

Mornings  
After

*Selected Poems*  
1975-1995

Paul Kameen



Copyright 2017 by Paul Kameen  
Cover Image 2016 by Joseph Kameen

7/2/2025 edition

**Acknowledgements:**

*Backspace, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, PoetryMagazine.com,  
5AM, West Branch, Piedmont Literary Review, The  
Brownstone Review, Gulf Stream Magazine, Endless Mountains  
Review, College English, Oakland Review, Boston Literary  
Review, Endless Mountains Review, The Kansas Quarterly,  
Pivot, Eleven*



## *Contents*

<b>Preface</b>	8
----------------	---

### **Part 1: The Mornings After**

Morning Song 1	11
Morning Song 2	12
Morning Song 3	13
Morning Song 4	14
Morning Song 5	15
Indian Summer	16
Autumn Walks to Work	17
Three Spring Songs	20
Breaking the Ice	22
Just Before the Rain	24
Crazy	26
For Daphne: On the Mornings After	27
Morning Rush	30
Limbo Rock	31
Winter Solstice	33
Pike's Peak	35

### **Part 2: The Nights Before**

The Night Before Roy Orbison Died	41
In Passing	44
Dreamwork	45
Star-Crossed	46
Night Thoughts	47
The Same Old Story	48
Index of Refraction	49
Love Song	50
A Beginning for the True Poem of January	51
Five Scenes from My Final Dream of You	52
Memorabilia	55

The Taste of Water	56
Nine Lives	58
Sleight of Hand	61
Missing Americans	62
The Other Side of the Light	63
Gentrification	65
Postcards from the Shore	67
Appraising the Vase	69
Poems in the Manner of Emily Dickinson	70

### **Part 3: Snow Man**

Snow Man	73
The Poet Comes Out at Night	85





## *Preface*

Between the mid-70s and the mid-90s I wrote a few hundred poems. Then I stopped, not just the sending out but the writing, for a set of very good reasons I detail in my book *Re-reading Poets*. I compile here many of my personal favorites from that earlier era of my creative life.

I started writing poems again in the fall of 2016, all of those books now on my website and Amazon, and I've been at it ever since. I am, in retrospect, delighted with all of it, these poems I wrote early, the stop, and the sudden re-start. I hope you'll find something here to be delighted with as well.



## **Part 1: The Mornings After**

*Morning Song 1*

This morning  
many small angels gathered  
on my window as if  
they might stay  
all day to pray or  
picnic there, happily  
for no reason in particular.

When they moved their luminous  
heads, splinters of daylight streaked  
all across my room.  
After a while they filed  
quietly upward and  
out of my sight.

I leaned back more solidly  
in my chair and smiled, thinking:  
they have nothing  
whatever to do with  
the day I am  
about to waste now.

On my way to work a passerby  
glanced at me a second  
time thinking: that man  
must have seen angels on  
his window this morning,  
while I slept.

*Morning Song 2*

This morning  
a herd of elephants  
stampeded through the trees.  
For no particular reason except  
it is November now  
and there is nothing  
left to wait for.

I dressed hurriedly  
and stepped out into  
the thick, gray  
flesh of Thursday, thinking:  
sometimes it is hard  
to know what  
to love  
and when.

Then I remembered  
the elephants who love  
everything even  
Thursday and November  
and I skipped my way to work  
through the beautiful  
wreckage of leaves.

*Morning Song 3*

This morning  
I woke to  
a roomful of azaleas,  
thousands of them, clouds  
of flowers blooming ferociously,  
more gorgeous than I  
could ever hope to afford,  
enough lush color to crowd out  
even my loudest dreams.

I lolled for a while  
in a haze of fragrances too  
hothouse sweet to breathe.  
Then I hacked my way  
to the stairs thinking:  
sometimes you cannot trust  
anything to be  
only reasonably beautiful.

On my way to work I saw nothing  
except the fog of my hot  
breath catching itself like  
cotton on the frost-  
sharp air and I thought  
of all I had meant  
to say that day about  
my being beautiful  
and wouldn't now because of  
those damn azaleas.

*Morning Song 4*

This morning  
all the bluebirds I ever knew  
(and that's a lot of them)  
stopped by my place just  
to sit around and sing.

I couldn't figure it.  
I was no place they should be.  
But they were there. Not just  
like I remembered it.  
Like for real.

Pretty soon it was "blue"  
this and "blue" that and  
"blue" them and "blue" me  
until there were more  
blues in that room than  
all the music I knew.  
Or than the sky.

I rocked back and forth  
in my chair thinking:  
they say the Eastern Bluebird  
is nearly extinct, and most of  
this month I believed it.  
Now I have to wonder.

On my way to work  
their cheerful, delicate voices  
diminished as I walked  
till all I heard was traffic  
or the wind, which seemed  
to want to wonder  
how any day could start  
so blue and come so soon  
to this.

*Morning Song 5*

This morning  
many made-up minds climbed  
in over the windowsill  
back from wherever  
sane as the light of day  
meaning what they meant.

I had to laugh.  
They just sat there  
in a small circle and talked  
quietly  
for a long time  
mostly about "life:" how  
this one for example happened  
at the moment to be mine.

I did not "think"  
anything all day.  
I did not need to.  
I did not go to work.  
I just sat there  
and listened  
quietly  
for a long time  
to the sound of many minds  
saying something  
singly,  
like mine.

*Indian Summer*

The sassafras I sit under is a tangle  
of mango-colored hands. With each easy breeze  
they wave bravely, cavalierly even,  
as if there were no such thing as November.

Lots of other leaves flutter  
down around me--beech, maple, oak--  
one, a couple, a dozen at a time.  
They are crisp and flat and make a pleasant clatter.

But the sassafras leaves stay where they are,  
their August-sundown oranges  
growing more and more gorgeous  
in the warm, late-morning light.

I try to figure out what they are here to teach me.  
I already know every shade of sundown they can think of.  
I know the secret of holding on when others won't.  
And I know all about November.

Still, I cannot turn away.  
I decide to sit a little longer than I'd planned,  
enjoy, while I can, this heat,  
the breeze, these mango-colored hands.

*Autumn Walks to Work  
Through Schenley Park*

I

Maples drench everything  
in lovely shades of red.  
Always above average,  
never stunning, shunning  
attention, they display  
what is left them, yield  
slowly and only to need.

Today, while I am taking  
care of my affairs,  
I will remind myself:  
maples drench everything  
in lovely shades of red.

II

The two elms on Flagstaff Hill,  
so lush, so sexual, just yesterday,  
went last night—that needling  
rain—in privacy, to pieces.  
Today: a shambles of yellow  
dulling down the lawn.

I know just what it's like,  
those all-at-once undressings  
in the cold; and the mornings-  
after. I shuffle down the leaf-  
slick hill, hoping not to slip.

### III

Like a team of breaching whales  
locked in freeze-frame  
at the top of a leap, three sycamores  
lean over the street, waiting  
for stop-action to start up again:  
a splash of sun-bleached  
umbers, a settled sea.

Such colors as these, they say, emerge  
only as dominant green  
recedes: spectacles of absence,  
brief celebrations  
before loss entire.

### IV

Ghinkos—licks of flame  
stilled, cool tongues—  
line the sidewalk.  
The rest of the trees  
on the block—coal-black  
and alien their remains—  
gave up days ago.  
Ghinkos still heave back  
rain-soaked manes  
and menace.

I walk by watching  
only out of the corner  
of my eye, wanting  
not to intrude on  
what soon they stand to lose.

*Coda*

I have lost  
just about everything I can think of  
at least once in this town:  
one night, firestorms  
afloat on a foam of smoke,  
smelting; by morning  
nothing but empty  
shells of mills, tame as sheep  
asleep on their feet.

Raucous autumn: I walk  
across broad yellow pools  
of dead leaves, my gait  
steady, geared it seems  
to a dream of my own making.

A shutter clicks, fixing  
in black and white  
the empty frames of trees,  
the leaf-strewn hill,  
and me—grateful  
the fallings are all over,  
this fierce season—  
at the brink, glancing back,  
almost halfway home.

*Three Spring Songs*

I

Mid-March—the Carolina wren sets up  
in his old spot on the basketball backboard  
and warbles. The notes that float from his throat  
are so pure I am sure they will endure  
whatever the day's weather.

Just a week ago I wondered  
if anything at all would survive winter:  
that long, gray ship gripping  
row after row of gaping mouths, not allowed  
to make even the slightest sound.

Today the sky is a bright, brittle blue.  
It arches over the newly green treetops  
like the shell of an egg, a sign  
that soon it will be time again to sing.

II

A tiny iris spikes through last night's snow.  
I have waited all winter by the window  
for this moment. The blossom opens,  
each petal a dark velvet pool,  
perfectly still, over which a man rows boat  
slowly, on his way back home.

I am suddenly beside myself, staring  
at that strange, pale, gray-haired fellow  
standing by the window waiting for something.  
Before the morning is out, there will be  
only one of us here, rowing  
slowly on his way back home.

### III

Like fireworks freeze-framed in free-fall  
three switches of forsythia sweep  
in elegant arcs over the lip of the hill  
all the way down to the street.  
Yesterday they were just a few thin sticks  
whipping wildly in the wind.

Today, they trace an array of paths  
between this dreary universe  
and the one we want to get to.  
Look: In just the last few hours  
they have left thousands  
of yellow prints for us to follow.

*Breaking the Ice*

I

Last night's freezing rain slid  
like a tight glove—precisely,  
down to the finest detail—  
over leaf and twig and bud,  
each one iridescent now  
in the bright March sun.

I've been studying this scene  
for the last half hour or so  
trying to find a way of saying  
how life is sometimes like that.  
You know, the ironic play  
of fire over ice:  
thin, shimmering fingers  
burrowing into the firm sky  
against all odds, achieving something.  
Or the other way around:  
slivers of heat intruding  
into the good wood  
which shivers, gives way.  
I can't make either one work.

II

In the ninth grade I prayed  
day after day  
that she'd stop and talk to me  
on her way out of school.  
I'd stand by the door hoping  
to catch her eye as she hurried by,  
try to come up with a clever line  
to break the ice.  
I couldn't make either one work.

So, every afternoon at three  
for the last thirty years—  
in my mind's eye, at least—  
she breezes right by  
without noticing I'm there,  
hugs her smug boyfriend  
climbs aboard the same clunky bus  
and chugs away.

### III

I walk down to the bus stop  
to meet my son.  
By the time we get home  
the ice is crashing down  
in big, wet slabs  
all over the back yard.  
We sit on the porch steps  
and laugh like crazy amazed  
at all that dazzle and disarray.

As his bus heads up the hill  
I could swear I see her  
looking out the window at us,  
big eyes, like it just dawned on her,  
that tomorrow,  
when she's heading home,  
I won't be there.

*Just Before the Rain*

Three amber beacons meander  
around the night sky announcing  
*something* and I follow  
all the way across town until  
out of nowhere: a life-size  
plywood ark, blue, bobbing  
on fake yellow waves  
the heads of two giraffes  
poking up through the top  
and smiling like no animals  
are supposed to smile except  
maybe alone in the privacy  
of their own wilderness  
before they were ransacked  
and led up the plank to a small  
stall for a 40-day boat ride  
to nowhere, too poor they both  
knew for a real cruise so stuck  
together for this. And a deck  
below, the hippos, snouts  
opening and closing as if  
they can't stop laughing at  
the thought of adding ballast  
so the whole damn thing  
doesn't just topple over and sink.  
And for godssake of all things  
two ostriches weaving back  
and forth on deck like drunks  
toward Noah, at the wheel,  
looking a lot older and dumber  
than I ever would have guessed  
it would take to keep a boat  
like this afloat, his furrowed  
brow throbbing out in neon  
an ad for car stereos and sunroofs.

I wait at the base of the stairs thinking:  
it's only a matter of time now  
before those three amber beacons  
beckon my roommate and we board.

*Crazy*

as the wind he was and wanted,  
for himself, nothing; but for her:  
the most glorious chrysanthemums,  
armloads of yellow held loose, huge  
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;  
behind them, his smile, so wide  
no one, not even her, could ever hope  
to resist; then he'd run toward her  
through the tall grass, in slo-mo  
maybe, his dozens of chrysanthemums  
bobbing every which way, crazy  
as the wind he was, and wanted.

Or so he told his florist in the morning,  
who recommended roses, or a nosegay--  
anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,  
but what he wanted, was: the wind.

*For Daphne: On the Mornings After*

I

She told me how in her day  
it happened matter-of-factly:  
some girl on her way, say,  
to the well, stopped in her tracks,  
legs stiff as tree stumps,  
feet rooted to the ground;  
and from fingertips clutching  
at a cloudless, blue sky,  
thousands of leaves puffed  
up from their buds at once.

The news spread fast:  
proud parents announcing it,  
a coming out of sorts;  
brothers and sisters amazed  
at the luck of such a great story  
to tell to their friends at school;  
her boyfriend, well, at a loss,  
a little miffed, missing her.  
Later, all the celebrating done,  
everyone else home and asleep,  
he'd hold her in his arms all night,  
promise never to marry.

II

I couldn't have been more than  
7 or 8 when I first heard you  
murmuring from the old elm  
I had to walk past on my way  
to the creek to play.

For years I steered clear,  
trying not to listen.  
Then one morning, my mind  
too much abuzz with wonder,  
I clung to the trunk  
hoping to seep like a dark stain  
into the clean wood beneath.  
That night your words  
turned into flocks of birds  
swarming wildly by moonlight  
across savannas of empty sky.

### III

Last week, on my way to work,  
the hollow of my head filling up,  
as usual, with a cloudless,  
blue sky, two birds circling  
without a place to settle,  
my legs suddenly stiffened;  
tendrils descended from  
my feet, holding me hard;  
arms, flung up to steady myself,  
locked, hands cupped  
open like empty nests.

Clouds of doubts massed up,  
passing in fast-forward,  
rationales I ransacked  
in my panic for an answer:  
the inevitable and graceless  
changes of age? the grappling  
fingers of someone else's past?  
death's staccato laughter?  
Then the birds settled  
and I heard again your words.

#### IV

I notice it now mostly mornings:  
a little stiffness in my hips,  
that ringing in my ears.  
All day the birds busy themselves  
with nesting. By night  
they settle down to rest.

I hear only the ceaseless music  
of their voices, or mine, singing  
of loves lost and then recovered,  
ever the same song, growing  
simpler and more clear,  
nearer to the light into which  
we are always rising up or settling,  
beyond which there is nothing more now  
either one of us needs to say.

*Morning Rush*

The big storm is all but over.  
A final few flakes float down  
in super-slow motion, falter in front of my windshield,  
and stall there, unwilling it seems to fall.  
Traffic crawls and halts, crawls and halts,  
hundreds of us hung up in long lines  
slung from hilltop to hilltop all the way to town.  
I will be lucky if I get to work by noon.  
I stare down at the broken white line  
inching past beside me. At this pace  
it seems so precise, so individual, so breathtakingly graceful.  
My radio blares: "Wild thing, I think you move me.  
But I want to know for sure."  
I try for a while to think of one person  
who might move me, for sure.  
Instead I find the driver in the car stopped momentarily  
alongside mine staring blankly over at me.  
He looks as if he might be watching me on TV,  
bored, blasé, the remote poised, ready to zap.  
I rise up, wind into my wickedest air guitar,  
and scream along with the Troggs,  
the two panes of glass between us  
not anywhere near thick enough  
to keep him from hearing:  
"Wild thing, you make my heart sing,  
you make everything . . . groovy."  
He jerks his head forward, pats down his hair, and scoots  
a car-length ahead, looking for another channel.  
I slide back down into the seat and think about maybe  
heading home, having accomplished already  
about as much as anyone has a right to expect,  
at least for a day like this, at least for a guy like me.

*Limbo Rock*

The lines for the water slides seem to snake away for days.  
Sleek, brown bodies steam dry between rides.  
Their parents, pink lumps slumped into inner tubes,  
bump lazily down a curvy turquoise culvert.

It must be a hundred degrees today, even under this tree.  
I creep deeper into the mottled shade,  
crocodile out of water.  
I can hardly breathe.  
"The Limbo Rock" rollicks down from the boardwalk:  
"Every limbo boy and girl/ All around the limbo world."  
Overhead the trees gyrate wildly  
in the rising heat, trying, as I am, to reach  
the cool languor of autumn, the freedom to let go.

I try to picture "a limbo moon above."  
It comes out electric blue, a black plastic sky  
oozing vaguely away from its wavy-hot edges.  
I try to imagine what it is like to "fall in limbo love."  
I think it is something I am too old for  
but would like to try.

Through the hazy heat I see a thin, lithe boy,  
tanned deep, leaning back, knees bent,  
duckstepping up to the limbo stick.  
"How low can you go?"  
I wish suddenly I were 16 again.  
Or at least had worn my bathing suit today.  
This must be just what these leaves will be thinking about  
in October, on their way down  
to the cool, beautiful ground,  
wishing it were August again, that they could gyrate  
wildly one last time in the unbearable heat.

I head out into the sun.  
Sweat pours down my chest.  
My daughter has been splashing around  
in the crowded pool.  
Now she runs to me, shivering, her lips blue.  
I swoop down and scoop her up,  
my knees buckling under her weight.  
Old, young, too hot, too cold,  
parents, children, each inching along  
in their own separate lines.  
Even the leaves in such a big rush  
to get where they won't want to be.  
On a day like this, if you stop to think about it,  
none of it really figures.

My daughter and I sway and laugh  
to the last few bars of music:  
"All around the limbo clock . . ."  
Pretty soon she doesn't shiver  
and I don't sweat.  
". . . Hey, let's do the limbo rock."

*Winter Solstice*  
*(with some fragments from Empedocles)*

a roomful of pure moonlight  
oozes over every  
pore of my body  
bathes me as if I were a child  
peals of his laughter leak  
like helium I hear  
a little-boy voice squeak  
parts of his heart healing . . .

he says to me:  
“shelter . . .  
a silent  
heart . . .”  
he says to me:  
“love . . .  
tenacious  
love . . .”  
he says to me:  
“there . . .  
it is fixed  
forever . . .”

night after night I sit here  
silent in the dark thinking  
I am closer than ever now  
to the last great nothing  
these dreams keep leaving  
my children build heavens  
I try . . .

tonight I will hold myself  
in my own warm arms  
then let them come apart  
riffle through pages scattered  
around me on the floor

lift them up in big bunches  
how slowly they float  
back down shining  
with borrowed light

tonight I will write myself  
a love poem  
it will begin with the line  
“a roomful of pure moonlight”  
but it is not this poem

this poem is only  
to help me  
forget  
what you thought  
I was trying to say . . .

*Pike's Peak*

I came for nothing but a pretty good tan

then the mountains massed, vexing  
a sky, wide and unoccupied turbulent spaces  
only a new eye  
can size up  
break down  
over and over, spending attention  
proportions of perception reordered

a whole season of sun in a week

tanning into the evening  
heat, skin sweating  
through the night

pigments gathering

in solitude abiding keen-eyed, silent  
the dry heat of thinking leaner and leaner  
toward nothing  
but a reputation for distance a pretty good tan

the western sky  
cowboy blue an hour after sundown thin air  
the sting of stars  
refusing to use even the fewest words

I lean back, listen  
skin stung with sunburn turning one word conserved,  
another red rock  
sandstone  
fool's gold

too deep even to feel  
massive plates of hot rock drift casual under pressure  
willing simply  
to give  
in the nature of things, resources in transit  
the silent sky intruded upon

I do not know any longer what it is possible  
to learn, teach, all afternoon

the grass lengthening perceptibly under me long silences  
over dinner listening

lapses of attention  
the privacy of sunburn turning

courage to preserve orders, order  
let go

strangers in a strange place cannot remain strangers long  
presenting oneself  
in the proper light

anyone's skin  
turns, the sun unconcerned with pleasantries  
over breakfast  
voices seeking  
the heat of speech

lint of cottonwood blowing up the steep slope  
to snow in the air  
brutal reversal of seasons a geography of loss grasped in the  
passing maps of the mind redrawn, the state

of things abiding sun, snow, stars struggle of feeling

the peak

peace  
willing simply  
to give  
in my words forming too deep to feel  
the burning  
under my shirt  
hot skin turning

words into

nothing  
but a pretty good tan





## **Part 2: The Nights Before**

*“Things between men and women are very important.”*

*Jim Fahey*

*The Night Before Roy Orbison Died*

I

In Miss Merino's ninth grade art class, I'd just drift off,  
daydreaming myself into the back seat of her black Pontiac,  
the late September heat abating in a lake breeze,  
Roy Orbison crooning "In Dreams" over the car radio,  
both of us grappling with the only things left between  
me and the ecstasy of . . .

The 1:55 bell snapping me out of her lap, back  
into the last row where I go grudgingly limp  
all the way to Algebra, never to measure  
even one of the curvy wonders Miss Merino  
kept treasured under her regimen of lingerie.

II

In the summer of 1963, months before  
the Beatles were anything more  
than a few teenyboppers screaming in Liverpool,  
I must have pumped a hundred nickels into the jukebox  
in the back of the Sugar Bowl, just to hear  
that sleek tenor, wire-tight, "oooh, oooh, pretty woman,"  
bought myself a slick, black, fake silk shirt,  
sat in the back booth, dark and mysterious,  
waiting for my own pretty woman  
to come walkin' back to me. Except  
in the second it took her to think about turning  
around, Lennon and McCartney  
started holding everybody's hand,  
Ringo pounding harder and harder on his drums,  
one at a time, then row after row after row  
down Pennsylvania Avenue, ratcheting our dreams  
all the way back to a tiny flame in Arlington,  
a day's worth of drumming to remember it by,  
to forget, Roy Orbison singing "Crying,"  
all of us into the streets, to war.

Eight years later, the Sugar Bowl closed for good,  
I pulled that shirt from the corner of the closet,  
threw it in the Goodwill pile, the '60s suddenly  
history, bombs exploding all over Cambodia,  
collars buttoning down, belts tightening,  
the long, slow leak of impeachment,  
Roy Orbison singing "Only the Lonely"  
on the double album I bought  
as if he were already dead, or I was.  
and then 15 years later, there he was,  
on "Saturday Night Live:" that frying-pan flat face,  
the slicked back, sculpted sideburns  
still jet-black as the plastic glasses  
hanging halfway down his nose  
squeezing out the slight smile of a man too shy, or wise,  
to ask for anything. Then that voice:  
haunting, smooth, still chilling.

### III

Last night, the night before Roy Orbison died,  
his dark blue heart about to break  
one last time into unearthly song,  
I woke up in the back seat of Miss Merino's Pontiac,  
the decades between us passing so fast  
not my hair going gray, not the drag of gravity under flesh,  
not even Roy Orbison about to encore with "It's Over"  
could come between me and my sweet destiny.

### IV

I almost don't know what to make of anything tonight.  
I think my heart is breaking but I am not sure.  
I think of all I have missed, am missing right now  
to finish this, the way life keeps rushing off, up ahead,  
before you have time to finish asking for  
a second date, a better raise, a simple favor,  
just a single straight answer.

Without even thinking about it, I find myself  
saying a prayer for Roy Orbison.  
I don't know why.  
I am sure he is a happy man and probably always was.  
I play his songs over and over on the stereo.  
No one with a voice like that  
could ever have had his heart broken  
for good. If there is a heaven, he is singing there now.

Or, better, in the back of the Sugar Bowl,  
leaning against the jukebox, listening  
to his own sweet voice fill the room,  
some pretty woman, Miss Merino for all I know,  
halfway to the door, unable to decide  
whether to turn around.  
I see him there, frozen in that moment  
A serene early-'60s smile still on his face,  
nothing but a shy, kind man  
without a worry in the world,  
because the whole time—her heels  
clicking against the tile floor on her way out,  
another man immeasurably more handsome  
waiting in the street to meet her,  
my heart pounding faster and faster,  
fearing for him, for myself, for everyone who waits  
deep into the quiet night for someone else to decide  
and then walks home alone—  
because the whole time he knows just how the song goes  
and how it's going to end.

I think of Roy Orbison, dead less than a day,  
that voice rushing out through her car window  
as she drove away from school to somewhere, someone,  
a boy of 14 could never begin to imagine he could be  
or be like, "oooh, oooh, pretty woman"  
diminishing into the distance, as close  
as I thought I'd ever get to Miss Merino's back seat  
until the night before Roy Orbison died.

*In Passing*

On the border between your words  
and mine, there are half a dozen  
children jumping rope.  
I hear them laugh, count out,  
recite their rhymes.  
I have no idea how they are deciding  
whose turn is next  
or how they make the shift  
without skipping a twist of the rope.

But they do, as if nothing could be simpler.  
After a while  
I tell them to go faster  
so you and I can pass:  
They grow slowly older  
right before our eyes,  
look oddly askance at one another  
as if wondering why now  
they are chanting, must continue to jump.

One by one they tire, wander off.  
Soon you and I find ourselves  
alone, staring at each other  
from opposite sides  
of a worn rope turning  
and turning on its own now  
to a rhythm  
neither one of us can keep.

*Dreamwork*

Dizzy as all hell  
with a loss of love  
she calls me Ishmael  
in my sleep.

An odd-shaped ball  
tosses when we turn  
and what we talk about  
eludes me like a dream.

But this, if you don't  
believe me, is all for real.  
We rest in pieces pressed  
apart like sheets.

*Star-Crossed*

She climbs out of every star  
a delicate shining;  
I mean, out of her lingerie,  
a delicate shining  
behind my eyes  
where all the stars reside.

A mile from here  
she walks out into the light,  
a delicate shining  
in someone else's eyes.

Outside my window  
the sky  
is spotless  
and black.

*Night Thoughts*

I wanted to  
stick him good:  
an icepick  
in the eye.

Even a pinpoint  
star can drive  
spikes through the sky  
if you squint right.

It's the way  
light multiplies  
scares me most  
about the night.

*The Same Old Story*

On the bed she stiffens:  
the sheets, sweat-starched,  
a second skin shedding.

Words work  
up from her lungs, hunger  
for another history.

The same old story:  
love's delicate membrane  
abraded—a cough.

Into blue moonlit pools  
huge schools of orange fish  
swirl suddenly up from the deep.

*Index of Refraction*

As if this were only water  
let us lie down with our own bodies  
together as we remember them,  
rush up into the brilliant air  
all flecked and sprayed with light  
no longer what we were.

They say that at a certain depth  
the lungs simply explode.  
They do not ache.  
There is no more need  
to breathe.

To drown like this is peaceful  
only once, the great weight  
of water pressing down  
until the slightest touch will break  
through into another world divided  
entirely from you  
by a wide pane of light  
impassable as glass.

Where in the infinite sheen  
of white above me  
have you gone up for air?

*Love Song*

A broken bottle:  
chunks of brown glass  
scattered  
on the grass.

Any piece  
held as a lens  
brings autumn rushing  
down, evening,  
and the leaves.

Specks of gold light  
tensed apart in awkward  
poses: nothing left  
to hold.

*A Beginning for the True Poem of January*

Thickets of forsythia slick  
with ice: stiff switches  
snapping at each other  
in the back yard: apathy,  
anger, starlings arguing  
over seeds. Sleet ticks  
off the bedroom window:  
litanies of grievances  
repeated, harsh repartee,  
the hard ironies of winter  
stuck bud-thick in mid-

*Five Scenes from My Final Dream of You*

I

I am standing behind you on a balcony.  
Your white robe billows in the wind.  
My fingers reach all the way down  
to a child's memory, tinkering  
until you think you are no longer alone.  
From that moment on you do not hear  
any singing. You turn around and are mine.

II

When I raise my hands,  
thousands of yellow finches  
stop, wheel in a whirling mass,  
waiting their turns to pass.

Tonight I will teach you  
how to reach out for them,  
how to keep each one in your hand  
an instant only,  
fingers parting as they close,  
holding and letting go all one motion,  
your only measure  
the delicate pressure  
of feather-edge against skin.

In precisely this way  
your time and mine will be spent.  
Until morning.  
Let us begin.

### III

It is womb-warm and humid here.  
I could not be more at ease,  
with myself, with you.  
As we walk, long, lush fronds of fern unfurl  
eerily green before us.

Through the steamy mist  
that rises between us,  
hundreds of white horses  
are thundering over the tundra,  
eyes wild with desire.

Do you hear them coming?  
Do you hear?

### IV

I am standing alone  
against a stone wall, eyes closed,  
hands folded at my waist.  
I am growing slowly smaller  
and smaller. All around my head  
green auroras flicker, flash and fade.  
I fear that in the light of day  
they will masquerade  
as these mere words,  
which neither one of us will hear.

### V

Even in the deep of sleep,  
my heart aches  
beyond reckoning  
to see nothing more or less  
than what I have done.

Forgive me.  
It has taken me half a lifetime  
to begin the waking.  
Before I rise I must savor again  
this terrible aching of my heart.

*Memorabilia*

I thought of her as a crystal vase  
and wanted cut flowers to fill it,  
but it was March and the garden  
was buried under snow.

So I carved her likeness out of ice,  
and when she walked past me in the night  
the sound of her long, white gown  
disturbed my sleep.

Somewhere in the wilderness a deer  
reaches for three green pears on the lowest  
branch. He remembers her suddenly  
and leaves the last to ripen.

*The Taste of Water*

These days when I think of you  
it is like remembering the taste of water  
from an empty glass.  
I know I drank from it,  
this afternoon, while I was working  
sweat-drenched and achy in the garden  
to plant the rose bushes  
I got from my father over the weekend  
because he is in the hospital now,  
unable to turn the earth  
by himself for at least another month,  
too long to let those roses sit  
in their tight pots, waiting.

On the long drive home, uncertain of what I'd find,  
I tried to remember how things went  
wrong with us, and couldn't.  
My mother and I joked about divorce  
over dinner. It has finally come to that.

I have no idea how love can be reduced  
to nothing.  
But it is. Every day.  
By all of us.  
I am a witness.  
All I can think to tell you is that today,  
the hottest day in a couple of years here,  
I spent part of my afternoon  
digging holes for my father's rose bushes.  
They are important to me for reasons  
I have no interest in exploring.  
My children run back and forth squealing  
through the lawn sprinkler.  
Sweat mats my hair and streams down my face,  
which I think is smiling.

I have survived what I've had to,  
as most of us do, most of the time,  
until thirst is simply there again,  
waiting to be quenched.

## Nine Lives

### I

Persephone snickered,  
her beehive mind abuzz with  
digressions. He  
glanced at the calendar  
of love and offered her  
honey, sticky fingers  
picking at her wings.  
He did not believe  
in anything, not even her  
lips. He kissed her,  
sticky fingers picking  
at his wings.

### II

"Some people do not matter  
and never will." Martha  
wondered if she was  
one of them.  
She talked the room  
full of fudge.  
He ate it.  
She sat and waited, sated,  
afraid her skinny legs  
were getting fat.

### III

Rebecca stuck to  
her guns. He slung  
his hands low over  
her hips, swung her  
to some sweet music.  
Rebecca stuck to her  
guns like glue.

### IV

Stephanie slept with  
sorrow in her arms.  
He came and went  
like sighs between  
her teeth. She kept  
an empty glass to catch  
his breath. He slept  
soundly elsewhere,  
left her sheets intact.

### V

Carla towered over  
him, breathed power  
even in her sleep.  
He grew hair on his chest,  
talked tough through  
clenched teeth, reached  
roughly up to clutch  
her cheeks, as if to kiss  
her. Carla lowered  
herself  
slowly  
. . . if at all.

## VI

Dolores came like pain  
and stayed all day.  
He predicted rainy weather  
in his joints. She loved  
the loneliness of owning  
things. He coveted  
her tarnished moon  
and stars. Dolores  
came like rain  
and stayed all night.

## VII

Stella struck him  
as ornery. He fumbled  
not to tell her anything  
he felt. When she  
stumbled on his  
story Stella struck.

## VIII

Molly wanted nothing  
she could have  
and anything she couldn't.  
He spoke hopefully  
of love. She complained  
that sunset was a different  
color every evening.  
He sat amazed in his chair  
that there was ever  
light at all, that even as  
it faded, it felt  
warm enough to hold.

*Sleight of Hand*

Let me explain to you  
that this is not in any manner  
mysterious, what I am about to do, I mean,  
right before your eyes.

But you must pay close attention:

Here is a round bowl  
into which I pour one liter  
of distilled water.

It is just enough for one of us  
to survive for one night  
in the desert.

In a few moments I will allow you to decide  
in which direction you wish me to turn.

On the one hand

I will simply climb the stairs,  
take off my clothes and go to sleep.

You will find yourself alone here,  
staring contentedly at one goldfish  
in a round bowl

as it puckers its mouth  
over and over  
breathing.

On the other hand

I will stride directly at you,  
passing right through  
everything that stands between us.

You will hear nothing  
but the monotonous sound  
of my voice warning you over and over  
that you have gone too far now ever to get back,  
that to do so you would have to cross  
both your desert and mine  
with nothing but one liter of distilled water  
in a round bowl  
in which we are both now swimming  
unable even to breathe.

*Missing Americans*

Bearded, sweaty, he crouches in the shade  
leafing through the August *Penthouse*.  
I buy a dozen daisies from him, pretending  
the day is lovely, there is romance  
where I'm going, a woman in the flesh.  
As I turn the corner a wall of heat  
heaves up from the street. I stroll  
slowly through it, pretending I am  
Norman Vincent Peale afloat on an iceberg.  
It doesn't work. I am too hot to think  
straight, might as well be Buffalo Bob  
layered in braided suede, or Howdy  
Doody, wooden headed and sweatless.

They say the weather is going crazy.  
El Niño swirls slowly off the coast of Peru.  
Molten lava oozes down a swollen Hawaiian  
hillside. A year's worth of rain falls  
in a weekend on Galveston. The Sudan  
turns Sahara. And I am only halfway  
home. Norman Vincent Peale is lost at sea.  
His ice cube clinks inside a glass.  
Clarabell steals a Jeep in El Salvador.  
Four nuns fall to their knees pleading,  
el niño, el niño, just a kid, shoots them  
to keep cool. I stroll slowly home alone,  
a dozen daisies wilting in my fist.

*The Other Side of the Light*

I

My mother-in-law's former lover killed himself last Thursday.  
She just found out over the phone.  
She and my wife talk about him  
in hushed tones in the living room.  
I stare out the study window at an acre of new snow,  
a foot deep, maybe more.  
The trees--apple, locust, maple, oak--  
hover above it, like dark shrouds  
disconnected from the ground.

Death is, I'm sure, self-evident  
in an exhaust-filled garage.  
It is not a few bare trees in the back yard.  
It is probably not even very frightening.  
Someone looks at the bloated, blue face  
and says, for the record: "dead."

I wonder how long it is after the last breath  
before time evaporates?  
The past, the future, all of it,  
just a ball of smoke caught in the throat:  
one small cough and it mingles with infinity

II

Allen Johnson wanted to be rich.  
He failed, chunks of his money sunk  
into one bad investment after another.  
His own doing, really, and undoing.  
Guesses. Bad news. Broke.  
No, not even anywhere near broke.  
Just not as rich as he needed to be  
by, say, last Thursday,

when he must have sat down and said,  
for the record: dead.

His past, his future, didn't reconcile,  
even if the instant they surrounded  
could not, because of them, be different  
by one iota from what it was.

None of us ever lives in the moment,  
except maybe at the passing of that last breath,  
past and future colliding, finally,  
at the only point they will ever have in common.

### III

My wife and mother-in-law are not talking any longer.  
Perhaps they have gone off for a walk.  
I try to get back to what I wanted to write about:  
the other side of the light,  
right before light starts.  
None of this seems quite right.

That white-haired man slumped over the steering wheel  
of a Jeep Eagle in a garage in New Jersey  
has nothing, for example, to do with  
my daughter, who was out in the back yard  
stomping out the definition of alive  
in quick, bold strokes across the snow.

Now she is laughing and making a racket at the back door.  
My son is running out to meet her.  
This is what I would have been writing about,  
if only I had not looked out the window,  
if only no one had answered the phone,  
if only it had not snowed.

*Gentrification*

You cursed me, Mrs. Karlonis, just for parking there.  
Or for dropping that bucket-sized block of ice  
you kept shaking your finger at  
on the sidewalk in front of your house.  
I couldn't tell which.  
Only that you were yelling and crying  
at the same time. At me.  
That life was too hard. The snow  
too heavy to move.

I just took the shovel from your hands  
and started shoveling.  
When I was done I told you  
to come up the street and get me  
whenever the snow got too deep  
to sweep away with a broom.  
Then I picked up that odd block of ice—  
maybe you thought  
I had carted it in and dumped it there  
as a first installment,  
that all the ice in the neighborhood  
might soon be piling up  
around your run-down, heatless house,  
around your cats, around you—  
and I carried it up the street.

When you died that spring,  
without even once having come to get me,  
I could still see in my mind's eye  
your sad, teary, astonished face  
watching me walk away.  
Maybe you were grateful I shoveled your walk.  
And I think you wanted to believe I had nothing to do  
with the ice, your grief, those fears.  
But I really don't know.

I read in the papers later that you owned  
the vacant, dilapidated houses  
on either side of the one you seemed to live in.  
The contractors came and went.  
Realtors with names like Briana and Leota  
put up signs: \$199,00. \$219,000. \$249,000.  
They all sold fast.  
I wondered all the time I lived up the street  
if you had enough to eat.

And I still wonder how that block of ice got there,  
why you thought it was mine,  
why I live now with the fear  
that your raging at me never really ceased,  
why it seems to me sometimes  
that the whole neighborhood is filling up  
with ice and tears,  
and I can't any longer be sure  
which of the two I am leaving  
behind me on the street  
and which I must carry with me  
when I leave.

*Postcards from the Shore*

Monday

A dank wind clammers in off the fog-blank Atlantic.  
My daughter and I pick through little heaps of shells,  
the litter of last night's storm still stalled off shore.  
"Show me how brave you are," she taunts,  
daring me to chase the receding surf  
then out-race it as it rushes up the beach.  
I play that game over and over,  
if only to avoid explaining to her  
that what little I know about bravery lately  
is how much it can take just to turn around.

Tuesday

The sea is gun-barrel blue and roiling.  
Wind pushes back breath, deafens.  
My wife and I stride diligently into it.  
I try to think of what I used to say to her  
on walks like these. Dark swirls  
of seaweed keep churning up between  
the words . . . I need . . . to speak.

Wednesday

Wind and water wake me wide at one.  
I roll over, whispering "Oh, shit,"  
expecting it to make a difference.  
Wave after wave crashes rhythmically in the  
background.  
I repeat whatever I can think of to recover sleep:  
"Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep  
and can't know where to find them . . ."  
I know just how she must have felt:  
you wake up one night in a start  
from what you thought was only a bad dream,  
and there, the whole field in front of you is . . . empty.

### Thursday

It is nearly midnight.  
The skies have finally cleared.  
Each incoming wave, as it curls to break,  
is momentarily molten with moonlight,  
which scatters then in thousands of sparks  
among wet shell-shards along the shore.  
I wade out waist deep into cold combers,  
wanting to believe that the sea,  
which cleanses everything, can cleanse me.

### Friday

Six or seven seagulls fly single file in close formation  
inches over the ocean,  
each one silhouetted for an instant  
against the huge red sun hovering  
just above the horizon.  
I see it this morning as a hole  
poked through the ceiling of a large, gray room  
where I have been forced to stay  
for days and days, opening now into a place  
alive with light that pleases  
even the seagulls, which celebrate by sqawking  
just as I drive off.

*Appraising the Vase*

It came here, she says, from Genoa,  
late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the story goes, saved,  
stolen, bought, no one now knows,  
still flawless, without visible scars.

“My family owned it for generations.”  
I asked to see it, hold it firmly  
in my hands, move my thumbs  
over its smooth face caressingly.

I care only for this: What was  
its beauty, power, there, then;  
what is its beauty, power, now, here;  
what does it hope for, fear?

Only when I know all of this—there,  
then, now, here—can I say for sure  
if it still breathes or is gone, what someone  
else will be willing to pay just to hold it.

*Poems in the Manner of Emily Dickinson*

1.

Settled in a second—  
how her eyelid moved—  
the words I had just heard—  
disproved.

Truth by definition  
finds respite in the small—  
words are weak—  
eyelid says it all.

2.

Arrayed around a table—statues—  
a voice I cannot hear—  
woman with a grimace—  
man with unkempt beard

and twenty more of each  
iterated chair by chair—  
I walk by sidewise glancing  
glad I'm here not there.



## **Part 3: Snow Man**

*Snow Man*

I

He did not go to the tundra  
it came to him--  
first a tickle in his teeth  
then a frost on his tongue  
then a slab of ice  
inching up his throat.

When it finally broke,  
everyone else was somewhere  
else but him: had left  
by night, had left  
by plane, had left him  
bundling into his future  
all animal handsome  
in a thickening coat,  
elk-sleek, moose-stubborn,  
hammering, hammering  
hammering hooves to snow.

## II

The world blubbered.  
He trimmed and slimmed and leaned.  
He hated blubber: the flaccid  
feel of it against his teeth,  
the fatty slick it left on his lips,  
the slow, gelatinous curls it wound  
down his throat, the way it lay there  
like a wet log on the slow fire  
souring in his gut.  
There was nothing about it  
he could love.

But when cold drilled  
pinpoint holes in all his bones,  
when wind thinned blood  
to ether in his brain,  
when his sorry heart wound  
down to zero-dark,  
he hacked off hunks of it,  
ate it quick and raw and all  
he could stomach,  
until he was bloated, bilious,  
all smiles to find  
there was nothing  
he could not love.

### III

It went hard out there  
for the flowers: flash-  
card blurs of red dashing  
past breathless upstarts  
of yellow spattering  
freak summer snow-thins;  
pale pink, pale blue  
pastel woozies bobbing  
through thaw fogs  
prickled by sunlight  
still stiff from winter  
and stiffening already  
toward winter again.  
A cold world for color  
to go on coloring in.

Lucky.  
He hadn't a mind now  
for color.  
He needed snow-sheets  
billowing up like bear thighs,  
horizonless white  
steaming out of infinity.

He courted each flake that fell  
kissing bittersweet  
on his cheek, unballad  
his tight little fists,  
limbered his fingers into  
each hexagonal hole  
lifting back the delicate  
tissue until his whole  
head bobbed through  
and he knew where  
he was and what he had

found and a thrill  
of guilt throbbed  
in his throat  
puffed up the muggy  
steam-pots of his cheeks  
tickled his quick  
hot tongue until  
the gentle rhythms  
of snowflakes contracting  
over and over slowly  
into infinity pumped  
voice-box wonders  
out of his  
mouth like words.

#### IV

"Ha," he said to the sun  
when it failed to rise.  
"Ha," he said to the snow  
when it failed to fall.  
"Ha," he said to the moon  
when it failed to shine.  
"Ha, Ha, Ha."

He stood and listened  
a long time  
to the flat black  
echo of that laugh  
wanting to be wrong.  
But he was not.

His "Ha, Ha, Ha," re-  
sounded nothing like  
the laughter he had practiced  
trying to be right.

But it was, mind you, a laugh.  
The only laugh  
he heard.

V

It was nice  
those long nights to need  
no words to have  
no one to hear him  
having no thoughts  
to talk about  
as if they mattered.

He sat in a sparkle  
of stars and a low hum  
rose through his throat  
tickled his lips  
pressed shut against  
a silence that expanded  
across the entire sky  
without jostling  
anything without even  
nudging the tiniest  
speck of light  
out of  
its perfect place.

## VI

Time was tiny  
scissors snipping  
here and deft  
there unfold-  
ing origami  
memories whole  
sheets of  
holes stiff  
birds unable  
to fly anywhere.

He tweaked  
a beak that  
would not  
speak clipped  
a claw that  
could not  
close poked  
those tiny  
scissors  
down  
every  
hole  
but his.

## VII

He was the dead  
of winter so cold  
he coughed a solid  
block of fog  
all motion slowed  
to a stop or almost  
he breathed  
once  
          a day  
heart  
          beat  
every  
          hour.

Gelid love he called it  
frozen slow in time  
never complaining  
only to himself  
a month-long monologue  
a monotone of snow  
a slow roll all the way  
to the pole  
which was where he was  
when he awoke  
and saw her  
sitting like the dead  
of winter on his heart.

## VIII

He rolled a smooth stone along  
the fingers of his left hand  
and hunkered motionless  
over an ice-hole  
seal-spear poised, ready over  
his right shoulder stiffening  
as the surface gurgled  
slanting down fast then  
between seal eyes through  
seal bone into seal brain.

A day's wait done  
he slung the carcass  
over his shoulder plopped  
the smooth stone down the hole  
and plodded off: one step  
always only one step  
ahead of the blood-stained snow.

## IX

He had always had at least  
seven names for the snow  
but tonight he had seven  
million, one for each  
flake that fell in its  
uncanny uniqueness.

He called out one  
after another until  
one flake struck him  
as so beautiful  
he could spend  
the night with it.

And while seven million  
flakes fell somewhere  
else besides here  
this one zeroed in on  
the tip of his tongue  
and melted like none  
of the names he knew.

## X

He walked on water that  
jackpot morning multitudes  
thronged behind him waiting  
to crow-laugh him under so  
he jogs out all gingerly  
and gentle each toe-drop  
feathered under his weight  
and it held the damn thing  
it held so he strode step  
after step goat-surer and  
surer until the crowd's  
sounds pounded down  
around him on the ice  
he hadn't told anyone about  
which is what he was  
walking over after all  
and when it got just quiet enough  
for the whole universe to hear  
a dull thunder rumbled  
under the ice divided  
his mind and the next step  
he took flushed him  
all bug-eyed and bony  
into the krill-ripe swill  
of the beautiful sea.

## XI

He dove down deep in the coastal  
where bowheads sang  
unearthly songs of hunger  
and home and loved each other  
with each rubber-hose bass-twang  
note plucked  
whole from  
their hollow throats.

These were the voices  
he dreamed of  
having  
and hearing.

He climbed on an ice-floe  
and heard his words emerge  
from pitching blacknesses  
into the dim green light  
of winter day  
like the darkest shades of  
emerald he remembered like  
his hunger lunging  
deeper like his  
love-song headed  
home.

*The Poet Comes Out at Night*

He waits in a thicket  
like moonlight seeping  
down along twig-tip,  
leaf-vein and bark.

Suddenly the razor  
edge of his voice leans  
cold and gentle against  
my throat, prodding.

I follow each flick  
of the blade all adazzle  
with moonlight and  
do not know what to say.

I empty my wallet  
in his hands, empty  
my pockets in his hands,  
empty my hands . . .

He leaves behind  
nothing but moonlight  
in a thicket, all that  
he wanted to say.









Paul is the author of numerous books available (at cost of production) at Amazon.com and (for free, in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

**Poetry:**

*the other side of the light* (2024)  
*slights: my new tiny poems from here not there* (2021)  
*September Threnody* (2021)  
*In the Dark* (2016)  
*Harvest Moon* (2016)  
*Li Po-ems* (2016)  
*Mornings After: Poems 1975-95*  
*Beginning Was* (1980)

**Personal Essays:**

*Reading/Writing Outside the Lines* (2024)  
*The New Not-Normal* (2024)  
*Writing Myself In* (2024)  
*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)









