

THINGS

Poems & Notes
by Mike Finley

August 2009

This notebook contain thoughts and poems I wrote during the week my daughter Daniele died in August of 2009.

I don;t usually think much of “poetry as therapy,” but being able to scribble down a few lines at this time was very comforting to me. Sometimes I escaped into it; other times I went in to work, and to deepen my understanding.

These are not private poems. They are for anyone who has suffered, anyone who has had a bad day.

Rachel and I are starting a tiny foundation to disburse the funds received at Daniele's funeral: Robots & Pirates, the Daniele Finley Foundation. We are also available for comment or conversation at mfinley@mfinley.com. We want to prevent what happened to Daniele from happening to any of the people she loved.

THINGS

I went down to the river the morning of Daniele's funeral. I still had to write most of her eulogy. I passed a group of men having a Saturday morning meeting on folding chairs by the water. My heart was broken, thinking of Daniele's sorrow as she lay dying. Everywhere I looked, however, I saw a story – a cigarette butt on the walkway, a tree devoured by caterpillars, a jet flying low over the Mississippi. Everything seemed to mean something – though nothing seemed to mean much. These odd little poems, which seem Thurberesque to me, and want cartoons like James Thurber's, were the result.

THE GLUTTON

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.
You pig, said the sparrow, you are killing the tree.
How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,
can't you see I don't have eyes.

THE CABLE

Stretched taut between two buildings
it crackles like a force about to snap
it is the almost bursting sound
of a brush dragged along a drum skin.
an awful expectation
like a world preparing to crack
and all the yolk spill out

THE CIGARETTE BUTT

I have ambitious aspirations
the cigarette butt announced.

The toadstool answered him,
I don't think you've thought this through

THE FOUNTAIN

Families come from all over
and spread their blankets on the grass

The fountain is predictable
every forty minutes it goes off
and sprays its water like a carousel
of rinstones

Mommy look, a little boy says,
the murmurs ripple through the group.
Mommy, I tasted it, it's salty --
and greasy, he says with a grimace.

Mother kleenexes a smudge
from his cheek,
Don't you know it's
a fountain of tears?

THE CAST-IRON SKILLETS

God says, I need you to do something for me
and hands you two-red hot frying pans.
Twenty years later you run into him again.
He says, are you still holding those things?
Hey, you can set one of them down.

THE STINK

Does not understand
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters
where are you going?

THE MAN WITH NO ARMS AND NO LEGS

A man with no arms and no legs
is grinning ear to ear.

What have you got to be cheerful about
he is asked.

I like how the light is playing on my face
I have a feeling it's my lucky day

THE MIRACLE

The man in trouble had prayed for a miracle
and sure enough a jet landed on his house

THE MAN MADE OUT OF GLASS WHO KEEPS BREAKING

Every time he turns
some part of him breaks off

first a finger
then a hand

He wonders whose blood that is,
swimming on the edge

He keeps breaking and breaking
without losing mass

Why doesn't someone say to him
stop stumbling about like a dope

All this pointless breathing
and surprise

It is funny how spit bubbles
between his lips

Don't hug me he says
it's unsafe

I'm too fragile
to be loved

He is an object of intense
interest now

Making rainbows
out of prisms

STABBING GOD'S EYES WITH BBQ FORKS

We had had it and called a meeting.

"He sees what we've been doing, and comes down like a thunderbolt!" said a man named Porphy.

"The punishment is disproportionate to the crime," cried a woman with neurofibromatosis and Tourette's.

"Still, maybe he's within his rights," said an old man known for his thoughtfulness, who was holding a bird's nest on his lap.

"Sidney, why don't you shut the fuck up!" we cried in unison.

So we chose a champion, named Leavitt, and handed him two silver long-handled BBQ forks. The plan was to plunge them into God's eyes while he was surveying what he had wrought.

Leavitt lay in wait while God adjusted his instrumentation. Then, stepping from the drapes, he struck, embedded the BBQ forks deep in God's sockets.

"My word!" said the Lord God, wrenching the utensils out with his fists and weeping bloody tears.

"Things will never be the same," he said, his eyes wrapped in a checkered sash.

"I did a lot of good stuff, too," he said in his defense. "You ought to give me credit for that. Poems and babies and such."

Leavitt was unmoved. "Let's move on," he said coolly. "But I will say, seeing you like this, that we perhaps didn't appreciate your

totality."

"Don't blame yourself," God murmured. "You had just cause."

But Leavitt was transforming. "My friends made me do this," he said, beating his breast. "What jerks they all are!"

"I know," God said, staring off into space. "I know."

EIGHT WILD TURKEYS

They are glorious, hideous
with their dark attire and gible-red faces

They turn their backs to you
but they do not yield

They don't want to engage
in a lengthy conversation

They are almost passing
a cigarette between them

They are waiting by the curb
for the next bus out of town

THE CHORD

See how just lifting one finger
changes everything

A door opens, something
new and unidentified is there

Do you hear it?
Do you see?

THE HALLUCINATION

Watch your step, it says,
shambling over the shifting stones

No, check that, take my hand
I will walk you through the changes

OTHER THINGS

These were also written that week. They are more conventional in tone and topic, and directly address what happened, and what we might do about it.

Hopscotch

I knew in an instant
she was there, and there, and there

The being small, under radar
where love clambers in the umber

We take turns like Merlin
inside every creature

No membranes, no padlocks
to hinder the leaping

The mole makes castles underfoot
Crane sharpens bill on a log

A duck cannot fly without flapping
Mosquitoes explode like kisses in the air

And suddenly everything
waves its hands and says hi

Renunciation

I break with St. Paul
and the one-way
Irish streets

And join with Patrick
and the Christ whose blood
veins every leaf

When They Die

The mother makes you weep
because all mothers are Greek
and they do not know
but they suffer so

The father makes you sigh
because of all that never was
Fathers are foolishness given a voice
that then has nothing to say

A son would be like being smitten
by a smith, a hit on the head
like nothing could be, pray God
could never be

But a daughter is the end
it was the man turned inside out
his soul become a flower
and his only shot at beauty

Late August

River dispatches spirit as steam
evaporating
in the morning light

The fawns of spring
dance across
dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he
is unaerodynamic
and so he
bumbles along

Advice

I guess this is my takeaway from the week. It is the idea that there are good ways to grieve, and bad ways. Sometimes I think that, out of guilt or confusion, we punish ourselves. This poem is an invitation to try another way.

Thoughts are like tenpenny nails.
They have a point, they have a heel,
and you can drive them deep into muscle,
and then extract them with a claw.

If you insist.

We trust our instincts.
But our instincts are the reason we suffer.
We say, "Obviously, this,"
but it is far from obvious,
in fact it is wrong
the way chomping on a fishhook
is wrong.

You need to find a new way to live,
in which you take it easy on yourself.
You are the only you you have.
Conserve, preserve, pull back on the reins.

Somewhere you got the idea that
hurting yourself was your job,
and that was bad,
but then you became a workaholic.

Stop it.

God gave you two brains,
and you never use one of them.

Unwrap it now, and set it in its place,
and take it for a spin.

Instead of empty space
put a bird there and let it chirp.
An annoying little bird.
And let it chirp until you wish it would shut up
while it drowns out your stupidity.

Someone got what they wanted
so what makes you restless?

Do you want to spend the rest of your life
like a knucklehead, never getting anything?

Stand up.
Get out of the street.
Walk, and see where that gets you.

The Weather

In poetry there is a phrase called pathetic fallacy. It is the idea that nature imitates human emotion. Like, it rained when FDR's caisson was led through the boulevards of Washington DC. This was no kidding, though – the weather in the cities was gray and grim through the most difficult days after Daniele's death.

The day of the death it began to drizzle
and people arrived at the door stamping their feet
to be rid of the wet.

It had hardly rained all summer.

An hour before the funeral the sun came out
and a soft breeze arose from the west.
People took off their jackets
and hung them on the backs of chairs.

In the middle of the night on Tuesday
the heaving thunder woke us up.
We ran through the house
lowering windows.

Then stood on the porch
as the rain came down,
rain by the oceanful,
pounding the boulevard,
blasting the neighborhood,
choking the gutters,
running and rushing
to rejoin the river.



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