



*Why Horses Run
Back Into Burning
Barns*

Mike Finley

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Walking the Seminary Bridge Before Dawn, 1963

I went away to a junior seminary in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to train for the priesthood. I was 13 years old. This was how every day began, at 5:30 p.m.

The boys slide from their bunks and tiptoe to the trough to brush their teeth and spit.

Now dressed, they pound down two tall flights of stairs and exit into the still-dark morning.

Down at the pond the ducks are remarking, the footfalls of 60 boys echo on the planks.

They enter the rectory and pass through an underground corridor to climb three final steps to the chapel entrance.

From the darkness, everything suddenly becomes light.

A hundred lit candles. The censer, swinging. Smoke rising.

We kneel on the bare boards. Our knees have gotten used to it.

Before them is the crucified Christ, and the breast of the pelican, jetting blood.

All through the night, while the Catholic boys slept, Jesus suffered for them.

"My Body"

"My body is drifting through space – "
How in love with our bodies we were!
The stuff we were made of, our protein glory,
the only one we would ever have, yet so afraid
to strip it bare, our treasure, our encapsulated selves --
"Oh, my God your skin is soft I love your face --"
And then! "How dare they try to end this beauty?"
Why don't we sing "My Body" any more?

2001

Weight Loss

People, when they diet and hit a good patch
And for a while a lot of weight comes off,
It is like a cowl has been peeled away

And you see them in their glory now
Like resurrected souls
The way they were always supposed to be

But notice the look of sorrow on them
For all that they have suffered
And all the times they were betrayed

Can I offer you one more piece of pie, Louise?
It will only go to waste on my counter
And you enjoy it so.

But now they are beautiful
Even if they are wasting from some disease
They wear a look of shining pride that says

None of you ever really knew me
And now I approach you, hands held out
Like Christ on Easter Day

Wonderful World

Getting out of my car at Lunds, I noticed the car
parked beside me.

It had angles and curves I have never seen before.

It was not Chevy or a Kia or a VW or Ford.

It was a Porsche 911, steely blue and compact.

I wondered what important and valuable work

The owner did to deserve such a car.

Then I saw the license plate said COLLECTOR.

And it all became clear.

This person maintains some kind of collection,

Perhaps a museum of art, or antiquarian treasures,

That families and children visit and learn about.

No wonder he was rewarded with such a beautiful car.

Bless you, I thought, as I approached the store

And the doors opened wide to welcome me.

Election

Don't take it personally.

The wind comes,

the leaves blow

down the street.

Blind Spot

There is always that one place you cannot see reliably.

Things sneak up on you there.

You know that when the end comes,

it will probably appear in that space behind your shoulder
that you cannot comfortably swivel to.

So that is what you focus on,

year after year,

with a dismal, forlorn feeling,

because what can you say despite all this vigilance --

"I didn't see it coming."

Yuan Dynasty Story

How I miss the tiny footsteps on the floorboards,
of the young girl Hsia Liu
who took out the ashes and minded the children.
I think about her shy smile, and the way
she looked downward, in perfect modesty,
presenting a hot pot of tea for us.
When she passed through the room
I could detect the faint rustle of her clothing,
and when she presented herself,
the quickened beating of her heart.
How sad, I think, as I stir the tea
I had to make myself today,
we sold her to pay the mortgage
on our mountain cottage,
the one where she watched over our dear young ones,
in the northern prefecture of H'ai Province.

Complicated E

You hold out your hand, you tuck in your thumb,

See how the four fingers make a complicated E.

The E is four hatchlings singing for the dangled grub.

It is four snoozing butterflies, dreaming of the life to come.

It is the tail of a chicken hawk, grasping a mouse.

Four teats on a full bag of cow.

A wave of carrots, greeting you from the table

They are four damp tube socks clothes-pinned to a line.

The comb of the cock, that has been violated by the dawn.

A Chinese hexagram signifying a well-plowed field.

A kind of a rake, with which I maintain your lovely grounds.

They are two brides and two grooms, mad with love and
dashing up the stairs.

See how the E is a naked heart now, gasping in your hand!

The Boards of Spring

Be joyful as you climb the steps --
put spring in your toes and the treetops.
You are measured out for these green sleeves
and boxed in by these exigencies.
God gave you big bells so give them a shake.
let them bong to the striking clock.
Say oh what a beautiful day
as if you were Gordon McCrea

An Idea to Entertain

It's a good idea to weep more.
It dissolves the salts that collect in the corners,
It flushes the rings and uncakes the pistons,
It lubricates the entire mechanism.
Maybe we should set aside time periodically
to throw ourselves on the bed
and drench it with tears
Like a sponge expanding,
like a loaf of bread left out in the rain,
like a ship taking on water.
Sobbing and sobbing, until we scrape bottom --
and maybe we should unratchet
The nut on the hydrants and hose down the city
with a sloshing of tears.
It feels so good when it rains on the body.
It stings! But it corrects the idea
that the eyes are only for seeing.
Maybe if you squeezed the last tears out
and took a Q-tip to each cranny
Till the tanks sound hollow
When you bang them with a wrench
And the sound shivers through you,

saying empty, I am empty!
And once you have had your cry,
And wrung the washcloth out,
when the sun evaporates the last of it,
it may be time to assess our progress.
Maybe you can muster the hope
to be happy.

Rotten Stump

So a tree becomes a stump
and the microbes burrow in
until it is all lacework
a filigree of matter.

The world that seems solid
is riddled with holes,
holes between pores
and holes between cells,
holes between the molecules,
atoms and particles.

There are oceans of space within and between.
You could say we live in space.
'I'm not really here,'
I'm just saying I am.

Where Knowledge Goes

We know where you go,
down into the ground,
but what of all the things you know
that gave you such pleasure,
not just to beat other people over the head with,
but just the embracing satisfaction
of knowing a thing
and having it be yours.

Does it leave you all in a moment,
like a dynamited dam,
or more gently, like a sigh of information,
like wrens flying out of a bush,
thoughts inching from the ends of the hairs on your head,
crawling out of your ears like soldiers
blinking in the bright dust that follows battle,
and wondering where to take up residence next?

There go the answers to every test question,
the punch lines, state capitols, quotations from books,
the names of birds, our high school Spanish,
multiplication tables,
the hard lessons one learns from experience
that can not be put into words,

plus the kinds of knowledge that we don't even know,
the answers we are given at the last moment,
the last blink of an eye, the last breath,
that now must wait another lifetime.

The Druthers

I wish I was a better man

I wish I was more honest than I am

I am somewhat honest but I prefer
to shade things slightly in my favor

I am fairly kind, but with exceptions
as when I make bombs in the basement

My wife is right, I'm an angry guy,
and negativity scares people away.

I don't know why I always play the fool --
Perhaps, to avoid being useful.

I wish I could do a job just right,
just once, and have it be perfect, complete.

"He knew what he was doing," people'd say.
"That's the kind of guy to be."

I wish I was the sort who radiates calm
and pleasantness, and never flips the alarm.

But in fact I have this anxiety problem
so wishing is what I spend a lot of time on.

Don't Be Like The Moon

The world must carry the moon on its shoulder
like a stillborn child to the grave. - Pindar

Don't be like the moon, your face all scars,
dismayed by your bombardment.

Because if that is your choice,
To be just like the moon,

The night is what you will be relegated to,
a lantern hanging in the darkness.

Do not be bewildered like the moon
Do not gaze open-mouthed into space

Do not dwell in memories gone bad
Be like the earth you were plucked out of,

The one that lives, that heaves and sighs
Deny your losses, shed your skin,

Pack away the dead so they cannot be seen

Make roses grow between the rows
Be like the blooming earth and forget

Revolving Door

Seeing the old man
Step tentatively
Into the glass cylinder,
The girl slowed down,
The two tiptoed around
One another, palms high.
He smiled at his partner,
And she, who had never before
Danced the minuet, stepping
Out with the old, stepping
In with the new, did
likewise.

Outside My Window

from: *Songs of Disappointment*

Every morning I part the drape with one finger,
hoping yet again to see
professors of literature discussing with one another
how deep beyond deep I am,
a head start, really, on the post-postmodern era.
There should be earnest young men lining up
to receive my blessing.
By now there should be shy girls in pigtails, hoping for the touch
of my hand against a cheek,
and rapturous women in red dresses, their hearts in full swoon.
There should be the publisher's representative,
bringing the day's valise of cash.
But when I look out the window I see grackles
stealing the sunflower seed
and behind them, the garbage truck backing up,
saying *beep ... beep ...*

Nature

There are people in the world who are so remarkable of face
that traffic stops for them,
that others, beholding them, go to a distant place
inside their heads,
and imagine endless days of worship in a golden light.
Because of the look that streams from their eyes,
because of features that seem sculpted by God,
the cheek, the throat, the color of the skin,
you know they will be objects every day of their lives.
Their lives may not be complete,
and they will never be certain they are loved
because they are good
or just because of their cheekbones.
They will never have to work,
whereas you, my beautiful one, will toil
every day until you die.

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 babushkas 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?

Your Human Being

Do we know what our gifts are before we give them?

Closer than we ever dreamed,
the way the members of this family
pass through one another
wordlessly, where there
is a bowlful of something
especially for you.

Let's not ever say plural again,
let's not speak in our waking lives again.

If we can't be friends let's be lovers.

We have no time for impatience.

Keep time the way you keep
everything else,
temporarily.

For your two hands are only seeds of miraculous songs,
interrupted by silences,
unfolding at the edge of what you are.

Hurt So Bad

"The old songs are overrated," he said.
"We think they're good, but they're not, really.
We just liked them because we were young."
He said this proudly, as if it liberated him
to betray everything, to say no to everyone.
It confused me to hear him, because everyone
Who sang to us suffered for us.
The Beatles and Stones, the Temptations and the Who,
They gave their lives or they lived in madness
So we could rock.
Little Anthony spoke to every breaking heart I knew.
Hear him singing:
I know you don't know what I'm going through,
Standing here looking at you.
Tell me Little Anthony did not suffer for me.
Twenty three years waiting for induction into
The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,
He bled for the many.
Hear him singing:
But let me tell you that it hurts so bad
It makes me feel so sad to see you again –
Except it didn't hurt so bad because of him.
The songs encircled us in lassos of love,
They were given to us and us only,
They were our treasure,
They were the passports we carried into life,
They laminated us with the pain of love.
They bound us to one another in perpetuity,
like insurance, only sweeter.

Don't

Don't get too attached to your feet.

They'll soon take off for the hills
because they must be going away,
leaving you on spinning stilts.

Don't plan on holding onto your eyes.

They have things to see on their own,
and all this time, all the livelong days
they were only on loan.

It's possible to go about your
business without skin,
but you will need a soft, wet coat
to hide within.

Beating Heart On Sidewalk

What do you do about it?

It's not cool to kick it under the hedge.

You could take it inside and try to raise it like your own,
but it's hard to see where that will go.

You could call the American Heart Association,
but this isn't really their thing.

Police are no good, they'll tag it and bag it.
you can see the dog in the screen door
licking its lips.

This is the problem with every heart.

We see it huffing, a little bit scuffed
from passing traffic, so brave, so hopeful,
so eager to get back to business.

We know it's there, but we don't know
what to do.

Mobile Greek Chorus

Radio dispatched, they can be on hand
to minister to every moment of panic

They know somehow what is in your heart
and what must be weighed against what

Sympathetic to you, but also mindful
of the needs of the larger community

Should you act out of rage or selfish desire,
that might be it for Denmark

They explain what the hero cannot
Because they have the common touch

Still the megaphones seem a bit much

Some Days Don't Seem Like Stardust

When the rent is due
and the dog bowl's bare
and depression blinds you
to the glory stitched tight under
the surface

When the memory of being fashioned
in the fieriest furnace
isn't there for us

When we are yanked from our perch
by disappointment and shame
We walk through the fog we know as now
unable to glimpse the brilliant atoms
we are swapping every day
like flying fish

We should love ourselves knowing
we are the kiss of the universe
everything pitching in to make us
and us giving back at the end
which is really no end at all
even on a dank, dull day

Monet Understood

To countermand a bout with depression

I row to the center of the lily pond,

and recline awkwardly in the boat.

Overhead the clouds bleat by,

and the pheasants beat a pathway through the sky.

My spirits soar at the knock of the woodpecker

like a seeker of truth in a faraway tree.

The cork I plugged the rowboat with

shoots out and strikes me in the groin.

It returns: the sinking feeling.

Dog In The Manger

Hard years after I first hear
the expression
I understand its meaning:
The dog is in the manger,
Napping in the hay.
When cow comes near to eat,

Sharp teeth warn her away.
But you know dogs, sooner
Or later they always repent.
Watch one as he trots out
To pasture, drops a shank-
Bone at your hooves.

Lovely Thunder

How beautiful the grinding up above us is,
the slowness of arrival,
shoulder brushing against mountain shoulder,
the moans of cattle bawling for release,
the sound of empty barges let loose upon river,
thick skin of steel against steel, hollowly banging,
the notes that are sounded, each different
in its own rhythm but of the same uneasy song.

Big Ass Angels

Beauty has always distracted us from the truth.
Adam was deceived by Eve. Was she good
or did she just look that way? A man never knows.
Artists likewise get taken in. Given a choice
between naked beauties to model the saints
and lumpy people from around town, you know
which way they're going to go.
Women of the world, take heart! from the knowledge
the masters could not see,
that no one is prettier than anyone else.
The eyes tell lies, what we call beauty is just temptation.
Help is coming, dearest friends. A bell will sound
and all will know what we hoped was true,
but could not bring* ourselves to believe.
We are beautiful, lovely ones — oh, so beautiful.
And then we are beautiful beyond even that.

After the Rain

Sometimes when it stops
you can scan the faces
and understand them a bit
That man with his wife's umbrella,
people put up with him
and that's about all he gets
The girl in the rainboots
wishes she weren't pretty,
at least not all the time
There is a fellow, hands in pockets
who does not know what
to do with himself
And that other guy, bug-eyed
in the reflection, disturbing people
oh, wait, that's me

1983

Intuitions

Why do we hold them

In such high regard

When they are what got us

The way that we are?

Sentence

Nature divides us into male and female.

The woman is the object of loving,
the beautiful, the one acted upon,
kissed and caressed and implanted
with the substance of life.

The man is the subject of the sentence,
the doer of the loving, the adoring one,
he acts and is not much acted upon.
Like a hunter or a soldier he
isolates the object and sends forth his sting.

Which perhaps explains why, as I stand
at the cash register paying the woman
who works there the bill,
on the line that says tip,
I always enter forty percent.

My New Religion

Drifting down the river
with a friend who cannot save us,
who cannot stop the war,
who cannot set us free.
All we have is one another
heads in our hands
staring up at the stars.

The Problem of Consciousness

To be aware, and to be able to contemplate
a thing is such a kick.

So many millions of opportunities we are allowed
to have a laugh,
or put two things together, or be astounded
by a weird coincidence
that seems to have no meaning but there it is anyway,
teasing your mind.

It's like someone has dropped a hand grenade
down your chimney
and it goes off inside you and you are riddled
with tickles and tingles.

This is our life, a long walking with consciousness,
which can cause such delight,
as we seek to maximize the poems spread over the hills
like bright flowers
while struggling to deal with the shit
that enters in the same way,
the pitiable state we find ourselves in,
the bills in the mail can't hope to pay,
the people who don't understand us no matter how we explain,
the sad stories we tell ourselves till we believe they are true.

The world doesn't care about any of this, it just is --
go stand by a pond for twenty minutes if you doubt this,
the risen state, the ability to know, is our fallen state as well,
sobbing into the pillows of impossibility, all of it coming
from the same good place in our heads, in our hearts,
in our lives.

In Defense Of Self Pity

It is never in favor to feel sorry for oneself,
but I offer this meek refutation.
I was driving on Cedar Lake Road in 1977.
Life was good, I had a pretty girlfriend and a job.
I was a published writer with a dog.
But then I felt the building of tears inside me,
they erupted and stumbled down my shirt.
It was the realization that, lucky as I was,
I wasn't ever going to be great.
Not untalented but lots of gaps in character and resources.
My work was lazy and slipshod at times,
I lacked the follow-through to make that perfect draft,
I had a disturbing propensity for the dark and obscure,
a guy without pedigree, sprung from ordinary places,
already too damaged in life to make it big,
I would just go on being this guy in the mirror
with the premature crows-feet by his eyes.
I pulled the car over and wiped my face
and felt in that moment a kind of affection for myself
I don't recall feeling ever again, admiration for going forward,
acceptance of the blessings that came my way,
even if I never lit up the sky, maybe I could still be
a decent man, or a dad.

Conformance To Specs

I didn't want to be there
but I knew I couldn't leave
so I painted eyes on my eyelids,
for when I attended meetings.
People seemed reassured by this --
by the clamshell sclera, tea-leaf iris
and that amazingly attentive expression.
“We’re finally getting through to him,”
they said,
but I was gone.

Instructions for Falling

We have to let go in order to fall

And the steady tumble that carries us down

Surrender all order, unclench every hand

Until we are sleeping, and begin again

The New Model Francis

I greet the birds in the spirit
of lovingkindness.

I expect them to perch on my finger
and chirp hymns to me of God.

Instead they take wing at my approach.

Probably it's the lit cigarette.

Dime

One day I learned
I was wrong all my life,
offended by lightness
and wary of cheer.
The only music my ear respected
was the groan
of the soon-to-be dead.
Then did I see how far down mountain I was,
and what hard climb lay ahead.
In what spirit does one
undertake such a journey --
with indivisible purpose?
And towering fanfare?
Or better, set foot
as if nothing were certain,
as if birds migrating
are off on a whim,
and matters of life and excruciating death
are resolved with the flip of a coin.

Underwater

Why do horses run back into barns that are burning?
That is today's lesson for learning.

It's an instinct to seek out the familiar
Even when conditions take a turn for the worst.

The abused wife, the addict, the man
tearing stubs in half at the track.
He looks at the window and heads back.

It's an investment once made
that we can't walk away from,
even when the house we bought with our blood
is sinking into the blue of the bay.

Lesson

There are people who have not been held in twenty years.

Understandably they are easily reduced to tears.

If one were just to see them and press close

All the built-up aching inside explodes.

Why can't the wounded have what the rest have?

It's because heartache is unattractive.

Big Gulp

Could 7-Eleven have chosen
a more degrading name, one making us sound
as sentient as a toilet, a swallower of commodities,
a flusher of calories.

I read that a farmer in LeMars, Iowa,
fed his cattle expired ice cream from the Schwan's plant there,
great troughs of cookie dough vanilla and chocolate mint
disappearing into labyrinthine stomachs,
it feels as if our politics are retarded, we have no more way
to elect ourselves out of this maze
than the cows do, the free market is a confinement facility,
and we are the herd shut up in the meat factory,
and by and by we buy and buy,
hoping for something, for the conviction that we will be OK,
sucking down corn solids in the feedlot of America,
we are not citizens, we're livestock and democracy
is such a crock, we get lost in the indifference,
if not for you, there but for you, the exception is you
and the intelligence you honor me with,
the wonderful gift, the seeing of me,
the seeing that I am not a callus of tissue,
not a yard of tillage, I am a man with thumping heart,
I know we fight sometimes but forget about that,
because you are all I have to make me feel known,
a person, not another cart at the register,
the moo cow returning to kneel at your manger,
burping vanilla and stamping my hoofs to say
thank you.

Are You Like Me?

You don't trust yourself
to hold your keys
over the storm drain,
because an essential part of you
is sure to let them fall?

I Cry When I Hear 'Wichita Lineman' on the Radio

It's the spaciousness of it,
the yearning of the man
high up on the pole,
blades planted against the wood,
and he hears the burble of voices on the lines,
people talking, them telling their secrets,
them sharing their news, though far apart,
and the golden wheatfields stretching out for miles.

Shampoo

When we were little we howled
when the stuff got in our eyes
This was before Johnson & Johnson was.

And though mother cupped our brow
With the soft of her hand
And pointed to the spider

On the bathroom ceiling
The spider we were to fix our eyes on
Until the rinse washed away the soap --

You couldn't help it, you looked away
And the soap was like daggers
And oh how you cried when it stung

Then one day you discovered
You could live with the suds
If you simply closed your eyes

Until the foam left your hair
And cheeks and spiraled down the drain
But you had to be willing to do nothing

We need to get word to babies everywhere
Oh stupid little people --
Put on the blindfold and see

Microwave

I hit the 30-second button,
and being busy, step to my office,
hit a key on my PC, and walk back
to the kitchen. Bing, coffee's warm.
But where did the 30 seconds go.
Like a card pulled from a deck
that gets smaller and smaller,
like the tiny waves hurled round the machine,
banging on the glass of time.

The Good Times

It's like you're driving the interstate
And you hit a pothole and blow out a strut
And you stand by the roadside
Kicking the chrome
And cursing the road maintenance crew
For being a day late with a shovel of patch
Saying son of a bitch what a crummy system
And you don't seem to notice ...
The headless horse in the crook of a tree ...
Or that there is no road, just stink and smoke ...
And the days that used to make you
Call on God for better times
Are never coming back.

Miguel Hernandez

Stars, ignore the crimes occurring like catfights under your windows.

Sometimes I'm ashamed of what goes on in the alley,
the things we overturn and track into the house.

It isn't your fault, it's the kind of animals we are,
if we were cats we'd know when to move on.

The pastures of glass we pretend we forget
are always browsing at our heels,
the beauty of the universe trapped in a puddle of oil
on a rainy stretch of road.

Sun and moon, leave off your high faluting,
if you were so grand would you carve us our shadows?

All of us sometimes scratch at the screen –
we want what is ours.

You look down, it looks down, everyone looks down these days.
All of us claim what we spot at our feet.

The Chain

Nowadays it's all celebrities, we've given up
on individual selves and now seek someone famous
to enjoy successes on our behalf.

So when a ballplayer or rock star is having a hard time,
we root for them, as if their progress will lift us
with them, a crumb will fall where we are crouched.

They used to publish sob stories in the paper.
Personal interest stories that people could relate to,
assigned to name writers who could no longer report:

Little Jonnie Potvin has no teeth, tongue, or lips,
thanks to a hit and run on West 36th Street,
but you don't hear him complaining.

Or the crazy toothless mother of fourteen
still beating laundry against a rock, and ask
Do you want to be queen for a day?

And they ran one of these at least every week,
reminding the slobs who thought they had it bad
they were doing pretty well by comparison.

It stands to reason, if some are better off than others,
then you could line up the earth's population
from luckiest to least, from Brad Pitt down,

who glide through life to the last, indisputable guy,
the one the dark clouds have stopped following,
whom the second to worst-off guy feels sorry for.

Legless and eyeless, each breath a source of hacking pain,
purulence seeping from every cracked pore,
without hands with which to work, or beg, or pray

This one has no money, no talents, no health,
no family to bear him along, only the consciousness
of his own condition, and we will be friends

and I will pat his palsied thigh and read to him
in the street about the exploits of Brad on the opposite end
and thank the Lord for all we have received

2011

Ghost In The House

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
Every night I give you my kiss.
I cover your sleeping face with my hands.
I look into your eyes with tenderness.

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
The floorboards creak where I stand.
I am here at your window, drapes flowing.
Speaking to the moon like a friend.

I am the ghost who lives in this house,
Where the living come and go.
The secret I cannot convey to you --
That I lived and loved and knew

Joy | Heartbreak | Nothing

Those lucky enough to experience joy this fall day
are saddened by the shortness of it.

Those whose hearts were broken today are glad it's over when
it is.

Those who feel nothing special from sunup to sundown feel
nothing at all.

For them there is no short, no long.

It is just another day.

2013

Roads

Macadam, asphalt, blacktop, tar.

These surfaces will take you anywhere,
speeding through the countryside, every bend a mystery,
every unevenness a jolt. Roads on islands
are conflicted because they cannot get you anywhere really.
Mountain roads turn cars into eagles, breasting the current
then streaking down, eyes open wide.

Shore roads and causeways lick the water
while the water licks them back.

The dead end road is indeed a death, irreversible
and to be avoided, until such time as you wish to back out.
Expressways and beltways that traffic courses through
like blood through muscle, every car a note in a mighty song.
City boulevards throw each car into the spotlight,
like the next arrival at the ball.

Alleyways where cats trip by on tiptoe,
and the modest lane that guides us to the garage,
the squeaky brake that tells you you are home.

1983

Compassion for the Tall

Many admire these long drinks of water.

Women like gazing into their misty mountaintops,
wondering about the wildlife leaping about up there.

They feel their blouses are always being peered down through.

Other men imagine everything is proportional –

Big feet, big hearts.

The tall one is expected to be older and wiser,

But obviously that can't be true.

I have looked myself into the eyes of the tall,

and found them to be intelligent and empathetic,

like sorrowful giants in certain fairy tales

who watch the children play in the moat,

yet they are never quite accepted by the populace

and they are always swoony for love, any love.

These treelike beings were babes like the rest of us,

and babies they remain, but wailing from the clouds

at the impositions life hands up to them,

and them unable ever to find a place to hide!

2013

Runner

Are you running to escape
your genetic inheritance?
All those dumpy aunts and uncles,
mother with her thunder thighs,
father and his love handles.
Only by running can you keep their bodies
from overtaking you.
Don't look, they are gaining.
They are about to scoop you up
into their arms.

2014

Against Nature

No thing ever tried
because things do not intend
They do, but they do not on purpose

No thing ever cried
they lack the ducts to do it

No thing showed courage
at least not of the thinking sort
their boldness is close to stupidity

This is not to cheat creatures
This is not to undermine them
or their difficult journeys

But it is to say that it is us
that makes them beautiful

They need our eyes to be seen
our voices to speak
our souls to put souls in them

If there is a spirit in the forest
it is because
we breathed it there

If there is beauty in
the woodrose

we fashioned it with our eyes

If there is purity here
it's in a dream our
hearts have dreamed

We reward the industry
and the valor
and the grit
we see it
with our respect

We were the witnesses
we made the falling tree
make the crash

We were the suffering
and the affection
and the joy

Do not look for virtue
in the little ones
in the humble ones
unlikely as it seems
it is all in us

And there is our
frightening
responsibility

The Light

I talked about it, and talked about it, and now I'm afraid to look at it.

It was supposed to be visible a long way off.

Supposed to be outside, but I could take it inside.

Though it came at the end of a long, bitter year,
and many dry miles of traveling, it would be perfect.

And here it is, of all seasons, summer.

It comes and it's not what I thought it would be.

From the veranda of my mother's house in Ohio -- fireflies.

I know what will happen.

In the end I will congratulate myself, saying:

I knew it. I knew it.

But no one else could see it.

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

Great Stuff

There is a crunching sound under the kitchen floor,
you imagine it's a mouse that came in from the cold
and is having its way with your circuitry and beams.
You check the limestone foundation of your home
and see numerous holes
in the porous rock a creature could use as a way to get in.
So you go to Menard's and find a product in the paint section.
Great Stuff is what it says on the can,
it's an aerosol foam sealant.
You attach a kind of straw to the can to direct the flow,
hold the can upside down,
squeeze the trigger on the can, then release the foam
into the cracks between things
and it expands to form a yellowish dam that swells and hardens
to keep things in or out.
You expect the foam to be like shaving cream,
light and inoffensive,
but as soon as you pull the trigger the foam oozes out,
and it is nasty sticky,
it does not go where you want it to go, it tumbles end over end
down the limestone wall like bloated snakes.
You want it to squirt exactly into the chink you see

in the wall and stay there,
but the snake says fuck that, I'll go where I want to go.
That's when you see that Great Stuff comes from Dow,
the good people who brought you napalm.
You think, well, I'm still in charge here, I'll use my fingers
to sculpt the contours,
it will be like drawing a bead with window putty,
but the moment you come in contact
with the foam you regret it, it is astonishingly sticky,
in a sickening, greasy sort of way,
your fingers cry out that this was not such a hot idea,
and you hold up your hands in horror,
trying to scrape the gunk from one hand with the nails
of the other,
and you know in an instant this substance is going
to be on you all week.
In the end you arrive at a truce with the foam.
It fills the holes, then goes where it will, swelling, blobbing,
tumbling down the wall,
so that when it dries it looks like your house has a cold
and these hideous boogers are weeping through the cracks,
and you stand there, hands blackened by the greasy glue,
you cannot touch anything for days, or eat,
but the holes are filled,
the mouse will beat on the dam you have made

with its tiny fists.

I sought refuge from the wild in this house of infinite food,

he will say,

and now it is my fate to starve behind this hopeless,

sealed-up wall.

And you can accept that, gothic as it is, because you have filled

the holes that let things in to the place

where the family you love

sleeps in their beds with their adorable risings and fallings,

alive and unprotected, and unaware of all

the great stuff you do.

2011

Happiness

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps at its thousands
of beaches, pebbles and rocks
and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.
A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by a island nesting in a happy sea,
a sparrow hawk flies off toward
a bank of violet mountains.
It lights on a limb of a tall green tree,
the stars alight in her branches.

We Think We Invented Wondering

We think we invented wondering,
but that may not be true.

All these things buzzing around us --
what if wondering is all they do?

Wide-eyed, zigging, zagging, eating –
all of it a query that is never resolved --
an unbegun sentence that hangs in the air --
that being the business of being, without the extra ado.

2005

On Having My First 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 squeak of the snow-pack as I step toward the door ...
the gasp of the apple surrendering to the knife

2003

Cup of Old Pens

It's not that the pens are crap, although many are –
who has nice pens any more?

It's not that I wrote so furiously with them, and bled out
all the ink that coursed through them.

It's that they are old now, twenty, thirty years
lying in the drawer with the rusty paperclips
and shredded rubber bands,
whatever dreams they might have dreamed
turning to scab in their sleeves.

The Cherry Tree By Du Fu's Cabin

I watched you when my boughs hung low,
bending with their weight.
My harvest was the season's wear,
bitter as blue crab apples.
You passed by me, still and soft in black rains.
Trickles were cool tears, and mine
was the joy of ten thousand blossoms as white as May.
From these weathered sticks I have spared one branch.
One day, it will fly true as a zen arrow.

1975

The Sign In The Flaming Store Window

When you say you can't imagine I know exactly what you mean
-- you mean it hurts to imagine, and who needs that
unnecessary pain

when there is enough of the real stuff to go around.

The truth is we imagine all the time of course and as bad
as this is we imagine much worse.

If you couldn't imagine you wouldn't be afraid.

The truth is we are losers, we will lose everything we have
and everything we know,

each lovely face will crumple in the flame and if we don't see it
it's only because our face caught fire first, but someone saw
and so someone's heart must break.

We knew what the deal was when we signed on.

Everything must go, the sign in the store window says.

The shelves will be stripped and the roof set ablaze,
and every thing inside be swallowed in the roar.

It's no good to walk the white chalk line, bereft, mumbling,
tearing at our hair and clothes, no one can live
for a week like that.

But it's not a bad thing to pack it away in the back of our mind,
closeout, clearance, make us an offer!

The other creatures, rooted in the earth or yawning in the grass,

they don't have to deal with this.

Next time life seems pointless, next time you want to watch it
shoot out of the can,

remember that fact: Why would this excruciation occur,

why are you able to imagine this and so much more,

until every tear sizzles

to a salty nothing, if you meant nothing?

Brother, if your heart doesn't break ... you're not here.

2014

The Return Stroke

Few of us see it this way
But when lightning occurs –
I won't say "strikes" –
It does not appear in the clouds
And then shoot down,
the way our minds tell us it does.
Something does strike, called the leader,
but we do not see it
and it does not light up.
But then, from the ground,
A visible bolt shoots up into the sky.
This is known as the return stroke,
It is the earth talking back, it is
returning the sudden energy
to the storm.
The weather supplies the electricity --
but we supply the light.

The Gladhand

He recognizes me but can't summon my name.

Hey, how ya doin, he says grandly,

putting his hand on my shoulder,

like we had been best friends as boys.

You know, he says, I was very impressed with the thing you did on suicide.

I look up. He has read about my daughter?

He snaps his fingers. I forget the guy's name, he says.

The suicide guy. Come on, help me!

My mind goes blank. I wrote about someone else's suicide?

You know, he says, the fellow out on the prairie!

Ah, I say. My old editor, Gruchow.

Something I had written seven years before.

I mean, you really nailed it, the man goes on.

The psychology, the depression, the impression he made on people.

It's a shame, and it's an area we have to do more about --

as if he were in charge of society's agenda.

He was a friend, I say, a sort of one anyway.

It's really the issue of our time, isn't it, the man says.

You did a super job, you should write more,

as if I had not written my heart out on this sickening sad topic.

I thank him for the compliment, as he skates

down the aisle to shake other hands,
and to cause them similar pain.

Perspective

There are no fields between the plane and the ground below.

The farmlands look like Band-Aids, and the little car

On the long skinny highway down there looks foolproof

As a bead on an abacus wire, undeviating as a button on a thread.

Actually, someone full-sized is inside, and he has to steer

Or he'll go in the ditch. He could hit his head.

Or worse, miss his appointment in a room up ahead

in one of the buildings alongside the road.

1974

How To Turn Bad Things Good

If something bad happens act like you don't quite get it.

Wear that what-the? expression on your face.

That way you never give the thing the satisfaction
of knowing you hurt.

Walk with a distinct rhythm, bouncing slightly as you go,
even if it causes pain or you are a somewhat crippled.

Pretty soon, by definition, you will be dancing.

Love, but be discreet about it.

Everyone twists an open valve -- you look for the tight.

See what the other hands are betting, then open
it up all the way,

so the strong of heart can stand and follow.

2012

Profound Imbecile

It's exciting to be ignorant, forever on the crisp
of learning something, anything ...

To get soaked in the puss by a thought ...

That is as sweet as pudding dribbling
down one arm.

I take it as an oracle, I press it in a book
like a baby rosebud if you could talk it
into opening up again.

And I smelt it dizzyingly, it went
Into my mind and I smelt it
like the very first arousal around ...
but you know --
you never know --
you know?

Opportunity Costs

In business it means,
if you do one thing,
what does that prevent you
from doing instead?
And after you decide this thing,
any investment you make is sunk.
You can never get it back,
Any more than you can leap backward
from the pool to the diving board.
And that is the essence of the lives we live,
opportunities selected
and efforts, once taken,
that are unrecoverable,
which gives every breath
we take new meaning.

Sleeping On My Hands

I sleep on my hands every night.
As I pull the covers around me and prepare to let go,
first on my right side, then on my left,
I bunch both hands under the pillows,
holding my head up through the night.
My head may not need to be held up like this,
but I cannot do otherwise, they go there on their own.
And in the morning when I awake
the stems of my wrists are sore and hollow
and my fingers numb and cold and I feel
I have been flat on a cot donating blood all night.
Possibly my hands were intertwined
this way in the drift and brine of my mother's womb,
the twist of zero gravity for wet weeks on end.
Or my head is so heavy from the ordeal of ordinary living
that only my hands can prevent its sinking forever
into mattress like a black hole of gristle,
bone against wrist against skull against mind,
as if I am taken down nightly from the cross,
and set on my side in the darkness to rest and dream
of the wounds in my palms and my heart bearing
the sins of the world in my bones,
diving sideways into time.

In Passing

We are always passing people on sidewalks and in hallways.

They walk toward you, you walk toward them,

It is unlikely either one of you will say anything.

Maybe some non-hostile tic – a smirk from him,

A momentary smile from a woman scared to death.

There is a rule against waving happily when they are still
a block away,

And everyone observes that rule except the insane.

There is a chunk of you lodged deep in the hypothalamus
that understands that passing is a moment of possible danger
that this oncoming stranger may thrust
the point of a bread knife
into the soft part of your forehead and the last dumb
thing you said
was hello

2015

The Day

You wake up seeing mountains where there were no mountains.

People on the street have somewhere to get to,
but still they crane their heads and say hello.

In every tree and bush you hear cheeping, and an assortment of dogs

are hollering from their pens.

You go to the door where someone should have been standing
and you rap on the wood with light knuckles.

You shield your eyes from the sun with one hand.

A hawk nuzzles itself on a bare phone line.

A child in blue runs by with a kite.

2015

Envoi

Why should I cry that I'm not getting rich
When I had fun at every step?
Why should I charge you for one of my books
When I had nothing to do with it?
I didn't do anything; nobody does.
It was given to me, so here, I'm giving it to you.

2009

The Stink

Does not get that it is the problem:

“Brothers, sisters -- where are you going?”

Grand Canyon

If we pulled the plug on the ocean and the water drained away,
what canyon would we live in then
and what descent should we make?

We would wait until it hardened
lest we all got stuck in the mud.

We would pack for a good long journey,
then make our way downward.

2006

Hertz Doughnut

Foolish woman, imagining we will become friends!

You snort and smile and cover your face.

You all think we are such nice guys when we
are aching to pump you full of tears.

Girls underestimate the fusion at hand.

They suppose they are in charge and that they dance
because it's their idea, but it isn't.

1988

Million Dollar Smile

It's an attractive attribute, that catches the light
That pours from your eyes, the pleasure that melts mountains,
That blasts us into space, ricochets round the world
And explodes like nitroglycerin in the heart of all who know you.
But is it a sign of your genuineness?
Or were you just born that way,
So that every time you flash the high beams,
the mechanics combine
To freeze us in our paces? Is it something you do on purpose,
Knowing full well you have this power
that you have never registered
With the local police precinct. Maybe the sight of thousands
Fallen to their knees to perform the sacred rite of seppuku
Has emboldened you to smile, smile, mowing down
The faint of heart for the pure joy of doing.

2015

American Hearts

We are an emotional people
with fire in the belly for every sort of thing.
But in the end we lack depth
Because there is usually something we can do
to shut down the ache we start to feel.
We have options other peoples lack.
We can always enjoy a slice of cherry pie,
or shed a tear at movie's end,
or carpet bomb those who get on our nerves
until we feel right again.
There is always something we can do,
and this keeps the feelings from building
and wisdom from taking root,
so we are never ever longing for long.

.

Cycling

I love being able to climb a hill
I didn't think I could
and the look on the motorist's face
when I come to a stop and stop
hang in there say the telephone poles
the shiny storefronts have your back
death may toot its grim ocarina
but see the light step
through the trees!

2004

Kraken Press

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