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art by Gerry Zeck

# THE <br> BLUEBEARD <br> OF HAPPINESS 

by Danny Klecko \& Mike Finley Kraken Press | St. Paul | 2013

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## Hearting the Ape

An ape who goes to work all day And comes home tired but ready to play. An ape who walks on two hind feet But takes great care not to step on me An ape who loves me and teaches me words, And when I am sleeping does not disturb. How odd that dogs should live with apes, are at the door when they are late. Opposable thumbs allow different habits. Because no one gives body rubs like primates. Strange other species, so different from mine, Thank you for being my valentine.

# Los Angeles House Party (1963) 

Thomas Merton sat poolside
Diane Arbus joined him
She asked whether atheists
Would be offered forgiveness
Thomas Merton sat motionless
And said he wasn't certain
But asked to be forgiven
If the heavens turned out to be empty

## Let's Get Lost In The Forest

Spin around till we lose all direction,
splash two-footed in every rocky stream,
enter the caves of sleeping bears
and wake the young ones up with our tickling.

Let's give new names to all the plants, like "Deadly Lampshade" and "Worried Lips."
Let us eat grubs from moldy stumps and enjoy a chewy texture like clams and a nutty taste like broasted pine cone.

Let's take a box of confectioner's sugar for sprinkling, let's swear eternal love and seal the covenant with cocoa.
And when the search party comes upon our raggedy clothes
let's drop from the trees and shout surprise.

## Crossing Indiana

Sunday morning
Alone on the freeway
I had to pee
Zero gas stations
Only a bowling alley
Open for business
I went inside
Nobody was bowling
They stood in a circle
Speaking in tongues
Hands holding hands
A girl in the middle
Sobbed like a devil
Her miracle hadn't surfaced
Her prayer warriors had failed
A woman, their Pastor
Broke from the circle
Fell to her knees
And screamed explanations
Perplexed as ever
I ran like hell
And never looked back

## I Want to Kiss a Lutheran

From the bar stool to the church pew
A certain thought occupies my mind
A thought laden with sin
I -- I want to kiss a Lutheran
Maybe it's not my fault
Maybe it's the neurotoxins
That have seeped into the local water table Numbing my critical faculties

The Pope wouldn't approve Not to mention the Blessed Virgin
Whose statue must be spinning in the crypt
Faster than a well-greased propeller
But when my love surfaces
I know she'll be adorned
With braided pig-tails, shoulder-length
Like so
And when I place my mouth on hers
Our lips will slowly part
Allowing me to taste the cardamom Lingering faintly on her breath

## Third Happiest Moment

I was nine, playing in the Amherst, Ohio, Little League.
I wasn't terrible. I was good at flies and grounders. But during a game I tended to clutch, like I was in the spotlight, and everything depended on me enveloping the ball as casual as all get-out.

But my heart sped up and I would quickly time travel to thirty seconds later, the kids slapping me on the back with their gloves and loving me. And all I had to do was catch a ball.

It 's the 6th inning now, the final inning for our league. I am in left field, swatting my wonderful worn-in Billy Pierce glove.

Some kid hits a high fly. It is the kind that goes up, up, up and it then down, down, down - right where you are standing.

I could feel my heart rising in my throat, feeling the beat pounding against my larynx.

I look up and I am lost. I sort of see the ball, but not really. I time machine to thirty seconds from now, but it is a dark moment in history. My friends are throwing their gloves in the dirt in disgust. No one talks to me on the way home.

I get dizzy now, and I seem to be swimming in my uniform, The sleeves encompass me, the pantlegs trip me up. The grass in left field seems a foot tall and loaded with grasshoppers.

I turn my back to the ball and stumble to my knees.
And then I feel it. The ball landing in the hollow of the glove. A one-handed, back-to-the-plate catch.

I quickly put my other hand on the ball to hold it in, and struggle to my feet.

The umpire, an alcoholic like my dad, signals out. We win. The kids on my team, who usually groan when the ball goes my way, leap into the air and shout yay.

I stagger to the dugout, players clapping me on the back with their mitts.

I want to slow time down and tell everyone about each tick of the clock as I stood out there in the dying sunlight.

But good judgment overtakes me, and I keep my counsel.

We get ice cream at Zimmerman's and I keep my mouth shut. But I am dying to speak.

Gradually people turn to other topics. They are drifting from the moment.

On the ride home, I announce from the back seat to my dad and brother, "Boy I was as surprised as anyone by that catch!"

But no one wants to hear. I tend to wear people out with my consciousness.

So I keep the game ball. And all the way home I toss it from one hand into the well-oiled pouch.

The catch was a fluke. I had no idea where that ball was. If anything, It caught me.

But it went into the books as my great catch, forever.

## Thug

The bully in the playground Lays on his back<br>Stares into the sky<br>Squints into brightness<br>And when his mind sees fit<br>He feels his body<br>Gliding into emptiness<br>An area without incident<br>This place<br>This space in particular<br>The perfect place<br>To kick somebody's ass

## Lion

This is how I wanted my kids to be, indomitable, lazy, supine on the plain, purring like thunder sliced up by bike spokes, announcing contemptuously to the stuttering world, I am the terminus of the entire food chain.
I absorb all your poison and shit out your bones.

## Tourist

It's OK to see things and not understand them fully.
In fact, that's all you ever do.

## Why The Dog Ate The Dictionary

Maybe she wanted to hurt me for leaving her alone. It was her one chance ever to talk back to words. Or maybe the pages just smelled like my hand.

## The Penguins Of Rio

(AP) - Thousands of penguins, refugees from the melting Antarctican ice shelves, are washing up on Rio de Janeiro's immaculate beaches.

More than 4,000 penguins have waddled onto the beaches of Rio de Janeiro State in recent months.

Many residents, wishing to be helpful, have taken the creatures home and placed them in their freezers, imagining that penguins require cold, which they do, but they also require air.

The result has been hundreds of frozen, asphyxiated penguins, tasting more like seafood than fowl.

Tiago Muniz, a veterinarian at the Niteroi Zoo, believes overfishing has forced the penguins to swim further from shore to find fish to eat.
"That leaves them more vulnerable to getting caught up in the strong ocean currents."

But witnesses have reported seeing flotillas of penguins paddling north past Tierra del Fuego toward Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

And now they are washing up on the shores of Brazil.

## Foolscap

The village fool at the medieval fair is a knave in motley colors, short of stature and round of belly, who communicates with audiences only by way of duck call. He speaks in phrases and complete sentences, but the sounds are all duck sounds. You can sort of tell what he is saying whether it's a question, a declaration, or a curse - by the rise and fall of the duck-quacks.

He does some bad magic tricks - pulling a handkerchief full of holes from his pocket - and scowls at the crowd when they hoot at him, berating them with a stream of foul quacks. His act is successful, and the hat is passed, and fills with dollar bills.

Now the fool needs a volunteer from the audience, and chooses from the people surrounding him on benches an 8 -year-old boy with droopy eyes.

The moment the small boy steps before the crowd they see he is not an ordinary child, happy to be the object of fun. This boy is apprehensive of the situation, but determined to do well in it. To him, this moment on the medieval stage is a serious one. He stares out at the faces with ferocious dignity.

But the fool does not comprehend the situation. Quacking a command with his duck call, he hands the boy a sheet of foolscap, like the one he himself is holding. The two stand side by side, until the boy realizes he is supposed to imitate whatever the fool does.

The fool shrugs and begins to tear his foolscap paper into a pile of long strips. He drops these strips at his own feet.

The little boy, imitating the fool, tears his paper into strips, too, and drops them at his feet.

Now it happens. The fool picks up his scraps, rolls them in his hands into a round wad, and then unwraps the ball. Magic has happened - the torn paper is now intact again, untorn.

The crowd applauds.
But all the boy can do, blinking, is pick up his mess of tatters, hold them in his hands and, lower lip trembling, gaze into the permanence of his tearing.

The audience creeps to the edge of the benches. All eyes are the boy. All are terrified that he will disintegrate before their eyes. The fool, suddenly not so foolish, also stares into the boy's eyes, a look of out-of-character concern illuminating his face.

The fool now realizes he has a problem. He is in the verge of breaking a proud little boy's heart in plain view of a hundred people.

Moments pass like bomb ticks.
And then, suddenly, a solution. The fool takes his restored paper in hand again, rips it to bits and tosses the scraps into the air. They hang for a moment, like duck feathers, and then they fall.

The fool kneels and embraces the boy, who stares at him, unblinking.

And the crowd, which has become a village, cheers.

## Birthdays With A First Wife

I still see her lips
Moving in slow motion
Forming promises of love
But I have to believe
She was uncertain of her feelings
Since once a year, for many years
She gave me birthday treats
Purchased at the grocery
Or perhaps a high-end gas station
When I flipped the lid open
The cupcakes were always frosted
Chocolate or vanilla
Candy confetti
Exploded in rainbow colors
Sweet shards of shrapnel
Scattered across the parchment
But the part I remember most
Were those scary plastic clown-heads
Periscoping through the frosting
While grinning at my discomfort

## Product Placement

For me, there is no better way to start the day than opening a can of Libby's vacuum-packed sweet corn and scooping them up with a clean soup spoon.
You wonder how they removed so much liquid from the can without the corn going bad.
Delectable?
You can taste the soaked-up sunshine in every mouthful! Libby's -- hot or cold, the best canned corn around

## Milk Maids

With a yoke across her shoulders
Weighed down by sloshing buckets
Svetlana trudges across a stable
Covered with mud and much worse
The milk maids rely on language
To bring beauty to their day
Often accomplished with merry songs
Or a joke about the bull's anatomy

## Flying With The Dutch

I am flying commercial,
Six foot three, 274 pounds
Wedged between four Dutch boys
A lanky American
Who looks like Abe Lincoln w/o the beard
Drops into the chair in front of me
Heading to Amsterdam with a choir
With a voice I'm guessing was falsetto He announces his wife couldn't make it She was scheduled as the tour's flautist But her right hand was afflicted with drop palsy

Honest Abe reclined,
Thus placing the back of his chair
Flush against my cramped thighs
Leaning forward I flash him the guy look
Which is just another way of asking
Do you really need to be such an a-hole His silence indicated that he did

Maybe I was trapped with this guy's head in my lap
At least I wasn't a flautist with drop palsy
Constantly subjected to this lout

## Bumper Stickers

I break for green lights.
My gun is my friend - my only friend.
My 6th grader is nothing special.
I heart my dog, who would lay down his life for me.
Honk if you're white.
Coexist because I know where you live.
I'm stupid - and I vote.

## Peggy Palmer

My sophomore year in high school I discovered that under the table in study hall you could see girls' legs and underwear. One week I must have dropped my pencil twenty times to grab a look at Peggy Palmer's legs, which were not pretty but indomitable, crammed in her nylons as taut as a girdle.

Each time I surfaced on the formica tabletop, like a pearl diver, gasping, I would avoid looking at Peggy Palmer.
Was she wise to my activity?
She was either very wise or not wise at all, because she never let on, and if I were an angel perched in the study hall beams I would keep an eye on the boys who could not hold onto their writing implements for the life of them, at any table throughout that great place of learning

## Selection

A devil squats
On your left shoulder
While an angel
Alights on the right
Neither has the power
To force decisions
They simply offer
The benefit of their experience
Knowing unsolicited advice
Offered by celestial beings
Isn't much different
Than that given by humans
And as likely to be heeded

## Silence And Silos

When a child is born in the city, You have no idea it will grow up And defy you by moving to lowa.

I was wounded by this getaway
Until his mother suggested
That we set off for this rustic world
Where asphalt turns to dirt
My wife possesses the ability to negotiate
With Amish and stray dogs
Traveling in packs
Seemingly without purpose
She promised she would stay awake
While I set our course by the stars
But the cornfields and corn solids
Hung heavy in the air
Forcing her to close her eyes
And with her body slumped and snoring
Against the passenger door
I realized I didn't believe in fate
Just the sum of passion

## Siamese Twins At The State Fair

They don't do it anymore, provide peeks at freaks for seventy-five cents as a feature of the midway experience.

But back then my friend Bob and me tiptoed into a tent and saw two girls older than us and not Siamese, connected at the forehead, languidly paging through a single issue of Little Lulu.
One of them, the larger one, chewed Juicy Fruit

Bob and I tumbled down the out ramp.
We were sarcastic, opinionated boys
But we did not speak again
for twenty-five minutes.

## Girl Cake

Nobody understands
The thought process of a woman On the anniversary of her birth Quite like the village baker
For he has set one thousand cakes
Before the fairer species
And he has deduced
What the majority will miss
That woman is not thinking about
The arc of her life
The losses she has suffered
Or how many candles are blazing --
She's not imagining the perfect man
She simply wants dessert

## The Abominable Snowman

He seemed a cheery soul with his stovepipe hat and corncob pipe, standing on the terrace on Ashland Avenue, until you saw his eyes and mouth were made from frozen sticks of dog poop.

## Second Happiest Moment

One time, at the stadium with friends, a foul ball came my way, hit by a journeyman third baseman Scott Leius. I put out my hand and the ball went to it. I looked around and saw two boys, about nine, and handed the ball to them, even though I had a son of my own, about their age, back home.
These boys saw the arc of the ball coming toward us, and it would mean more to them.

Ten years later my son and I have invited a visitor from Brazil, Cesar, to a game.
Our seats are in foul territory in right field.
A player hits a fungo ball in a soft trajectory to us.
My son catches the ball, and without a moment of hesitation, places it in Cesar's hand.

## Another God Fact

How does God warn us
That it's time to despise our children?
They're given squeaky voices
And hairy armpits
Puberty is nothing more
Than a siren for parents
To warn them that their kids
Are about to turn insane

## Dog On The Lawn

He staggers out of the house this morning and stands on the lawn, huffing and puffing.
He is in heart failure.
Rachel uses her stethoscope on him --
125 beats per minute, about 30 more than normal.
Dogs make nearly the same face when they are in trouble as when they are happy.
Panting heavily, tongue out, teeth peeled bare and grinning.

Great joy and heat stroke look about the same.
I coax him to step toward me but he can't.
His legs wobble beneath him. His chest heaves.
After half an hour I lift him up, like a lamb, and carry him in and lay him down.

I just sit with him for a while, running my fingers through his coat, patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.

I am snuffling, but it isn't too bad.
I am reminded of the first day we brought him home, 15 years ago, and we did the same thing, he and I. We laid our heads together on a beanbag chair, the one with the leopardskin spots, and closed our eyes and slept.
And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

## 45 Minutes In Central Park

Between the hours of 3 and 4
Sat a man who was coming apart
A man at the end of some battle
Big drops of rain began to fall
Rain drops by the tablespoon
The man refused to move
A woman with a terrier
Stopped as if she knew him
Offering dry escort
Underneath her umbrella
The man began to cry
"What determines luck?
Who makes up the rules?
Why is value attached
To everything but me?"
The woman sat by his side
Put her arm around his shoulder
In silence the umbrella twirled
Until she offered explanation
"Everything will be fine," she said.
"Just not today"

## Happiest Moment

Five-month-old baby sitting on floor, in our apartment in Milwaukee, 1985. Father, wanting to play with her. He wads up an athletic sock into a ball and then, Rollie Fingers-style, reaching way back, winds up and pitches the ball to her.
As the sock sails across the room, he thinks, oh, no, I am striking my infant daughter with a projectile, I belong in a spidery prison, but the ball strikes the baby's onesey and rolls to a stop. Then the sound begins to pour out of the child, volley after volley of infant giggling, like a passle of baby ducks wobbling and quacking, it is a sound I never had heard before, peals of laughter manufactured in the brain of the person your drop of seed created, and I thought, I did that, I made that happen and I want to make it happen again.

## Laugh Like A German Officer

(from a 1911 account of a lieutenant colonel of the Death's Head Regiment of Hussars)

I hear the way you laugh and I do not like it at all.
It pains me to hear you reduced to sniggers, titters or guffaws.

There is one and only one way a German officer can properly laugh:
short, sharp and manly.
Like this: "Ha!"
Did you hear how I did that? "Ha!",
Now repeat after me: "Ha! Ha!"
That is how we are to laugh from this point forward.
No other form of laughing will be accepted.
Now I want to hear you practice it that way.
Come now: One, two three, "Ha!"
Come along there, you can do better than that.
I want you to shout it lustily, and with explosive, masculine mirth.

Then - be done with the mirth.
Do not reflect on the object of your amusement.
It is time to be serious once again. Now I want you to practice among yourselves!

## Win Your Children’s Attention

When they are thirteen sign them up for the Mars mission.
Then during the two-year space voyage, call them every six weeks or so on the radio.
They will be so glad to hear from you.

## The Young People

We were like jewels glinting off one another's light, sapphires, rubies, garnets, pearls .. our teeth were so beautiful and so was our skin, nothing old could hold us in, our poor parents were at a loss to contain this savage perfection, the Buick roaring from gravel onto highway, laughter and beauty and limitlessness, six-packs of Rolling Rock, sexy cruel sneers, and our poor dear mothers in their babooshkas and aprons carting Kleenex out of our bedrooms, and father with the gathered hose damping down the lilies.
What religions would we not topple?
What ancient wisdom would be next to fall?

## Nighttime In Heaven

was the nicest surprise because you expect it to always be day there

But after dark is when the real fun starts and all the praise is packed away

There is music far across the lake and occasional applause and whistles for long stretches everything is impossibly funny, and you
keep saying of course, of course except your cheeks don't ache

And there is time for tender walks under a moon that is bigger than a house And if you want you can rest on the stoop hand in hand with your life's best friend everyone sleeps in a heaving pile and has the most wonderful dreams

People of every ethnicity smacking their lips and don't try to do the math on this
we all sleep suspended from the strings of God's Zubas

## Cup

When I find the Holy Grail I'll bet the Vatican will contact me
And offer a pittance for its return
But I plan to sell it on eBay
Collecting all the shekels it will bring
So the two of us can swill down Dom Perignon
The chalice of a Messiah
Certainly holds some swag
But a wooden cup guarded by cherubim
Pales in comparison
To a champagne flute
Smeared with lipstick kisses

## Hey God

I once met a man
Who waved snakes in the air
He was trying to get your attention
I once heard a woman
Speak in tongues no one could decipher
She might have been hoping to impress
Then there was that guy
Who took a vow of silence
I wondered if he bored you to death
And here I thought I was high-maintenance

## Mix Tape

My stepdad's star cytoma caused something to change in his brain.

This man who said "That's the bullshit" anytime you tried to thank him was suddenly exposed to every pang and feeling.

This man whose head has been irradiated till he could no longer swallow now fought against showers of dry tears.

He spent his days in bed, his dick in a catheter and his eyes fixed on the trees outside his bedroom window, and the birds springing from branch to branch.

I made him music, which he never much enjoyed, and now it swept over him like waves, melancholy piano, luminous harp, invisible hands clapping in time.

Why do people say avoid sentiment, don't be trashy, don't go slumming with your emotions When the right thing to do is obviously to hold one another in the corniest way weeping and laughing and professing our love.
"I didn't know it could be like this," was the last thing Dick said to me, clasping my hands in his.
"I didn't know," he said -- gratefully.

## Atheist Heaven

He is especially tender with these ones because they lived their lives without comfort There were no opt-outs from reason They lived in the crush of what could be seen and never asked for favors
They never took comfort from lies
They never were kissed by the soul's endless night They were saints of a sort, of a bleary, chap-mouthed sort And when it was over they lurched into dirt and issued not a complaint They say he loves them most of all and he gives them the tools to live without him, the willingness to suffer being chief among them and instead of one guardian angel they get two because they have more trouble to get out of
And now they sit in this reading room forever elbow to elbow, legs over knee smoking because it's safe to do now and thumbing through a special edition of the New Yorker magazine without words
They never know and no one tells them how loved they are, or where

## Up All Night

If I lose my job
I believe I'll switch careers
And apply to be a guardian angel
I'll bet they'd start me on the third shift
Hovering over headboards
Fulfilling my responsibilities in stillness
I would issue prayers, poems and dreams
Amidst moonlight and nightlights
And if I should grow weary
I would rock ever so slow
Humming psalms of protection
To the squeaking of a hamster wheel
And when the daylight finally breaks
I'll wonder why I was even needed
Staring into the waking eyes
Of a child born so pure
There was no reason yet
For the renunciation of evil

## The Baby Who Breastfed Forever

The first year no one objected
but the thing never developed, it sat on the breast with that dazed look of unblinking bliss, rolling its eyes and twitching its fingers.
Decades pass.
I am old now, waiting for that baby to take a break.

This baby's not going to college.
This baby will never get a job.
This baby is going to suck and burp that whey-smelly breath into the room until the cows come home.

## Dust

Every night I sit on the edge of the bed, and brush the day's dust from the soles of my feet. I can't see the tiny stuff that's there, but I'm guessing it's garden mud, house dust, bug parts, cracker crumbs, dog hair, spider web, flakes of skin, dandruff and whatever else. The graceful hand grooms the brutish foot. This is the moment my life is like the life that everyone lives, from every walk of life, this universal moment of hygiene of saying good night to the day. Either that or I need to vacuum more often.

## On Having A Hearing Aid Implanted

I hear ...
my breath like an athlete
drawing strength for the next heat ...
the murmur of the exhaust fan
reaching out to me from a duct ...
the thud of the windshield blades
dragged across ice...
a new sound from an old CD,
a liquid throb of accordion ...
the grind on the snow-pack
as I step toward the door ...
the gasp of the apple surrendering to the knife

## 2 A.M.

I awakened
to your sobbing
Don't cry I said
though I knew what it was
and I knew don't cry
is useless advice
I patted you
and thumped your back
like a drum
in the covers
as if the sounds
from the heel of my hand
passed through you
in waves
I wanted the vibrations
to set up a hum
and pass through us
like a shout through water
and take it
outside us forever

## The League Of Beleveres

At an age of accountability One considers religious affiliation For many, this important choice Is predicated by tradition When I debated conversion I knew my soul would be captured By the church most fashion forward Vatican City, you were the odds-on favorite But those scarlet Pope robes secured with a sash Would only serve as fist magnets In the masculine world that Catholic boys inhabit Buddhist Monks, you came real close Your flowing robes provided comfort But pumpkin orange seldom offers
The slimming effect one desires I also considered accessorizing
What could gain me quicker credibility
Than a Jewish phylactery made of leather
Or Mormon underwear
Finally I chose Amish attire
It never goes out of style
In ecclesiastical terms
It's like the Yankees uniform, Conservative and functional, Only minus the pinstripes

## The Poet Finley

The poet Finley stood irreverent Bypassing the podium Insensitive to protocol
Replacing verse
With an account of loss
The stage became a confessional Of which he took full advantage By announcing that he'd fired God

Finley didn't qualify as agnostic
He didn't convert to atheism
He fully believed in a supreme being
But he terminated this companion
In ceremony and silence
Half the audience became unnerved, But the rest of us sagged in the folding chairs, Knowing what our dear friend had lost

## Friend

Why do I twist your arm to come to a poetry reading I make you sit through all that bother
as if you needed to be tested to prove you deserved me when what I should have done is plunk your hand in mine and thank you for your love despite, and not because, of this what a generous pretense that these stick-figure stories matter and our history does not, that there are important others in the world
when we both know, as a point of fact, that there are not

## The Staff of Life

A young man stood in the bakery's retail
Two women entered
One was fair, the other one gorgeous
The young man gawked, a baker nearby
Understood the look in the young man's eyes
The baker's whispered advice
Date the brioche
But marry the rye

## Win a Dream Date with Danny and Mike!



Log onto our Facebook Bluebeard of Happiness page and post a picture of yourself, or say something. The winner will be escorted by Messrs. Klecko and Finley to a St. Paul eatery and made to listen to old jokes.

## Q. What does the Bluebeard of Happiness mean?

A. The bluebird image seemed to lack emotional complexity, so we opted for the French fairy tale of the evil lord Bluebeard, who married beautiful women and then strangled them and stuffed their bodies into a secret room.

What would happiness mean for a person like that, we wondered. Did he somehow become a better person? Or did he remain a monster, but with a better disposition? This slim volume is our exploration of that rhetorical question.

Artwork by our friend Gerry Zeck
\$4.00


# The Bluebeard of Happiness 

By Danny Klecko and Mike Finley
"The most remarkable event in American verse since the publication of The Wasteland, or for that matter, before it."

- Danny Klecko


