

the other side of the light

poems by

paul kameen

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looking cafe

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Preface

Poets, like all artists, can inhabit liminal spaces that are both vividly present, right now, documenting the moment, and powerfully futural, opening ways towards what's next and new. These two ways of “envisioning,” often at odds in settled times, tend to coalesce cooperatively at historical moments like ours, an old order on the way out, a new one not yet fully fledged, see-er and seer becoming one.

The poems in this book may seem on the surface to be doing the former in an extreme way—they are tiny and precise records of perceptions, almost-nothings in a way—and very little if any of the latter—absent as they are of assertions or prescriptions, or even linguistic novelties. For me, what these poems don't do is more important than what they do. My foundational belief is that the eyes we see with create a default path forward. So to alter that path, which is urgently important right now, one needs first to learn to look in a new way at what's right there, now, in the moment.

The figure of the poet has been writ large in Western culture for so long it seems the “natural” mode for this kind of artist, an egoic echo of what that culture believes and stands for. But history is full of examples that go quietly in the opposite direction, which is the one I'd prefer, personally, to go in right now. The best way I can think of to do that is to realize, in every fiber of my being, that “it's not about me now, never was, never should have been,” my boiled down essence of what an “object-oriented” poetics might feel like.

On the most practical level, my creative project is now animated by a desire to become smaller, as barely there

as possible, until I am malleable enough among all those other not-me-objects-out-there, the ones I meet while I'm sitting on my front porch or on my daily walks, that, from time to time, they will reveal something right-now-true about themselves. And I can, via the alchemy of poetic translation, reveal something right-now-true about myself, both to them and to me. That may sound implausible, even delusional. But that's my plan, and this book is an attempt to execute that plan with some actual poems.

**part one: 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 with
this late august heat

2. *august 23rd, 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

3. *august 24th*, 5 AM

somewhere up there
air goes wild whooshing
down here in dark
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
light invites us all to wake up

4. *august 27th, 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
is now down
there with them
just above the floor
where I hope it will stay
all day long
so astonished
by how deftly I
was caressed
this morning
it will need to keep
reminding me
to breathe

5. *august 28th, 5 AM*

blurry fog
blesses everything

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

every porchlight
is huge and haloed
many little moons

two hooded floodlamps
throw down
pyramids of 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

6. *august 29th, 4:30 AM*

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

they rise 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-floss
clouds shapeshifting

when I block the streetlight
with my hand
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

7. *august 30th, 5:17 AM*

I am so sad this morning
good sad
the kind of quiet mind
that's left behind
when finally
you tell yourself the truth

charcoal skies
background black trees

I realize for the first time
that I can see at least
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
or by people walking 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 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 ever 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
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

8. *september 3rd, 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 my lens
refracts today

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

9. *september 4th, 3:07 AM*

I don't think
I am going to think anything today
I don't even think . . . I am

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

I woke up telling myself
I know exactly what
I want to say
even when I can't
maybe you do too
if so I hope you'll say so
so I won't have to
wait to know

I'm pretty sure
quinn izzy and delilah
are still asleep
and I would be too
except I couldn't stand
my dreams any longer

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 raise my hand
to the streetlamp
dozens more flicker on

if I could turn off
all the lights
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-studded 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 who I am

10. september 8th, 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 iridescent
lightstreams
through the 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

11. 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

12. *september 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
five 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

**part two: walking to water
at dawn poems**

walking to budd bay and back, october 7

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

1.

sudden sunup stuns
air breathless
everything appears
magic mushroom clear
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
at the edge of east bay
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.

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

6.

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

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

christmas morning in olympia

a flotilla of buffleheads
twenty or more
cruise across budd bay
in v-formation
all their puzzle-piece whites
checkerboarded on black water
like the road this morning
patches of new snow
on the dark, wet street
a rare white christmas
in this neck of the waters

and I am “light as a feather,”
after past-present-future
visited my dreams last night
as they do almost every night
reminding me that today
is christmas and so is today
and today and today
an endless stream of them
each one “light as a feather”

like those buffleheads
fluffy as feathers
made of feathers
gliding so gracefully
across still water
toward me today
the way everything
of value in life

glides so gracefully
toward me every day
and you too
if you let it
so right-now-white
so right-white now
so light-as-a-feather white

the day after christmas in olympia

snow pours down
a grim gritty fog
wind-swirled

three huge hemlocks
in the park
across the street

older even than I am
shimmy and sway
but never waver

ten stories tall
they have seen it all
and still stand still

I spent the night
watching things end
through the window

so many I love
gone missing
in the clouds

I have spent the day
forgetting what I want
through the window

this blur of snow
tiny tears swirling
wildly in the wind

three hours later
the weepy branches
settle and laze

glazed tip to top
with icy white
shimmering sunlight

building-tall minty
cookies cut
out of blue sky

worn thin by
what was lost
and found today

tears are never
enough to cover
what's not here

year after year
they come and go
a fog of snow

pouring down
over and over
blurring everything

until sunlight
shines blindingly
somehow still always

january 2nd

january sunlight blazes
june bright coaxes
amazingly
each grass blade
glazed white with frost
into sudden blossom

silences rise
like chimney smoke
through my mind
all day watching
this and that
pass through
without a trace

each vernal
instant
eternal

nothing

every

thing

still

still

there

january 8th

1.

after days of rain
harsh and heavy
after days of snow
halted everything

the air clears
low puffed clouds
endless ruffles
tiger-stripe sky

tiny blue eyes
peek-a-boo
seeking sunlight
unremembered

2.

a dozen coots
bunch on budd bay
drift along shiftless
white beaks adazzle

two mergansers
flaunt flamboyant 'dos
flick off water
fluffing up after dunks

three glider-winged
gulls dive wildly
cloud-white kites
wired to wind

3.

in my last dream
last night
I found you
waiting back home

one kiss and I woke
suddenly knowing
everything left to know
about not knowing

what it feels like
to miss something
terribly until it's
gone again for good

now cloud-crowned
mountains stride
violently
toward downtown

january 12th

after rain all week
washed air warms
eerily still

one silent gull glides
to the bay
two blocks away
without flapping a wing

at the tip of each
twig and leaf
a water bubble beads

lines of tinier droplets
distend the tender
underbellies of branches

none of them
move at all
or fall

small blown-glass balls
each a snow-globe
universe overfull
of life ongoing
invisible from here

just like the one
I have to live in
every day now
where nothing
seems to come
of the nothing
already here
no one near enough
to see outside-in

off in the distance
a single gull squawks
over and over
barely audible
the only sound
mid-january air
washed clean
and warm carries

still eerily still

january 20th

last night wind wailed
rain flailing sideways

the few leaves still left
left in a dither

this morning gulls glide
around icy skies

bright white blades slicing
blue to pieces

one plus one, february 10th

1.

two soaked oak leaves
flip-flop like flapjacks
up the wet sidewalk

the rest
stay stuck
down tight

2.

two buffleheads dive
curled necks unfurl
drive beaks down

a minute later
they bob up
do it again

3.

two cormorants
black statues
on the dock

one's head held high
the other's s-hook neck bowed
beak touching feet

4.

I hear the crunch of metal first
a big 90s Buick
dark blue coasts to a stop

right front corner crushed
a man in an orange vest
rushes across the road

a woman old as me
sits staring blankly ahead
hands clenching wheel

hoping to cope
with the discombobulation
of a day like today

so dank and gray
one plus one suddenly
doesn't add up

for lulu

fifty gulls float
motionless
on still water
superwhite in
bright sun
face right into
the light
waiting . . . for

what?

one and one only
shrieks over and over
no replies
no way to know
why it cries

a child trips
and falls
on the paved path
wails waiting
to be picked up
and held

I walk off into the woods
those cries ringing
in my ears
wringing my heart

no loss is too small
to mourn
all now nothing
here now gone
blank space
waiting for . . .

what?

Rainier's ice shines
behind the tree line
the only clouds
in the whole sky
three filmy gray streaks
smudging up its peak

on my way back
all the gulls
face the other way
the late day sun
slant too much even
for their eyes

no bird shrieks
no child cries
why must
tears always fall
without sound
to the forest floor
no one ever
there to hear

not lulu, not you
not anyone

not even me.

again

after rain
puddles wane
pain drains

again

water wells
hollows swallow
wallows follow

again

one-way wants
wander off
wonder won't

again

love shallow
fades fallow
so do you

again

*and I think to myself
what a wonderful world*

after days of gray
sun rises
blindingly bright

the bay lays
itself out
absolutely flat
a layer of jade
carved out between
stands of firs
lining each side
bowing heads down
a hundred feet deep

a few buffleheads
float motionless
fleeting foreverness

as soon as I enter
the woods I notice
the path-side trees
have moved so much
closer than yesterday
near enough now
to reach out to me
one after another
a slight brush
a gentle touch

and I reach back
“friends shaking
hands saying
how do you do”
we’re “really saying
I love you”

if you don’t believe
that last sentence
stop reading this like
right now I mean it
stop like right now

. . . okay now
still here with
ears to hear
you know for sure
we are “*really*
saying I love you”

how I reached back
to thirty-some trees
no strained stretching
clambering off
the path touched
five times more
than yesterday
without even trying

and I know why
so I'll tell you

on my way back
up the blacktop path
to the lot alone
maybe 100 yards
ahead a mother
with her little girl
just heading in
holding hands
and I heard her yell
“look, *there's* somebody!”
as if it was a miracle
not to be there *alone*

yes little girl
I *am* somebody
no longer alone
at least today
after all that gray
sun so bright
and all those trees
reached exactly
the same conclusion
“look, there's *somebody*”

and if you didn't
stop reading
and have reached
the same conclusion
as this poem well

that little girl
those trees and me
the sun the bay
the buffleheads
still sitting still
as I drive off
we're all reaching
to say back "yes,
you're *somebody*, too,
look, there, *you're*
somebody, too"

february 24th

1.

half a dozen buffleheads
zig on the wing
up the upper arm

of budd bay zag
back hyper-fast half
a mile in half a minute

skid to a sloppy stop
swirl in circles
chasing each other

wild wing-flaps slap
water every which way
I watch and wonder

playing bathing mating
fighting no idea
after a while one slides

off to the side and settles
then one by one they all wind
down dunking under to fish

in order to see normal
orderliness in order
it sometimes helps
to see disorder first

2.

I woke late today
frost ice-pack thick
on the carport roof

now noon sky blue
sun done bleaching
crazed white away

half a year in half a day
half a dozen birds fly half
a mile in half a minute

so wild on wing and
water all I do is
watch a while

some days what's out there
matches so exactly
what's in here I wonder
is that half also this

march 9th at woodard bay

1.

mountainous fountains
of ferns spout out and down
both steep sides of the path
flash frozen mid-air last fall
still winter-stiff as this wind
splicing splines of white caps
onto lines of wine-dark waves

on the abandoned rail trestle
hovering hauntingly mid-bay
maybe a hundred herons
huddle up head-tucked
under hunched shoulders
dreaming of nest-building
any day now in these tall trees

2.

there is an end to everything
even winter no matter how long
it lasts for those willing to wait
without wanting what winter
withholds at land's last fingertip
pointing out toward open water
wind stinging cheeks pink

until one day a hundred
herons take wing at once
scatter every which way
and whole forest floors
of ferns flash forward
fluttering emerald feathers
dazzled with endless light

walking by budd bay, march 10th

between a ground-
bound mound
of sheared wool clouds

and a ragged band
of black bangs
dangling down

the bottom layer
of a parfait of grays
ladled to heaven

six snow-streaked peaks
of the Olympic mountains
float in mid-air

levitated by sunlight
no longer either
here or there

four or five
seagulls glide by
all grays and whites

trying to show
airborne mountains
how now to fly

avian inventory, march 22nd

1. *the inlet*

2 bald eagles
glide side by side
treetop high
a flight path
to my right
so soon
out of sight

6 herons
galumph across
the inlet settling
separately
in topmost
cedar branches
their s-hook necks
stretching up to
pick something
for nest-making
or just to
breathe in deep

a smattering
of buffleheads
maybe twenty
in a scattershot
pattern near
the inlet mouth
dabble and dunk

half a dozen scoters
scoot around
in tight formation
at the center
bullseye

1 kingfisher
bullets instant
down the inlet
inches above
water alights
on a branch
overhanging

30 seconds later
2 kingfishers
bullet all the way
back up the inlet

30 seconds later
2 kingfishers bullet
all the way back
down the inlet

I have no idea
how few kingfishers
comprise those 5

2 canada geese
snuffle up
something sumptuous
near the shore
then paddle
madly away

2. *the bay*

30 or so herons
stand steel statue still
on the abandoned
lumber-dumping
railway trestle
out in the bay
soaking in heat
from morning sun

2 geese waddle
side by side by
a big alder near
the picnic tables
marking a spot
for me to stand
tomorrow when
they are not
there to bother

1 spotted towhee
flits twig tip
to twig tip
in underbrush
I know for sure
it is not a robin
by the white
bits on its wings

1 very rare varied thrush
yellow-orange stripe
above the eye
rusty-color breast
robin-like but not
sits still on a bare
branch long enough
for me to memorize
later to learn its name

3 more herons
float overhead
barely wing-flapping
waft down to join
the legions warming

1 robin after another
every fifty feet
or so too many
to number
and sparrows
and juncos zinging
back and forth
across the path
same thing but

I see them
every single one

3.

every single one
I see them

air so clear
so right here
nothing not near-
by my eyes wide
as sea and sky
unconcealing all
these things
with feathers
floating or in flight

two new birds, march 29th

1.

pink dimpled
skin head
hook-beaked

thin-necked
thick-thighed
forty feet up
on the flat top
of a wind-lopped
hemlock
a turkey vulture
turntables
clockwise
step by step
wings spread
wide to dry
in the sun

2.

that popsicle
stick tail
sidewise-flicking
tiny brown
round mound
on the ground
beak-picking
bewick's wren
twitchy as I am
fiddling with
my camera
then bam gone

back at woodard bay after a long absence

1.

from the tip of Henderson inlet
a phalanx of buffleheads
is swept off like flotsam
on the outgoing tide
three flame-coifed mergansers
leading the way

2.

a dozen juncos
skitter and flit
down the gravel path
zig-zag back and
forth settling
in low-slung
hemlock branches
on either side
of me seeming
(to me) to smile

3.

a tangled stand of
white-blanch'd alders
eighty feet tall
winter bald
all lean jauntily
at the same angle
tipping patiently
in the direction
of remembered
summer's sunlight

4.

the water seems so much wider
without late-summer foliage
mirror white for half a mile
then washboard gray
the rest of the way
to budd bay

5.

twenty seals slumber
on the hundred-year-old
lumber-dumping dock
gurgling and grunting
contentedly

every few minutes
one bellyflops off
to fish

6.

as I stand at the point
one stunning bufflehead
flies past me
the first one I've seen
on the wing today
inches above the water
displaying all at once
in freeze-frames
flickering fast-forward
all of its dazzling whites

7.

once again

I am here
after all these weeks
nothing
but an absence
happy to host
all this presence

once again

I have no idea

what that bird is
in my backyard
singing away
every day at dawn

such a song
I never heard
a bird I cannot
ever see and

me sitting here
typing away
at something
exactly like this

that cannot
sing like that
I would try
to make up

a few words
that sound
something like
that song but

no poet ever
could do that
even shelley
surely never me

but come over
any day you
want at dawn
and sit a while

with me and
you will not
need a poet
to tell you

how a bird
you never see
can sing a song
you never heard

think

what it might mean
today

to say
out loud
I love you

if you are alone
walking in the woods
among winter trees
their svelte delicate arms
outreaching
so openly
they will smile
understanding

never say
I love you
back
knowing
you will know
that everything they know
about love
is in words
that cannot be heard

except
we will be here
when you come back
tomorrow
lovingly
by yourself
with us
another ordinary day

you may say
I love you
all day long
to children
the glossy wings
of those words
gliding perfectly
through the crystalline air
a bright white wedge
dissecting the bluest of skies
swooping
to a soft
landing
in the greenest grass
that grows
in that wide field
at the top of the hill
where you always end
your imagined walks
with them
together

and you may
say them
smilingly
to any passerby
on the street
who will assume
a lunacy
of loneliness
or the out-of-tuneness
of Jesus
sounding loose
even stupid
so barren there
in the open air

when they cast
eyes askance
and walk past
at an obtuse angle
as if they cannot hear

or nod smilingly
to say
silently
safely
thank you
even if I can't now
know for sure
or say
that I love you too

be wary though
with those
who barely
know you
out there
in the marketplace
of giving and taking
wanting and needing
where those three words
are a worrisome
currency

care there
is imperative
say I love you
even beneath your breath
and those who overhear
will tighten
recoil slightly
eyes dipping

tiny invisible anxieties
gripping the corners
of their lips
tipping them
down

but always
and I mean always
in the lush hidden chambers
of your own heart
where you speak to yourself
ceaselessly

say I love you
over and over
an endless loop
as if those are
the only three words
you still remember

ever need

to hear

or to think

**Paul's other books, available at paulkameen.com
and amazon.com:**

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:

The New Not-Normal: after the pandemic(2024)
writing myself in:an essay and a story (2024)
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)

