

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

1996

### Throat| Poems

Paul Keller

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

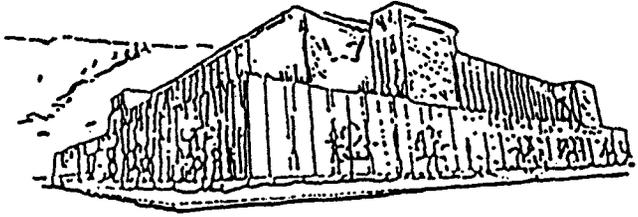
---

#### Recommended Citation

Keller, Paul, "Throat| Poems" (1996). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3901.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3901>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).



Maureen and Mike  
**MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

The University of **MONTANA**

---

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety,  
provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in  
published works and reports.

*\*\* Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature \*\**

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature

*Paul Kell*

Date

5-15-96

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with  
the author's explicit consent.



# THROAT

---

*poems by*

**PAUL KELLER**

B.A. California State University, Chico, 1994  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
The University of Montana  
1996

Approved by:

  
Chairperson

  
Dean, Graduate School

5-15-96  
Date

UMI Number: EP36018

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP36018

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

*for my father*

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements iv

## *I*

Study of a Door	6
To the Great Horned Owl with a Deformed Wing	8
Man on a Bridge	9
Let Me Tell You	11
Schrödinger's Cat	13
Angel Fingers	15
Horror Story	17
Okham's Razor	18
Angels at Rock Creek	19
Try	20

## *II*

Handlebar Mustache	22
Failed Architecture of Desire	23
The Promise	24
The Juggler's Wife	25
Regret	26
Blind Man's House	27
One Act	29
The Pearl	30
Postcard to Sisyphus	31
Argument Against Dark Matter	32

*III*

Throat	35
#17	37
Postcard to Kaela	38
Postcard to Kaela	39
Late September Postcard	40
Misterioso	41
Failed Architecture of Desire	44
Turnpike	45
Quantum Jazz Theory	46

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following periodicals in which these poems first appeared or will appear, sometimes in earlier forms and under the name Paul Michael Steven:

*Analecta*: To the Great Horned Owl with a Deformed Wing

*Mid-American Review*: Angels at Rock Creek

*Santa Clara Review*: Schrödinger's Cat

*Talking River Review*: Okham's Razor

*Watershed*: Postcard to Kaela (as part of 'Shared Light')

I would like to express my personal gratitude to my thesis committee members for their time and help in assembling the manuscript: Patricia Goedicke, Mark Levine, and Tony Crunk. Also thanks to Bob Wrigley, Patricia Traxler, Gary Thompson, Greg Pape, Derrick Burleson (and the rest of The Workshop of the Long Knives) for their comments with particular poems, and to B.H. and R.H. for their much needed support.

***I***

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

---

8

*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?

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.

*for Jim*

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."

*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,  
unpleased 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 down-  
stream 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  
in the sheets. Blackbird. Blackbird. Nothing I could do  
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  
no one. Say Blackbird. Blackbird.  
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 clenches  
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.



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.

### ***III***

---

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*

---

*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,  
her 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.

