

FRAGMENTS

FRAGMENTS

POEMS AND NARRATIVES

EDWARD A. FRANCISCO

Yew Tree Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Printed by Lulu Press, November 2022

627 Davis Drive, Suite 300, Morrisville, North Carolina 27560 USA

www.lulu.com

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Library of Congress United States Copyright Office
101 Independence Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20559

Title of Work: Fragments

Year of Completion: 2021

Registration Number: TXu 2-278-768

Registration Decision Date: September 27, 2021

Author: Edward A. Francisco, 1945 -

Copyright Claimant: Edward A. Francisco / Raleigh, NC 27612, United States

Certification: Edward A. Francisco / September 08, 2021

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LC record available at: <https://cocatalog.loc.gov>

ISBN 978-1-4583-2308-8

Text design by Yew Tree Publishing

For Michelle
and all I have loved and admired

FOREWORD

These pages are the product of three years of thinking and writing. Memory tags, notions and phrase fragments were found and framed, sometimes in an instant and more often with repeated effort, as poems, verse essays and narratives about the moments and forces that shape us, revealed most sharply at inflection points in personal and historical experience. I have written about the complexities and impacts of these moments and forces, most of which sustain us but some of which do not.

So, this is about moments: natural, historical, emotional and intellectual. Moments when events and commitments are suddenly amplified, fractured or their trajectory is changed. When things open or close or get out of joint. Moments when we shift or when we are pushed by the weight of events and forces beyond us. Moments that are existential.

At a deeper level it is about how we transact with ourselves and within the world we inhabit. Especially how we transact between clarity and confusion, conviction and humility, commitment and restraint. So much, it seems, turns on how we do these things.

You will see that I work with form and space as much as color, tone and subject. They are expressive speech for me as the space that carries each word becomes pace and punctuation. A lens, I hope.

Beginning in Jacksonville Florida in 1945 I have taken different paths, often at the same time. Always impatient to experience, understand and create, I have studied and worked widely: in literature, philosophy, finance and management consulting. Together they have led to this result.

I am very grateful for the encouragement and steady support of Pamela Berger, John Eddy, Ernie and Diane Latorre and Janet Rapp throughout this journey. And I am especially indebted to Roy C. Dicks, former performing arts critic and feature writer for the *Raleigh News & Observer*, for his time, commitment and editorial skill in finalizing this effort.

Raleigh, North Carolina
October 31, 2022

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LOVE, AS MEASURED

WHERE LOVE RESIDES

Where love resides,
love without expectation
or hidden tabulation
or latent harm,
so also resides beauty
and kindness
and convergence.

Where love resides,
as trust
and affection
and respect,
in all respects
that ever could truly matter,
so also resides beauty
as light
and constancy
and truth.

Where beauty resides,
beauty as grace
held deeply within,
so also resides love.
And with this
thus,
where beauty and love reside
so also reside
our gentler
happier selves.

BEING NOT QUITE WITH HER

Something there is that isn't
when lovely she
who holds me
without touching
uncoils from silent reveries
of the settee
and turning downwards half-read pages
leaves this room.

A QUIET BALANCE BETWEEN US

There is an understanding,
a quiet balance between us:
we trace lines of convergence
and laughter
with ease and grace
in this, our happy affection,
where we share
in the communion of sharing,
where we care for what we are
when we care,
where we halt
to hold the balance.

There is an understanding
in this space we have become,
where we flourish
free and certain of ourselves.
Where we affirm the balance.
Never breaking it at its heart
lest we be broken.

COMMUNION

Its smoky nuance at mid-palate,
round and finishing long,
quickens the rush of words
between us;
yes, we'll have another Malbec please
and some flatbread.

Now, where were we, oh yes
what if Charles II of Spain had survived:
would Britain still get its empire,
would Louis control even more of Europe?

The curved mahogany frame
of our booth,
its suspended Edison lamp
and tufted leather
hold this space together.
I glance at my watch:
surely we haven't been here two hours.

We have lost time together.
We are, this now, unbounded present together.

We are in friendship.

EMBRACE

With this embrace
my body offers my soul
a resting place
the space between us
now pressed away
almost
as I am yet here,
with remainder.

In this embrace
we lean further,
for more,
to the limits of our bodies.
We hold the moment,
finding always
that we persist
as two.
For were two one,
as we so aspire,
an embrace could never be.

I WOULD HAVE SUCH JOY AND LOVE
PROPORTIONED

Centering me
on me
in reflection
and mirrors
is odd,
as I am inconstant,
a rubbing
oscillating
tentativeness of stuff
cascading in currents of
unheard speech
stapled to half-moments of transparency.
I feel a weight of emptiness
just below
must subvert the effort,
as if I should not try,
a weight from inner places
that are homeless
and always have been.
Yet there will be joy
and love
that replenishes me,
steadies me,
if only briefly.
I know this.
Still, I would have such joy
and love
and centeredness
proportioned,
in tension even,
with my unmade self
unfolding
uneasy
at the living edge.

FOR PAUL

Closure comes not easily now to us,
friends in mid-sentence,
still picking the lock of some puzzle,
earnestly, with passion.
Your mind and your laughter
suffused my life with joy
and I shall be forever diminished by your passing.
You worked to pull the truth out of life,
no matter how reluctant its appearance might prove to be,
and parried easily all facile solutions,
holding to a standard
that placed upon you
such admirable, such final demands.
Sweetly though, deeply at the center of your clockwork,
such gentleness, such sensibility
that so loved and so knew so much.
Yes, closure comes not easily now to us,
for as on the way you held so tightly,
so I shall ever hold to you.

WE CREDIT NOT SUCH CREDITS

A subroutine
of surveillance
runs routinely
through you
out of sight until,
suddenly at us,
it snaps forward
boiling and barking
with counts of slights borne
and credits due,
to be fair you say.

Yet more than that,
you launch them:
even when love may be lost,
you will have your credits.
Yet we credit not
such credits
when demanded.
And so the irony:
credit granted
when truly given not
is mere counterfeit
of you for us
and us for you.

ONCE WHOLE

Bone white, wooden and empty
 our long and low recliners
 have weathered
 where we left them:
 still open,
 at the mirrored end of the pier.

I cannot settle -
 in this moment -
 in this chair -
 where once you were,
 nor stay -
 half-hearing once again
 our laughter till nine or so,
 sipping mulled wine
 with orange and cinnamon
 to stay the chill
 at waterside
 as though, as ever,
 all was fine.
 This we did, here,
 at the mirrored end of the pier.

Recumbent still,
 where none have stayed,
 these canvassed frames
 are only frames, I know.
 They keep no presence,
 no ephemera,
 to hold them in their form.
 Yet I cannot settle -
 nor stay a while -
 half-hearing whispers
 at waterside
 in chill,
 at the mirrored end of the pier.

I hold to things, I now can see,
 once held by those I held in love.
 And, while odd I know,

I hold thereby some part of me
once whole, and only so,
in them.

THE TRAIN FROM EDINBURGH

By chance the train from Edinburgh
stopped in Carlisle
on my return to London,
and eventually Chicago;
I could have taken the earlier train through York
but that was going back on myself.
I did not want to retrace.

When I called the friend in Carlisle
of a Chicago friend
to say I would be through
and oh, by the way, did she have time for a cup of tea
before I carried on to Stratford and London -
she said yes
and if I could stay for dinner that would be brilliant.

The white door of the small brick house
opened with a cautiously radiant hello
and all was shadow beyond her face.
Polite and warm, she was familiar, strangely,
an unknown friend far from home.

And then,
a frozen pause between seconds.

Just there, deeper within the shadow,
a happy, lovely animation
smiled without affect
for the traveler from Chicago.
Their world, far smaller than mine,
I might have missed the truth of this place.
But I did not.
She who stood in the shadow
became light
defly, without effort, loosening the knot of me.

We found a place among the daffodils of Ullswater
that April day, hands enfolded and smiling,

unspoken in our joy
unspoken in our unfounded hope,
and there, in the rolling dream light
of Cumbria,
we found a space for two
we had not known before
and had not thought could be

persisting now as new.

I HAD NOT KNOWN SUCH KINDNESS

I had not known such kindness,
really,
or what it was.
Nothing like that
happened in the rooms
where I was held in place.
By keepers of the truth.
You lived transactionally:
small rewards lashed to greater threats.
The older ladies in Sunday School
appeared not to know this.
But they did.
They recited words of kindness,
benignly.
But not the men.
They were the enforcers.
You might get an act of kindness
if you had earned it.
We learned this
before anything else.
Sin came first.
And then redemption if you were lucky.

I had not known
the deep and wide home for us,
the resonant space for us,
that is made,
and made only,
in kindness.
Kindness unbinds, I now know.
And suspends the constraints of time,
everywhere and at once.

And so now, she brings to me a kindness
I did not think could be.
A power, a touch in kindness
I had not known
and did not think could be.
And in this, now,
I am unbound in her.

MY HAND IN YOURS

My hand in yours
may seem as one.
Yet intimacy is not union.
It can never be so.
Two shall not become one
in intimacy
for the intimacy of one is solitude.
In this inheres the irony of intimacy:
it is joy made in nearness,
but only nearness.
It cannot complete itself.
Not in overcoming
or becoming the same.
Difference
and contingency
must persist
for the joy and gift
and ephemeral brevity
of intimacy
to make far more of us,
and far more for us,
than solely we should ever be.

THEY WERE LOVERS FIRST

They were lovers first.
Light shot from every surface of them
as they spun on the axis of their passion,
yielding to the force of it
held by the force of it
all lines of them falling away,
life arcs caught at the crossing

for an instant.

until there was time enough
and world enough
for the invention of them
the divergence of them
the larger parts of them
to push through,
separately for each
tearing a piece here and there
undoing the center of them
annulling the once and constant truth of them,
that truth now seeming
a trick upon the present.

WITH A LIGHT THAT PASSES THROUGH ME

There is a quickening,
a jolting hot electric pulse
in my head
and chest
racing up
when you smile
that living lingering light
that you smile

straight through me.
That light that holds me
unbreathing
for an instant
in that instant that is any light.
It is incomprehensible,

yet just as real
and consequential
as any weight
or force of physics.

UNDER THE BUTTERMILK TREE

Her simple summer dress
flowed synchronously
in the long lingering afternoon breeze
when we found that shaded place
of thick cool grass
under the buttermilk tree.
She called it the buttermilk tree
because we could imagine anything there,
anything like buttermilk biscuits and ripe peaches.
Anything we could not have.
She made an opening in me that day
and was my Beatrice,
keying a portal to everywhere
not there before.

I could not know then,
as now I do,
the grace and wisdom
and power
and joy
of her gift.

I KNOW IT'S JUST A BRICK IN THE GROUND

I know it's just a brick in the ground.
It has my mother's name and dates
in the path
to the door
of the hospice.
Under mossy live oaks
across the street from Sun Coast Realty
and Jimmy's car wash.
I put it there to commemorate her.
Yet I tighten
(tasking my spiritual immunities)
each time a Zimmer
or wheelchair
rolls over it.

THE SPACE OF MINDS

Freshly brewed Sumatra and bear claw pastries
fuel our intensity:
did Einstein really understand Bohr's complementarity
and how could Innocent III think that his god
wanted the death of all Cathars?
Passionate recitation and interpretation
unreel and spin out from us
each new thought a charge point for our brains.

We are electric
we are together
this is the space of minds.

Then, an awkward twist snags our words,
an unseen trap -
a turn -
No, I am sorry, but
you are not right.
Yes, I do mean that.
No -

A deep rush of fighting blood
overtakes him
words that seem not his own
rush through:
this is existential
this is non-negotiable.

And we fall apart.

THERE

There -
yes, just there,
we feel it, of course,
that space
between us,
that space we make that keeps us.

The one unsaid
the one unseen
though real as any real we know,
bolted to the frame of us.
No metric marks it,
yet ever essential

if we are

to be.

PERHAPS TRUTH, PERHAPS BEAUTY

THE FRICTION IS EVERYTHING

Now past one in the morning,
 I am languid in the incandescence
 of my reading room, an old spine-worn friend
 open at chapter five on my lap.
 The amber opulence of Islay whisky
 glints through faceted Waterford crystal
 and its warm lingering finish
 is round and caramel and peaty.
 I am enfolded here,
 lapsing at the edges.

I wander about in my head
 a little,
 muddling about how these things are so
 and how my apprehension of them
 is hidden.

Another dram swirls in the glass
 the amber becomes an embalming ether
 and we spin frictionless together
 so lovely, so lovely, I whisper
 until -
 sharply
 I pull back.
 The friction is everything,
 I murmur.
 The friction is everything.
 I argue.
 It is the ground of me,
 the possibility of me
 the me of me.

The friction is everything.

TIMAEUS

We name the sorts of things there are,
and so they are;
this is the sorcery of naming.

Where, I wonder, were latitude and kindness and corpuscularity
before naming them?

We fill, box and wrap the world as demigods,
driving the shape and count of things.

But we, the naming ones,
stand apart from the ground of things

-- we are told --

and cannot be authors of the world.

There must be first names,
there must be names with none before them
and one name above all others.

First speakers among us will bring them forth

-- we are told --

and these names will be the living breath of us,
the anchors of us.

And some of us will die for these names.

Now upon us, the sorcery of the one name,
the imperium of the one name,
brings the death of all other names,
the death of beauty, truth and justice;
and the death of any demigod
who dares to name anew.

THERE IS A FORM OF MIND

There is a form of mind
contemptuous
of itself
 as thinking.

It would rather not
 be.

A form that wants filling up
with certainties,
convictions
 and power.
Oh, yes, power.

A form that punishes
failures of mind
in others
 cheerfully,
 exultantly.

And so, not a form of mind at all.

CARVING AT THE JOINTS

I hold three knives
cutting deeply and sharply at the joints
of our thoughts
and beliefs
where we pivot and commit.

I hold three knives
carving
the big muscles
from the joints of our thoughts,
knowing
where to make the cuts.

I hold three knives
cutting under
and deftly to the joints,
flaying the hidebound.

And they have names:
Hume, Russell and Popper.

INTO A CLEARING, NOT

There is a clearing in the wood
just ahead
I am told;
yet I have not found it.
It is necessary to leave the wood
most believe
to see the way ahead;
yet I have no sense of where
ahead
or the clearing
may be,
if either is.

Excising any doubt
there is a clearing
is necessary,
a guide insists,
if ever one is to find it;
and obvious,
for it is not conceivable
that the wood is limitless.

Yet I shall remain in the wood.
For here things are
as they manifestly are,
undiminished
by a promise
and only a promise
of a clearing
beyond and ahead.

A CANOE GIVES YOU OPTIONS

A canoe gives you options.
You can hold in the open middle
under the arching wideness of it all
rhythmically folding rippled light
with your oar.

Or, if you want, you can come closer
along a line of the bank
and into river birch and willow shadows,
minding what's exposed
and beneath
as you go.

Yet you must at last
put in

where the water
and your options
will be behind you.

REMEMBERING THOMAS WOLFE

When genius is big and roiling within,
when it overruns your skin
and your voice and
all the spaces around you
driving every shuddering breath
remorselessly,
when it extinguishes the smaller you
for your larger more magnificent self,
charged white hot
and electric in every creative moment,
when the next word
the next page
is all there is
and all else is useful,
or not,
you will dazzle us
and what you make
will live and pulse
even when you do not.
Yet you will be this genius,
this magnificence,
at the end

alone

finding
it was not enough.

CUMBERLAND GREENS

Coiled, my backswing releases:
the sweeping arc of my one wood
slices the cool mountain air of the tenth tee.
Then contact,
club face and ball are one,
for an instant.

As I walk the short grass of the fairway
the harmonic of my swing
lingers the full length of my arm;
and I am here, in this place.

Yet, from the elsewhere of me
resonances converge:
the sharp crack of my little league bat
confirms perfect contact,
and I send the baseball flying high and long.
The smooth travel of my cue toward the pocket
propels the white with spin and speed and angle,
as the nine ball, compliantly, falls away.

Addressing my lie in the short rough,
the five iron releases smartly,
driving the ball long and low toward the green;
but short,
and in a bunker;
deeply.

The common proportions of things now return,
the reverie of me lapses
and the extended line of the world is restored.
I must now find a way to make par.

FRAUDS AS THESE SHALL BIND US ALL

And yet these, of all men, hold their opinions with the greatest stiffness; those being generally the most fierce and firm in their tenets, who have least examined them. John Locke, 1690

If what we think (and how we think it)
is claimed to be so
because we think it,
adamantly,
and for no further reason,
then reason
is annulled
as is thinking.

Here will be frauds upon truth,
here will be tyranny posturing as thought,
here will be certainty murdering possibility,
and here we shall hold that
all that ever need be known
is now known.

Frauds as these shall bind us all
and all thought within them;
questions shall be blasphemy
questioners shall be apostates
and apostates shall be silenced
or slain.

Here rise the great imposters.
Here rise the soldiers of intellectual vice.
And will be the refuge of monsters.

I STAND IN PRAISE OF FALLEN IDOLS

I stand in praise of fallen idols,
diminished and often odd to us
whose voices, whose genius, whose invention
drove purpose and proportion
and virtue in us.

I stand in praise of these.

They did not know themselves as such
and into unsupported space
they stepped -
working word and form
and music and vision,
passion and brilliance
fusing in them
as beauty and idea.

No smooth imperatives,
no mocking certainties,
no predatory intolerances
could be found in them
and they did not crouch chained
in corners contrived by proctors
of new and ancient purities.

They gave their minds to us.
They gave their backs to us.
They gave us our greater selves.

I stand in praise

of Euclid, DaVinci, Dante and Michelangelo
of Canaletto and Newton and Galileo and Gandhi
of Russell, Brunel, Descartes and Mozart
of Renoir, Aristotle, Einstein and Shakespeare, of
Locke, Montesquieu, Wilberforce and Hayden, of

what we have so magnificently been

and must be.

MANY AS ONE

So comes the force of unity
and from unity the force of will.
Many as one shall make more of the world
than many alone should ever.
This Sun Tzu knew.
This Hiawatha and Gandhi knew.
And those who followed
were magnified and clarified
in their union.

So comes the force of unity
when the will of one,
now bound to that of others,
is consented to its purpose.
And from consent
a commonweal may arise,
equitable and congenial in its expectation.
Yet still, from impulses ever in us,
a new imperium may arise
a despotism of the one as many,
forged with fear and force,
overrunning all that lies before it
overturning the currency of consent
for a counterfeit of unity.

Resolute in our wariness then,
in our assent and acclamation,
we shall measure the persuasive few,
the few who would lead or compel us
to a redemptive unity,
a unity that may assure and ennoble us.
Or yet release within us
forces that none may overcome.

I HEAR THE SOARING LINES

I hear the soaring lines
and hypnotic tremolo
of our laureate of the moment
parading sweet stanzas
of sunlit hope
and jackbooted guilt
through us,
prophesying a world remade
from the detritus of our sins.
The sins of us and our fathers
and their fathers
and theirs.
We will be redeemed,
we are told,
from our unreconstructed selves.
From the implicit
and complicit
that lies within
and beneath us.

New truths will remake us,
and non-acceptance
shall be further sin.

And so,
sin shall be sustained.

MENTAL STATES

The tufted sitting room chair
 In this country house hotel
 is uncomfortable
 as I linger over a long-delayed letter to Paul
 about my recent stay in Ambleside;
 writing on paper does not flow easily for me
 and I struggle with my script.
 Niggling thoughts about dinner time
 and whether we can avoid gamey dishes
 compete with the narrative voice,
 thoughts collapse.
 And just there
 a red kite's steadiness
 high and far beyond the dry-stacked wall
 stills me
 for a moment.

There is no singular presence in this.
 Only a complexity revealed
 as much as made.
 The real ephemeral,
 the ephemeral real.

I am I think a loop
 half-open
 turning back to catch
 something of itself:
 finding this voice speaking as me,
 and there another,
 intimating, just beyond reach,
 an insinuated whole.

Yet,
 I am here
 saliently

and know of no accounting for that.

INTIMATIONS OF ETERNITY

We reach, it seems, for stillness,
a convergence in all things,
to find and hold a center
to fix time
and, thereby,
to reach an intimation
of eternity.

And if we chance to hold a moment
of beauty and love,
or even a whisper of truth,
just once
just there before us,
the bounds of sense can fade
to nothing
and all become transcendent,
an intimation of eternity.

Yet when at last the force
that holds the form of things
fails and falls away,
as ever it must,
such things that by their forms
are as they are
shall no longer be;
and then, it seems,
intimations shall be
of nothingness.

INDETERMINISM

Some thinkers think that all we think
and all the other things that are
could not be otherwise;
which is strange to think
since any otherwise would be unthinkable.
Laws, unrelenting they say,
determine all there is
and even all there is to say.
Strange this view, this nomological imperium
of some science
and some philosophy,
since Newton could not say
how bodies more than two would move.

Strange this view, this nomological imperium
of mechanists and reductionists
when quantum states buzz and quiver,
unpredictably,
and no algorithm knows my breakfast.

Some thinkers think that all we think
and all the other things that are
could not be otherwise;
but till this instant I could not think
nor could, I think, another
what's written here now makes the point
that it and I are otherwise.

KNOWING

We may not be Bayesian probability engines
 not perfect ones anyway,
 but we do not like mistakes.

We see the flow
 and frame of
 facts as we find them:
 we expect, we predict, we test
 seamlessly
 for the most part.
 Half thinking
 we minimize error.

And when we further think
 about facts
 and how we think we know them
 we get theories,
 although we may think we have more:
 some basic truths, perhaps,
 or invariant certainties.
 Reflectively though
 we get less:
 maybe invariant support for belief;
 but not binding confirmation.
 This we learned from Popper.

So, we are oddly served by facts:
 they can tell us when our theories are false
 but not when they are not.

THEN WE SAY NOTHING

If what I say is so, is so,
but only relatively,
as it is now so for me
and maybe only me,
and if what you say is so, is so,
but only relatively,
as it is now so for you
and maybe only you,
and if what we say is so
is not the same,
but opposite,
so that what is so
is also not,
then we say nothing
but nonsense.

And that is so.

MRS. BELL

A plague of kindness
stood at my door:
I have freshly baked cakes
for your wife
she said
standing there,
her breath upon the glass
between us.
The world beyond my door
had fallen into chaos and death
from plague
but she appeared not to notice;
not enough at least.

Thank you for your kindness,
I said,
but there is a plague
on your side of this door.
So I must decline your kindness
and hope you will understand.

Mrs. Bell nodded
and said that she was not worried
about the plague
because she was blessed by God,
who would protect her.

She did not, however,
say how God would protect me.

POLYPHRENIA

The space within the space where secrets hide
is unknown to only but a few of me.

I am the many I have been
but no longer know them all
nor all the secrets they have kept
from the many
and from me.

The space within the space where secrets hide
is doored and keyed and kept by quiet beasts
that secrets as secrets shall reside apart from me,
the parsed contrivance of me,
that strides as fiction
I think
through the world.

SIERRA NEVADA BREWING

Great forces compete for us some say,
but only the bitter sweetness of this IPA
holds the forward part of my brain.
A juke box belts out Proud Mary
across the billiard table
as my cue sends the red down a rail.

Great forces compete for us some say,
dark matter pulling oppositely of gravity:
big freeze, big crunch, big rip,
it doesn't matter which.
My beer, this time, this place
will perish.

Great forces compete for us some say,
pulling everything from everything.
Yet here, in this instant,
we brace against the pull,
such compaction of energy
such compaction of mind and will:
a hint of substance,
but only a hint.

MY THOUGHTS

When I think about the thinking
that I do
I find myself in little of it
at least not the self that knows what it is thinking.

Yet, still, there is a sort of me
in all of it
versions of something arguably me
laid down at sometime
that drive and frame each now.
Thoughts from the unseen
many of me,
and the working aware
of me,
resolve themselves,
reciprocally
I think,
to make and keep
a settled narrative
that is mostly me.

Yet I push against
its gravity,
its margins,
flinging bits
into an existential ether
relentlessly

that I, unyielding,
may endure.

PHYSICALISM AND ITS VARIANTS

Some thinkers think that thinking,
 as normally we think of it,
 cannot be:
 for everything that is
 and can be known to be
 is physical, and only so;
 which is strange to think
 since knowing this,
 as thinking,
 cannot be.

We make, it seems,
 odd illusions for (our)selves;
 a paradox,
 for ourselves as well cannot exist
 (ourselves as remembering and acting and expecting)
 not really,
 or, if we fudge a little,
 only as inert non-physical properties
 or correlates
 of chattering neural recursive loops
 (that think they think).
 No causal voice within the corpus,
 No dualism to resolve,
 just body and the illusion there is more;
 this these thinkers think.

So now I can be confident
 (we are assured)
 precisely where and when
 within the body physical of me,
 a neural token can be found
 (in principle)
 of equations being solved
 by something (apparently not me)
 anticipating a frothy espresso
 one Paris mid-morning day in May.

And this I think cannot be so.

THEY TURN THE ENGINE OF US

Passions, all bundles of felt
and thinking stuff,
instantaneous
inscrutable
they propel us
resolve us,
reasons coming now or later, perhaps,
they turn the engine of us,
trigger us,
reveal us,
affirm we are,
incandescently at times
dangerously at times.
They mount us
and shake us
and set the range and beat of us.

But for them
we should never be,
not as we are.
No pale purpose without pulse,
no bare process without presence
shall ever be resolved as us.

We shall never be found in merely that.

A BOY, ONCE BECOMING

RED CLAY AND TOBACCO

Jack, my father, came from the red clay
and rusted tin roof barns of Halifax County
and the great green prominence
of tobacco fields that rolled down to the Dan River.
He hunted and walked to school in heavy snow
and got sick if he worked green tobacco
when it was wet.
It could take the life out of you.

That was before he married Mae,
my mother, who carried
twenty-pound pails of water
with her sisters in Danville
uphill
from Jackson Branch
to Monument Street
on wash day
for grandma

who worked in a brick-hot factory
from the age of twelve
twelve hours a day
rolling cigars by hand from 6:30.
She got addicted to nicotine
and rock hard
in that factory,
and mostly read the Bible after that.
One of her four girls
died in an abusive marriage.
But grandma was ashamed
and would not speak of her.

Now I want to imagine grandma before
as, perhaps, she might have been when small,
wearing a smart calico dress and ribboned bonnet
on the banks of Jackson Branch.

But I cannot.

BASEBALL

The splendid sweep of Tom's pitching arm
released the ball.

I was safe here in right field
because all the batters were right-handed
and Tom would throw his fast ball low and inside.
Fly balls wouldn't come this way
and I was good at snagging grounders.

Tall pines surrounded the red clay infield
and the heat of a Florida afternoon
hung airless around us.

My freshly oiled old MacGregor field mitt felt supple
and ready, as I rapped my right fist into its center.

I heard the crack of the bat
before I could see it
at first almost imperceptible in the glare.
This couldn't be happening,
I was no damn good at catching fly balls
(that's why I was in right field)

Then I found it, bobbing (it seemed as I ran) high above
and coming at me;
panic threatened until
a track of Coach Wilson's voice triggered:
now son, just remember,
keep the ball in the same place above you
and you'll catch it.

And I did.
Now baseball was a wonderful game.

SUMMER'S FIELD

The fly line between my pull hand
and the bridle held firm on the wind.
It comes and goes, the wind.
Compensating is everything,
easing off in a gust,
tipping the nose to spill some air,
tugging back to add force
if I could find the face of the invisible.

Lifting my Strato-Flier far above the treetops
the wind whipped around me
and up the line.
Red, yellow, blue and white,
the four jet engines on the front of my kite
seemed to blast away
as it soared with its long swaying tail.
Just me, the wind and my kite
in an open field
on a summer's afternoon in 1955.

For ten cents and a ball of twine
I was up there, in the wind,
every pulse of it pulsing through me.
And though this boy,
in this summer's field,
knew little of himself or of the world
he knew that this was surely good.

FOR THE FIRST TIME

I missed the details
of the world, childish
in my blurring energy
to spin and run anywhere,
sneaking through chain link fences
that sagged between our hot
treeless houses,
some with old car tires
some with empty paint cans
out front.
Only tall yellow weeds for color.

I guess I lived asleep.
Until I was ten.

That's when I stopped moving
for a breath or two
and saw some things,
some small and beautiful things,
that I had to kneel to notice.

For the first time.

THREE STORIES

I.

Slim was seven feet tall, jet black
 and the nicest man I had ever met.
 Always smiling
 he clamped a great iron claw
 around a great block of ice
 and carried it,
 tilting to one side,
 to the icebox in the corner
 of our kitchen.
 Every week. On a Wednesday.

A toe-headed tiny five-year old,
 I liked Slim
 and have missed his long stride
 up the path to our unlocked door
 since the day we moved.

I was not there to say goodbye.

II.

On sunny days I rode my
 JC Higgins bike to school
 and back, past Mr. Richards'
 oddly shaped drug store
 at the corner of 103rd.
 His high shock of white hair
 and quiet geniality,
 dipping ice cream and pulling phosphates
 behind the luncheon counter,
 felt grandfatherly
 though I had only heard stories about mine.
 I would stop by for a coke float
 when I had twenty-five cents
 and he would smile
 with a kind consideration
 I had not known.
 Mr. Richards was a good man.

One Tuesday I lowered the kickstand
of my bike outside the door
and walked toward the luncheon counter.
They said that Mr. Richards had died the night before.

III.

Mr. Meister always seemed to know
more than anyone else
about anything to do with people.
In our senior literature class
he filled chalkboards
with quotes from Wordsworth and Shakespeare
and Hawthorne and Milton and Eliot,
spontaneously,
smiling his wide mysterious smile
as he revealed the art and genius and power
of great language.

He challenged us,
asking us to write,
to think.
In 1962 he seemed to sense
what was coming and in
our yearbooks he wrote: "D.N.B.T.L.G."
The same cryptic code was kept
in the upper right corner of each chalkboard
and never erased.
"Do not be the last generation."

That meant little to me then.
That was then.

FLAG FOOTBALL

Eight men who loved the game
four on a side
shivered in the still blue December air,
too cold to play without gloves;
but we did anyway,
cupping both hands to catch our steaming breath.

Gary pushed his right forefinger
Into a bare patch of the ground
to draw up the next play:
okay, they're rushing two
and bumping our receivers at the line;
so let's flood the right flat,
I'll fake a run to the left and throw a jump pass to Mike.
We all nodded that this might work.

Rob hiked on two and crouched to block
as the ball glided into Gary's arms, stepping right
then accelerating to the left.
Somehow rotating against his inertia
Gary cocked his throwing arm
and arced the ball deep and high.
Mike's stride was never broken
and he crossed the goal line whooping with joy.

We had seen it, we had done it
and the moment was magic.

AS CHILDREN

As children we carried on as children.
Our fathers had returned from the war
and most seemed okay, attending their monthly
meetings at the VFW post and flying the flag
proudly on national holidays.
We watched WWII movies on TV but got scared
when some older boys went to Korea
and got killed;
we never understood that one,
but it was very far away and didn't seem to matter much.
I recall feeling very badly for poor Mr. Eden
and his Suez Crisis; and for Britain.
It was all over the newspapers
and we wondered how such things could happen so quickly.

As children we carried on as children
until our practice drills for duck and cover
scared us again
as Mr. Kennedy tried to keep us safe
from Soviet bombs. The bombs never fell
but we didn't feel as safe again; not really.
Yet, we carried on as children,
cheering for the team, getting letter sweaters
and going to the prom in satin gowns and white sport coats.

Then something happened far away again
in Saigon.
We had never heard of it
and did not know that Mr. Dulles was afraid that
we would never be safe again
unless we sent advisors and a million men.
As children we had pledged allegiance to the flag
but didn't really know what that meant until some of us went to Vietnam
and got killed. That we understood.

The lucky few of us found a way to stay
and some of us, not so lucky, just ran away,
from our fathers
our confused, angry and unrelenting fathers
who never understood any of that.

As children we carried on as children
until the fictions of our youth nearly killed us.

THE WHOLE OF THINGS

Our small hands reached to the ends of our arms
to catch the cool racing air from that other space

outside the window of our sloop-backed Chevy,
the invisible force of it knocking us back until it was

too much. There were edges and layers to things, we knew, but could not
grasp them, seeming substantial,

but not. Pressing against the underside of our bodies
the firm fabric of the bench seat up front gave us location

and presence as all that was seen and felt beyond us
fell away. Yet we wondered where and when was here

and what we could know. Digging into the whole of things
was dangerous and harm lay ahead, received truth

lying heavy upon us in the great stories and gods and creeds
that would anchor us, we were told, when we could not hold

the wind. The code of the tribe would save us, we were told, forcefully,
collectively, remorselessly.

Shuddering, our arms pulled inward, and away.

ESTELLE

I lost my grip on the handle
 head high
 as the shrill tension in the rusted spring
 slapped the screened door behind me;
 outside, our 1954 Buick Century with its dynaflo transmission
 was filling up with high-test at the red and white Esso pump
 as Lester was cleaning the windshield and checking the oil:
 You're down a quart sir, I recommend Pennzoil 10W-30.

The sun was bright and hot this summer day
 along the only road from Yanceyville to Milton
 and it was difficult to see the counter on the right
 until my eyes, adjusting, found the store interior.
 Please, sir, how much are those Johnny cookies
 and do you have Nehi Orange Soda?
 Yes, son, the cookies are one-cent each
 and the sodas are in the chiller behind you.
 My small right arm ached as I reached for the bottles,
 lifting them one by one from the deeply dark iced water,
 until the genial man stepped from the counter
 and rescued my arm
 pulling up a Nehi Orange Soda on his first attempt.

Outside, my father waved it was time to go. Yes sir, I said.

A few miles up the road
 we pulled into the shaded yard of a weathered log cabin,
 rough-hewn and sturdy with a tin-roofed porch,
 clothes hanging on a line at the back
 where the chickens were.
 Stooped with age and hobbled by a long-broken hip,
 my grandmother moved slowly around her Franklin stove
 saying little, smiling warmly, and touching
 my shoulder with kindness.

On the stove, cured pork and beans simmered
 as she spoke with my father
 in a whisper.
 That was the last time I would see her.

Many loved Estelle and they buried her
in the cemetery of the Gilead Presbyterian Church
across the road, next to her mother and sister.
The stone that marks her place marks as well
the affection of those who brought her here;
they felt her loss as theirs
and said so.

Now I stand before this stone
feeling renewed
feeling loss.
All that were here are here no more
and the church across the road
has fallen into ash.

Yet Estelle remains in me
and in this place as well
along the road from Yanceyville to Milton
that bears now her name.

ON ARRIVING

Some of us arrive tight,
like those old string-tied parcels
drawn hard and double-looped
sent by Carson-Pirie Scott
from State Street in Chicago
that never came loose
on the UPS truck.
My maternal grandmother was like that.
I couldn't find the knot.
And she didn't want me to.

And some us arrive without a wrapper,
snug and at home
from the start.
We call them well-adjusted.

I came as a five-pound parcel
wrapped in a blanket tucked
with a bottle of warm milk and Karo syrup.
Gormless, and curling my fingers into a fist,
it seems I tugged and wriggled away.
At five my theory was that I
had been sent to the wrong address.
Well, that's the way I remember it.
It was all too Ozzie and Harriet to others,
too Stasi at home,
a desiccation of willful sentience,
a coiled intolerance of difference,
a seamless state of waking anesthesia.

So, before computers, I rebooted.

UNBONDED

A small hand
the hand of a small boy
reaches for his mother's hand
which pulls away;
the hand that does not touch
detached
from the voice that does not give
detached
from the boy who seems not her son.
Or so it seems in later life
to him
a void persisting between them
always
unspoken
uncured
until death.

PIECES

The troop leader's field compass steered us south southwest
 through the piney woods of a boy scout hike
 and I hoped my father's hand
 would be there
 should I stumble under the weight of my pack,
 as we men, we boy men, legged out along the nettled path,
 and he whittled on a fork of dry oak
 to fashion a slingshot.

It was a callow time, a growing time,
 a time of being small and overpowered
 and minding my daddy;
 but not a time of knowing the depth of things
 or of trusting things
 or of belonging.
 Obedience and belief,
 these above all else
 anchored us:
 no space, no air, no light was there
 without permission.

Falling away
 was invisible in the beginning.
 Then the whole with my father became pieces
 unassembled and shrill.
 Edges, unseen before, rose up
 sharp and hard.
 And I, now unknown to him,
 coiled, turned inward, then outward again -
 restive and driven.

A RETURN

Corpulent and congregated,
 a line of Farmers Union
 steel grain elevators
 stood starkly and massively
 on a Dakota plain
 in September,
 off Highway 52.
 The silent promise
 of global annihilation
 from Minot bomber base
 had receded miles behind me
 and I held the hesitant relief
 of a prisoner,
 just released.
 Today, I was not dressed as an airman.

Great mouths of combine harvesters
 reaped and winnowed
 fields without lines
 planted with nuclear missiles
 just down the road.
 And there were no vistas.

The retread on the driver's side
 of my rusting 1958 Chevy
 tore away, suddenly,
 with a deafening thrump,
 lurching me toward an oncoming car.
 It was close.
 Shuddering for almost a mile
 I limped onto the pavement of Mouse River Oil Co.
 In Velva
 where Liam sold me another retread.

There would be three more near misses
 before I rolled into West Lafayette
 with a cracked windshield
 and a pipe cleaner
 holding one headlight toward center.

I had traveled a road of return.
A road far from flagpole warriors
and their great warring machines.
A road back to a future once taken.
A road back with what remained

I hoped

and renewal.

REDEMPTION

Pastor Jimmie Dobbs extended his left arm
 toward us,
 the beguilingly supple book
 of God,
 its calfskin binding and gilt-edged India paper
 now suspended, seemingly in mid-air
 and open to heaven on his upright palm
 at the bookmark of John 3:16,
 and he spoke:
 “For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten son . . .
 his only begotten son, for you;
 and if you touch the hem of his raiment
 he will drive the devil from here and
 everlasting life shall be yours, in Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Reverend Dodd’s voice rose and fell like thunder
 under the great canvas tent that hot June evening
 in Medart Florida.
 Ladies wore full length summer dresses
 and some wore their Easter Sunday hats.
 The men wore broad patterned ties
 at the neck of their white dress shirts.
 Sunset was an hour away and most,
 especially the ladies,
 swept praying-hands paper fans across their faces.

Those there had survived:
 the Great Depression, wars in Europe, the Pacific and Korea.
 They feared the global menace of Communism
 and believed the evangelical national truth:
 America was the greatest nation on earth.
 Yet, oddly, they were yoked to sin.
 Their souls in imminent peril,
 they must be saved. Peril filled that tent.

Sweat poured from his brow as Brother Jimmie
 sounded like Jehovah bringing forth the promise
 of salvation and divine healing,
 his voice rasping as he pounded the rostrum with his fist.

He said God wanted my soul
to save me from the devil
who also wanted my soul.

Yet, although I hadn't known I had a soul
on entering that tent,
I then and there resolved to keep it.

RIO BRAVO, ONCE

March 1959

The dark green coil of mosquito repellent burned slowly,
 curling a fragrant wisp of smoke in the dimming light
 above the dashboard of our Studebaker,
 angled up on the humped earth at Playtime Drive-In.
 The warm night air simmered after an early rain,
 promising they would rise and swarm to us
 from the pines. Repellent worked, usually,
 when the car window was rolled high, just open
 enough to thunk the speaker against the glass.
 I had walked to the concession stand for
 buttered popcorn as last arrivals parked,
 killed their headlights and settled in.
 After a Tom and Jerry cartoon the movie flickered
 and familiar Hollywood voices assured us
 of ourselves: John Wayne did John Wayne,
 Dean Martin crooned and Angie Dickinson purred in Rio Bravo.
 They got the bad guys, the Burdettes.
 Because they were the good guys, like us.

November 1959

There were two lines for voting.
 Our new high school would be Valhalla or Forrest.
 Someone said Forrest was a Confederate general
 (I had never heard of him)
 who would give our school a good name,
 like the names of our rival schools
 Lee High and Jackson High.
 I voted for Valhalla
 but the starred blue bars and red field
 of a war flag became our flag.
 It was fun, we thought,
 just something to boast about.
 No one told us that Forrest had been
 Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.
 That might have mattered.
 Might have.

November 1963

The lecture on mechanics in the quadrangle
challenged me as I strained to hear the whisper
of Professor Petrie. A gentle man, he lost his voice
in a cloud of mustard gas in France in 1917.

Kicking leaves on the path back to my freshman dorm
I took in a lungful of clear bright November air,
and deeply exhaled. I had studied through the night
and expected to drop into the big leather armchair
in Cleveland Hall, opposite the large radio, to relax.
The brassy pulse of big band radio music
was too much for me; so I lowered the volume,
just as the music stopped.

An ABC news bulletin interrupted:
President Kennedy has been shot.
In Dallas.
Shot and killed, in Dallas.

In that instant that seemed endless
the world cracked open.
None of us were
or could be
the same.

I never returned to Playtime Drive-In.

MONTANA ELEVATION

Motionless
over the low still water below
until tilting
the hawk split the air with speed
and vanished somewhere below
the darkening ridgeline of the Rockies.

My tent was staked at the forest edge
where glacial melt had gathered into
a finger of clear water
faceting the falling light.
Off-balance on fire-hot rocks
my grill cradled a supper of soup and rice,
warming me deeply
against the chill black mountain air
that moved toward me from the forest.
This fire gave the only light there was
as the depth of things had lapsed,
completely.

Then, stepping away,
as the fire fell low and far away
a white profusion of infinity
slowly and immensely
made half-shadows on the forest floor.
I stood, rapt.

I am resolved to hold this light
this wider outer light
against all lapsing
and to put the weary animal of me
to sleep, but only briefly

waking early before the return of the hawk.

PANNING

The mother-of-pearl blue glaze
at the bottom of my riffle pan
had come up nicely after hours over an open fire.
Numbed hands
dipped the broad flat curve of the pan
into the shallow gravel of Fairbanks Creek,
swirling, looking, sifting
for flecks of placer gold.

Patience was essential here
belief was essential here;
there was no instant bounty from the gravel;
you knew countless others had come before you
you knew this was a longshot,
but patience seemed nothing after
hopping a freight from Havre to Glasgow
and catching stones thrown by logging trucks
careening on the unpaved road to Alaska.

My backpack leaned against a small fir
just up the bank from the smooth screed along the river,
its international orange
credentialed with hand-sewn travel patches:
Quebec, Glacier National Park, Whitehorse.
It was my home in this place.

A loon swept low over the tree line ahead
and just then, as I sifted slowly,
flecks of gold appeared.

ETA CARINAE

The settled detritus of pine embers
warms me at fireside
as I lie within an arc of starlight
without perspective.

The steady tick of my camp clock
assures me there is time,
and that now is not then.
Yet it does not seem so
as all folds in upon itself,
the edges that make me
lapsing.

The light I see,
this expanse of pulses
in the deep rounded darkness,
has streamed here
in this moment
of now
that is not now,
its simultaneity
an exquisite paradox.

Yet I am content.

NEWMAN'S CAFÉ — ALASKA HIGHWAY 1970

We had settled onto red vinyl bar stools,
six in a line at the polished pine countertop
of the small cafe,
just off the long gravel road
from Delta Junction to Dawson Creek
at Tetlin,
ready for burgers and pie.
The head of a ten-point buck
hung on the wall above a large sign:
“America Love it or Leave it.”
We had seen these words
everywhere in Tok
but thought it would be okay now,
here near the Yukon border.

A French professor had given us a ride
in her white and green Volkswagen bus,
all the way to Sacramento.
And now we were stopping for lunch.
She had wanted to hear our stories of
hitching across Canada,
of watching loons fly over
our campsites at nightfall,
of panning for gold in cold rivers
and smoking dope in hippie saunas.
We were hairy and a bit rough,
but polite,
and she was happy with that.
The owner of this cafe, however,
thought we were dangerous.

He wore a red apron
over his red checked shirt
and glared at me.

Are you boys hippies?
Why no sir,
we have been in the woods for a while,
that's all,
and we are on our way home.

Well, you sure look like hippies to me
and we don't serve no hippies in here.

His right hand reached halfway
under the countertop.
Where we were sure he had a shotgun.
You better git now boys
cause I ain't gonna ask you again.
I was the last one out,
holding my breath as I rushed
through the rasping screened door.
The French professor shook,
shook with rage and fear
and said she was sorry,
but could not endure that again.
Our shoulders dropped,
we said we understood
and waved a muted goodbye to her.

Someone gave us a ride
a few days later.
And after we left that place,
that place beside the long grey gravel road,
we found kinships and happiness
that restored us.
Renewed us.

Yet we did not forget
the evil we found that day
at Newman's Café

PAST VOICES, PRESENT ECHOES

DE RERUM NATURA

Glowing warmly, a terracotta oil lamp
 enfolds Titus Lucretius Carus
 in a steadily enveloping light,
 his stylus poised ready with
 eloquent Latin verse
 on physics and philosophy.

It is the year of the consulship of Piso and Gabinius,
 the year stout Caesar descends the alps
 into Gaul to meet the Helvetii at Arar,
 five legions strong.

Masterful in language and theory
 Lucretius opens the universe,
 long closed to many, once again:
 the compositional universe of matter and void,
 the enduring universe of indivisible and indestructible atoms;
 the ethical universe of friendship and truthfulness,
 the indeterminate universe of evolution and chance
 the infinite and variable universe of relative time;
 all found first, centuries past,
 by Epicurus of Samos.

Then once Epicurus, and now Lucretius,
 makes a beginning, an astonishing beginning,
 in atomic theory, millennia before Thomson, Millikan,
 Rutherford and Bohr;
 in the random motion of particles, millennia before Thiel,
 Einstein and Perrin;
 in the construction of all matter from a single particle,
 millennia before Gell-Mann and Zweig.

Then once Epicurus, and now Lucretius,
 confronts the idealisms of platonists,
 denies any power to contravene a fact,
 asserts death as personal annihilation and
 affirms life as its own end, lived best
 when lived as kindness, balance and tranquility.

Where, now, noble Lucretius is your voice?
Where now is the force of your metaphysics
in framing a life lived well?
Where now are Montaigne and Jefferson
who knew you
and knew the way forward?

CHADDS FORD - SEPTEMBER 11, 1777

If you drive over the slow brown waters
of Brandywine Creek
where it is shallow and oak lined
on low native banks
you can hear the fiery crack
of long rifles and muskets
and the shrieks of dying artillery horses,
still, with an ear turned backward.
Upstream from here
Howe and Washington
and thirty thousand soldiers
would recognize this place.

Nothing decisive happened here,
yet it almost did.
A rebellious child
was nearly killed by its parent,
chased into thick nightfall and wrangling woods.

So improbable
it seems,
three times my lifespan back,
that towns we call Tombstone
and Monroe and Jefferson
might never have existed,

that all of that
might have stopped

here.

COWPENS - JANUARY 17, 1781

Dedicated to the grit and intelligence of General Daniel Morgan:
 exceptional soldier, indomitable patriot, loyal friend
 unequalled leader and commander

I

The axis of the world has shifted,
 the center has fallen away.
 Colonies now fracture from within.
 Dissembling, suspicion, recrimination and spies
 are everywhere loose within them.
 Here in force, now deployed and marching,
 now subjugating citizens to the King, to Parliament and to London,
 agents of empire have shattered
 the compact of trust and affection.
 It cannot be regained.

II

Chill morning air lifts over the languid Shenandoah
 this 1780 day in May at Berry's Tavern,
 Ashby's Gap, just east of the Blue Ridge.
 Colonel Morgan and General Gates
 share a breakfast of bread, beer and porridge
 at a window in the corner, near the hearth.
 They know each other
 they trust each other;
 they are committed to stopping
 the leviathan of Cornwallis
 bearing now down upon them.
 Morgan repairs home with fever to heal as
 Gates gathers Continentals and volunteers
 from Fredericksburg southward
 to form, train and meet an undaunted
 and undefeated British army.

III

Brigadier General Morgan is febrile with urgency.
 This is a desperate moment for the Americans.

Savannah and Charleston have fallen:
 thousands killed and captured.
 Gates, celebrated victor
 with Morgan and Arnold at Saratoga,
 later reckless and weak at Camden,
 has been crushed by Cornwallis:
 thousands killed and captured.
 Finishing the south, then cornering
 Washington in the north,
 appears within reach for loyalists and the King.

Morgan, now commanded by Nathaniel Greene at Cheraw,
 detaches west through North Carolina to block Cornwallis,
 recruiting backwoods patriots, militia and Overmountain men
 fresh from their defeat of loyalists at King's Mountain.

Morgan has few trained men:
 two companies of Maryland Continentals
 two hundred fifty threadbare veteran Virginia militia
 and William Washington's light cavalry of eighty.
 He must recruit on the march
 and fight with irregulars.
 But he cannot win if they fight like irregulars.
 Not against Tarleton:
 They must be made to stand
 and fight in order
 with disciplined movement
 on command
 in every extremity.

Once ready, he will stab at Savannah.

IV

Cornwallis and Tarleton agree.
 Morgan must be destroyed.
 Shrewd, dangerous and tireless
 he is positioned to harass the British left
 in the western Carolinas.
 Feared and despised by the rebels
 Tarleton will chase him to ground.

Morgan does not know this
 until scouts find Tarleton three days south,
 marching hard across the Enoree and Tiger rivers
 to get him.

Unknown, Cornwallis is driving parallel along the Broad,
 wedging his army between Morgan and Greene.
 In haste, Morgan pulls back to Burr Mills
 on Thicketty Creek to plan and rally his men.
 Options are few, rations are low and
 sharp winter winds drive a freezing rain.
 Still, Tarleton comes on, relentless,
 crossing the Pacolet at unguarded Easterwood Shoals,
 pushing within striking distance of Morgan.

The Americans are not positioned for a fight.
 And Morgan knows it.
 If he can cross the swollen Broad
 they will meet Tarleton there, in rough country
 where maneuver is difficult
 and his riflemen will have the advantage.
 Yet, as night closes in upon them
 the Americans are five miles short.
 Morgan must meet Tarleton where he stands.
 He must meet Tarleton on this side of the Broad.

V

The open grazing ground at Cowpens falls away
 on each side of the Green River Road,
 sloping to the rear,
 offering lines of concealment and surprise.
 Scattered red oak, hickory and pine follow the road.
 This place of coming battle
 will prevent all escape.

Here, there will be no concession to fear.
 The Broad is at their backs
 and there will be no retreat for the Americans.
 This Morgan's men know
 and they are steeled for it.
 Tarleton's men do not.

VI

The scarlet line of British infantry,
martial and masterful in its appearance,
marches lock step to the driving rhythm of drums
and fife and bagpipes,
all squared and imperious at the shoulder,
shuffling the wet mat of leaves lying quietly beneath them.

Tarleton has pushed hard to get here:
two days of forced march
through rain and mud and biting cold
to trap Morgan, the old wagoner,
between the Pacolet and Broad rivers.

Tarleton is sure the Americans will run
in chaos and death.
His Legion is the pride of the army.
His Legion is unbreakable.
He will now advance.

VII

Three hundred high velocity rifle rounds,
pinpoint accurate at one hundred fifty yards,
crack the air with fire and smoke
and shred Tarleton's vanguard of dragoons
in a single minute
staggering the first pulse of the British attack.

A second withering volley
from the front line of Georgia and South Carolina riflemen
tears through the bitterly cold January morning air;
fifteen green-jacketed riders drop from their saddles,
instantly dead.
The backwoods skirmishers then turn and run,
on cue.

VIII

Just ahead, only now appearing,
the second American line readies for the charge:

Colonel Andrew Pickens,
 the Pennsylvania Presbyterian elder,
 stands tall and stern and rock-ribbed,
 his four battalions of enraged South Carolinians
 priming and aiming and looking
 for blood and revenge
 for the massacre at Waxhaws.

Tarleton hurls his legion forward,
 chasing the riflemen.
 Pickens shouts "hold boys, hold, till you've got'em in range".

At fifty yards seven hundred American muskets
 empty two volleys of three-quarter inch lead
 directly into the British line.
 In less than one minute.
 The red line staggers again,
 then reforms and advances.

Two volleys and two volleys only,
 Pickens' line turns left and to the rear,
 firing backward as it retreats.
 As ordered.
 Sensing panic and loss of command ahead,
 Tarleton uncoils fifty lethal
 mounted dragoons,
 ready on his right:
 whooping "halloo" they fly forward
 at light horse speed,
 crashing against Pickens,
 swinging their high carbon sabers
 sharply up, then down.

Then suddenly -
 concealed behind a third unseen American line -
 William Washington's cavalry,
 every inch the equal of Tarleton's,
 wheels out headlong into the scattered dragoons.
 The thundering force of horse against horse
 and steel against bone
 is breathtaking.
 The British right buckles.

Eighteen dragoons lie dead.

IX

Some of Pickens' men panic and run.

Morgan, in the center, sees this
and blocks their retreat:

"Form, form my brave fellows. Old Morgan was never beaten!"

Tarleton senses a rout.

The third American line of
General John Howard's crack Continentals
lies ready on the low ground,
hidden and silent in reserve.
Militiamen and riflemen regroup to their rear.

Tarleton quickens with bayonets and murderous fire.

Howard's men stand steady and aim well,
exchanging volley after volley.

They will not yield.

Tarleton bugles the 71st regiment of foot forward
to flank and turn the American right.

Smartly, Howard counters,
ordering his Virginians and Georgians to wheel left
to stop the oncoming 71st.

The volleys are constant
deafening
blinding.

Everywhere there is death.

Howard's orders cannot be understood.

His men pull back. They believe they are to retreat.

Morgan sees the unfolding peril,
and yet another chance. A new order
comes for Howard: quicken the retreat -
as bait.

Sensing a rout,
sensing victory ahead,
the British whoop and break ranks,
chasing the Continentals.
Then, on Howard's order,

with perfect precision,
the veteran American line halts, pivots
and empties its carbines
directly into the British, only thirty feet away.
Stunned, many fall.
A shuddering shock reverberates across the field.

Howard now shouts the counterattack:
“Give’em your bayonets men!”
And they do. Thrusting, the Continental line
drives steel deeply into the British front.
It reels and staggers.
Then, from nowhere, Washington’s cavalry
bolts from the American rear,
driving the British right
inward and to the center.

On cue, Pickens, also behind Howard,
swings out to his right
and rod straight and into the British left,
driving it inward and to the center.
The Legion is now doubly enveloped
and trapped.

Fear and death race through the British ranks.
All the King’s men in the center die, run or surrender.
The 71st surrenders to Howard and Pickens
as Washington chases Tarleton
who tries to kill him.
But he fails
and whips his mount from the field.

X

This single hour at Cowpens,
this single hour of Morgan at his best,
is decisive.
Cornwallis falters from here,
until defeat and surrender at Yorktown.

These Americans, these brave few Americans,
against all hope, against all sense,

have broken unbreakable Tarleton.
American losses: 72; British losses: 822.

The Legion, not Morgan, has been destroyed.

ETHANDON – JANUARY 6, 878

Northumbria has fallen in disarray,
 and so soon shall Mercia.
 A great northern swathe of carbonized steel
 has cleaved the Anglian earth, yawning
 with the detritus of church and court and limb.

You, Aelfred, son of Aethelwulf and
 brother of Aethelred, king of the west Saxons,
 you stand now against the approaching Danes
 with your brother, your devoted brother,
 who leads relentlessly in battle after battle,
 yet perishes after defeat at Merton.

You, Aelfred, last king of the Angles and Saxons,
 heir to the texts of ancient Britannia,
 custodian of the language and laws and faith of Wessex,
 though brilliant at Ashdown, fail.
 They are too much.
 You cannot prevail.
 Your survival secures their bounty.
 Until they rise again.

Now ten years on
 a thousand blades cut through the stillness of a January night
 at Chippenham,
 shattering the silence of Epiphany
 shattering the complacency of a counterfeit peace
 hundreds falling
 hundreds fleeing.
 Still, you survive in darkness
 and with you a halting hope for Wessex.
 A squat of marshy earth
 your throne,
 you fight on.

Whitsuntide is coming,
 the moment on which all will pivot:
 stealth and shadowing movement
 muster the hardened and readied fyrds

of Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire:
to Egbert's stone
to stand as no Saxon army has stood before.

At Ethandon you attack.

Arrow, pike, sword and shield
fall upon murderous Guthram
in heaving sunlight,
now ravaged as he ravaged you
in darkness.
Routed, chased, surrounded, he submits.

This is how we shall hear of you.
This is how we shall hear of Aelfred the Great.

This is how England begins.

JAN HUS – KONSTANZ, JULY 6, 1415

Power relents not
when power absolute is ceded,
as was ceded to the Church.
No prince of Europe
was prince but by the grace of God
and no bishop was bishop
but by the grace of a prince.
All bound together,
standing together,
or standing not at all.

Then came Jan Hus,
scholar and rector,
preaching against corruption of faith
preaching against predation and suppression
preaching against theft of religious spirit
preaching against bishops with armies.
Before Luther.

Yet, we cannot find Jan Hus,
whose ashes are in the Rhine:
killed for not recanting
killed for affirming plain truth
killed for heresies not believed
killed without a defense.

Power relents not
when power absolute is ceded.

THE MARSHAL – RUNNYMEDE, JUNE 15, 1215

Our stories pivot at moments like this
 here among the marshy lowland waters of the Thames
 where a great contestation stands ready
 to fling us into monstrous chaos.
 Here where trust should not exist
 where there can be no attack
 a compact is made
 a charter is agreed
 with the king
 secured only by this knight
 this knight like no other
 this marshal
 incomprehensible in strength and character.

William, Guillaume de Marchal,
 undefeated in contest
 exemplar of his code
 favored by Eleanor
 in the first rank with Henry and Richard
 brings John
 ever erratic John
 into balance.

As settlement, as frame, this charter becomes
 an order of things;
 yet fragile
 entropy always pulling at the seams of it.

PYRRHUS OF EPIRUS - ARGOS, 272 BCE

I

Great armies of great rivals
now convulse and bestride all that is Greece.
Pyrrhus of Epirus marches
against Antigonus of Macedon.
Lean and driven and lethal men,
archers, slingers, swordsmen and cavalry,
tens of thousands of them,
quake the earth
as they fall upon this place.
Marching to ancient Argos,
its temples and high walls
standing luminous and strong
in the shadowing evening light.

All await the moment.
Tightened, ready, no man finds beauty
In the low and languid line
of the blue Argolian hills.

II

By stealth and by night
Aristeas of Argos
conspires against Aristippus,
confederate of Macedon,
to open one portal,
one beamed and bronzed
and bolted portal
to Pyrrhus,
brilliant and mercurial Pyrrhus,
once great king of Epirus, Macedon and Thessaly,
twice victorious against Rome in Apulia,
who goads Antigonus,
shrewd and revengeful Antigonus,
king of Macedon,
who will not fight here
in the open

below the Argolian hills.

III

By stealth and by night
one gate opens.
The paid men of Gaul tread quietly
to the center
as Pyrrhus hastens his war elephants,
overwhelming with their towers
at Heraclea and Asculum,
to clear the gate
in the night.
Argos awakens.
Desperate men fill the streets
In chaos and fear,
thrashing and shouting and fighting
against Pyrrhus and his elephants.
Madness is everywhere
in every street
as Antigonus of Macedon
and Areus of Sparta,
in defense of this city,
send rank upon rank
into Argos
into Pyrrhus
into a deadly darkness.

IV

Pyrrhus cannot move.
Bold and impatient,
he cannot move.
There is no way forward.
There is only retreat,
back to the gate.
Too narrow for speed
and maneuver,
the gate and the wall
must come down.
Helenus, son of the king,
must open the way.

A messenger is sent with the order.
Pyrrhus awaits the dawn.

Standing ready outside the city,
Helenas receives an order,
the expected order:
advance in force, immediately,
with picked men and elephants
through the gate.
Running breathless through the streets
the messenger has brought death,
certain death with him.
He has not understood.

V

An elephant falls at the gate.
A mahout drops
from his fighting tower
to the stones below,
dead.
His companion, his war animal,
charges in fear and rage.
All is chaos.

In breaking light
a spear finds Pyrrhus.
Instinct brings his sword arm around
to kill the man who would kill him
whose mother, from a rooftop,
hurls a tile
to crack the skull
of a king,
his gaze now fixed,
on the stones of a street in Argos.

Halting, then stepping forward,
strong Zopyrus of Macedon
takes his head.

VI

So ended the life and reign of Pyrrhus,
cousin of Alexander the Great,
scourge of Carthage in Sicily,
contender for Greece and Italy.

Of him it can be said that he
imagined greatness, led boldly,
devastated much and achieved nothing.
And for that he can be remembered.

Or not.

IN ENGLAND, A CENTER FOUND

TARNSIDE

The road narrows down to the grassy
 rise on the left where we park
 just where we can see the steel blue tarn below,
 still and reflectively perfect
 against a dense copse on the far side.
 The decline from here to the water
 is rounded and firm and green
 and we listen, straining for a mere whisper in the air.

Our Labrador is anxious to dismount;
 he knows this place and his breathing quickens
 on the rear window of the car.
 On the lead, he pushes through the double-latch gate
 and onto the path ahead.
 We catch the chill sharp wind from the north
 and lower our heads, pulling in on our scarves.

The water is deep and cold and ancient in this place
 this trace of glacial retreat
 this Brittonic and Latin place
 where, not far, Hadrian raised a great wall
 so Eboracum, Londinium and Camulodunum
 could stand against the gales
 of unyielding Selgovae and Caledonii from the north.
 Like none before, he girdled the world in stone
 for Rome, for triumph, for empire.
 Now low along a ridgeline the wall remains,
 but may yet vanish; as did the empire in the west
 and all peoples once swept before it.

We make the shoreline turn in the copse
 and walk slowly into the open field ahead,
 renewed by the peace of this place
 and content in the silence of past voices.

BIDDULPH GRANGE

At the full length of her fluidly moving arm
 dahlia bulbs descend into the earth,
 her weathered trowel turning the deeply black soil,
 bedding the astonishment that is to come.
 Once done, ten thousand bulbs twice over,
 a profusion of pompom, cactus, anemone and harlequin dahlias
 will illuminate the world from this single place
 this place of elegance and genius and passion
 this place of centered peace and breathing presence
 this confection of color and light.

A vigorous heat brightens the pale ashlar sandstone
 of the great house that overlooks this garden
 and I pause to sense its pulse behind me;
 then, ten steps below, a tiered herbaceous avenue
 seduces into a seeming dream of azaleas
 and thick rhododendrons,
 down from the stone balustrade,
 down the foot-worn steps
 down to the lilled water's edge below.

Here, a perfected line of yew and boxwood
 and there, a dark secrecy hinted by shadowing ferns
 in the roaming rockery,
 spaces I cannot comprehend, only feel.

Here, I am only here,
 bound by the proportions of this place,
 yet extended.
 And greatly contented
 for beyond them
 I would know neither my way nor myself.

GETTING THROUGH

A slithering finger of road
runs down the rough crease
from Kirkstone Pass
to Patterdale,
a breath away from
stacked stone walls
and insensate sheep.

Sullen and low on the ridgelines
a wintry half-light
insinuates the day.
The air here is choked
with chilled rain,
near ice glissading
over scree
to an ancient beck
that cuts the earth,
ceaselessly.
It comes briefly,
this light,
then goes as it came,
giving bare life
to tufts of cottongrass.

A heavy remoteness
presses against you here.
Getting through the crease
is a contingency,
granted by capricious permissions
of the road and the light.
Best to stay true to the white line
if there is one
and if you can see it.

No one may follow in the night.

HIDCOTE

This cannot be the way I think,
turning down a narrow track of road
running deep between hedgerows and dark oak,
there is no line of sight ahead.
There is a better road, I think:
a strange conviction,
with no anchor for its force.

My feet drop to the car park gravel.
Is this the right place?
A folded garden guide
promises restorative beauty within.
Still unsure, I hedge.
I cannot see the way.

An ancient yew, shaped precisely
in its towering topiary form,
prompts the way through a gate
and then a portal -
opening just ahead.

I step through.

Sudden and wide and sumptuous
a world of color and light
and symmetry
fills every sense.

All edges fall away
all time is unfelt
and the way back is unimportant.

This is Hidcote.

THE WAY THROUGH

We had walked for half an hour along the Thames
 to the grassy bank where a few canal boats were staked out.
 It was cold and our breath frosted the air as we talked
 and pushed along the footpath to Goring.
 Our booted treads pressed deeply
 into the muddy margins of puddles
 left behind by the morning rain
 and we felt the sharp edge
 of a west wind lashing our faces.
 For a moment, I looked at my track in the mud:
 proof that I have been here, I think, until another morning rain.

The others were now well ahead.
 Last call for lunch at the pub is 2 o'clock, someone says,
 and it has already gone one.
 It shouldn't be a problem we agree,
 the footpath is easy now.

The metal kissing gate was like any other, really,
 stout wood fencing
 at either side of a finger of path
 just safely through a cluster
 of stinging nettles.
 Mark led the way
 and one by one
 we swung the gate on its wheel
 stepping into a small pasture.

My muscles locked in disbelief:
 huddled at the opposite gate,
 the only gate through,
 were enormous black cows,
 chewing and staring
 enormously.
 Not moving. Not an inch.

I did not know anything about farms
 or cows or sheep or such.
 God these things are huge, I think.
 Mark cautioned quietly: no sudden moves, step slowly,

don't look into their eyes.
My body compressed itself into a shadow.
The nostril steam from the big one
settled on me as a big damp portent
and I held my breath.
One misstep and I could be crushed.

The gate swung on its wheel
and one by one we were through.

ON THE ROAD TO CHIPPING CAMPDEN

Vaporously still, sheer clumps of white air
 enfold us in reflected afternoon light,
 far nearer than the slate grey keel of the sky
 cascading in soaking sheets to the horizon.
 Redolent below, a brow of rich earth
 lies vibrantly yellow in fields of rapeseed flower.

The car engine labors slightly as we climb
 and then
 the world falls away at the high arc of the road.
 All is suspended in one sky-filled breath
 as the proportions of things
 are overthrown,
 then restored,
 the bonnet of the car tilting downward
 and onward
 through a frame of Cotswold space
 to Chipping Campden,
 extended in the cossetting decline below.

The road curves to the right as we enter,
 lightly purpled wisteria ascending the stone
 of thick thatched cottages
 tucked side-by-side
 inch steady in place
 since Henry and Elizabeth.

A cup of tea and a fresh scone
 seem imperative
 and, by habit,
 we settle in the low-beamed contentment
 of Badgers Hall
 where we have settled before
 and need go no further,

the fullness of the afternoon lingering
 in the subtext of our brains.

