



I Am on a River and Cannot Answer

Amy Miller



BOAT PRESS

Charlottesville, VA USA

Copyright © 2016 Amy Miller

Cover, layout, and design by meg willing | www.megwilling.com

BOAT Logo by Florence Shearer

Text set in Baskerville

Portable Document Format

www.boatpress.com

*I Am on a River
and Cannot Answer*

Amy Miller

Table of Contents

- 1 [In the distance you hear it:]
- 2 The Grief as the Universal Translator on *Star Trek*
- 3 [If you fall into the rapids,]
- 4 The Grief as a Small Wooden Box
- 5 [Someone is scarred. Someone sliced]
- 6 The Grief as a Caribbean Cruise while Reading a Romance Novel
- 7 [This town is full of Harleys]
- 8 The Grief as the Warning Siren for Hosler Dam
- 9 [Fire stole the summer and smoke]
- 10 The Grief as a Black Arm Band in a Western Movie
- 11 [I am on a river and cannot answer.]
- 12 The Grief as a One-Way Mirror
- 13 [I go into the garden,]
- 14 The Grief as a Pattern of Black Dots on Purple Fabric
- 15 [Was it mink or otter,]
- 16 The Grief as a Low Depression over Southern Indiana
- 17 [Because the powerhouse stares dead]
- 18 The Grief as the Theory of Parallel Universes
- 19 [Come see this mountain. Where once]

In the distance you hear it:
an engine of consequence. Fuels
igniting. A race? A rocket?
A war? A roar like great bodies
boiled. Then round the swift turn
of the river, and there—white churn,
frenzied water hills, a permanent
rain rising—and you're in it,
down the pitching stairs. You knew
this would come. You knew it.

The Grief as the Universal Translator on *Star Trek*

Say *father* and it says
first horse.

Say *my love*
and it says *the wild*.

These planets are all
my planets, their tongues
my lost and speeding insect songs.

Come on, Scotty,
everybody dies in the stirred-up gel
of somebody's transporter.

Haven't you ever beamed back
divided? And what's this backward
language now? It says
my baby's gone missing
when all that blew up
was a world.

If you fall into the rapids,
make an arrow with your feet.
Make a pillow of everything
behind you. Look up. Hang on
to that one buoyant stick
you brought. Remember,
you may not hear voices
above the water. If you know
you're drowning—*Is this air,
or again that dream?*—
before it's too late, make an X
with your arms—think crossbones—
which almost anyone can do,
even if one is broken.

The Grief as a Small Wooden Box

You carry it with one hand under,
one over. In the rain, you pull
a flap of your coat to hide it,
though you're not sure
what's in there. Sounds
like gravel. Today
it's embarrassing, so old world,
drab and flat while all above you
spring tongues open her green.
You see others with their boxes,
their pinpoint concentration,
minding their steps on the curbs,
the cracks that could break them.
To drop it—how unthinkable.
How delicious.

Someone is scarred. Someone sliced
three purple lips across a leg—a rock,
a paddle, a fight's metal edge. No sun
could ever smooth them, dangling
from a boat, loose in the pitch
and bend. Pain? No matter. Smile back
at the river. The eagle
is missing some feathers. The clouds
are never this shape again.

The Grief as a Caribbean Cruise while Reading a Romance Novel

That is to say, go fuck yourselves,
petty worries and the slipping shale
of the past's impossible shoulders.
I don't care who's watching me read
or who wants to sell me happiness
in two tight t-shirts and a seashell-
bustiered mermaid. The sea
climbs over itself, and the many-
eyed creatures in its gut
are all business. A vast
indifference waits, salt face, line
dividing life from space. The meals
are never really free. You're paying.
You just don't know it.

This town is full of Harleys
and harlots, skinny kids
and a brown retriever
on a rope. The barking. They fish
the mercurial river, swim
in the washed-up soup
of the old mine. Cold stares
as they wade at the boat ramp,
watching the tour group back
a raft on a trailer
into the water. They stand
in that exhaust,
breathing it deep.

The Grief as the Warning Siren for Hosler Dam

This is a test. In the event of your own emergency, you will be instructed how to scream, where to dump your ill-constructed sandbags. You may not know which side of the river to climb, or whether fitness is a virtue. Be prepared to wade into water and then, too late, change your mind. Pack comforting items—some books, a blanket. But be aware that patience kills. And so does panic. Somewhere in between you'll see a boat, inviting in its listlessness. For God's sake, do not board it. In the event the debris wash carries you out to sea, please look around for your belongings. We all belong to someone. Someone may be missing you. This may also be a test.

Fire stole the summer and smoke
laid its tail in the valley for weeks.
But after rain—washed blue, bright cloud,
and air so full of trees it even breathes
the past. We found again the basement—
half-remembered arguments and photos
brittle with fear. We held our faded faces
to each other in the light.

The Grief as a Black Arm Band in a Western Movie

It's old. It does nothing
but remind you of how
you moved the piano
(weighted, felted hammers
of civilization) across the plain
and propped up the old gelding
until (great suspension
of his beams) he fell. Smoke
licked all the corners then.
The ash—you find it
in your clothes, your mouth,
a bruise, a ring
like somebody gripped you,
cliffhanging. How you still
play it out in dreams, reaching
and reaching through fire.

I am on a river and cannot answer.
I crawled here in a pickup
under Douglas fir and spruce
that steeped their hands over
delicate cores. I cannot hear
your message now. Please leave
a sliver of yourself in the soft fur
of bark along the banks
where I will be living.

The Grief as a One-Way Mirror

Today I'm the cop
just watching
that tweet tweet tweet alone
in the room.
I'm out here all day.
I come
from a long line
of detectives.
There—
did you see it flinch?
That little bird in there
is flesh. Tomorrow
we'll trade places.
I'll be the echo
thrown against the glass.
Not now. This
is about a few hours
of control.

I go into the garden,
dragging a long bag of memory.
Look—nods of purple, slow
explosions, nine tomatoes
I missed this morning.
Dusk and her softer shadows.
What slender stems
we all are growing on.

The Grief as a Pattern of Black Dots on Purple Fabric

You wore this dress.
You made it
gorgeous, dots puckered
at the waist and meeting
the broken-bone line
where the surgeon
winched you open,
small swords drawing everywhere
the floodlines of your body.
I see you
in between the black—
remember purple's taste?
A sweeter than grape,
plum tart—yes,
a thinning skin's embrace
that covers like a cloth.
The pattern moves.
Dots gather, a mass,
then vanish.

Was it mink or otter,
wet and watching our boat
slide by? Loosestrife, bright
on purple ropes, strangling
the willows' roots, long toes
in the river. Someone said
a huge salmon and the current—
brown of fire and silt—
swallowed and spit
and fish—three fish!—
showed fins in sun
as I pulled my hand
through the water's pelt.

The Grief as a Low Depression over Southern Indiana

A year's worth of rain
already. Vines climb
whatever doesn't move. Heavy
was only a word before the roof
stove in. Hunters are too hot
and the limestone quarry stands
quiet as history. Clouds fight fast
and boil a wall. Flash
and roll and it's like
somebody pulled a rope and let
an ocean fall down. Pull over.
It may never stop but you can't
drive in all this mess, so loud
it drowns the radio's
wail. You're inside, alone,
your own lone breath making weather
on the windows. Lights on
so nobody hits you
as they carom this way
under their own insistent storms.

Because the powerhouse stares dead
with a face full of old bricks, and the river
spikes with a spiny rust of Rebar,
and turbines never made a sound
worth hearing, we ask that the salmon
rename the rapids they run through now
with their pulsing flanks and single
compass point. Maybe they'll say it,
now that the wall is gone, when they leap
in front of the boat, their skins
reflecting watery suns while they climb
back up the mountain.

The Grief as the Theory of Parallel Universes

You have taken this drive before.
But the roadmarks aren't
what you remember: That station
where you had to stop
is now an office. The doctor
is now a cop. The papers
were yellow before and now
(miraculous electric angels)
the nurses know you by name. You
are the constant, but even
your memory remakes itself.
Remember, you were stopped there,
the engine out of breath.
Today you're still moving.

Come see this mountain. Where once
white nothings of smoke descended—
stoned milk, blown chalk—now, the sharpened
teeth of trees. And cattle and a road—no,
a waterway long dry. What clear country
docks against us? Unfamiliar clean,
blue-blue assaulting increments
of the eye, a gold grass August.
There, distance. A hawk,
small but unmistakably rising.

Acknowledgments

“The Grief as the Universal Translator on *Star Trek*” appeared in *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*.

The line “I am on a river and cannot answer” is based on an out-of-office message by Kimberley Barry.

“The Grief as a Pattern of Black Dots on Purple Fabric” is for Karen Warren.

The untitled poems were originally written on postcards for the 2015 August Postcard Poetry Fest, founded by Lana Hechtman Ayers and Paul Nelson.

Amy Miller's poetry has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Nimrod*, *Rattle*, *Tinderbox*, *Willow Springs*, and *ZZZZVA*. She won the Cultural Center of Cape Cod National Poetry Competition, judged by Tony Hoagland, and has been a finalist for the Pablo Neruda Prize and 49th Parallel Award. Her chapbooks include *Rough House* (White Knuckle Press) and *White Noise Lullaby*. She lives in southern Oregon and blogs at writers-island.blogspot.com.

