Throat| Poems

Paul Keller

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THROAT

poems by

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for the degree of
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5-15-96
Date
for my father
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Either it is bronze with many shades of green streaking down and shadows falling just now across it in sharp angles so that sunlight only touches the lower right third, or it is wooden. Either the light is on, or it has just been turned off. It's a matter of faith that way. The door is almost closed, which is partly open, or completely closed and not open at all. Voices you recognize are coming from within or there is no one inside empty rooms and they do not speak your name like the first time your lover spoke your name aloud, which was, don't you agree, when you began. Because what was your being there before? Step a little closer and see that.

Remember
driving the Fourth of July Pass
from an apartment without plants
for no one to water, to a town
where no one expects you and takes a little time off to show you around.
Anyway. You were driving the pass where truckers pulled off for the night with their dark steel doors and yellow lights lit, and you tuned in to a song almost about loneliness on a station three states away, where someone once loved you and maybe could love you again.
But now you remain before the door
something not quite. Listen.
Many nights of love do not make you, and even
if you’ve been through this particular door a thousand times,
that does not save you. Every arrival
is a departure from your life. You cannot
love the not-yet of yourself, you can’t.
The doorknob is curved to fit your hand
but probably cold. Either you take it,
open the door, open, open, and step into your self,
or you don’t.
TO THE GREAT HORNED OWL WITH A DEFORMED WING

At Earth Day Fair ‘93

I stare into those steady eyes that stare into me. Yellow is so indifferent, and I have never seen anything so yellow.

Perhaps if it were night, the eye of a new moon above, and in some dark orchard wood, you could see me tied to the earth, take pity, and name me.

I know your tattered wing. I know your displaced bones.

But there will never be such a night. You have your wooden box, and I my unhappy flesh. There is a hand about our ankles. A question about our throats. What is one good wing but desire?
MAN ON A BRIDGE

The man is facing downstream, both hands pressed on top of the rail as his body leans into it. The last light reflects off the water and onto FRYE BOX & CRATE, 1898.
The wind is finally calm and he thinks the river resembles the long, black hair of the woman he came to California with thirty-seven years ago. "In my next life I want to be a seabird." He can barely construct the image of her face, but when he does, they are walking along a San Francisco pier and she says those words to him, and he thinks to ask, but doesn't. By then she was already carrying their son, who was to become my father, after the Viet Cong blew up his company's pool table and he came back to his wife and a trailer in a small college town. As for my grandfather, I've put him on this bridge in my mind because at some remove he seems more the man he most likely is and less the man I wasn't able to begin to know.
So he is on this bridge which corresponds to an actual bridge that at some time he might have leaned the way he does now. He reaches into the pocket of his brown leather jacket and does not find what he is looking for. He watches two bitterns drift behind a blind of pampas grass, raise their heads and become the grass. Perhaps there is a man at his back,
at the other side of the bridge in a similar jacket
who is looking upstream toward the Old Cannery
and the carnival lights beyond. This man is thinking
it is time to be heading home to his wife,
to walk down Cypress Street, past used car lots,
time to find the woman's voice coming
from the kitchen, near enough in key with the radio.
Perhaps the first man, who is no longer my grandfather,
knows there is another man at his back,
knows about those long walks home, but for all
the light still coming off the water
downstream, cannot turn to face him,
cannot speak his name.
The river was full of the swallowing. 
But they dragged it. They dragged it 
because someone had reported how a man 
had jumped from one of the towers of the Maxwell Bridge.

So they dragged it. And the man 
who was in his orange RESCUE suit 
with the rope in his hands, 
he was on his knees, on his knees 
on the bow of the boat, and the others, 

they were on the shore talking. 
And if they didn't know any better, someone 
could have said that the rope tugged 
in the man's hands because the river 
wanted him in. But really, 
the river doesn't ask these things 
of us. No and two likely results: 

the mud was soft and the tower high, 
so the man if he jumped feet-first 
might have stuck in up to his waist 
before he drowned. And if they failed 
to find him, the current would eventually tear 
the flesh from the bone. or 

as they estimated the flow of the river, 
the man might well end up in a fisherman's net 
at the mouth of the bay by Monday, 
salmon and stripers dancing 
silver on the white fleshy body.
But they dragged it anyway, knowing well they would find nothing. And at the end of each pass, the man in the orange suit would pull up the yellow rope so that first was the end tied to a foot and a half of chain coming out of the water, and next three feet of chain-link fence and finally the dangling three-pronged silver hooks.

*You better throw some more bait on there, Jim.*
This was said by someone on the shore, and the man who now had the hooks dangling from his fingers
*I can't get the pizza and beer to stay on.*

He dropped down for another pass. This is how they deal with their lives. See, the man in the orange suit had a direct line to the other side. The river was dark dark. No one knows what's down there and they can't live like every moment is everything. No, you adjust, you just do.

So what if they joked a little. Only it was about that next pass that they caught hold of something and backed the boat on top of it,

and the man with the orange suit had to pull hard, and it was slow coming up. Hand over hand of rope until both were on the chain and it was probably a branch. Probably it was.
Someone's sick joke to take that cat
and seal it in a box with the random chance
that it will die if the gas is released.
Once placed inside, the cat, dark as
night's mantle, is either
dead or alive and
how can we know?
We are certain that
to look in the box would kill
the feline. And how
can we ever
know?

you were most the cat
when Jade died when. the phone
rang loud like a doorbell when.
the rough voice came into you like.
the quick answer.
that was the door opening.

you didn't go to the funeral that week
because you had learned
that her living went on
somewhere beside you. the living
always goes on. it's only kept
by place, not dying. her coffin
was not her box. it
was the door opening.

(if that hasn't killed you already,
it may kill you yet)
but you were dead from the moment they sealed the box. before.
from the moment the box was conceived. you were always dead. and the box itself--
that box no one dares touch--is your living.
I stole them. I was alone in the cemetery that night and I sat a long time before the stone angel where she lay across an altar or bench, her face buried in her arms and her hand suspended in front of me. It was a clean break. I thought I heard footsteps near the corner where the children's markers are. You have to get on your knees to find them in that grass, each the shape of a three-quarters moon. Many do not have names. I thought I heard footsteps but no one was coming. I took a rock and struck below the top knuckles. I tell you it was a clean break. The fingers fell heavy into my palm. I was sitting there for so long. She didn't talk. She didn't move. If she was a thing apart from those graves, she didn't look it. I put them in my pocket. The hand was white at the break. It was clean. And white.

I once saw a window in a field. I was driving back down the Oakville Grade, past the quarry: there, an old window, frame intact and planted into the ground. It looked out across the field at tall grasses, and lokoyas beyond them. Or it looked out at me, the road and my car.

I stole the angel fingers because of looking. Maybe. Sometimes look at a it too long and a thing can own you. Maybe I stole them because I don't know. Sometimes
we do things we haven't reasons for.
The way people will come to the cemetery
without knowing any of the names on the stones.
Because it is a good place to go. And they will see
this angel with the fingers gone. They will think
who has done this. Who would do this thing.
It is an unthinkable thing to do.
And they may have hearts that burn for the things
that people do. But they will see others
passing in their cars on Mangrove. If it's summer
and a Sunday, people will be walking near the gate
on their way home with large bags of kiwi
and apricots from the Farmers' Market.
And these people will not know the things
the people in the cemetery know. They will be
in their custom kitchens with wide windows which
they look through at their children eating peaches
on the lawns, juices drying sticky on their hands.
And before long, people will have forgotten
the angel, or they will be going on road trips
together during holidays, saying

"meet us by the angel without fingers."
"Look," she said. "The moth is you. And the light, well that's what's after. The humming sounds something like home. You slap your body against the lamp without tiring because the light is so much. You throw yourself at it, and the glass, it will not break."
OKHAM'S RAZOR

*Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.*

It's not about
me not loving you. It's about me
not needing to. The man in the grey cap
painting on the sidewalk at three in the morning.

It would be a lie
for me to stay. The good words are always
lies. The scene is moving and I want to ask him
why paint it where it will wear away by noon.

You ask too much
of me. It is more love than I have
to tell you to leave. The man says
"True beauty never keeps to the canvas."
It's anyone's guess really, why the angels of the disputed ether came down to Montana, land of rivers and fire, to Rock Creek in the palm of a mountain wilderness, only to splash their arms and wings around in the water like migratory mourning doves, displeased with themselves, the shade of despair long-fallen over their light brows and high cheek bones.

Whitetails did not water that afternoon and browns stayed downstream to spawn, but two hawks circled high above, each passing their currents to the other. And it's doubtful that the angels could have, if they'd wanted to, outrisen those hawks.

When one had taken off her gown and left it draped on rocks, the body became something real, and the others didn't need to be asked. Veils of shadows must have been lifted for breasts and shoulders glistened in the sun where there seemed before no sun, and wings were finally shed, and the hawks could cast nothing over them now.
I know your face. The way the flames
burn in the brain. No night is
dark enough to hide his body.

I climbed the Mayacama Hills, still crackling
in my ear, the odor in my nostrils. Blackbird. Blackbird.
I gathered the broken blackbird in my hands. Nothing I could do
could do. Carried it in my pocket down the canyon.

Woke in the night with feathers on my tongue. Rainwater
could do.

Did you forget the smoke? Do you forget
your left hand. I went searching in the forest
looking up trees, and everywhere the answer was
love the places he is not. O Blackbird. In the pines,
he was not. In the manzanita the alder
the grapevine and the fern, he was not.
I looked to the dirt, and the stone said
He Is Here, but he is not here.

You can lie in a dry bed all night, eat
your meals and pay your taxes, but what
to do to do about the shoulder that carries
Come now. Gather your trees and pluck the matches
from your teeth. Think. What you sing now,
you sing forever.

to the man who watched as
J.H. burned to death
II
with the ends so long they make wide circles
at the sides of his mouth where he clutches
a toothpick and works it feverishly
beneath dark-tinted prescription glasses
though it's an overcast February.
His daughter across from him moves the leaves
of a garden salad about the plate,
while his wife, resting her hand on his knee,
looks in his face though pitted and worn, but
looks at it still with something like love, long
understood love.

I like to imagine
them alone (the children asleep or gone
into their lives) and she climbs into bed
as the wind picks up outside their somewhere
wood-paneled house. She slips over and looks
that look again which is what he sees there
when he wakes because she has taken
to running her fingers along his thigh.
He moves slowly to her with a knowing
that is faith in common darkness and slides
his body above her. And they make love.
Old pros at it now, years of rehearsal
in preparation for the one moment
when their movement then becomes mechanical,
a ritual to what they have learned, when
before she comes and the chance is wasted,
she fists the back of his hair, but reaches
around so as not to touch them, the hoops
beside their heads.
Look from the street, and the second-story window could be Italian design from a small villa on some exotic coast, but in the glass of the hardware store next door, DONT WALK backwards which spells nothing really. As for the man in that second-story room, his world is made more local by the woman he is careful not to lean too hard against as she lies on her side in front of him, knees slightly bent and his body an echo of hers. A blue light, steady from Eaton Avenue, climbs through the open window but does not touch them where they are on the mattress, he watching her arm rise and fall with each breath he can hear leaving her body. It is near the end now, though he is still believing in the words that will save. It is either the sharp angle of her jawline or the off-center curve of her eyes that, if he could see them now, he would not forget. The hammer-ticks of his watch on the corner table grow further apart, but the distance is not enough to get lost in. What he does not say there, while morning light threatens to overtake them and they must wake up to themselves, what he does not say must be enough.
Altogether, the one-bedroom house on Walnut Street, forty-some years of marriage, and the light inexplicably
the color of grapefruit flesh, coming or going or both
on the air from beyond the mountains through
the bathroom window and down to the tile floor
where she sits newly alone or samely alone, the naked
body of her husband sloughed into her lap looking
inalterably awkward and sprawled, somehow the man
and not the man she loved, though she thinks
she needs to love this, must love this sack
of a man, and so runs her hand down
to the soft cock, lifts it between her fingers,
lets it fall, does this maybe twice knowing, altogether,
there is nothing but the cold kiss of the tile
on the backs of her legs. She has forgotten the potatoes
split open and steaming like a promise on the dinner table.
Anger rises since there is nothing in her
she could call pain. The porcelain tub
is white. The walls. The wash basin and floor.
All white. The light is nearly drowned behind
the mountains when she sees how the body is arched
across her legs, skin stretched tight over
chest and ribs like
a bridge.
Two weeks later and she manages
like one of the living, brushing her hair
or strolling aisles of the local market,
even answering "fine" when asked
how she's getting along without him.
Evenings while she's slicing mushrooms
for a salad, she imagines he's
down hours in his basement room
with the shut door, practicing
some movement against gravity
where, until she forgets and calls
after him, everything remains
in its air of suspension.
--I could have been with him a while."
This was her father’s couch in the house of her father. We hardly knew restraint for the pull of flesh into flesh, and were slowly strumming each other’s nakedness here in this dark, her father asleep in the next room, and the only light was the glint of moonlight off my finger when I pulled it out from the glove of her body. She pressed her hand to my chest for me to lie down and straddled my hips, one knee bent to the cushion, the other leg straightened to the floor. We didn’t even bother when we forgot ourselves and cried out at nothing in the house, but held still when we heard her father rise and enter the room. She placed her finger over my lips for me to keep quiet and answered when he asked if she was going to bed, though I don’t recall what her answer was or what was said after for she began again, slowly, rising and descending my body like a fit of fire. He stayed there for some time and she didn’t let on but spoke simply when asked to, though I caught a look at her face slipping in to something deep, as her father stepped loudly back to bed. How could he not hear her heavy breath, not smell her sex in the air or feel it sweat on the walls and windows? Somewhere in this room, between his not knowing and her pleasure, between darkness
and the eyes I couldn't see, I fell into a seam
in the night and was lost. And while she was finding
her way to ecstasy, and I was trying to reach her,
her father waited in his bed to hear
his daughter's footsteps
pass down the hall.
Everything else is silence
until. I reach the top of the stairs.
look into my parents' bedroom where
my brother sits in the middle of the floor,
his legs sprawled like. they were thrown
into position. He is laughing, only
not his laugh when. he looks up at me.
He is maybe eight. And what startles
me most isn't that laugh or the salt-
lines down his face. no. I am gripped
by the color of his hair: chestnut,
like my father's. the color I've tried
to hide in my hair. I am thinking
I love this about him when. I smell metal
and the air is warm. I see my father's
(military).45 on the white carpet beside him.
I drop to his right on my knees, place
my hand on the side of my brother's head and ear,
try to calm him but. my hand feels wet
and his skin is smoother than any
skin I've known. He whispers don't
tell dad paul don't you tell him. I try
to cover his mouth but all I've done
is smear the blood across his face.
He is beautiful. I think This is how
he must have looked
the day he came into this world.
I don't remember how I found myself
on the sloped bank of a river whose name
I didn't know, with a woman I didn’t
know well kneeling in the sand
between my legs, her naked body
overtaking the late afternoon sun
from my sight so that all I could make of her
was a silver silhouette: I don't remember how
I found myself there, but I did. She poured
her palms over my chest and legs and took me
into her hand and held me like the hand
of a child, and of that moment, I remember
a rustling of wings, an eagle gathered
itself from the trees and flying off,
disappeared into the rings of the sun.
And this is clear: the way she leaned in,
pressed her cheek to my thigh, and took me
into the warm catechism of her mouth, the way
her mouth climbed up and down
the ladder of my cock. I felt
my arms and legs throb, the fire
leaving my body and she didn't stop until
drunkenness had taken over and pressed my back
into the ground. Then she raised herself,
opened her mouth to show me
the pearl couched on the back of her tongue,
threw her head back and swallowed.
The river was going nowhere. The swell
of my chest was filled with nothing and nothing.
Mustard seed has sprung
among the dormant vineyards, the valley
is golden. Spring is come, but still I write.
Anna says she can hear you singing
over the fields at dusk. I told Anna
you don’t sing. This morning, I watched
a blue heron suspended in flight, descend
on Marshall Rock, say
There, and land.

Old friend,
When will we learn to call a stone
a stone, and what we do
desire?

Napa, 1993
So this could have been a poem about the body. *Try a little harder.* A poem about the lures of Amsterdam's red light district: windows of women with themselves in satin and lace Thursday-night stockings as if they kept their secret right on the shelf. More about how friends talked me in to a dark one-guilder booth that stank of urine to see a woman, platinum blonde and beautiful, lie on a large turntable stage, long brown legs, perfect breasts, and she must have seen my face

--*Don't say your own body didn't come alive*--

, so she rolled on her side, opened her legs, and the thick arm of cock swung from her dark center.

And this could have been about other bodies and other lives. Those that were and were not there at the Exhibit of Eighteenth Century Torture Devices on tour across town near the Dam.

*Don't you love* The pure genius of pain, what man has done to man, the deep steel of the Rack where men and women either
gave in to the body or gave it up.
But either way, pulled like a chord
over the body-length screw, the body,
wishing it held the power to confess
to every slight turn of the wheel, would

No, it's not even
about that. It's about
me being alone on that cobble-stone street
along the canal, darkly enchanted
by Dutch architecture and evening light,
shadows and the angles of doorframes,
so that everything was larger
than myself. And?

About
that woman who came riding out
on an old Schwinn bicycle, from some dark corner,
with short black hair and an oversized
V-neck tee so that it shifted to one side
to expose, in the light of streetlamps,
her right breast and the small copper coin
of her nipple.

About how I felt
she needed me to see this, how this moment
could not go unloved and though
we exchanged only glances, the body
seemed something more than shadow.
Outside my window, a vireo
was throating from the mulberry:
see me see me see me.
I put down the poem, turned away
from my life and leaned
into his song. It was endless,
a stained glass window in the ear.
I listened straight through the night
and even if he was not singing,
I heard him singing. Never mind those
who worried about my health, by which
they meant my "mental health." Never mind
I didn't poem for months. I sat
near the window and I could not leave,
did not want to. He was so married
to his song, the vireo became
indistinguishable from it.
Difficult to say just when
it happened that all I could see
was a feathered throat pulsing
in the mulberry: see me see
you see me: the song turned in
on itself. The throat began
to grow. It grew by every note,
every riddle: see me vireo see
me you: and it dwarfed the mulberry.
But the throat must have been hungry,
because it swallowed the tree:
me see me you see. The throat
breathed in the neighbors' car,
and grew. It breathed the house,
it grew. It swallowed whole cities
and continents: see me see see:
and when finally there was nothing left,
Throat looked at me: see me see me:
I looked back to the other side of Throat,
where everything had gone and sang:
me see me see: It was endless,
a stained glass window in the ear.
I'm in the backyard, on the top tier

standing over

the ditches I've just dug.

I've just dug ditches

and Karen and I are planting lemon trees in the same Spring

we don't speak about the baby

and we don't speak about the baby

because there is nothing to speak of. We have ditches

full of shadows so some late summer we can sit

in green lawn chairs, drink iced tea, talk about nothing

and suck lemons.
I remember the first time I saw
the cliffs at Drakes Bay
and the way
the waters had carved them
into sheer
separation of rock, into a thing
I could love by knowing myself
apart from them.

So it is out of something
a bit like concern and more
like fear that I am writing
to you now. Tell me,
where do the edges go?
The outlines dissolve.
What are we when placed
against nothing? Isn't the soul
what resists, or does it adjust?
A tanker departs out of the bay,
the horn in a slow syncopation
when the fog overtakes the vessel,
so that nothing

but the sound remains.

*Point Reyes, 1995*
The day I owned my aloneness, drove out
to the valley of pines, of sunlight and nothing.

The day the sun climbed down the mountains
and rode the river silver.

The day I stood the mid-drift rock, watched
rainbow trout
  point upstream
  (little throats of nothings in the throat of a river)
  and hold still as

the river passed through them. And because I wanted
to love them, I threw my S's into the air until

the air was filled with somethings, and I cast my line
to the water. And when one flashed

her belly and took it, and my rod like an arm
leaned in, there was
  a string of light between us.

*Missoula, 1994*
Appetite is restless. There is no turning, nothing turns. But today at Rock Creek, leaves were still not yellow and still not fallen, and when I ran my fingers down the length of the line of my rod, for the first time, it was the wet belly of a brown trout in my cupped hand, and not Kaela dead.

*Missoula, 1995*
MISTERIOSO

after Thelonious Monk

Listening to Monk while Spring still fails to overtake Winter, I now understand something about the way silence enters music, opens like a throat around the keys, so that dark holes grow where Monk leaves apart the notes, so listener and musician fall beautifully in syncopated time.

A half hour hike into the Mayacama Hills, above the Napa Valley floor, beyond vineyards and lokoyas and down the shale rock of Devil's Canyon, the gorge gives way to a waterfall beating into a pool worn in the stone floor with years of pounding: Punch Bowl.

We spent many late springs in long afternoons or full-moon nights, skinny dipping with girls we talked into going or with talk of them when that didn't work. Either way, we always had the rhythm of the water slapping the rocks and the deep sound of the water missing the rocks altogether, falling all the way down to the bowl, a sound so full and pure, it moved against the rhythm but held it as well.
Trav once said that no one knew how deep
the Punch Bowl was, so after many attempts
to touch bottom, it was inevitable
that three of us returned with 25 feet of rope
and tied a stone to one end, but it didn’t reach.
Slurge even tied the other end around his ankle
and did his best to tread water, though
that didn’t work either. Yet we returned
spring after spring to where rhythm had forged
the depth that escaped us.

They closed the field of abandoned missile silos
near the Chico airport marker,
but despite the rumors about the guard and his dog,
we cut through the galvanized fence
and found a small opening above one
of the elevator shafts where once, warheads
had been housed. I slipped below, onto an I-beam
high above a pool of rainwater. The shaft
was as wide and dark as a throat. Further down,
large corridors of steel pipe opened up like arteries
underground, our voices echoing throughout so that
once I thought Adrea who wasn’t there
was right behind me in my ear. We’d come
with felt pens and began writing on the sides
of the walls. We had all read about the girl
who’d fallen and drowned the year before. Now
we were making testament to life and creation
out of a place built on destruction. Writing
words like down down echo
like throat. Letting the moment guide us into a music only the moment could contain, we left the silo as elegy and left the music behind, ringing in its belly.

When he returns to melody the notes become more than their sum since each contains a history, and the movement is undone into depths that were unforeseen so that the music is less the keys than all the throats between.
I've been lying. That man with the woman
in the second-story room is me. Was me.
And though I held her light against myself, something
was stealing her from me. Literally. It was osteo,
and I couldn't understand how it was wearing her away.
That I could feel this shoulder against my chin,
this elbow in my ribs, this hip, this thigh,
though all vanishing.

I was thinking
about the new physics, that I wanted to believe
in this other world of anti-matter. That when a particle
meets anti-particle, say electron and positron,
they annihilate each other, disappear in brilliant flash.
The event as old as myth: Siva and Kali dancing on
the ringed-edge of the earth, moving back
in time, particle-anti-particle, to that first
energy of the world balanced on the tongue.

She lay there, losing bone mass, structure.
I thought there must be some way I could see it,
hér dissipation like a soft glow on the horizon
of her body, or how heat rises
off the black pavement in summer. It was
the perceived nothingness we shared, and
I wanted her to look at me, to turn
and look at me right then, to see
the thing in me that was gone.
--and if you got lost
you had to pay, twice."
:: trying to understand time as matter.
Time the thing.
That planets are not held by gravity
but that they come up against
time (think mountain) and choose
the path of least resistance.

(against/ time
   to come so close
to something you're against it
   choose to stand still
or move away from
   (resistance/ against
   time.

____________________________________________________

Early August on the Tuolumne:
blackberries purple-black on the brambles but
the water so high, we only fish
the creeks.

   My father has talked years of this,
his early life spent with his brother
and a woman he later married, fishing
up and down these waters, knowing
every rip rap, every cutbank.

   And though
every hole is the hole and not the hole
where he caught his prize trout, I've never
seen him happier.
The water is running hard so
I only go in as far as mid-thigh,
until I spot a point
around the next turn where the creek
meets up with itself, creating
a perfect hole where undoubtedly
a big brown is feeding, just outside
my casting range. I begin to wade toward it
upstream, but when I look back
at my father casting from a rock,
my brother is nowhere around.
We had agreed that one of us
should keep our father within sight
at all times, and though he looks fine
from here, I stop waist-deep, turn away
from any brown shadowing just below the surface
and let him go. Do you understand.
I let him go.

Coltrane on "My Favorite Things". From the first time he lays out the melody you
can already sense his resistance to it. That he doesn't even want to give it to you
once, but he does, he gives it to you, once only and with little patience, like
someone in passing. And he's gone. Riding over rhythm and time on some other
ether only coming down occasionally, briefly, to the melody though each time the
melody has changed, at once leaving and wanting to stay.

Wait. That's not quite right.
There was a time I saw him happier:

He was having another reaction so
we sat him down at the kitchen table, but

he refused the slices of orange and M&M's.
His hair was messed, damp at the ends with sweat, and
he smiled, how else to say it, without burden.

It reminded me of the two photos
I once saw of him over in Vietnam.
One with his shirt off, blonde-hair
sidewalls, and he is caught in mid-laugh
so that his shoulders are thrown forward
and his chest is collapsed. In the other,
he's sitting next to a beautiful Vietnamese girl
with long dark hair and a short dress.
His arm is draped along the couch
behind her but he is smiling
across her, at something
out of the frame.

This is what I'm thinking when I ask
What do you want?

Afternoon sun spilling in through kitchen
windows, the wife and three children

he did have standing around him, and
What do you want? I ask.

Sex, he says.

Almost unrecognizable when he goes silent. And this is what I've never understood. Not his silence, that seemed the only place he could go. But when Coltrane returns, he plays it straight. Like repentance. You are unsure where he has been, but he is asking the song back in, the doors back open. They open. It opens and you open.
At 3am his jaws are locked tight. *They're on their way.*
I can't get the sugar tablet
in his fists clenched so that
I can't even test his blood
*They're coming.* he doesn't understand
and presses his forearms against
the air he's somewhere
I can't reach him I grab his wrists
pin them to the mattress *They're here.* I say
his eyes open *Who?* he says.
He's come back to me.
This time.

What I'm saying is
it's easier
for my father to die
he's against it
too close to wait
longer

*wait/ longer*

But it doesn't last long, he's leaving again, an exercise in the self as Coltrane combs the distance between this uncertainty and the next, breaking from rhythm and melody, moving further and further out in search of the next note, and each note a departure from the last, until he is free, free with no way of coming back, ever.