the center
    of each wing. Sounds pretty,
        I say, but it only makes you cry.

It landed on the playground,
    right in front of you, flexed its
        wings up and down, unafraid.

Then your friend saw it too.
    He ran over, stomped his shoe.
        You pushed and shouted, but he

stomped again and again,
    thinking it funny, shifting his
        foot back and forth. You show me,

like a grown-up stepping
    on a cigarette, twisting. When
        he stopped, the butterfly was still.

It had a hole in its wing. It
    had a hole in its wing. You keep
        telling me, pulling me to fix it.
But, son, we’re in such a hurry to get home, I say. How much can anyone learn in one day?
Navigating New Orleans

Two mornings now, an orange-billed pelican
has descended into Esplanade Canal, its blue-beige
neck curled back along its body as I turned on Esplanade
to proceed upriver toward Clearview.

Yesterday, I saw it coming from a hundred
yards away, rocking above the trees. Not because
of wind, its neck already tucked for the descent, its legs
trailing like a kite-tail, but because

its wings were fighting thermals from warm
pavement, warm canal water, in a slow gentle sweep.
So slow, as I passed it, I began to think of other things
before it disappeared below the bank:

thoughts like the banks of the canal itself,
littered with light, ambient digressions of powdered
dimness, disintegration’s pomp new-flowered, melted
into canopies of maple and crepe myrtle.

Today, however, it was already eye level
as I flicked my turn signal on and waited for traffic
to clear. I theorized about illicit love as Jerry Lee’s piano
pulled even with me in a line of cars,

and before I could straighten out the wheel
its wings were dusting the tops of the dandelions,
disappearing into the canal right next to me. I watched
in the mirror all the way to Clearview

but saw nothing of its long thin legs reaching
down from sky to water, water up again to sky, stepping
through themselves to stand on stillness in the end.
Tomorrow morning, I will take I-10.
The Visit

Vines, braided in vines, pulled from the door. Cobwebs more numerous, the nearer you come. They clutch a tarnished knocker close to the wood but cringe at a candle, recoil from a breath of rum.

You pause instinctively, let silence soak between your toes to sod, time and time again, unsure of what you hear inside. A footfall? A newspaper tossed on a table? Snatched up? Flung again?

A shadow falling, levering down like a leaf, the shape of it changing as it tumbles? A strip of ribbon rather than a leaf! A voice? So much like a dry, brown leaf you stop and listen after every step?

Even as you take the knocker in your hand you hear what may be dust motes in a shaft of light: planetesimals, debris fields, collapsing in a plummet that returns them all to roughly the same height.

Think hard as you lift it. And yet again wait! Will you listen one last time before you let it drop? For, afterward, there is no room for doubt. Whatever is about to fall, or may be falling, will forever stop.
ORIGINS OF ECHOES

There is no cleverness that can obscure
the issue more than a decade. The kernel
of it lasts when the body has begun to waste
and finally shines out from the mind’s foil,
shredding memory with shrill immediacy:
the dry shell wet with the sound of water.
Call’s Creek Loop

Is this, after so many summers,
the same familiar maple on
the pinewood path again? The solitary
mountain laurel, leaning out as always
into sun? How many

million leaves have fallen since I
climbed down the rocks here,
through briars and bear grass, to the quiet
stream, the flat, meandering clouds, half-moons, the birdsong

tangled in the interstice of twig
and twig? How many petals have
circled briefly since? My knees moist
on the mossy stones again, hands cupping
water’s coolness I recall.
SECOND SET: THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

—Plato, *Euthyphro*: “Is the pious loved by the gods because he is pious, or is he pious because he is loved by the gods?”
**TO BUILD YOUR OWN PARTHENON**

You will need one fulcrum
   and a V-groove chisel.

Be careful to review any
   restrictive covenants that may
apply. And a lever. There
   will be some bending down,

bringing the elbows level
   with the knees, some

lifting with the legs. All *that*
   is in the manuals already.

But when Doric fluting
   rises from Ionic bases,

when the triglyphs funnel
   rainwater into standing

troughs along the frieze,
   it takes more than a fulcrum.

For this, you must sit
   on the stairs like a stone

too heavy to lift. Kick
   at some pebbles. Consider

them at rest. Some days
   you’ll forget your lunch.

You’ll want to go home,
   toss in the trowel, work

with something lighter
   than limestone: more

beautiful, more willing
   to receive a polish. But
wait a year or two, when
   others have gone home,

when the dew has frozen
   on the webs. A stubborn

light will stumble from
   the cypress grove, bending

the cold leaves back against
   cold bark, grasping cypress

knees for balance. It will
   loiter awhile at the foot

of the stairs, smelling of figs
   and grapevines and olives,

dissembling, as if it means
   to visit somewhere else

instead. It may stand there
   so long, in fact, you forget

how it feels to be warm,
   see clearly, until it stubs

its brightness on a step
   and falls across your feet.
Causal Sequence

A monk rings a bell,
    a brown, bronze bell,
    and both his eyelids close,

but only now does
    the startled butterfly
    rise up from a nearby rose.
Fog swirls in the wake of a butterfly’s wings and slowly settles in an empty bird nest for a while. But it cannot rest for long. Two vines braid higher and higher around the tree trunk. One we shall label Leonard Cohen, for it hooks its tendrils over the craggy edges of the bark and pulls itself straight up without concern for artifice. The other we label Cassius Clay, since it refuses to serve in the armed forces. When the sun comes out, the spray of the falls begins with a lurch. Its distant roaring ricochets like fragments of bird shell through the branches. It catches here and there on twiggy crotches. So Clay and Cohen pause to eat their sandwiches, to plot the path of their final ascent, watching the fog hop and flap in the nest.
SUMER IS ICUMEN IN

—a seasonal bukakke

Kneaded swath of beaded pearls,
which in our necklace strings
affection, lay on the springtime’s
cricketed neck

in lurid, pearl-white strands;
roll down the autumn’s
ripe, ingenuous throat
the way a wave, once broken, rolls
back down the hull of a boat.

Or laying rather on the winter’s
face the way the moonlight lays

upon the sea, its memory
broken by the water’s
eyes until it seems a set
of sunken stars, a shattered sun,
shine like pearls among a deepness,
darkness, known by none.
GREEN THUMB

Being tendered in so vested a conceit
of nubile barter, so incestuous, so spackled

with nuptial twinges of ardor in each new
invagination of the strobed eclection, it

is near to being nothing as nothing is to
this; as it rises, falling among shredded

lilacs, of a kind made kind with similarity,
a Thomist knowledge tending plants in tidal

isolation; toward noon-time, standing, feeling
the sun bleed warmth between folds of brown

fabric; there is a sprout needs pruning; a
pitcher of cold water on a bench, so cold,

so piecemeal in the patchwork light; so
separate with gold surrender circled in its

old elipses by a globed fatigue's reflection;
it is near to being anything as anything to it.
Liturgical Chant

Hildegard of Bingen begins with a low hum’s undercurrent, unbroken base for subsequent elaboration, and bends her voice before the first breath finishes around the porcelain handle of a smooth, glass pitcher, pouring in a long stream out of stars the present, now and now, to spatter softly in a basin, the solid current of her song submerging its own sound.
DOZING WITH COFFEE

Only long enough to watch
a Polynesian girl from work
letting air out of someone’s
tires, then I wake up spilling
coffee in my lap. It is

paneled with abstraction
this conglomerate of worlds,
and a warmth is soaking through
my clothes. I remember knowing,
in my dream, where a clock

was, in a laundromat.
When I looked, it was midnight,
or, more precisely, ten minutes
after, and there was an old
man reading in a green and

brown recliner. It seemed
a jumbled, pleasant city, but
that same night, driving fast,
we ran down members of a
color-guard. Their flags fell

wrinkled on the asphalt. A
cloud obscures the sun abruptly,
grey with moisture, ragged,
from its edges long, stark
shafts of sunlight spear. I am

outside in the garden, wist-
ful over autumn as the ducks
lift off the lake. The leaves
are falling drenched with hues,
a jade bug on a blossom.
Monsieur Transitif

Gamboling, gamboling,
all this morning spent
gamboling. First, in
the kitchen, pouring
coffee, I gamboled by
a cabinet. Then, sockless,
set off by the ceiling fan,
beside a thumb-tacked
map of Europe, I gamboled.

But now, bogged down
by grammar, I do not
gambol. Picking and
sorting for sense and pace,
the fireflies in my head
take seats, and around
my page the patient
world gets up, and goes
gamboling, gamboling.
MEMORABILIA

On April 12, 1976, Elvis drove
his Jaguar through the gates of Graceland,
smoking a cigar.

In the photo, taken by the collector,
the cigar is clearly visible as the King
looks left at oncoming traffic.

The collector has even drawn
an arrow to it in Elvis’ mouth
with what appears to be some Wite-Out.

A moment later, Elvis turned right
and proceeded to a Memphis
shopping mall, where, stepping from his car,
he casually let the cigar fall to the asphalt.

Elvis bought a cute little puppy at a pet store.

All of this is verified by a typewritten,
signed letter from the collector, who
followed Elvis that day.

Now here it is in a plexiglass case
like enamel from the Buddha’s tooth.
Bidding starts at $175. For the cigar, of course.
The dog is with Elvis.
ON ZHAO MENG-FU’S “WANG RIVER SCROLL”

—Yuan Dynasty

More interesting even
    than the mountain cottage

are the seven pine trees
    on a nearby slope. Alone,

except for scattered shrubs,
    they break the foggy distance

into fact, draw forth
    the gaze toward far peaks.
NAME DROPPING

I telephoned Allen Tate
   around 1986 or so
   to wish him a Happy Birthday.

He’d been dead a few
   years at that point
   but didn’t seem a bit surprised.

I sensed, however,
   a hesitancy in his voice,
   uncertainty, perhaps, about
   why someone he’d never met
   was calling.

So I said “I’m a friend of
   Robert Penn Warren’s.”

He and I both realized then
   that, as things stood, one
   of us would have to be a moron.

Only after waking up
   and staggering off to pee
   did I think to check if it was really
   his birthday. And guess what?
   It was me.
THE DEATH OF GÉRARD DE NERVAL

Hardly capable
of fastening a proper slipknot
in the frozen darkness, his fingers
must have fought

a clumsy moment
to close upon that writhing tail
the slender fangs held motion-less and pale.

In his poetry,
one finds the near miss everywhere,
the spent recoil from the strike
at the scaly air,

but that morning,
dans la rue de la Vieille-Lanterne,
he bit the wick with such a flame
it ceased to burn.
REFERENCES

Pure conceptual geometry littered with religious relics, dunes, scorpions, atomic testing grounds, amplitude modulated aromatic somas where my glasses are, and yet all previous landlords testify to my reliability; the sorts of relics found on any bedside table, but reified, afar, infused by the prescriptions of the lenses, the amount of water left in the glass, where the moon is, for all previous landlords testify to my reliability.

Amplitudes the likes of which Ruy Lopez might have looped about the Renaissance, palpitations, pure conceptual geometries, atomistic, as light moves from the glass of water to the lenses so all previous landlords testify to my reliability, caring only that my checks cleared, came in on the first, when I left I cleaned the refrigerator, including the crisper, pulled the door to, having dusted the bedside table where my glasses were.
THE PHOENIX RIOT, 1898

—Benjamin Mays’s first memory in Greenwood County, SC, recounted in Born to Rebel

From such a fire,
with the elective franchise,
his father submissively bowing,
his father at gunpoint saluting white men,
all swirling upward in its smoke,

what species of bird could
reasonably be expected to arise?

But the pine shadows, shaken
over maimed confluences
of muscle and tired memory, unspooled
fresh senses from his soul.

Wounded voices became so quiet
that winter, burnt cedar so cold,
the bleak rattle of flames one evening
broke upon more basic flame, brittle sheets
of rebellion broke on a bedrock
of rebellion.

Who can say exactly how it happened?

By spring, at any rate, the crack
in the window pane, in the wren’s
egg, in the spine of his favorite book,
in his heart, ran like wax from a single wick
wherever he dared look.
SYDNEY LANIER PASSING
THROUGH ASHEVILLE, NC, 1881

White pants in an open carriage?
A child’s eye fixes on the like.

Having read no poems, what
should you look for in a poet?

Their parents made them line up
along a dirt lane to see him pass.

He was very ill. The white pants
mostly, and the way he tried
to smile as the carriage lurched.
He lost his concentration once,

then, smiling, said “they have no
shoes on” to his wife, Mary,

reading next to him, who said not
a word nor ever once looked up.
THE COELACANTH

—believed until 1938 to have become extinct
60 million years ago

Now *that* is a listless fish, deep-water dropout from the bothersome surface, bulge-eyed, having plumbed every believable motive to reach the lightless bottom. It works its primitive flippers just enough to keep from plowing fully into silt, manages to hover a few feet above a total disavowal, letting the currents move it laterally, conserving energy. Archaic beyond dreaming, it predates the dawn of dinosaurs (a cumbersome fad of muscleheads it wholly failed to notice), who battled for the choicer cuts while it gawked in pitch darkness, barely even wanting to breathe its thimbleful of water.
HOW IT HAPPENED

A pebble

kicked
gardening
clattered
off a bamboo

shoot.

For another

only
the red
flutter
of a redbird

rising.

Dogen

heard
a goose
honk
and grew

feathers.
SOUTHERN CRESCENT

Turning westward where the kudzu
    climbs the various canopies of sweet gum
    and white oak and suddenly collapses like a great wave
    on the downward slope of pine trees and mimosas,
    we pass over a penny.

The elderly gentleman in front of me
    turns to look at the eight year old across the aisle,
    then he casts a glance at me, as if someone has spoken,
    as if he has overheard something, like the last half
    of a football score on someone’s radio.

A long strand of Norfolk and Southern freight cars,
    rusty brown, with bright orange and green graffiti,
    flows past the window on the right-hand side,
    rolling with us, but slower, a strange visual effect, veering
    off slightly and descending.

Georgia versus Tulane? Auburn versus Florida?

I suspect a conference rivalry; an in-state
    contest involving all-white, segregated
    teams. Hands grasping hips in rain. No face masks.
    All the noses broken. Blood turning brown on orange
    jerseys, blackening the green.

He turns back finally, gazing out his window
    at the spirals of wisteria, moss on the stone pilings
    of the old bridge.

And it is as if the boy’s voice never shouted,
    never rode on the shoulders of other shouts,
    as if he never leapt up, shouting, from the still-warm rails
    or juggled luck from hand to hand, no heat having faded
    from a year no longer legible.
**Frog in Ivy**

After a huge white strangely billowing
tuft of cloud escapes the easternmost
branches of the oak tree and withdraws

tirely beyond the porch to leave me
staring into nothing but the stricken
abstract curvature above my spouse’s
car, a tree frog chirps in a pot of ivy
next to me. Only once. And he seems
to assume he has achieved his end:

that other frogs will suction their way
down all surrounding trees and pioneer
a set of small methodic paths through

glass and gravel like spokes of a sexual
wheel collapsing inward to this ivy pot.
Now, I cannot say there is no precedent

for this in Greek mythology, especially
the wanderings of Dionysus, but come
on, frog, who do you think you are?
Once the purple cirrus orgies had subsided,
I arranged myself among the arrogant harangues
of starlight and began my corrective maneuvers,
desiring moral insight over my empiric past,
sterility of purpose over pleasant curiosity,
depth of indecision over lenient proclivity.
Carefully in fleecy tandem then eternity’s concision
circled in my hindsight and spun upward as if
singed by the recollection of lost love. My
fingers clutched at the ache and were cut
by antiquity’s unkind concern, ragged ice among
my eye’s reluctant gel. Caesar lowered his cup
to me, but I slapped it away. It was the last
time I ever saw him. Cumulus formations covered
us with urgent coils of rheumatoid contentment,
dragging pallid hubris over ornery depression,
tranquilized amazement over turbulent ennui.
My essence spun forth like a whisper wearing
a spider web, like a blue spark turning on twin axles
of pure light, past the privet roost of ordinates
with cobweb wings upheld to slander false
directions, past maidens in white dresses scaled
with ramparts and bronze railings. Voices
tickled out of voices like dust beaten out of
a carpet (quick-turning acronyms of endless
interspersion, bristle-coned, world-barbed, from
a song so luridly depictful as to spatter its own
visage with a high-flung solstice flirt) until I was
dispersed. Orchids fade and brighten in the scarlet
folds that flutter along my breath these days. Knees,
knees, and blind aching, I call. Whose cloud have
I lost my way in, whose beautiful, stony clutter?
BY THE COMET’S LIGHT

Bark falls away from the tree. The silver tea set tarnishes every damned time you turn around to the shade of a Darjeeling tea.

That perpetual, annoying yelp you could not stop the idiot dog tied up to the porch from always yelping, stops without your help.

Cool breezes smear the borders between breaths, cooler at each cough. You ponder it instead of giving drive-through orders.

Worse, in your dream tonight, you stop outside a jewelry store with a huge glass window, yet you see no jewels. Only a blue, bright hummingbird’s reflection just behind your head. It found you, its humming seems to suggest, by following a trail of ice and dust.
One of us will soon
be gone, tree,
and I have not yet learned
your proper name.

The woodpecker
works you over
every Spring, the worst
of it on the side that faces
west,

and my left knee
bends a little less each Fall.

I’d like to be able
to say more to you
than “Poplar,” after
all these years, if only your
Latin genus,

when I hoist myself,
grumbling, our final
afternoon together, to
fling the last of my whiskey
at the tulips.
Set Three: The Hedgehog’s Dilemma

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena*: “A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter; but, as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse.”
Dilemmas

**Dialectic**

Hate is simple.
    Love is complicated.

Hate like a fist
    lunges at its object.

Love is at rest,
    tangled in itself.

Love cannot remember
    why or why not.

Hate cannot
    resist its reasons.

Hate in its certainty
    is eager to explain itself.

Love, confused
    by its many complexions,

looks and looks
    and never learns enough.
TRYST IN THREE DIMENSIONS

One: Sunset

It is dusk among the genotypes
    and the flowerless invalids cascade
    across the aperture, braiding their

peevish archetypes together in one
    timid loop. Igneous trivia pulses in
    the marrow, mingling its crystalline

memory with meaty warmth, genetic
    predisposition. Oh, for the latinate
    sporedoms of the Cenozoic, the first

rare wave of angiosperms: the Rynia,
    ferny Medullosa. We lounged like chimps
    in the shade of the Lepidodendron,

closer than two petals, a string of
    pearls, strands of hair behind the ear,
    the crease of the clothing’s orbit, a hinge
Two: Night

having opened and shut unobserved
eleven times, aphids’ feet navigating
the pin, it opens, reveals all physical

space to be translucent diamonds, all
physical space candescent for an instant,
angularities ablaze with curvilinear

stitching, intestinal memory, two stones
falling from the temple’s cornice,
arrested in all pivots, granular music

of our impact spun from the gut, closer
than a hiccup or cough, coming to rest
among orange, off-white flowers a while,

soil grasping our roughness with red
ochre . . . less factual than plausible, less
pantomime than popular geography
Three: Sunrise

we lay, plucked by a thornlessness
   in doubled vase, drifting negligently
   muted where a swan’s neck circles
to itself within the water. This goes
   further than a physical bird’s reflected
   wake and is concerned with categories,
being one as we like this in singleness
   to our composite natures seem: our
   several sub-variants of seed, of stalk,
in standing oceans, in deep sky deposits
   of white chalk. Purple, violet petals
   on the vine pervade the vivid intervals
between your lips and mine; pivotal voicings
   purr among rapacious morn; it is so cold . . .
   and look at what we have not worn!
ELLE FAIT UNE PROMENADE

Interesting how it is when she walks forward,
how her wake, with its memory of stillness,
draws familiar deadlock through my thought’s inertia up into the branches of my eyes, how it rattles the brittle leaves; interesting too . . . how the colors deepen from the edges in, like curved attention cupped within the retina, a ruptured pomegranate wrenching the iris . . . how, stopping, her shadow stirs the still, blue stream between us.
HER LAUGHTER

Made of the fifth
element, the flesh of angels.

Quintessence.

Not of earth, air,
fire, or water, in the least.

A conceptual plasma
such as dances in the air above
Alaska.
My decline, not yet pronounced,  
began this morning.

But you, dear, still have  
numerous career  
options open through  
the middle of next week.

Is it honorable of me, thus,  
to suggest a liaison  
between the two of us?

I have at last count  
only past accumulations  
of insanity and pregnant silence  
to persuade you with.

My breath moves  
beside your cheek  
like a cold stream past  
impossibly bright flowers.
THE VESUVIUS OF ORRERIES

Magma hardens around
 my mouth: 81 degrees longitude,
 32 degrees latitude.

Stars within moons within
 suns of sometimes cloudy
 quelque fois unclear perfumes
 of ancillary madness move
 among my teeth, damaged obstinacies
 arguing the issue at random angles,

(though I myself am still as flame).

Damnation but the pulse’s brief,
 interminable tetanus of hallucination
 stings. I almost think at times that
 I could speak a word and have you
 hear it.
Meandering in New Orleans

Below us, the Mississippi
moves quietly, the water
making only a low murmur
as it runs along the levee.

Docklights flicker in the wake
as the sun descends
toward the Lac des Allemands.
   How much we two can take
depends. Therefore, you peel
the rind from a mandarin
orange. Your swift, thin
fingers slow a bit to feel
the pressure of the sap
below the skin, then draw
the fruit apart in two raw
wounds abruptly in your lap.

And as the sun goes down,
you give me one to eat,
the river making, at our feet,
along the levee, a low sound.
HE CATCHES HELL

A little longer,  
a little longer  
and the sharpest edges  
will begin to blunt themselves.  
A few more prepositions, a  
few more verbs forgotten  
and the argument may  
finally turn in my favor;

her face, so angry,  
may acquire the shadows  
of interior turmoil, her words  
the shape of her own pain  
instead of my shortcomings.

A little longer,  
a little longer  
and her last goodbye  
may seem, my god, some  
other sort of word; the moon,  
finally, supplanting the sun’s  
reason, may soften, almost,  
her face into a tortured  
resignation, and her eyes,  
in the darkness, somehow  
smile.
One fully expects
the table to give
way, let fruit
and fruit basket fall.

One expects
and is, therefore,
astonished when whole
stars remain aloft,

when the hesitant
blush of sunrise
flowers, and the birds,
long silent, sing.
THE STRESSED SYLLABLE

My second night in the apartment
   since before Christmas, this being March,
   I make a point of moving nothing, disturbing
   no dust. It all started when I stupidly said
   “yes” to my supervisor.

   “Success,” I always say, “means never saying no.”

But when I told you about it
   you turned away from me,
   twisting the sheet across your hip,
   and whispered at the wall: “There’s obsequious
   and then there is obsequious.”

I lay there for three hours, watching
   a blade of light stab through the blinds
   with each passing car, estimating its outermost
   edges on the ceiling, thinking about the way
   you placed the emphasis on the second syllable
   of the second obsequious.

Then I threw the covers back
   and swung my feet down to the floor.

I believe you heard me, putting on
   my clothes, gathering my toiletries, maybe
   a little too loudly, but you lay there in your sheet.
   Goddamn, the streets of the Garden District
   are deserted at 4 a.m.
BY LAKE PONTCHARTRAIN

Inadequate meanders of preceding
quaintness stir the heart and sullenly
perform again all ancient failures,
raising

and lowering the relevant national
flags in alternating flourishes; red,
yellow, red, white reticulations
plumping

the fall breeze with harmless rage.
I have no idea that my shoe is untied,
but as I gaze toward the careless water
I pull

up my sock. A sudden swell of
querulous shadow quiets the sunlight
for an instant, then its brightness
crashes

along the rocky shore with added
force. I try to trace the tangents drawn
tight between all temporary meaning,
suspend

the disparate world’s debris
a moment in the eye, to measure
the collective exhalation of the
tide, its

piecemeal ruin as it ravels
over the rocks. If I find you again,
I hope I will be adequately broken,
amiss,

tangled up at last in the incidental
tripe of things unspoken, to persuade
you to come wading with my impure
kiss.
SEVEN P.M. OR SO

Were this Louisiana,
your headlights would be raking ivy
on the fence-top right about now, blazing
along yellow blossoms as far as the house allows,
not quite to the rusted shed roof, blown away by Katrina,
but close enough to draw my gaze there.

I would let my left foot slide
from my right knee soon, draw my right foot up
across my left knee, open my book again
as if I were still reading something.

Were this Louisiana,
I would contemplate the yellow blossoms,
no less beautiful in darkness, knowing full well
that the house is scented with baked salmon, basil,
that the orange light on the rice cooker is still glowing
in the far corner of the kitchen.

You’d come straight through the house
to open the back door, your shadow flowing out
through the grass to the ivy, rising up along the fence
to the yellow blossoms, and my right foot would fall down
from my knee as I closed my book and turned
as if I were surprised to see you.
Parting, with a Sequel

Some lithic time upon a once
within a circle stream we walked.
Kind flakes of cold forgiveness blew about me
as you talked.

Not swift, not necessarily that slow,
the waters eddy backward as they flow.

But January’s anger
foamed against the jagged bank, and jumbled
remnants of old letters washed about me
as you mumbled.

Too swift, however, to be safely swum,
the parts all being slower than the sum.

Bright suavity of broken
sunlight swirled among the sandalwood,
and you fell silent finally. You turned to see
if somehow I misunderstood.

Things recede or surge so much with us,
I said, with all so simultaneous.

But phrases spoken soon froze
solid. Words, like moss and water mingling,
became so twisted up they tightened with each
untangling.

Things are never only and thereafter
always and forever woe or laughter.

And so again we lay
some lithic waste of time upon the sand,
a ripple’s length or less, rubbed smooth as rock,
where calm and rabid chaos ran.
Parking in Bayou Des Égarés

Mercury-amalgam ruminations
    reverse themselves mid-sentence,
shattered into silver beads, endings, beginnings,
scattered among intermediate meanings.

Across Acadiana’s wreckage
    only the sexless light of stars,
indifferent and centered, casts appropriate
designs of shallow or deep shade, captures,
across the jilted, Doric starknesses and lime-green sprays of foliage still spreading up the metopes,
as we kiss, decay.

It is a cold night, chilly, even in a tunic
    and tri-corner hat, Elizabethan ruffles of frilled rust.

Constellations snag on lipstick stains,
    spilling out our raw thought’s ripened
orchestra of frets and strings.

And in this light (who knows
    how many millions of years old),
your lips, your hands, appear peripheral
to landscapes and livestock. Species follows upon
species, fangs, talons, tumbling, until the advent
of animal husbandry, specialized handicrafts,
and this automobile with, of all things, fins.
PEASANT WEDDING AFTERTATH

—taking liberties with Breugel, 1567

Merely to feel her flesh, though its
Flanders vigor is worn away, though
keepsake tendons only of Walloon motifs
survive beneath a relic graft of gum and
pasty resin, is better than fresh beef.

As a mode of furnishing, at best,
his arm presents itself, a rink of lesser
grays engaged in a grotesque endeavor:
going out across the tablecloth, between
the empty pie tins, toward a severe

woman with a narrow face. She
seems an aggravating strength among
the weakened yawnng of amassed pastels
and looks away from him on purpose
to peruse the scattered mussel shells.

His eyes, his countenance, remain
unseen. His hand, however, hesitates,
becomes a bit medieval in its artificial twist.
It ought to stop, retreat, but seems inclined
to falter past the meat toward her fist.
AN EVENING OUT WITH PHARAOH

Six of the world’s seven wonders
are gone, and rain emerges from the night
with aimless regularity. An owl hoots,
its eyes half closed against the light.

Water has penetrated to the heart
of things. Nothing is waterproof anymore.
It dampens the last dry sock at the bottom
back corner of every dresser drawer,
soaks through all paper towels
and beads on the inside of each flimsy,
cardboard core. Deep shadow floods out
into shallow darkness, fed up with me.

It pushes past, brushes my shoulder
like an angry son, sullen as a separate life.
Tonight I had dinner with a powerful man
who has made overtures to my wife.

His voice rolled under the table like
a cherry tomato, tapping the tip of my toe.
He reached with his fork, without asking,
and cut off a piece of my petit gateau.

A light-brown moth flutters down
from the filament, fatigued. Such things
take time, friend. Imagine how much longer
the pyramids may last against my wings.
Carved crystal dripping window light, red-orange light, yellow kitchen sunset light, your meaning wavers in the doorway, bright

with memory, expectation. You have asked me to open a jar, pointing to it on the counter, making a twisting motion, wasting no words.

Oh, I understand you well enough, but I stare awhile, remembering, who knows why, that waterfall beside the pool in the Keys, backlit by night by colored lights. Your black hair wavered out through blackness as I buoyed your body up. I could twist a lid off easily then,

talking nonchalantly, gesturing. Nowadays I take in air and tense my gut. Maybe that’s why I hesitate, recalling the garish light,

how it mimicked the water’s movement on your legs as you climbed the ladder, how you motioned without speaking, offering a hand to help me.
RUNNING LATE IN YUYAO

—Zhejiang Province, PRC

We stopped briefly before reaching
the bridge, your eye distracted by some
silk that might be suitable for a cheongsam.
So I turned to the mountains with your purse
in my left hand.

A brownish black goat planted
a hoof in the dirt, lifted the other hoof,
planted it, shifted, looking down a long
draw toward an old woman washing pots
in stream water.

Voices like water over the rocks,
clashing, chaotic, unexpectedly quiet,
carried up the hill, but you bought
no silk. And I continued to hold your purse
in my left hand.

The brownish black goat lowered
its head to the stream, so fast and cold,
so much louder suddenly than women
or wind. I cannot remember if the bird sat
in a nearby tree

or on one of the rocks to sing. But,
as you looped your arm in mine and began
walking down to cross the river, every voice
inhaled, and in that hush I heard it: high notes
in a clustered hurry.
RHETORICAL OCCASIONS

1.

Fermentation works its magic on our weather.
Red leaves have become red wind, acidic wind, astringent, blown about the table like so much lipstick on a napkin, radiating flawed remorse
in spokes of briary shade and corked virtue. We both agree on this much. Blonde and jet-black weaves of anger and self-doubt shake dandruff on our pastries, spilling nostalgia from the saucer’s edge. And, again, you commence your authentic Norse chanting: an aspirate followed by a sibilant followed by an alveolar. There is precious little archaeological evidence that this was ever done.

Or why. Or why a modern advocate should undertake it now. To make the clouds move lower? To separate the noise of the rain from the wetness of thunder? Not that ignorance can slow you. But much to my amazement, a light smattering of letters begins to tap at the awning. Before long,
type-writer keys are descending, slanted, upside down, alongside raindrops that are always angled rightly. The ruddy braid of your singing spoils everyone’s appetite, though no-one has the nerve to say it. I push my plate away. You open your mouth even wider. Am I supposed to rush madly into your arms now? Move closer like the clouds? Shed my armor like a sous chef? Like a besieger of Jerusalem? Is that your immature expectation?
2.

Clean patience earlier, but now the providential
hum of broken hours in the brain is pulsing,
high-pitched like piano wires, glass chips pecking
at pavement, patterned intonations interwoven
with broad heresies of rhythmic bass, and I sense
my ruin. The age of progress ends with a steamy
hiss. If only you would look up from your book,
our lives might be so different. You have read
to the bottom of a page and now grasp the corner
of the next one, gazing back as if to gather insight
from the pattern of preceding punctuation. Perhaps
I can offer some assistance here, stranded though
I am on a separate mountaintop. I initiate a series
of rapid shifts from chest to falsetto registries in
order to yodel some basic literary pointers across
the coffee table. But snow devils whirl my truth
toward the kitchen, dropping it in powder drifts
against the refrigerator. Flurries and snowsqualls
cover the footprints that might have led me safely
to the vicinity of your slippers. From there I might
have felt about for the edge of the sofa cushion.

Accumulations of ice snap the guide rope I hung
between the side-table lamp and the front door.
Look up! I am clinging to the edge of a crevasse!

My fingertips are becoming very uncomfortable!
Yo del ay ee oo. Just turn the page, why don’t you?
Get on with it. Because even from here, through
my educational transparencies of 1750s European
Imperial rivalry to control the Ohio River Valley,
through concentric electromagnetic fields that spin
my compass needle, I see the silhouettes of two
figures running through fierce rain to one another
despite the howling prospect of financial doom.
A Note on Surplus Value

You had plucked the last grape or else
harvested a succulent fruit of some kind
that would not ripen again in your lifetime,
when you paused without knowing why

and remembered your first love.
She smiled at you again as if you had
forgotten she was there, extended a blue
pomegranate, a magnolia blossom perhaps,

held it out to you in a way that suggested
a generous heart. But you wondered
what it was. You thought mostly about
figuring it out. And she could not tell you.

So she lowered the bouquet again, put
down the pomegranate, pear, persimmon,
or small berry. And as you looked out
finally at the withering fields, where nothing

similar to what you now held in your
hand would ever grow again in your life,
you lost your appetite at last. You opened
your fingers a little, offered it to your wife.
OZYMANDIAS AT ODDS

Out in the garden, reading Shelley’s lies
  about a dome of colored glass, an elbow
  reaches through my own reflection

from the kitchen window, testing the ties
  on the orchid spikes, then watering the aloe.
  Farther in, past a glittering confusion

of eyeglass lenses, I look for your eyes,
  concentrating, as they must be, on the slow
  debris of sunlight circling the onion.
Dilemmas

LAST MEETING

When they no longer knew each other’s names, they laid their flowers beside their favorite pairs of shoes and extended their best memories out across the water. His involved the games their son played, the carpet he liked to crawl around on, her face made beautiful by worry as the baby stood the first time. They traveled eastward, while hers, with their sizzle and sprawl of pancake batter complaining on the stove, went west. And where they finally met again, somewhere far away from land, drawn out almost to nothingness, a school of delicate sunfish dove.