

Songs From the Page of Swords

a selection of poems
by Paul Pines

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Bio and Acknowledgements

PAUL PINES grew up in Brooklyn around the corner from Ebbet's Field and moved to the Lower East Side of New York in 1960. He shipped out as a merchant seaman,



spending '65-'66 in Vietnam. In 1970 he opened his jazz club, *The Tin Palace*—located on the corner of 2nd Street and Bowery—which became a cultural watering hole for the better part of the 70's. It provided the setting for his novel, *The Tin Angel* (Wm. Morrow, 1983). During this period Pines traveled in Central America where he became aware of the genocidal policy targeting the Guatemalan Mayans—the basis for his second novel, *Redemption* (Editions Rocher, 1997). Pines has published five books of poetry: *Onion*, *Hotel Madden Poems*, *Pines Songs*, *Breath*, and most recently, *Adrift On Blinding Light*. Selections from the last two have been set to music by composer Daniel Asia and appear on his two CD's, *Songs From The*

Page of Swords and *Breath In A Ram's Horn*, on the Summit Label. Paul's poems have appeared in *New Directions* #37, *First Intensity*, *The Cafe Review*, *House Organ*, *Pequod*, *Ironwood*, *IKON*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Mulch*, *Contact II*.

Paul presently lives in Glens Falls, NY, with his wife, Carol and daughter, Charlotte, where he teaches at Adirondack Community College, practices as a psychotherapist and hosts the annual Lake George Jazz Weekend.

—To my ghosts, Cynthia Lasky, Paul Blackburn, Eddie Jefferson,
Muriel, Irving, Charlotte & Bernard

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Bread

Dry bread on my table
dark brown bread
my father used to call the staff
of life he said stale bread
was good for the gums
and himself always ate the heel
said a man could almost live on bread
and in my sleep I dreamed
my skin was bread
and love was when my heart
rose like yeast I learned
sweet bread stuck to my teeth
but sour bread had teeth of its own
and bit back
but my favorite
bread
was Spanish
bread
I'd buy still warm
pretend it was a part
of me I'd lost
and found again
bread
is something you only break with friends
but when I was estranged
climbed two days
until I reached the timberline
of Puig Mayor
discovered both wrists
smelled of bread
looked down and saw the shoreline
spread
broken by inlets
and doughy beaches
breadcrusts
braceleted beneath me
such alms as we are
given
the best bread I ever had
was when Barbara and I slept in the kitchen
gas stove on
in those days my lies were bread

I burned incense bread for my nose
had tinted bulbs arranged for love
and occult bread
like pipes and chess
and who I thought I was
was bread bread was
all and everything I read
Gurdjieff
with hot bialys from 14th St
seeded bread
wheels of it
whole meals with sweet butter
onion rolls
with left over soup from the Little Rose
and through my head
late at night
lonely bread
walking
with a chill in my shoes
stars in ice
draped over the fence around the park
snow on the ground
like a poultice

cloud bread
when I thought I could fly
and when I could hardly get out of bed
moldy bread
from the rear of the fridge
in 1961
which I recovered from
and afterward
Barbara tasted like bread and I was hungry

Rats

Rats are like the rest of us
they need

 food
 shelter
 water

The Norway rat weighs about a pound
The common Roof Rat about 3/4

Rats tailor their population to fit
the supply of available food and overrun places like

 Bilaner
 Rajasthan and
 Calcutta's "Rat Park"

where they are considered Holy
incarnations of some cosmic hunger

Rats
unlike Hindus
are merciless about birth-control
and have been known to practice euthanasia
by killing off the old and infirm

Rats are noisy lovers
at night you can hear them in attics
on roofs between hollow walls under street vents
They are devouring in everything they do
That is their law

A rat's teeth
are perpetually growing
and if left unused will curl back to penetrate
its brain

Moderation for a rat is a form of suicide

Rats use our sewers for harbors and make highways
of our pipelines

Rats are blind

but prowl after dark to avoid
predators
 the greatest of which is man
who kills the rat
with substances that cause heart attack
and softening of the arteries

or a trap
 that breaks its back
 in a mechanical rage

Regarding the Percussionist

It was ten to five
when Jimmy and I
finished our drinks and walked outside
to find a young man taking a dive
from the roof of the Kenton Hotel

(he closed his eyes
didn't even try
to fly)

and everyone
in the doorway jumped
when he exploded in front of them
we all went soft inside
when we saw his bones were flour
in his skin...

 someone said
"I bet you could skate on his eyes"
and someone else called an ambulance
an old philosopher in the crowd
pointed out that 'divers'
lose their shoes when they dive
"Their shoes usually end up
behind them on
the curb."

We all stared
and just before the ghost escaped
through an unmuscled grin

in the corpse
its face turned phosphorus
a white
that is the absence
of light
such as one sees
seconds before
a total eclipse
when the solar winds
stop rushing
like a bird
holding its wings out
in the sun
to dry

Reincarnation

Jake!

 you green eye'd jackal
 from the alley
where Egypt dumped your imperial soul
like an old chamois:

I see she's brushed your coat
and pared your nails. Just look at you
spread out on the couch
rippling disdain.

Don't forget who left dry food
in the hall even when neighbors complained
you sprayed on their doors,
who let you rest by his radiator
on cold days!

What will you do for me
next life?

If roles are reversed
don't forget who met a rich girl
and found you a home.

Meditation

There must be an end
to this palaver
before and after sex

this nodding
acquaintance of love and isolation

Madman Cocaine
stitch up my mind
with the tears
in things that never speak

make my heart
a place
where all my friends
with swollen feet are dancing
without shoes

Tathagata

when I find my grief
let it burn like fire
inside crystal

when I find my tongue
let it swim like a fish
through downy hairs at the nape of her neck

The Old Testament

Marriage has three parts
a beginning
middle and end
the beginning and the end
are almost the same
a return
to the melody
for most men
they are easy but
the middle is a psalm
a long improvisation
from which men hide
close their eyes
and ears—
the middle
is truly the valley
of the shadow.

If a child
can't marry his mother
he marries his father
or his brother
the way David did
Saul and
Jonathan,
 if later
he marries Bathsheba
it's by sending her husband
to be killed in battle
after seeing
her naked
in her bath.

In the beginning
David lies down in green
pastures by still
waters,
in the end
he's anointed
his cup is full but
it's the child in the man
who walks through

the middle
saying he has no fear
because goodness
and mercy are
following him as if
to a blind assigation.

The Ghosts of Mother's Day

"Mama" I said
"what shall I do?
The ground keeps shifting under me
and I've left no tracks.
The women I touched I quickly left.
Those I loved I hardly knew.
As a father I withdrew
into my father's sadness."

"Close your eyes" she told me.
"Where are you?"

"Miami.
I'm a child again.
The earth smells like chocolate
and the wind is peppermint."

"And now?" she placed
her fingers on my forehead.

"I'm a young seaman
walking up a gangway in Mobile."
Then she removed her hand
and I started to cry.

"Where are you?" she coaxed.
"Where are you now!
Montreal? New Orleans?
Try and guess.
Guess!
Try!"

Homage to Guy Lombardo

You've gone
and left the rest of us stuck with it

New Year
ringing down the windless spaces
of our privacy
Auld Lang Syne
like a violet gas
motionless
over the orchestra pit

Mingus
taught me
to live gracefully
beneath the underdog
but hearing you play
"the sweetest music
this side of heaven"
I learned
that a man's last word might be
"Confetti!"
his final image
that of you beside your brother Carmen
amid crepe-paper
balloons
champagne bottles
noisemakers and party hats
in a ballroom with
the Royal Canadians
around you like numerals
on the soft watch
in Dali's
PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

Once I thought I'd grow up
and become the emblem
of my experience—
SHAZAM!
a super hero
wearing the logo
of his uncommon power
tattooed on his chest

and that everywhere
I went
people would say: "Here comes 'The Kid!'"

or
"Hey, that's the Time Traveler!"

Once I thought
I'd develop occult abilities,
perfect an obscure martial art
so they'd see me and scream:
"It's Baba!"

or
"Careful, that's the 'Poison Palm!'"

But once a year
like clockwork
you let me know
all I'd done was continue
to exist

You were Father Time
doing your job
a professional—
what we mistook
for a confectionery smile was
in fact
a tap-hole
for the sap
in our family tree

Listen, Guy!
I'm beginning to understand
a gypsy might open my hand
and say:
"You've wasted your life."
But not you
You knew better
What could any of us
have done
that we didn't do?

Taken the violin
practiced scales
until we could play
the conversion of matter into energy

leaped planets
like notes on a staff
to drop
at last

into
the Vortex of Harmony?

No

Instead

you showed us
your helplessness
at Midnight
when the old year hung
like a monkey
on our backs
and all you did
was
wave your baton

With Admiral Bird on 5th Street

A house full of animals
cats and dogs
farting into the dim recesses
of early morning.

"Ah," I think,
"if these are the winds of Arabia
take me to another part
of the desert!"

Animals.
Even in my dreams.

My brother spots a shark in a mudflat,
screams:

"Hey, watch this!"
and jumps.

Before I can grab him
something flashes silver
then wrinkles over his head like pudding:

"Chocolate,"
I think,
going after him,
scared he's become
yet another skeleton
I'll be unable to flesh
with words.

Morning light
darts through the curtains
like shark skin.

Tipping to the bathroom
I find a kitten in the sink
another on the rim of the tub
swishing its tail,

everyone testing
for traces of what-has-been
in what-remains.

Mein Bruder

I want to write a poem
to you, Claude, who never
believed my words but endured me
as a brother
who couldn't see you

in spite of which
we managed to agree
it was a pity anyone should suffer
for being what
one is...

 then tell me
why it's true
that half-way through my life
I rush around afraid
the world will stop
if I do
 then stop
and realize
you are
among my deepest sorrows?

Little Ian in Slumberland

Ian, my dear,
at the end of Time
where the universe folds
in and out of black holes
like an old sock
is it true
you are accosted by

FROST BARONS?

little men
with thick necks and stubby legs
swinging mace and chain
not frightening really
but formidable say
as someone else's
assumptions
armed against
your own?

And if one
uses a tone
I reserve for the dogs
and another has
your mother's toes and
you must wield
a club—
 even so,
better to emerge from sleep
a warrior
than submit.

Soon enough
those barons fall
like dust motes
through our dreams of order
until our fierce
insistence on ourselves
contains them
like a cup
that never fills,
or holds them
as a hand
holds water.

Requiem

Mom
today I thought
about you
for the first
time in years
without anger

but a sadness
like dry leaves
I raked
across my insides

to find
underneath
like ghosts
in the hard ground
no grass
but where
there had been
grass
holes

and the black roots
of trees
like roots
of blond hair
in your head
sucking up how
to be
warm and cold
growing out
where you wait
eternally for spring

in the sweet
hemorrhoidal flow
and rasping odors
of decay

The Fear

That you're hard as nails,

that your body is set
for a combination
my fingers search for
among an infinite
combination of numbers
and bodies,

that you will open
like an unsuspected metaphor
to make my life
intelligible and warm
for a moment only,

that I appear to be less
before you than I am,

that before you I am revealed
to be less than
I thought,

that you are separate from me
and hold a stone,

that you will say, "Come in,"

that you will not,

that you are alive inside me
and still can't read
the look in my eyes.

Hello Baby

Last night
I tried to call you
on the phone

Where have you been?

I've been moving
like Ellington's hearse
headlights on

slow and quiet
in the rain

all the music
in my life
playing

"maybe I'm wrong"

but there must
be a moment
when
a woman
gives birth
to a man
full grown

who thereupon
gives birth
to her...

maybe together
they can make
a relationship
that has no name

Poem for Susan

There's something
about love
that won't let us
walk away

but asks,
to no certain end,
that we become
what becomes of it.

Last Call at the Tin Palace

Granada falling
at my feet

a Mayan princeling
in the service of his conquerors

or the buried time
between time
before I was young
when I saw
my life to come
what it held in store
and decided I would live...

whoever I was
in other lives
it doesn't matter to me now

as it does to Nat
in the kitchen
placing layer on layer
of paper thin dough
to make his spinach pies
that he was once a woman

and
way back
an apprentice
to a scribe
sanding down stones

or to Jim
closing down the bar
that as a Nez Perce
he watched his people dying
in the Montana snow
and that he was in tears

He says his name was Looking Glass
that he knows
where he was born
and where he's buried

says he's stood
and said a prayer
before his own grave

Bird Poem for Ilyse

Whenever my bathtub drains
I hear this chirping

regardless of the season
for ten years
I've heard it
as the water
disappears

it makes me
want to chirp back
to say I'm listening
and agree that all we want
of the world really
is a conversation
we can trust
a few words
that make sense...

but I don't

instead
I reach for a towel
and wonder if it
could be a baby bird nesting
in my parapet and why
it doesn't age
or if it's the ghost
of a bird that died
years ago
in an early frost

or if it's not
a bird at all
but rust
in the lines
moisture
in the wall
an old valve
leaking

Bohdan Antonych

—for Jaques Hnizdovsky & Bohdan Boychuk

You want to be Orpheus,
make trees dance, grass sing,
water a sustaining melody:
you refer to yourself
in the third person, saying
"Antonych moves" or "Antonych breathes";
you give the moon animal reflexes,
the sun a grace, like your own,
that looks for its intelligence
in everything it lights upon,
wants to grasp it where
it grows invisibly
from seed.

I see you in Lviv
holding your ears as almonds burst
or late at night Mercury rains
marine concerti
 on stones
that will rise and weep
at Judgment,
 when all things confess
they'd been distracted,
couldn't keep their meanings clear.

At 28, nearing the end,
you rush to keep pace
with your ghostly dictation:

in my mind
you're all ears,
listening to silverfish
eat your books
like a whole band of Carpathian tubas.

Reading Cavafy

What I like most about Cavafy
is that he can't stop moralizing.

Growing old he sees he also grows
warmer to the barbarian in himself,
the Persian among Greeks,
the would-be voluptuary.

He spends days in cafes
by the sea,
drinking ouzo and wondering
if the whole world is destined to
become as small and seedy
as Alexandria.

The bodies of young men excite him.
He watches them from
his Garden of Missed Opportunities
until it resembles Gesthemene
where he turns part Christian,
almost anti-Hellene

while the Greek in him
continues to weep
at the tomb of Patroklos,
insisting there is a grace in us
more magnificent than the god
it reflects.

Blackburn

I hear
your voice again

as light
trapped in ale
at the lips of old men

a net
spread
for words in
the low grass of my throat...

Pablo, see

they're
playing Kung Fu
on the roof below

two Newyorikan kids in black gis
and a blond Ukrainian girl in toe-shoes

the boys
are showing her
how to kick like a grasshopper
how to move her arms like a praying mantis

September sun
is flooding the western sky

and wind
is cool
E-N/E

slipping down
my comprehension
like a ghost I thought had abandoned

its old routes between my sleep and the outer air

Ars Poetica

Herbert, my friend, I hear you've taken out the fiddle
again.
What can I say?
I once knew a man who shaved his head and went to live
with Cajuns
because they fiddle in bogs.

I fiddle also,
with myself.
My fantasies hang like Spanish moss
outside my window and are always in my light.
My dreams swim like alligators
around my home,
reptile minds
diencephalons
of merciless clarity.
I look out my doorway
squared against the impeccable mitre of
'things-as-they-are'
and am moved to say,

"I lie."

I do.
I fondle my prick
and slobber over the lady in my mind
bending to my anger and my need,
wringing her hands,
salt air whipping her thighs.
I tell her:
"Take me!
Make an honest man of me!"

I look for her everywhere.
In bars. In banks.
And everything I think is cheap,
is worthless
without her, if she isn't there, with her naked eyes.

Easter Friday, Savannah

On Congress Street
the cross is draped in black.

Over the radio
a preacher declares:

"He rose!
I wish I'd been there.
Wish I'd been standing
next to Peter!
Wish I'd been a fly on the wall!"

I drive around Ogelthorpe Square
aware of a mystery I can't see,

a fragrance:

the Angel of Death

passed over the Children of Israel
on just such a morning.

(Did he look back
from the walls of Memphis,

care, for a second,
about destiny?)

Cynthia, sweet friend,
we've shared

the bitter herb of rootlessness,
uttered our questions aloud,

held each other then walked apart
and now I'm told

the cancer
that surrounds your heart

has wandered to your brain.
My Egyptian sister,

as the sun rises on azaleas
I pray the seas part for you gently

before they close again
in that swift abolishing wave.

My Egyptian Sister

Do you remember
we lived in a beautiful house
with light streaming
in over cushions
straw mats and wooden tables
how we wandered from room
to room searching
for others
and finding no one
wondered at
the dustless floors
the neatness of
the beds
in silence?

lives in furniture and books where it satisfies
its enormous thirst
for glue

All roaches
carry their eggs in wallets at their backs like alms
for oblivion
they've been found
intact
in fossils
and sealed
unhatched in pyramids with the souls of Kings

Eavesdropping

David called
to say he'd nursed Cynthia
out of this life
a little at a time
as a doctor might
ease a newborn
from the womb.

All week I've been
trying to figure out why
we listen for what
the dead and dying
tell us,
 read
their books,
examine
old photos.

Cynthia, we always wanted
to know what lay beyond,
spent long afternoons
at the reservoir
talking about it.

Now you know.

Or don't.

And I
wake from a sleep
blessed with
extinction
to a world
full of
ghosts.

Ode to Alf Landon

Alf—
you've done it!
outlived them all;
Father Coughlin,
Wendell Wilke,
F.D.R. who,
in spite of your objections,
sent American boys
abroad
to fight Germans.
How
does it feel
to reach your nineties
in Topeka
sitting on all those oil wells?
Wait.
I think I know.
In Nam I drove a jeep through
exploding jungles
up
and down mountains
lit by tracers
tip-toed
over roads
laced with mines and punji-sticks.
When I came home
my melancholy son
took one look at me
and refused to brush his teeth.
How do I explain to him
what happened to my hands
and feet
or why I work
Chinatown
with a tin cup reciting
poems about
silk worms and
hundred year old eggs?

Ending the Decade at Phoebe's

Carol gives me her cheek
but not her lips,

Lisa her lips
but not her heart,

and all those balloons
crushed under the feet
of a fat kid with a noise maker
racing up and down the bar:

Michael, say Good-by
to the decade,

the way we were up, down, up and down again!

Good-by, Mom
Lester
Cynthia
Eddie J.

frozen
in my life
like stone
piled on stone...

Rosario!

bring out the sweet sausage from Jersey,
the zucchini pie, California champagne.
I'll tell you what it feels like
to be a survivor before
I go home.

No Complaints

Poetry is all I've ever really had.
When a poem works

it means the world to me. The World
made vivid and young. Once I thought

Poetry would deliver power, wealth
and endless adoration. Instead,

I got more poems. Every year. And
the world growing brighter, younger.