

Borrowed Mysteries: Lines Composed on Tantalus

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Abstract

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A collection of poetry arranged in six series on varying subjects. These poems are meant to be purely expressive, without any kind of didactic purpose. Each series is introduced by an epigraph from a different work, and the most important theme throughout the entire work is, as the title suggests, the concept of borrowing. Nearly every poem relies on some kind of allusion. The second most important theme is the inconstancy of the poet, both his feeling and his expression, and the guilt and dread that this results in; the guilt of indulgence, and the dread of the abyss. As a result, any other theme may or may not be the fantasy of the reader.

Borrowed Mysteries

Lines Composed on Tantalus

Reach, Tantalus

We stand in pools of past
Above us future fruit
But when we bend or reach
Away, away they shoot

Do not lament thy hunger
Do not regret thy thirst
This appetite for life
The priv'lege of the curs'd

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Death in Chaohu

*It began with anguish, anguish and desire,
and a frightened curiosity as to what was coming.*

And his soul tasted the unchastity and fury of decay.

*For how indeed could he be a fit instructor
who is born with a natural leaning towards the precipice?*

- **Thomas Mann**

(or maybe Life)

The name Chaohu (巢湖) means “nest lake,” or maybe “nidus lake.” It is the place where things are born, fed, and gain flight. Or maybe it is the heart of the infection, a prognosticator of slow deaths.

For much of my life, I knew only my home, and China, the home we left behind. It took me some time to realize that the island of O‘ahu was not quite like the rest of the world. I knew it was not like China, but surely it was this far away land that was strange. These far away people, my family. I cannot even remember some of them, though I had visited them on their deathbeds. I can only hope that the memory of a child, cherub-faced and ignorant, brought them some cheer. In the years that followed, when I landed on new soils, I would observe, “Oh, this is like China.” Did you know that the trees on O‘ahu smell different? This may not be true, may not be the trees, but it is something that I know. Things can look like China too, sound like China. Especially when they break. Everything is always breaking, smashing to shards, while we start to build anew. Some of us sweep up the pieces first, others think they look charming, or at least important, lying half-buried in the earth.

Everything was born in Chaohu. In Chaohu, everything began to die.

**Like China
(or maybe Japan)**

we keep, gingerly, our lives, displayed, and admired, or at least
honored and tucked away in secret places, hidden all too well
by us, from us, tell ourselves, each other, that the wearing
away is beautiful, when we see that it is already broken
and scattered on the ground, like so many porcelain
shards, like clay, that gold could not keep, we
recall its shape, and say "Ah" cup your
hands and drink from the hollow

(a memory of lightning)

It was a perfect day to visit my grandfather, overcast, the storm held back by the will of faithful sons and daughters. Perhaps they would permit the clouds to shed a few tears. It was a long drive, spent mostly with craned neck, and twisted body, looking out the rear window. The sky was a magnificent theater of purples and grays. It was an educational play, trying to teach me what no one else wanted to, or knew how to. The stone, neatly carved for someone whose name I could not read. I told him that I would work hard in school, that he should watch over me, and be proud. Here, in this allotted space, how much of him could fit? How many shards remained? I could not remember the whole. And yet I cried. For I was among those that could remember, that I would remember. The lightning, carving a pale purple into a paler sky, was so, so beautiful.

The Way of All Stone

Let us go the way of all stone
Harder than flesh
Easier to cut
Laid before us
Like a path
Or maybe a trial
But it is slanted and smooth
Slick with dust
And we fall

We give these stones the names
That we gave to each other
To earth, to ashes, to dust

So walk these stones as if they had been carved for you
Until you reach the one that was

**Auguries of Jade
(and also China)**

It is beautiful, no doubt
In every variety
Some think it holds some great power
It shines and sings
And when we shape it
Let us not think of what falls away
Diminished not by its quality
Nor yet by its authenticity
For who can discern these things

But I will tell you what I can see
For it reveals, plainly, all that may be
Cracks, shards, the way of all stone

I have seen this since the bangle shattered on the pavement
And the boy cried

One Arrow Short
(ten thousand is Chinese for many)

softly the sun falls again
etching time into the sky
the sky that bears ten thousand scars
of ten thousand days and more
and more than we could know
for it is only so many wounds
before flesh turns to ash
to ash that scatters into kindred darkness
but is afforded no rest of night
for it is night now but as always hounded by day
for it is day now and no gray testimony remains
oh Archer! listen not to mothers or kings, and keep thy arrows close!

and again in sanguine innocence
the sun rises softly

(a memory of curtains)

The rumbles in the distance are echoed in the stirring of bodies and tilting of heads. In the dark of the station, people wait on colorful plastic chairs, glancing at the time, red LEDs. The lights, sound, kept low. In the dark of the station, strangers speak dimly. The crickets are unabashed. When the train arrives, children will watch the man standing closer to the platform's edge than they are allowed. When the train departs, the vigor of farewells will rise to meet the engine, chasing after cars with their curtains pulled back. It does not keep up, never meant to. Never could. The space between the beds and the wall are filled with the cracked shells of roasted sunflower seeds, the space between those filled with the ash of cigarettes. Remnants of small pleasures, somehow comforts rather than filth. The curtains are closed now, though they will barely keep out the sun. The next day will be spent sitting in padded chairs that fold out from the wall by the windows opposite the rooms, with the curtains pulled back. A child will sit with the thin curtain draped around him, like a veil, and watch the farmlands whisk by. The farmers will not turn to look at the train, the child will not know what they are planting. The child will point out every water buffalo they see, and their mother will say, "Look, the sun is like a yolk." As the sky dims again, and the rhythm of the wheels begins to slow, the curtains remain open as the passengers await those who might greet them.

We'll Be There When You Wake Up

I think you only feel like you're falling
when you sleep lying down
on your bed of sunflower seeds
and cigarette ash.

New infrastructure is impressive
but not as regal as the rhythm
of rusted wheels on rail.
The glow of dawn goes down to gloom of dusk
over the course of three bowls
of instant noodles.

Because if you fall asleep on the train
sitting by the window
you don't get to see the water buffalo.

Hundred Percent Humidity

When we wake
We do not hope
For mild weather
When heat shimmers on the pavement
We wonder if the buzzing in the trees
Is a cause or complaint
It doesn't seem fair
For either of us
If we only know you in summer

They call it a wet market
Because that's what happens to your shirt
When you walk there

In small miseries
There is guilt

Corner Store Ice Cream

There are small delights
That sustain us

Some of them taste like mung bean
Old and familiar
Like home

Others are new and exciting
Like a foreign chocolate
Or some kind of green tongue

You can't go wrong with milk
Rich and creamy
And easy to share

But my favorite is the old popsicle
All you need
Is sugar and water

Autumnal Tones

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: What if my leaves are falling like its own!

Sweet though in sadness.

- **Percy Bysshe Shelley**

A Celebrated Season

Autumn, as the time of harvest, is perhaps the most celebrated season, contending only with spring. Both draw reverence from their relation to winter, one from its apprehension, one from its remembrance. Summer, most removed, has forgotten both the past and the future.

One's place of birth and upbringing becomes very normal, but there is one thing that I knew was strange about Hawai'i. Half the year, the valley's green depths were dark with rain. The little bird with long legs kept its distance. Half the year, the valley's green depths were bright with sun. The little bird with long legs was gone, but I didn't know its name. And in the twelfth month, "White Christmas" would come smoothly over the radio. I knew that children made men, and angels, out of snow, but I did not know winter. I knew that children jumped in piles of raked leaves, but I did not know autumn. In this green garden of youth, it is difficult to understand the allegory of the seasons. Not all of us are sure that it is cyclical, and if it isn't, what does it mean when winter comes?

It seems that we all persist for some time in the oblivion of summer, until we learn of winter. And when we learn of winter, autumn begins.

Apprehension

Flickering in the wind
The little yellow leaf
Holds fast to its stem
Despite its winterward hue

Perhaps, little leaf, you are afraid
Of the long, long way to the ground
(and you're not sure what you'll find)
Perhaps, little leaf, you are brave
And determined to surfeit yourself with sun
(even if that means burning away)

Bright leaf, you are heavy with cold
Laden with birdsong's end
And full of fatal knowledge

But little leaf
Do you know?
The rest of your tree is green

Birdsong's End

To Y.H.Y.N.

Sometimes
When a bird calls us in spring
We learn its name
So that we know
Whose song
We will miss

The fine feather
We clutch
Will not sing
And we will realize
That the only song we know
Is a response

We will sit by the window
in wonder
And be borne away
by migratory sorrows

(the things we learn from comic books)

In summer, the child will lose track of the days, their elbows deeply imprinted with the texture of the rug. Their left cheek, or today perhaps it is the right, will have the same pattern from when the sunlight through the windows turns the particles in the air to fairy dust. They will awake and see the pages with a wider eye. They will see a young boy, with yellow, spiked hair, and his companion tiger. He will find a dead bird and say, "Isn't it beautiful?"

They Fall

The leaves
Held fast by their stems
Shudder
Under autumn's breath
Until
In the shock of cold
They are loosed
By a gasp

By kind or callous winds
They fall

And as they fall
They do not tremble
For there is nothing trying to hold them still

(the things we look for)

There was once a wanderer, the consummate gentleman, dressed elegantly in a black suit and wielding white plastic bags. Few heard him speak, many knew him wise. He seemed a god disguised, not of jovial tests of hospitality, but of the knowledge seekers. Wherever I found myself, when I saw him, I knew I was home. One day at the natatorium, the next at the academy. How fleet and wise, like Hermes! And the day after that, he was gone. You have forgotten to take me with you. Now, I stand by the road, wondering how to get back. I should turn left by the beautiful tree, but the living make poor landmarks.

Tuxedo Man

I have wished to represent you in my pages
for a long time now.

But how?

Your ways are more than mine.

I lack the imagination, or rather,
the Knowledge.

What do I wish to give you,
through my words?

Honor? Life?

These, that I have borrowed from you,
who in the undertaking,
succeeds.

I see you now,
taking shape.

All my life,

I have written you.

(the things that children know)

The parents work long hours, so the children remain at school, but their time must not be wasted with empty play. They are not yet firm in their native tongue, but they will learn another, so that they may grow strong together. They will be gathered in front of a large, pull-down screen, distracted by the particles in the projector's beam. The adults charged with their supervision will quiet them, tell them to sit calmly, and direct their attention to the screen. A song will play, in Mandarin, and the children will repeat the words. They will not understand. A mother will sing to a young daughter, of how she cares for her. A grown daughter will sing to a mother grown old, of how she will care for her. The children do not understand, but the oldest of them, standing in the back, will cry.

Remembrance

Why do you weep, mother?
You have won your bargain with undying death,
Your joy returns to you.

We have each partaken of that damning morsel,
And so we grieve and wait and rejoice,
then grieve again.

The world is so briefly barren,
Shorter with every sad anniversary.
Why then, do I weep?
Where do you go, mother?

Again the Garden Green

From Y.H.Y.N

Even though we know
What becomes of flowers
When we watch children make posies
We smile

Stiff, mottled hands (too long in the sun)
Will cup themselves
To receive handfuls of jasmine
From rosy grasps

And when the children watch the petals droop and brown
All the high muses and wintered birds
Will vie at the windowsill for a chance
to witness the generation of a tender motive

The Laughing Rebellion

Man was created a rebel; and how can rebels be happy?

The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn't it?

I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones!

Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child will have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn't grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dog, at eight years old.

- **Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov**

Grudge the Bard

The starved creature
Good and lean
Gives the finest material

How sweet a sound
Can twisted entrails make
When plucked

From the head of your protector
Drooped and deaf
The crown has fallen

Shall I wear these thorns as a laurel?
Come, lambs, to my slaughter

Illborn

It is easily believed that we are made in the image of a god
Who would keep serpents in paradise
A careless likeness

Nothing more sickly sweet than the fruit of another's garden

We are likewise cruel to our children
Kept so briefly in the eden of early years
Cast out

From what rough beasts are our children born

We speak of their innocence
Bright and blameless eyes
Whence did darkness enter

Eden is full of shadows

Our sickness resides in the blood
Pumped through bodies by hearts
That cannot stop beating

*And beating
And beating*

Light Us the Way

The great maw of the city
Has snapped shut
The night is twice dark

We have no need of nightmare
In our wisdom
We have surpassed the terrible dream

Where did you go, shepherd?
Fangs flash in the dark, seeking the throat of the babe.
Take up your crook and drive us away!

The Reason We Stay

Calculate coldly, our lives
Put us in tables, and call us X
A column for our pain
A column for our pleasure
Do we fit in so few rows?
Calculate kindly, our lives
and tell us
why we should go

We have found our Y
A second variable
If only it were a constant
instead of a sometimes companion
A not enough friend
A stranger
Yet joy must be the reason we stay
Fear alone cannot be enough. Right?

Tell me that despair is impossible.

Heart of the Machine

Let us observe the world
And what it does to our species
Its haphazard heart a torch
To light our kindling
Bursting with wires
Sparking and dangerous
Which in some frayed manner
Claim all sparks as their progeny
It is these that we grasp
And do not extinguish
For we are paper and straw
And ignite

How long can we smolder?
How brightly can we burn away?

Ask of Them Virtue

Gracious host, we have invited to thy home
an unwelcome guest.

He shall consume thy store
and take all comforts as his own.

All that is dear to thee
will be marked by his influence.

Thou shalt have no power over him,
except that thou might hesitate to invite him
upon others.

In Darkness as in Light

“For ever and ever.”

- **Our Father**

In darkness comes the negligence
Of reason and command
And all good counsel and true sense
Stays not the trembling hand

Though better than to see things stark
And face a toothsome grin
For what we fear is not the dark
But that which lurks within

Insomnia

No more need for smiles
Let your countenance grow dour
Now begin the midnight trials
The clock has struck the hour

Try as you might you cannot see
What lies beyond the gloam
The figures in the twisted tree
Beyond the mind do roam

The dark is bitter on your tongue
Like crow calls on your skin
A song of horror not yet sung
Hangs frightful on the wind

Close your eyes and do not dread
the long way yet to go
'Til it's over when you're dead
await the morning glow

The night is still the longer

It's hard to wait for something
That one hopes never comes
But he who measures candle wicks
Knows the uneasy sums

And sweetly does the beeswax count
The light that's burned away
And bitter is the smoke that tells
The passing of the day

So tie the cotton end to end
And weave it all the stronger
But while it lasts enjoy the glow
The night is still the longer

But the day is everlasting

For even when the dusk falls in shuddering remembrance
of perennial gloom

And even when your hand leaves mine and your figure
parts from sight

When all the world falls hopelessly into the oblivion
of boundless night

As I lie down and close my eyes to all but you
the world once more is bright

The Crower

Crier of day O champion of light,
whose raiment is from noble birthright won;
Thy bright array does call the end of night,
to grace the Earth anew O voice of Dawn.
As Phaethon's crown rests light upon thy head,
and full of pride thou dost not know thy strength.
So shalt thou drive the sun in sun god's stead,
and soon thy daring boast shall fail at length.
Yet not by thunder will thy sin be scorned,
for thou dost not possess the guilty force.
Thou art an actor like a king adorned,
whose cries do not persuade the sun god's course.
 Unlike the golden child in amber drowned,
 the cockerel returns in sunlight crowned

Now

There is an honored guest
That ev'ry host awaits
And yet receives too soon
Or always moments late

Is never seen at morning
Is nowhere found by night
Has in the darksome hours
Already taken flight

When the Time Comes

Tell me when we have forgotten the warmth of sun
When every candle and lamp is done
When the sea no longer shimmers
When the glade no longer glimmers
When storms no longer flash
When volcanoes spew only ash
When the fireflies are missing
When the anglers have all gone fishing
When the moon has turned to powder and dust
When heaven has turned its back on us
We will put on plays under starless nights
And we will dance, dance by our own lights

Sing, Apollo

“It was the demand of thoroughly unmusical hearers that the words must above all be understood, so that according to them a re-birth of music is only to be expected when some mode of singing has been discovered in which the text-word lords over the counterpoint as the master over the servant.”

“He dreams himself into a time when passion suffices to generate songs and poems: as if emotion had ever been able to create anything artistic.”

- **Friedrich Nietzsche**

Reason Enough

For though the lyre sounds nothing like us.
For though all the songbirds have never a syllable spoken.
For though truest pain is a wail.
For though truest joy is a laugh.
For though the music precedes the sphere.
For though the bird sings and not the cage.
For though melody is never inscrutable.
For though beauty has no need of a tongue.
There is yet enough in the word of song.

Spinning Gold

After Claude Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin"

You there standing in the field
Shaming all the flowers
Your kin to beauty in your presence cowers
They stand blue and pale against the sun
Incomparable to the gold you spun
The girl with the flaxen hair.

You there wandering down the trail
Turning round to smile
Oh how your eyes beguile
Blessèd are the things they see
Such shining emblems of purity
The girl with the flaxen hair

You there sitting on the hill
Sitting right here beside me
Of all the places you could be
What simple unbound rapture
Do your curls and lashes capture
The girl with the flaxen hair

You there walking the other way
What regret I have to see you go
And I'll walk away just as slow
I feel I was lucky to have met you though
For all the things I've come to know
The girl with the flaxen hair

Dance!

After W.H. Squire's "Tarantella"

Bitten. Panic. Cure. Dance!
Roll the music! Fast! Fast!
Separate venom from your veins!
Seconds, minutes, hours, days!

Softly, slowly, drumming legs.
Quicker, silent eyes of hate
Fast, fast, wolf's fangs
Burning in your chest.
Dance, Dance, Dance!

Faster, higher, insanity
Get this poison out of me
Expunge, explode, eradicate
Arms to legs to fingertips
Spin your way to clarity
Whirl, Whirl, Whirl!

Pause.
Think.
Can it be?
Momentary sanity
Of this poison are you free?
Cure, oh cure of brevity.

Creeping, creeping, restlessness
Worry not, don't scratch that itch
A figment of your imagination
No fear have you of mind's predation

Tremble slightly, what was that?
Softly, slowly drumming legs
Resist! Cease! Abstain!
Quicker, silent eyes of hate
Run! In your mind you are not safe!
Fast, fast, wolf's fangs
Burning in your chest.
Dance, Dance, Dance!

Again, again! Around we go!
Laughter, higher, up we go!

Fast, fast, through your veins
Coursing, coursing through your brain!
Venom, venom, in your blood
Blood blood, venomous veins
Blinding, deafening, cacophony!
The cure to this profanity
The final perfect remedy
At. Last.

So Long

After Camille Saint-Saens's "Le cygne"

So long have you kept so quiet
Why now do you break your fast
Your head lowered so

Such melancholy your reflection invokes
on the smooth glassy face of the lake
that now reflects the weeping stars

Tonight you swim through the heavens
Celestial bodies trembling in your wake
The moon your looking glass

Why do you sing now
with such saccharine sorrow
your first and final performance

Must you go now
yet you stay
such stubborn melody

But now you turn to go
your sweet song fading
The harp heralds your departure

You take your bow
head lowered so
Must you go?

So long.
So long.

To the Rose I Could Not Keep
After Edward MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose"

Modestly
Tenderly
As I gaze upon you
Weariness flees me
Like the spring anew

Lucidly
Tranquilly
And with every virtue
Rest you peacefully
Midst the morning dew

Soon, when summer ends
Bittersweet farewells will trouble me
Fears that I forget my friends
Hopes that you remember me
Promise me
That I'll see you soon

Patiently
Wistfully
Knowing that you're gone now
Living on only
In my memory

Now, when winter falls
Recollection fond sustains me and speaks of when
Somewhere in these walls, I
Somewhere in these halls, I'll
see
you
again

Where, Wings?

After Felix Mendelssohn's "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges"

I know not where you have brought me
It must be far, far away
Perhaps it's across this sea
Or beyond a mysterious bay
For nothing here is familiar
And nowhere earthly pain
This must be someplace higher
Some realm of heavenly reign
And when I'm called to retire
I long to rise again

And if you find me weeping
Ask not the spring of my woe
If I was able of answering
I would have long, long ago
Yet here I remain an exile
From that celestial sphere
And if you see on me a little smile
You'll know that I have flown near
To the place for which I long
Please lift me, O wings of song

We Have Learned of the Heavens

That the motions produce sound.

That each motion has its own sound.

That the sound is proportional to the motion.

That the sound is harmonious.

That the sound is reflected in our fortunes.

That the sound is as silence to us, in our ears from birth.

That the sound is not silent to the soul.

That the sound is bliss, as harmony is.

That the sound is immense, as the heavens are.

That there cannot be such a sound, for it would shatter us.

Spun Gold
After and After

You once belonged to someone
A fine and silken strand
And fallen loosely leisurely
Or troubled by some hand

The softest sand your color
The summer sea your scent
And drifted from the vessel
To whom your grace you lent

You are not fast forgotten
Your fantasy endures
And leaves a fond remembrance
On shores of erstwhile tours

Yet now may you have rest
From storm and rocking ship
And from your windblown duties
Away, away you slip

Speak, Dionysus

“In song and in dance man exhibits himself as a member of a higher community, he has forgotten how to walk and speak, and is on the point of taking a dancing flight into the air.”

“Now, at the evangel of cosmic harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, blended with his neighbour, but as one with him, as if the veil of Mâyâ has been torn and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious Primordial Unity.”

“Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of all nature here reveals itself in the tremors of drunkenness to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity.”

- **Friedrich Nietzsche**

Could Breath Be Silent

See the wind that speaks for the leaf
And the leaf the wind
Hear now the jealousy of the stone walls
And above them billowing and billowing
The clamor of the clouds rises
In this great vacuum our breath
Is drawn from us and pulled upward
To that swirling inhalation
And held in collective astonishment
Of the sky.

And with the rushing of the river
And the fire creeping across our skin
We speak
So as not to suffocate

The Fey

It's years now since I've lost my way
Some time since I've been lead astray
Yet no happier lost than I that day
To dance behind the riddling fay

Humors

When nature strikes the canvas
In colors bold and true
A fiery temper takes
The cold and even blue

Yet those who come to gather
To marvel at the sight
Soon find themselves regarding
The blackness of the night

Nearer to Thee

You seem like me in look and feel
Your cries sincere and laughter real
Yet how can I my judgement trust
When it so often rules unjust

The heart by eyes nor sound revealed
When lips and teeth by hands concealed
We play a childish guessing game
And fancy that we feel the same

Yet side by side we go along
And dread to read the mirror wrong
And though we long to nearer be
Let us enjoy the mystery

To the Saturnine

How should we share the world,
We who stand so far apart.
All color transformed by a few feet of air.

And if we come near, and look again,
We will see only that near, never the same.

But we are not alone,
So long as that mystery binds us.

Aphorisms

I am the emperor, the god of this moment!

My words, eternal truth!

Then

The moment passes

How great is the eternity

That mourns the moment

Virga

On clear day, a darkening of sky
And hopeful stirring of parched minds
That turn to clouds where seraphs lie
Yet grasping thought no respite finds

Denied, the sweet squall
Are they who storm spurns
When that which from Divine falls
Again to heaven turns

Upon This Body

All I say, I have stolen from the lips of wiser men
All I know, from firmer flesh

Behold! The volume duly filled
That survives the sound and fury
Upon this body are cities built
Mine good only to bury

The Ghost Writer

She writes ghost stories
Stories that make ghosts
Because good literature is poison
And she writes well

Bittersweet

Oh bitter, Oh sweet, Oh much have I to learn
of the workings by which my heart does yearn
For bitter though is the love now broken
still sweeter yet than the love unspoken

Oh joy, Oh sorrow, Oh unholy hour
of mind, of body, and of soul devour
For sleep may I in regretful sorrow
still dream shall I of the hopeful morrow

Call to Rest

We are each of us called to madness
by what we have glimpsed, drawn by horses,
and strain to recover on earth
our noble passion.

I see that I was in the retinue of gods,
and that they have brought down for me
what is beyond the heavens,
bound in mortal pages.

So it is without any dejection
that I loose the rein