

CHARLES WILLIAMS

Not Even New Orleans?

All our rivers sail us to the sea.
What are we to do?
The river is Life. And the sea . . .
Well, maybe me and you . . .
We could pull off no further down than Paducah . . .
Welp, this is Memphis. We better, uh—
Natchez?
Not even New Orleans?
The river is life. And the sea?
Sail on! Yes. You and me.

*1 May 1969
Room J-501, Duke University*

The Evening Was Full of Sea Gulls' Wings

The evening was full of sea gulls' wings
calling us to fly
effortlessly as they—
barking pardons from the sky:
Come away, tear-tangled man,
from the live oak and your strings.

*31 January 1971
Charleston Harbor*

A Study of White

Snowclouds swirling in the new
green woods,
bare-branched woods that have
dressed for Easter.
Their arms gleam like alabaster
statuary,
dogwood petals smooth
as marble, floating—
and white as snow on
Christmas Day.

*13 April 1972
Munfordville*

First Time to Die

Since the disappearance of the sun
the liquid moon has courted these two stones,
splattering them to yellow,
those unclaiming fin-like fingers in embryonic seas,
these billion life-quivering drops,
returning, reclaiming, etching in a dusty frost.
From here in the May-yard where graveflowers bloom,
two lives were cut loose for heaven,
complete before a vision came,
a twin completeness, granted scarcely-earned,
like warnings of cicadas, two unrepentant stones
to chide the living to our own chalky lines,
Like the first morning fallen in new silence, they call.
They goad the dying
to go naked, forsaking our masks.
And yet these restless souls will search the stars
seeking the embrace they meant on Earth.

16 May 1972

Civil War Graveyard on Munford Farm

Two Marchers

—*The Worn Stone*
Nov. 7, 1841-Sept. 14, 1862

Tumbling down the ivy-hung Green River bluff,
crushing fuzzy occasional bloodroot palms
already bloomed and gone with March wind and March grey,
tumbling from the sentinel station,
from lantern light and a penny dreadful,
to the great cavernous river waiting below,
jade green, mysterious, deep
dark deep, deeper than
the echoes of the rivers underground
coiling rock-edged into darkness, far beneath
mammoth white Sycamore roots,
hidden rivers bathed in cascades of onyx, limestone, gypsum,
clear pools wrung through earth,
unseen, unsuspected icy streams bubbling
through the deep rock bed of Green River,
the cave-punctured, grotto-combed jade river
where blind transparent fish
dart through millennial night
far beneath his blue shirt covered with blood,
where blind pink-blooded fishes
yet frolic with the mermaids
that he tumbled to.

A friend close-by,
March 3, 1945-October 3, 1965

I recall a day before a day across the sea,
a smalltown Sunday afternoon
with smalltown boys abuzz on bicycles
swarming with bees in the white plum orchard
that his grandfather planted
in the week he was born.
The old man laughed as we passed,
“Looks like the plum trees
has got ahead of theirselves
this year, don’t it, boys?”
He pointed toward the straight young trees

in long straight rows
starting toward other shapes,
branches striking for a contemplative breeze,
the ticklish plum orchard
his grandfather had set
with his own white hands,
bursting to whiteness at the very first sign,
now fanned petals to the breeze like snow,
and the snow turned our faces
toward the spokes and each other.

And I recall a small boy's dare:
to swim in redbuds' glory
and off we rattled at the sound of a dare
in a swirl of plum petals and bicycle tracks
down the buffalo trail
through the limestone bluff
where redbuds dangled and seemed to leap,
to the Blue Hole Spring
in the Green River bottom
and above us, like Babylon, the redbuds hung.
"Oooh, Jee-zus" we hollered
as crystal Arctic water swirled
closing belly buttons.
Then, he plunged in headfirst,
toes tightening as they disappeared.
His open face streaked out—
"God A'mighty!"
from the cracked silk of the blue hole.
To swim on Easter Sunday
turns feet purple, curls the toes.

To fall across the waters
on a cold unnumbered hill
to hear the dragon's thundering silence
and taste the jungle earth inside his nose,
and feel a voice stopping in his throat
even as it sapped the gold away
and see the early morning pink sky burst
to a rosewood center
all at once,
and those bare-nippled yawns
in blue Kentucky springs

became no more than
the fan of mermaids' tails
through the sea.

3 March 1973
Munfordville

Libra Always Ends the Summer

I have waited,
passed the season of pawpaws,
conjugated another summer's end
to find the barest solace in September.
A yellow umbrella is spread
above me for this beach sun
that will dwindle with each October morn.

On the ground in Kentucky
custard-apples rot
and stew their yellow flesh to blackness.
All the dreams of August fade to one gleam,
burnished by an autumn sun,
forgotten like these new-sown seeds
from another season's pawpaw trees.

Other dreams, with sea breezes, come to fore,
October being the season of new dreams,
a time to dislodge hesitations past,
a time when love has found me times before,
For Libra always ends the summer
with its one unbalancing question:
What are you waiting for?

*19 September 1974
St. Simon's Island*

*Grandmother Williams died today—
moments before I wrote this.*

The Greenmostly Maple of July

I sense an incompleteness in the trees
where yellow crowns what barely has seen green.
We've hardly felt the summer's lick of fire
when flaming leaves distract us from July.
There are these leaves that rustle in our souls.
There is a touch of ice in all that burns.
For something more than Time speaks through these leaves
that Time has caught with eyes within that see.

*16 July 1976
Boone Tavern*

Monet

He caught the world of light
and it caught him afire—
The Sun itself moired in the Seine.
His rivers do not float but fly—
damascened by orange flame
and flared across the purple veils of air—

Blind then, he made himself a world apart
in a garden by an easel.
He recalled those days of light and fire
and all the colors of the air.
Then, he pushed the sky under the water's edge,
and held the Sun at the bottom of his pond—
to be nearer those fabulous reflections
of his fading light.

*6 August 1977
St. Louis Museum*

The Narcissism of Barns

I too have known myself in barns,
helped tobacco leaves to order
with the moistenings of my palms,
shaken seedheads from my trouser cuffs,
heaved the fine June hay, and
stacked alfalfa high as rafters go.
But I have done the other thing:
Gone to summer's balmy fields
to tomahawk tobacco stalks and split those stalks with spears,
driven hickory sticks, hoisted golden burley toward a silver sky,
summed-up August in the call of sweat and fire,
and loved there the flexing of my own arms.
I too have joyed in the narcissism of barns.

*16 August 1977
Los Angeles
Elvis died today.*

A Quiet Friday Deep in Fall

The cicadas are still now, and crickets
no longer chirp among chrysanthemums.
Yet, night before last, before Thanksgiving,
the air of Indian Summer trembled with
their songs, now like distant murmurings
before this hard frost.
Just Wednesday the world was full of their insect voices
—Hawee—Hawee—
like echoes of those evenings in May,
like the soft surprises of our hellos
—Hawee—
that startled us more than our gasps and sighs.
Yes, the deep fall comes so quickly sometimes
once earth has turned somewhere within us.

*24 November 1978
The Cabin, West Wind Farm*

Transported

Today all day I have been in Tangiers—Tangiers—
at the sight of the long row of pink roses in full bloom
and their dusky, sweet fragrance,
sweeping me up across an ocean to Tangiers—
at the very smell of their desert perfumes
and dry rust and the flower market there
and the sun at odd angles—
golden light on pink roses.
In Kentucky, we've had a dry Spring.

*31 May 1985
Munfordville*

Northwest Toward You

The rain is cold as silence, blowing from the northwest,
slashing the windows of the cabin you called home once.
It unnerves me, this howling of the rain,
sitting in this cold November room
on your bed without word of you.

You—free of these hills, those dreams, this cabin,
free of your bed, free of your life. But free?
You—chained to the wind, to the changing of your mind,
stuck deep in the prairie, mired in Illinois,
you—trapped northwest and wordless as sod.

I listen to the rain and hear
how much it is like silence—
drumming on the cold, corrugated roof.
I listen to the rain and walk
silently to the northwest window—
the one in your kitchen with the view of the hills.
The sun is setting in greys today,
but one stretch on the horizon is gold,
seven inches long on the window panes, due northwest.
For a long time, I watch—northwest toward you—
As your stretch of gold turns orange—
—pink—
—lavender—
—grey.
Then, night falls.
Like rain and your silence, it falls upon everything.

*23 November 1989
Thanksgiving Day
The Cabin, West Wind Farm*

First Snow

The last day of my wanting you back is at hand.
Tonight, in hand, the green pen you left from college days
finished my last poem written solely to you.
The pain and shock and silence fade,
as my wanting does, as autumn does.
Winter is too intense a season—too stark,
too bleak, too dark—to yearn through.
Today, the last leaf fell that budded in that glorious spring
that we shared like children discovering everything.
Tonight, the first snow is falling over our farm—
like a curtain ending a play.

*8 December 1989
West Wind Farm*

El Rio Verde

I am here *solamente* in this Green River country,
an old man from Mexico who wandered here eons ago
over land in a '37 DeSoto.
Now, I grow old in another country,
and know that I am dying of dreaming of the Sierra Madre—
its steep purple slopes and raw golden dawns.
I am dying of dreaming
in these Kentucky foothills that step so slowly
to mountains where the *lingua real* is spoken . . .

Los otros, the Anglos, don't even bother to know
their river that was named El Rio Verde
by my people 300 years ago.
I've lived by the river for forty years.
I've watched its floodpools—mesmerized, distracted.
In dry seasons, I've walked the stone-dry creek beds,
the ones the Anglos call “arroyos”
without knowing what they say.
And I sleep with the river as a lover,
And I dream his dreams.
I know from him the deep-down, muddy dreams
of all our makings, our flint against stone.

When he wakes at dawn, he breathes into my sleeping ears
words from the world of my mother
—for he knows her, has mingled with her—
words from the Sierra Madre (for I come from desert
mountains).
He whispers:

*El espiritu de Dios
se cernia sobre
la superficie de las aguas.*

The Anglos call me “the old Mexican who sleeps with the River”
and they now call my river “the Green River,”
but my family tongue was here before them.
El Rio Verde was his first name.
The Anglos' lodge and their church are still called “Rio Verde.”
The big clear spring that feeds the River they call “the Rio Springs.”
Their towns are named Sonora and Uno and Claro.

That's why I got out of my '37 DeSoto forty years ago,
because I thought I could find home here, in this Spanish territory—
and I did—by a river that speaks the tongue of my mother.
It says to me what I cannot say to myself—
that my dreams slide me to certain death.
El Rio Verde is deep and slow—
its secrets verblessly sliding to mar, to salt water—
to the Gulf of Mexico, my home.

19 October 1991
Rio Springs

September, Again

September, again,
and I am consumed, again,
by the lusts and passions of Summer,
fulfilled and yet-to-be-fulfilled—
the gold tobacco that enjoys this heat,
fine hay drying in the sultry afternoons,
pawpaws that turn yellow-ripe now.
But I am dazzled by the dark red apples,
hanging pendulous on the tree—
thriving in a breezeless August
to fulfill its promise to Blue October.

30 September 1992
Blue Hole Farm

Epiphany, 1995

The ping of sleet on my new roof woke me at four.
The morning sky was dark as love,
its silver sleet, mysterious as Melchior,
the Hindoo King who proffered gold.
A week before Christmas, a workman chided me:
“A man like you,” he said, “should have a shingle roof.
Tin is too common.”
But I like a roof that can be listened to,
and besides, I am a common man.
To wake this Twelfth Night to the ping of sleet
and touch you there beside me,
your body’s drowsy scent, redolent on the sheets,
exotic as frankincense,
your dreaming kisses, strong as myrrh,
I no longer need to search dark skies for a star.
I’m no King, no Gaspar nor Nestor,
just a common man,
loving you beneath this fine tin roof.

*6 January 1995
The November House*

Promise of Rain

Just dark now, the wind rustles through the house,
scattering the fine dust of a fine drought.
Tonight the air smells of rain.
Feeling moist air on their wings, cicadas sing loud
as thunder. (Only thunder we've heard in days.)
Sensing something, the roosters crow like it's dawn,
but dawn hasn't happened here for a month.
No dawns, just the morning blaze of white-hot air
in argent skies. No late-summer pastels.
The farm has been desiccated to saddle-brown,
end-cycle of dogwoods and black-eyed Susans.
Alfalfa is curled and tan, unfit for cattle or deer.
Hand-dug ponds have been parched open
for a month, nothing for turkeys and bluebirds to drink.
The fish baked to death. The wisest frogs fled.
Withered persimmons hang on the branches,
pendulous for their abundance,
promising nothing for raccoons and possums.
And now the dark wind rises again, smelling of rain,
dust visible in moist air.
Rain is life and life has become rain.
The promise of rain is hope.

*9 September 1999
West Wind Farm*

Law School Poems

The Finality of Homocide

Herr Doktor of Criminal Law
has sprouted his own Sonny Bono moustache.
30 years old, 5'10", 175 pounds,
he has pleasant, but menacing, brown eyes.

His heavy black eyebrows twink
when he lectures on the derelicts
who get their names into these cases.
Instead of "homicide,"
he writes "homocide" on the board.
I wonder if Mein Herr
has unconscious gay issues, or any issues—
So much for that—I'm quitting his class.
He can't spell!

4 September 1976
Criminal Law

Ode to Wilburt Hamm

Herr Doktor of Contracts
is a kind gentleman
with fine twinkling blue eyes.
He loves to ask questions
of common sense and facts.
Unlike other classes,
I know the answers here.
They're all just common sense,
nothing ethereal
or things procedural.
"But did you purchase it?"
"And did you know of it?"
"And how and where and when?"
I like Hamm's class the best.

17 October 1976
Hamm's class on Contracts

Res Ipsa Loquitur

Herr Doktor of Torts talks like a duck.
He speaks through his platapine nose.
He instructs us of Boodle's barrels,
how they rolled from above into a street.
Barrels in a street, we are to suppose,
have no explanation that's neat.
The Chancellor held "Res Ipsa"—
"Res Ipsa Loquitur," which means:
"The thing (always) quacks for itself."
And so does our fine Herr Doktor.

29 October 1976
Torts Class

Force Majeure

Herr Doktor of Torts informs us today
Of doctrines insurance adjusters play—
One old chestnut permits them not to pay.
(They never intended to, anyway!)
The doctrine is known as the Force Majeure.
To me, it smells like so much torts manure.

1 November 1976
Torts Class

Civil Procedure

Herr Doktor of Civil Procedure
preaches like Jonathan Edwards
(and takes about as long).
Sinners in the hands of an angry God
are nothing compared to poor law students
in the grasp of an angry Professor.
His classes in Civil Procedure
verge toward their own eternity,
and spark my own divine contemplations
of unending, precise damnations.
Dante foresees a frozen lake of pain—
as cold as the Court's holding in
Palsgraf versus The Long Island Railroad?
Our Baptists believe in a Hell that's hot,
a boiling cauldron of sulphur and steam,
which brings me to the obvious question:
Is Hell hot or is it cold?
I'd say, for now, it's neither—
Hell is a class in Civil Procedure.

*22 November 1976
Civil Procedure Class*

After 60 Days of Snow on the Ground

*—for Robert Lawson, who taught “Evidence,” and noticed birds
singing outside in the thaw, after long snow cover*

Snow retreats and mist arises,
four robins hopping
as if on dew.

*10 March 1978
Evidence Class*

Discovery in Law School

Today I offered myself
to what is left
of myself
and found
inside my soul
two yellow and white puppy dogs,
near-grown, and playful
as the shifting colors
of a new Spring dawn.
To one in Law School at thirty,
a most satisfying discovery.

*30 April 1977
Evidence Class*

We Are All Born Lawless as Dogs

Spring is the tiller of the soul—
That deepest look within the folds
Where East is Vajra
And West is Law,
And all men ought to know
That they are born lawless as dogs.

*30 April 1977
Evidence Class*

The Rule in Shelley's Case

Herr Doktor of Property recites
the Rule in Shelley's Case.
He says it has confounded
jurists for hundreds of years.
But the Rule in Shelley's Case is simple.
Any farmer (like me) understands it:
the Earth outlasts the wills of men.

*1 April 1978
Dean Matthews' Property class*

The Conceits of the Law Professor

The conceits of the law professor
are
cryptically
endless,
endlessly
cryptic.

*25 January 1979
Dean Matthews' class*