

light/waves

poems by

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preface

There are three series of poems here, each of which explores some of the nuances of light in my world. The first I wrote over a period of several weeks in late summer 2022, sitting on my front porch pre-dawn drinking my morning tea or coffee, looking at the trees across the street. The second comprises my most recent full-moon poems, some written in 2022, some in 2021, which I wanted to gather together in one place. I conclude with some walking-to/by-the water poems.

*I. trees across the street
at daybreak poems*

1.

august 17th, 6 am

the sea of air between me
and the dozens
of Douglas firs
across the street
is so crystal clear
I see each needle
right to the leaders
a hundred feet up
poking through the surface
that keeps here down
here and there up there
where endless light begins

just to the right
three leafy
house-size trees
all one ball now
flutter their lashes
at the blue-eyed sky
behind the aqua house
kind of catty corner
from the park
where quinn lives
with izzy and delilah
such sweet people

dozens of lavish gladiolas
in her corner garden
so ravishing last month
wilting now from
this late august heat

2.

august 19th

two side by side
cypresses elide
palm against palm

the first trees I saw here
I mean really saw
while I sat on my couch

on a summer's day
just like this one
four years ago

looking out the window
past my front porch
trying to figure out why

anything is anything
and nothing is nothing
without even one word

left behind my lips
upturned with wonder
just like today

each with a thick thumb
green as green gets
sticking out from the side

and up having waited
patiently for decades
to say every time I look

everything here
will work out great
for you today

if you just wait patiently
the way we waited
here so long for you

3.

august 23rd, just before dawn

black-robed cowl-hooded
firs file into pews
steeped hands lifted
to high heaven
praying maybe
to that one
vague wavy cloud
engraved into
granite gray
or the three crows
that fly raucously by
five seconds and gone

as day breaks
I see more clearly
there is nothing
here but the trees
and me on
opposite sides
of the same street
waiting breath
abated to be swept
up in a rapture
of nothing
but dazzling light

4.

august 24th

somewhere up there
air goes wild whooshing
down here no leaf
or needle wavers

barely there trees
stand stock still
so they won't be found
and pushed around

after a while
a cool breeze slides
down spines of branches
and glides by my porch

soothing face and arms
those soft places
where what is me
turns into what is not

somewhere in the space
between what I heard up there
and what I feel down here
asleep became awake

5.

august 26th, 4:30 AM

at first it is hard
to discern
inky firs against
the satin-black sky

they appear slowly
bearded wise men
hovering up like haze
over a far horizon

as my eyes acclimate
wispy clouds evanesce
into soft shawls on
their sloped shoulders

soon a sprinkle of pinprick
stars twinkle through
milkweed flossy
clouds shapeshifting

when I hold my hand up
to block the streetlight
more and more stars
blink on in an instant

all these bits of light
everywhere I look now
what dark proffers
if you just sit and wait

I have no idea what more
this day will bring my way
but if it ends right now
it is already quite enough

6.

august 27th, 5 AM

blurry fog
softens everything

trees flatten
and recede
could be clouds
or mountains
way way off
next to nothings
sponge-dabbed
on cleft slate

every porchlight
(I count eight)
is huge and haloed
many little moons
two hooded lights
throw down
pyramids
of amber spears

a moist glaze
on the seat of my chair
dampens my pants

the rest of this morning
air will want to be
intimate with my skin

and I will let it

7.

august 28th, 5:50 AM

the static stillness today
is breathtaking
I mean literally
I must remind myself
to breathe
and do it quietly
each time trying
to keep the peace

I feel it first on the tops
of my bare feet
the tiniest tingles
of rain more mist than rain
light as photons bathing
a receptive leaf

electric

somehow
after 10 minutes
nothing is even
slightly damp

if I hadn't come out
I would never have known
how much a part of me

the tops of my feet
can feel soothed cool
by next to nothing droplets
fizzing up in still air

even now
half an hour later
as I sit typing this
my feet remember
having been ravished
with such delicacy
so much more alive
than the ones
I walked out with
my whole mind
down there
with them
just above the floor
where I hope it will stay
all day long
so astonished still
by how deftly my feet
were caressed
this morning
I will need to keep
reminding myself
to breathe

8.

august 29th, 5:17 AM

I am so sad this morning
good sad
the kind of quiet mind
that's left behind
when you finally
tell yourself the truth
charcoaly gray skies
background all the black trees

I realize for the first time
that I can see
maybe thirty firs
from here
the same feathery shape
india-ink-stamped
over and over
closer farther
smaller bigger
fringed pinnacles
flat and still
pressed into softest silk

all the ones in the park
I write about every day
of course and the ones down
garrison street
behind the gray house

but today for some reason
I see three new ones
huge obelisks
I mean 100 feet tall
just up bigelow avenue
not 50 yards from here
and I swear
I never noticed them before
so distracted I suppose
when I look that way
by the house where
bob sits on the porch
smoking and smiling
a guy my age
I met on the bus
a couple of years ago
or by people walking
by with their dogs

these huge dark things
not lurking in the background
like secrets I mean
but right there streetside
close enough to reach out and touch
all the while invisible to me

a lesson in inattention
humbling as it always is
when you know you've made
way too much of little things
just because you want them that way

or they want you that way
like whatever love is
when it isn't

last night's sunday night dreams
the ones where
everyone who never loved me
lines up week after week
with litanies of bitterness
and then this morning
out of the dark
some tall clear things
stood straight up
right before my eyes

not tiny many-colored houses
gardenfuls of flowers
people coming and going
bob smoking on the porch
but three towering firs
that grew up right on that corner
way before I got here
and will keep growing up
long after I'm not

preternaturally patient
not hoping no never
just waiting
for that one day
the off chance
I'd open my eyes and see

like today say
drinking my coffee
so happy
to be so sad

between the two tallest firs
in the park
a single star sparkles
I mean actually sparkles
those flickering flecks of light
having made it all the way
from the other side of the galaxy
through layers of wrinkly air
right down to my eyes
the other side of the light
once you finally see it
always so tiny
pinpoint pristine and perfect
the only light in the sky
right now

my coffee tastes so delicious today
I hear the first soft coos
of the collared doves that nest nearby
always soothing at dawn
voices hard to describe
mournfully joyous maybe
their day about to begin
just like mine
everyday ordinary in every way

right where I am
alone on my porch
telling myself some true things
about what love is
when it isn't
tears welling
up in my eyes
good tears
every fiber of me
utterly happy
just to be so sad

9.

september 3^d, 4:40 AM

such an eerie silence
everything grayscale
motionless as a photograph
I somehow wandered into
allowed now to stay
the only thing moving
just barely
far to the front
on the lower right
(from your point of view
behind me
through the frame
of my living room window)
a vague shape lifting
teacup to lips

I know there is air
around me
from how it cools
my cheeks
but it doesn't move

everything nearby
presses in closer
the dense laurel hedges
in my front yard
a dark ragged mass

fractal fringes
glinting in streetlight

cobblestone porch pillars
cast shadows
twice their height
across the porch

the low hum I hear
must be pre-dawn traffic
from the highway
two miles north of here

it is that quiet

quinn's porch light
centered in the scene
scatters flecks of light
on honeysuckle
climbing up the railing
spreads a dim pall
over what's left of
her garden a few yards
in front to the left

to the right
of the ghostly white
garage door
an arrowhead shaped shrub
braces widely spaced branches
adorned gracefully

with tiny leaves
its shadow
on the weathered cedar fence
behind so closely matched
you have to understand
ahead of time
how space operates
to know which
is which and why
both can't possibly occupy
the same plane at once

the firs blur together
all the way at the back
solid flat black
the two tallest
framing the same single star
I saw a few days ago
the farthest little bit
of light the lens
refracted today

fixed this firmly
in a shutter-click instant
I begin to wonder
whether I will ever
be allowed to leave

10.

september 8th, 3:07 AM

I don't think
I am going to think anything today
I don't even think
I am any longer

my nose is summer cold runny
inside my head
a hundred little mes
pinball every which way
trying to fight it off
or just find safe places to hide

I woke up telling myself
I know exactly what
you're trying to say paul
even when you can't
so do bridget and joe
who know everything
I know and more
maybe you do too
if so I hope you'll say so
so I won't have to
keep this going

I'm pretty sure
quinn izzy and delilah
are still asleep

and I would be too
except I couldn't stand
any more of my dreams

it is the middle of the night
yet there is light
everywhere I look
the hedges one huge
moonlit-tipped wave
suddenly stilled
if it crested
forward to the porch
I would be swept away

a dozen stars
hover above
the firs in the park
when I cover
the streetlamp
with my raised hand
dozens more flicker on

if I could turn off
all the houselights
in the neighborhood
I know there would be
many thousands more
somehow tonight
I can sense them
and everything else
that's missing

the shrub
its shadow
and the cedar fence
are all one
twice yesterday's size
I have no idea how
they reconciled
or why

after just 10 minutes
and a cup of coffee
my head is settled
one thing again
a moonlit sea sparkling
a shrub and its shadow
in full embrace
on a cedar fence
a skyful of stars
so clearly there
even when they're not

and those dozens of firs
in the park across the street
the ones I started with
a couple of weeks ago
so gorgeous in today's dark
risen up majestically
into that star-speckled sky
still standing still
entirely themselves

even if because of
all I've told myself about them
and for the better
I am
no longer me

11.

september 9th, 6:08 AM

the lamppost light
in front of quinn's house
is a little sun surrounded
by auras of spiky white light

down the block
two streetlights stitch
cones to rooftops
with yellow thread

someone walks mazily
across the park
flashlight pointing down
looking for the way

*I feel like I have entered
my own book cover*

a little rain last night
washed fire smoke
from the air
which smells so sweet

wall to wall tall trees
all say over and over
stay small paul
so I guess I will

it is exactly 6:08
Dylan's "lonesome freight"
right on track today
to take me back inside

12.

september 14th, 3:50 AM

it's all topsy-turvy today
trees ten stories tall
just dead weight
great poles upholding
sky-high twig-tips
fleeting right-nows
twisted bristles
craving to displace
bits of empty air
wise enough finally
not to look down

the bright yellow fan
flaring from the streetlamp
down garrison street
showers lightstreams
iridescent with fog
fleeting right-nows
flash-flooding down
craving to cleanse
bits of empty air
wise enough finally
not to turn back

this week my head
has been bleak and blank
old heartbreaks

stunning once more
what I can't forget
haunting days and dreams
just dead weight
brown all the way
down to the ground
pitch dark forever
above the only light

I hope the topsy-turvy
of this morning
will teach me
finally
not to look down
not to turn back

13.

september 16th, 4:08 AM

yesterday at the food co-op
I bought a single peach
big as a softball
ready to eat ripe you know
soon as you put a thumb to it
full coat of raspy fuzz
so when you cradle it in your hand
all those tiny hairs
tingling your fingers
your tongue already tastes its sweetness
not yellowy or orangey or melony
but perfectly and only peachy
a platonic ideal
until I dropped it
as I put it on the checkout counter
denting it a little on the left side

a few hours later
I looked out my living room window
at the stunning harvest moon
snuggled up between
the red barn across the street
and a stand of tall trees
its first night out
not quite full
so a little flat on the left side

if you took my peach
and filled it with
a million old-fashion light bulbs
it would be exactly that moon

this morning first thing
I look all over the sky
on the other side of the house
to see where the moon ended up
but the sky is dark
decorated simply with a smattering of stars
orion the big dipper and lots of others
the tiny bright things that come clear
once the big light is off

surprisingly there is a light on
in quinn's front room
softly diffused through the drawn curtains
clean linen white
maybe she can't sleep this morning either
wondering as I am
what became of that perfectly peachy moon

in a few hours
I will cut up my perfectly moony peach
before it starts to darken
where I bruised it
put it in my oatmeal

with a handful
of the small tart almost black blueberries
I picked last week
the kind you can't buy in stores because
they are small and tart and almost black

while I eat I will remember
last night's bright moon
and this morning's dark sky full of stars

II. full moon poems

first spring full moon, 2022

1.

passover evening, april 16

her flat white
face looks
frightening
flashing that
so-fake smile

*just a faraway
rock I know
but hard as I try
I cannot see
anything not human
looking back*

2.

easter morning, april 17

between curtains
not fully pulled
a blade of light
slices my eyes wide

*I can see nothing
even remotely
human in
that violent
light no matter
how hard I try*

3.

*this moon is nothing
but lies no matter
which side of the night
it shines from*

full super moon, august 11/2022

first off tonight you were not
where you're supposed to be
right across garrison street
just left of the red house

so I thought you weren't even here
until I took the garbage out
to the big can by the garage
and saw you way down the block

a dollop of honey on a cobalt plate
the gooey amber kind bridget buys
from a couple of local beekeepers
so sensuous and sweet in my tea

I figured you'd be somewhere nearby
because yesterday east bay was mudflat
all the way out to the rows of sailboats
moored half a mile from olympia street

so they won't be left high and dry
every now and then like tonight
when you come near enough to swallow
a whole bay full of water in one gulp

maybe you're way over there now
because I pulled the plug
inside my head out at woodard bay
the last time you came this close

whooshing away all the women
that used to float so breezily
into my dreams on moonbeams
right through the front window

now they'll have to walk
all the way down the block
from thurston street
to knock on the back door

and I guess I'll see you only
out of the corner of my eye
when I take the garbage out
to that big can by the garage

the full moon, 1/2021

1.

because I know I cannot save

even one second

of moonlight in my memory

for later

I crave more

until after

even one second

the urgency becomes

unbearable

and I turn away

2.

when it comes to moonlight
there is no such thing
as the precision
of a sphere

borders
blur to black space
the difference
between dark and light
like the **MRI** image
of my brain:

“unremarkable”

3.

that pale white stone
racing around in the sky
frightens when it steals
all that light
and lies
claiming
it is
its own

4.

the moon wears
a long silk gown
lit from beneath
seen flared to the floor
from above

not quite round
on the ground

but almost

not quite white
in that pale light

but almost

5.

the eye cannot stare
long enough
straight at moonlight
to keep it settled
in the mind
photons keep speeding
around
at the speed
limit of speed

6.

Li Po drowned
with the full moon
in his arms

but no one knows
whether he was trying
to love it or save it

it just melted away
in millions of little white
flakes on the black water

that may well have turned
into deep space
when they both

went missing

7.

Li Po died while trying
to keep the full moon afloat
mistaking time for space

after he went down
for the final time
and water stilled
the moon was somehow
still there
still full
still still

8.

when there is no moon
you cannot possibly
imagine one

go ahead
I dare you

try

now imagine
this page
is a so-black lake
you cannot fathom
any bottom

try again

see?

9.

Li Po wanted me
to know how
“I died” and “it worked”
could both be true

so, so true

and why

full moon, 2/2021

last year's snow moon
was so cold, thick
slice of ice melted
into a black felt sky

this year it is a peach pie
succulent
as mid-July
I have no idea why

last night I woke
at 3 am just to be sure
I wasn't mistaking
time for space

three wavy clouds
above the horizon
lit from above
by a floodlight moon

like wide stripes
of fluffy icing
off-white
slathered across

a so-soft dark
chocolate sky
waiting with that pie
to satisfy

all the hunger
in every february
in the universe
at once.

full moon, 3/27/21

moon bright white
blurs teary-eyed
haze-hidden behind
wispy not-even-
there-clouds way
too much light
for this late at night

a slight blue aura
seems to droop
like a droplet
from the right side
of its bottom edge

after only one
minute of looking
I lose all clarity
fall into confusion
can't any longer
remember where
I am right
now or how
to get back
where I was
a here which I fear
no longer even exists

full moon, 3/28/21

hammocked between
two hemlocks huge
helium balloon
yellow smiley-face
laughing out loud
not *at* me or *with* me
but *for* me the way
the best laughs
sooner or later
make everyone laugh
for no reason at all
except to keep laughing

a few smudge-smooth
clouds huddle up
closer and closer
brightening with
gathered light more
and more cheerful
the nearer they get

after only one
minute of laughing
I lose all confusion
fall into clarity
can't any longer
remember where

I am right
now or how
to get back
where I was
a there which I swear
no longer even exists

dark comes

earlier now
late summer
I sit by
the window
watch the moon
slice of light
slide sideways
up the sky
my mind's eye
glass smooth
sees everything

but me

in the mirror
corner of the eye
glimpse then gone
might be grief
or gaiety close
companions those
thieves leaping
rooftop to
rooftop agile
acrobats of love
lost and found

silent each night
this week dreams
sidled by me

step by step
barely there on
waking then back
into the body
which remembers
everything

last night a woman
I'd never met so
handsome and kind
tested me to show
so I know for sure
how amazing I am
each released
breath she said
sonorous and deep
beyond belief

her long hug
and parting kiss
half on the right
corner of my lips
an awkward miss
gestures beautiful
beyond measure

and the night before
sallow sullen boy
standing aloof
outside my door
I open letting him

in after all these
years home again
me with me

with me

and the night
before the secret
of tinkering trauma
image and event
peeled apart
resisting repetition

how the body heals
when cared for
properly always

the body

tonight I am
moonlight on a
mountain stream
without dimension

change
 surging
 beneath

dazzling flecks
of white light
so soft and flexible

caressing every
crevice always
the same light
never the same
water twice

little ripples of
memory in motion
my eyes move
emptily as one
unrelentingly
forward afar
from the future

always

what I am not
yet becoming now
more and more
now and then more

amazing

as I am tonight
no idea
why I think

anything

not a word
I need to say

no one with me
to hear ever
I remember
just moonlight
cold cupped hand
lifting me slowly

on the way to
somewhere
a near heaven
I set out for
so long ago

with no
one
not even
me

to keep
me company

III. walking-to/by-the-water
poems

walking to budd bay and back, 10/7/22

“their strength is yours now”
(our native daughters)

1.

sudden sunup stuns
air breathless
so clear
everything appears
magic mushroom vivid
down to the finest detail

just as I hear myself sing
“none of us is here for long”
a single leaf floats down
in front of me
its season complete
perfectly timed
and I think:
I hope I too
will not leave
too early
or wait too late

2.

the bay is lathered with fog
maybe 10 feet deep
while I walk
down the hill
it rolls back slowly
toward the mountains
still water shaved clean

3.

a single mallard drake
preens himself
at the edge of east bay
his iridescent neck
shimmering lapis to jade
and back in the dazzling light

a quartet of sandpipers
squared off at corners
facing center sing
what sounds at first like
one continuous shrill trill
but soon as I stop to listen
I hear their sinuous song

three crows lined up in a row
along the path that curves
past the back side of east bay
leap into flight mechanically
in sequence keeping perfect
time with me as I walk by

4.

the homeless men who sleep
on the sidewalks on thurston street
near the furniture connection
and zeigler's welding
are packing up
bags and bags of stuff

I wonder as I always do
where and how
they haul it all day
day after day
until I see them again
in the morning packing up

one young man still asleep
seems to have nothing
but the small blanket
pulled down over his head
his bare calloused feet
sticking out
peony pink
slicked with soot
wood ash gray
I want to call them beautiful
and to keep looking
except well of course

5.

the four mystery trees
along the sidewalk
beside the doubletree hotel
have many long slinky arms
twisting out and about
like gayatri devi belly dancing
each one wrapped
in a tight green sleeve
of shiny green leaves
spiraling from trunk to tip

6.

and budd bay from the boardwalk
well what can I say
sky-high blue mirrored
a hundred feet deep
adorned with trees
and boats and birds
and clouds and docks
one down there
for every one up here

except for those bland nouns
I have nothing

7.

on my way back up the hill
at the corner of olympia and franklin
in the big store-window
that is a perfect mirror
the young woman I often see there
staring at her reflection
sometimes dancing
sometimes talking back to herself
stands still today
inches from the glass
pulling her hair back
to admire
her perfect beauty
as I do sometimes
to see mine
when no one else
is there to see me
see me but me

8.

on east bay the fog
has retreated
all the way back to the sailboats
lined up in rows
their mast-tips propping up
a soft white cushion
on top of which
distant mountains
now lounge lazily
gazing up
at endless azure sky

9.

I left later than usual today
to take my walk
sunday distractions and all

given what I saw
I'm pretty sure
at least today
I did not leave
too early
or wait too late

backlit

(walking to eld inlet, 10/16/22)

1.

that flat part of
paul 20 feet tall
bobs up and down
on the path
in front of me
attached somehow
to the tips of my toes

just to my right
lazing in light
white bark adazzle
a freshly fallen alder
friendliest of trees
stretches out straight
its full 80 feet

2.

sunlight-riffled
shade shimmers
brown and green
camouflage mottled
far as eye can see
a full forest hidden
inside only itself

3.

what happens when
sunlight walks
on wavering water
is wizard alchemy
hypnotic trance
optic overwhelm
way too liquid-quick

for stuck-in-the-mud
poems like this
strings of single words
wrung out and hung
up to dry on lines
strung too tight by
tongue twisters like me

*heading to woodard bay
before the fog burns off*

10/19/22

1.

I left early to lose myself
in outside-fog instead of
winding tighter inside mine
a week-long unraveling
sorted finally I hope
by last night's dreams

I'm wearing a new pair
of canary yellow
underwear to declare
to the only one
who really cares
what underwear I wear
I am still "still there"

2.

east bay drive hulls
unrolling off-white
taffeta from sky-high
folded over treetops
then pale green veils
down to the ground

3.

rolled aside chunks
of trunks line the path
hazard-trees chain-sawed
last week parted out now
around flat-topped
sawdust-crusting stumps

the first few firs emerge
vague moss-draped
shapes hovering above
burnished-bronze ferns
that vanish quickly
into static noise

4.

puffy pillow-filling
fluffs up atop the water
so thick you can't say
for sure there are forests
of firs on the far side
or even a bay still there

except for those
three seagull-sentinels
standing guard on shore
or plunks of invisible
cormorants dunking
underwater to feed

5.

I have not been
this happy to be me
in a long long time

by eleven everything
will be crystal clear
and so will I

standing by budd bay, 5/23/22

rows and rows
of glossy white boats
float hopefully
on wavering water
waiting . . .

air saturated with
saline sea over-
flows my eyes with
everything lovely
between . . .

soon a single warm
tear slides ever so
slowly down my
right cheek all that's
left of . . .

soon a second warm
tear slides ever so
slowly down my
left cheek all that's
found of . . .

I lean elbows firmly
on the boardwalk
railing and know
for sure my life
has been . . .

I think, therefore . . .

1.

. . . i am

a fleck
of wave-tip light
on an endless
sunlit sea

2.

... i am

on a path

straight and

n

a

r

r

o

w

or

i a

m

n o

t

3.

... i am

exactly what
popeye
the sailorman says

i am ...

Paul's other books:

Poetry:

insta-poems (2023)

first: my newer tiny poems from (t)here (2022)

slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)

September Threnody (2016-23)

In the Dark (2016)

Harvest Moon (2016)

Li Po-ems (2016)

Mornings After: Poems 1975-95

Beginning Was (1980)

Personal Essays:

waking up (2023)

In Dreams . . . (2022)

Living Hidden (2021)

Harvest (2020)

Spring Forward (2019)

The Imagination (2019)

A Mind of Winter (2019)

First, Summer (2018)

Last Spring (2018)

This Fall (2016)

Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)

Writing/Teaching (2001)

