

the wabac machine poems

Selected Poems
1975-1995

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Preface

Between the mid-70s and the mid-90s I wrote a few hundred poems. I compile here some of my personal favorites from that foundational era of my creative life.

I asked Mr. Peabody to crank up his Waback Machine, turned myself into my inner Sherman, and followed him into it to revisit that era (if you never watched “The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show,” you may need to Google that one!)

(Wa)back then, my life was divided into two seemingly incommensurable parts, the line of demarcation an out-of-the blue pronouncement from my then-wife on Christmas Eve (of all days!) in 1977, one that disassembled my world down to a granular level. It took me a few years to piece a new and better one together. Here, I put the reassembling poems first, which is how history should always be written: looking back into the dark from the light that comes after it.

Part 1: The Mornings After the Nights Before

Morning Song I

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*

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

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.

4.

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

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

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

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

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

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

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 . . .

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.

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

The Night Before Roy Orbison Died

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

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.

4.

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.

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Part 2: The Nights Before the Mornings After

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

1.

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 I think I am no longer alone.
From that moment on you do not hear
my singing. You turn around and are gone.

2.

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.

3.

It is womb-warm and humid here.
I could not feel more at ease,
As I walk, long, lush fronds of fern unfurl
eerily green between us.

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

Do you hear them coming?
Do you hear?

4.

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.

5.

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

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

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.

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.

Nine Lives

1.

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. She kissed him,
sticky fingers picking
at his wings.

2.

"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,
always afraid
her skinny legs
were getting fat.

3.

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.

4.

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.

5.

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.

6.

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 the night.

7.

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

8.

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.

Snow Man

1.

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,
hamming, hammering, hammering
hooves through snow.

2.

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.

3.

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.

4.

"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.

5.

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.

6.

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.

7.

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.

8.

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.

9.

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.

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.

11.

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.

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.

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

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