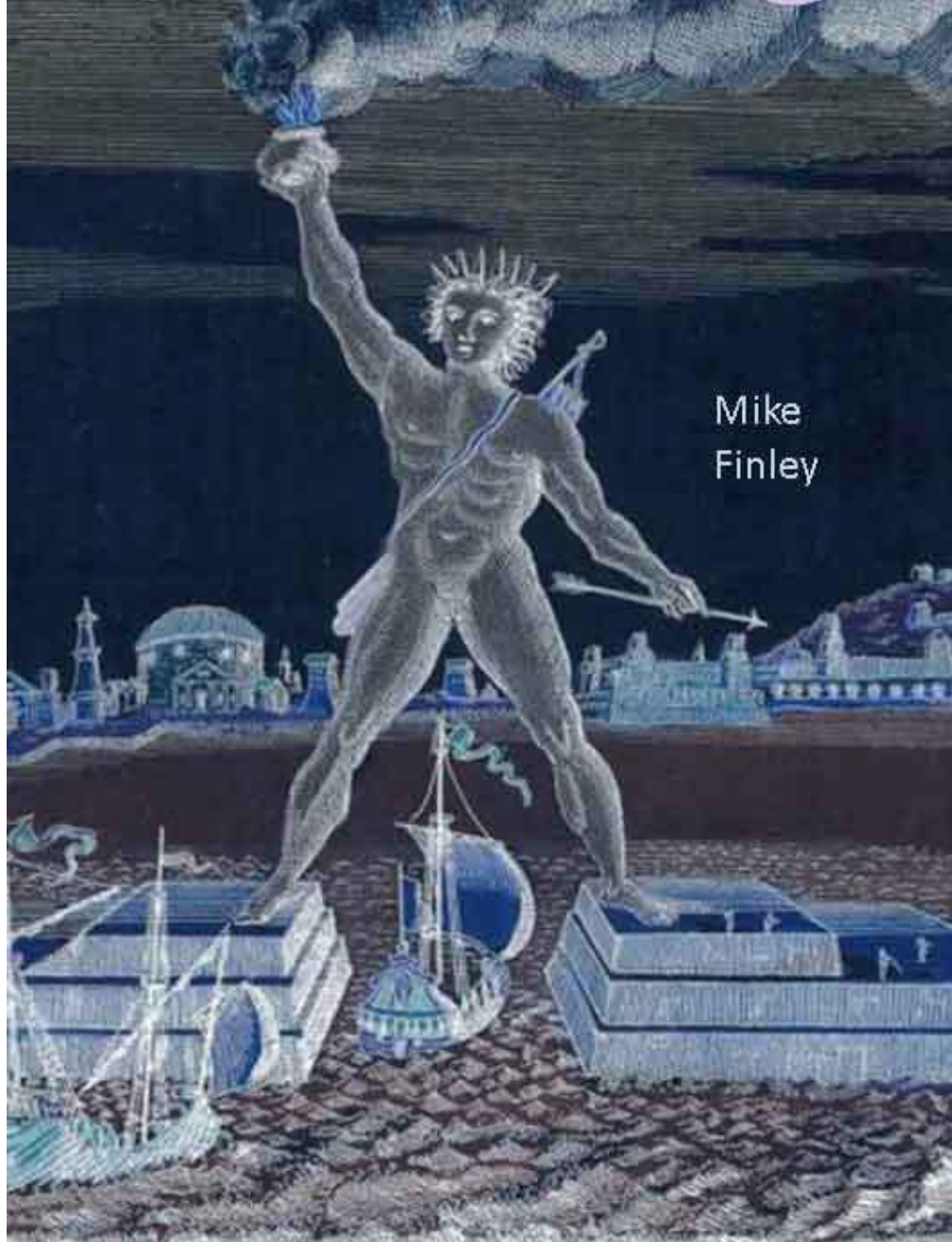


COLOSSUS

Mike
Finley



Colossus

Poems by Mike Finley

Kraken Press, 2016

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I'm Not Running Any More

When I hid among the corn, in the field behind our house,
My mother came and found me, and led me back home.
I was only five years old.

I loved her madly, but I had to get away.

At 13 I ran off to the seminary.

At 15 I flew to California to see my father.

At 17 I drove back to California bringing friends.

I ran off to college. I ran into drugs. I ran into art.

I was always putting distance between us.

Every time I left I broke her heart.

All I ever did was break her heart.

And then I did not see her so much,
and she got sick with diabetes,
and her feet turned black,
and she stuck herself with insulin
five times every day.

No one ever loved me so fiercely.

She would kill komodo dragons with a plastic fork to get to me,

and still I ran away.

And then she died,

and we put her in the ground.

Now I think of her five times every day,

every time I give myself a shot.

I Saw Jesus In The Wintry Swamp

God never spoke to me, but he appeared to me once.

I was tramping through an icy marsh alongside the Minnesota River.

I heard a crackling sound, like something coming toward me, and there was Jesus.

Only, it wasn't the usual Jesus.

He was a monster, twelve feet tall, and somehow he had blended into

the wood of his own cross.

He was naked, and his skin was like the bark of a tree.

His face had whorls and knotholes like you see in plywood.

Twigs and shoots sprouted out of him everywhere.

I stepped back with my dog, both of us terrified.

Jesus continued to advance, plodding, dragging a train of brush and roots.

You could see it was hard slogging all that vegetation through the snow.

I called out to him, "Jesus, how did you turn into a tree?"

He attempted to speak, he opened his mouth, but all that came out of him was dried leaves and sawdust.

Then I realized he had descended into hell,

And if they got him, what chance did the rest of us have?

Candy Bars Want To Know

Every so often another treat marches forward and is expelled.

No one knows why, or what happens.

You hear the wrapper tearing without -- and then nothing.

Face it, every moment is the closest you have been to death.

Every so often the current day is expelled

And you advance one day closer .

The candy and cookies fret in their cellophane --

Almond Joy, Butterfinger, Heath Bar (the favorite of King Lear).

Is today the day you have waited for, dreaded?

Did this final day of waiting give you an inkling of what is to come?

Kit Kat, Milky Way, Mr Goodbar.

A great anxiety shudders through the machine.

And what awaits us on the other side,

after the thunder rattles our homes,

after we are swallowed up by darkness,

after we are cast into the pit?

I Married Pippi Longstocking

It was her adorable face, the red hair and freckles,
those joyful constellations, the blissful pigtails
lifted up by a coat hanger within.

The sunny disposition -- I never saw her sulk.
She was naturally convinced of the beauty of things,
including herself -- so why did I take her away
from the magical island and polka dot horse?

In the city she immersed herself in study.

What she learned changed her. Her smile faded as she came to grips

With the ache of the suffering world.

One day she could take it no longer and left on an expedition
To bring medicine and good counsel to all nations.

I think of her in her tent at night, slapping at flies,
and I hope thinking of me from time to time
and wondering why did I take her from Villa Villekulla?

Valentine

Write the poem in your heart
Make a wish with both eyes closed
Say the things that needed saying
Undermine the status quo
And if you doubt me, don't –
I am standing here for you
Please take down this number
You will know what you must do
Tell the truth with one hand raised
Make a promise to the earth
Say a prayer for all who suffer
Pull the arrow from your heart

The Lake

If you swim in the lake you know the feeling,
That something in the water has draped itself on you.
Kids race back to the beach with ropes of plant hanging on
them,
alarmed that something scratchy was trying to get them.
Fishermen hate that it hangs on the lines.
Boats hate that it clogs the propeller and requires
meticulous picking away of plant before entering a new lake.
Some towns bought advanced dredging operations
Costing millions of dollars to cull the water milfoil from the
waters,
To keep campers and vacationers coming to their lakes
and buying from their grocery stores.
Towns would remove a hundred tons of plant per season,
only to have algae take over the deoxygenated water.
“This used to be a really nice lake,” said Barbara Olafson
in her back yard overlooking the lake, over lemonade.
“But there got to be too many of us.”

The Bluffs Overlooking The Sea

The sun catches our skin like this.

Our eyes are courageous because we are young.

I chase you down the path, kicking sand.

You pretend you don't want to be caught,

I pretend it's open to doubt.

When I catch you we kiss, laughing

with the gulls calling overhead.

We lie in the bent grass. my hand on your waist,
the morning breeze moving us this way and that.

The sun catches our skin like this,

there will be no war forever.

The Water Boom

Bicycling below Hidden Falls, I saw a water boom
tucked against a storm sewer at the edge of a cliff.
Water booms are those long stocking-like absorbent ropes
they put in the water when there's an oil or chemical spill.
This boom was perhaps twenty foot long, and as I rolled past it,
I saw it was twisting in a serpentine fashion.
I stopped my bike and saw it had a face,
that looked like it was contorted from always weeping.
When I looked into the face, which was clenched like a fist,
I saw that the boom was my mother.
My heart sank at the sight of her, dead for twelve years,
yet here she was transformed, and spiraling in the ditch.
She could not talk, she could only make a sucking sound
from her lamprey mouth. I did not know what to do.
Is this how the world works, i asked myself,
that a woman who suffered so much in life
should be dispatched to suffer even worse humiliation,
soaking up the poison that shoot out of our houses.
Or is this just a dream to remind me of her heart,
and her pride, and her wish to take on pain
rather than see it attach to me.
Weeping, I dragged my mother like a sodden carpet

to the river's edge, I released her and watched her slip away.
I held my hand over my eyes against the afternoon sun,
that shone on the turning waters like diamonds.

Vade Mecum

Vaderi, valdera -- valder ah ha ha ha!

All animosity between us has passed.

The war that caused so many tears

has been put to bed,

there is no acrimony remaining in the air.

Should you take bread from my knapsack

I do not begrudge it,

Instead I offer you more.

I know you need to maintain your strength.

Here, I say, or here, you say, take more, be filled.

Even when we pretend to quarrel

it is just a play we are playing in,

and then we stop, put hands to hips

and laugh most heartily.

We hike through the highlands pointing out every bird,

and imitate its walk and call.

And when our pikestaffs direct us back to town,

the church bells peal and people part

to let the happy wanderers through.

Pushed From a Huey

Interrogation in the field sometimes went this way.

Having got what they wanted,

or having not got what they wanted,

they led you to the lip and gave you a nudge.

They always took the blindfold off,

giving you the gift of scenery.

You wonder what is the best way to spend the next twenty seconds.

You could spend it working up your anger at the Americans,
but wouldn't that be an indulgence, a waste?

You could do the calculus on saving yourself,
perhaps the perfect tuck and roll would minimize
the wear and tear you are about to experience.

There in the distance are the crags of Ninh Binh

and that is your own village at its feet

and there in the paddies are your brother and youngest sister,
although you cannot make them out.

It is natural at this point to start running in place,

Everyone does it, like a plummeting swastika,

because why hold back, why not go with the feeling,
and someone may be watching.

New Poetry Setaside Program

Man at the door says he's from the National Humanities Office, to tell me about the new setaside program.

"I don't know what that is," I said.

"It's a simple concept," the man says. "Instead of writing all day every day, you agree to not write for a while."

"Why is that a good idea? Why would the government get into that?"

"Oh, it's a sound practice in many ways," he assures me. "First, it means there is less poetry in the aggregate. Gives demand a chance to catch up to supply."

"OK, I can see that. What else?"

"Well, it's good for you. You don't burn out your audience so fast. Lets newcomers get into the game a bit

"I guess I can agree to that. But what about me, personally? How do I benefit, besides the monthly checks?"

"Mister Finley, that's the best part. You get to rest your brain. Your creativity gets a chance to renew itself. Just think how good you'll be after a few months."

"Yes, yes, I'm thinking about this. One last thing -- you're not just telling this to me, are you? Every writer is being offered the opportunity?"

The man's eyes widened. "Absolutely, sir. We're telling everyone."

"Who have you told so far?"

"Well, so far, just you."

Clearance

The bridge posted clearance of 17 feet, two inches.

Perhaps your tires were overinflated at that last truck stop.

A two percent variance could yield this result.

Perhaps there was high construction this summer

and the new blacktop added just a hint of height to the layer.

But who's going to whip out a tape and measure the difference,

especially with the cross draft zagging alongside the access road,

the tape twisting and lengthening in the wind?

Beheaded

The word has been undermined
so you automatically think of mattocks
and stained chopping blocks,
when it should be a term of approval,
as in "That is one well-beheaded young man,
and he will go places," or,

"Her beauty was beheaded with
a diadem of roses that pulsed
with fragrance in the dying light,"

or for use in a vow when it must
be especially clear what we intend, as in
"I'll beheaded home soon to you, love."

Standby Equipment

If you tell the fireman to be more productive

he will have to be out starting fires.

Sometimes it is good to have some stand-down time,

like that dog curled up on the red braid rug

who would like nothing better

than to be splashing through the swamp

but saws and snores on your Skechers instead.

Collossus

I was brought to the site where my monument was under construction.

Tomorrow was its official opening.

It was a 150-foot statue of me, my feet set apart.

I held an enormous arrow in one hand

and a pot of something -- gold? -- in the other.

My head was held back, and the echo of heady laughter piped out of my enormous cast iron mouth.

Everything met my specifications, except for one thing -- my groin area was only about 65 feet above water.

This meant that larger ships passing through might come uncomfortably close to scraping my crotch.

I pointed this out to the architect-engineer, who protested that construction was already over budget,

and he wasn't sure what I was asking --

that I raise the platform so my crotch was higher,

or perhaps I wanted to dynamite the most vulnerable area as a precaution against the kind of accident I envisioned.

What a choice. I indicated to the architect-engineer that I was starting

to regret hiring a monument man right out of school,

but money was a factor, and I thought I might get lucky.

I stared around the harbor. None of the other collossuses

seemed to be having the problem I was having.

I sat on the wharf, feeling punked by all the collossuses
whose engineers had foreseen this eventuality.

Nothing ever works out for me.

The Way Of Men

Men lay their sins at your feet

as if they are proud of them.

I killed for you.

I stole an infant from its mother.

I am mighty like the monkey on the roof.

And when I have expressed myself,

and it won't take me the whole day,

I will bind you to the maple tree with rope

so that nobody takes you

while I doze.

Drop the Ball

Phone it in.

Go the shortest distance between two points.

Conduct a cost-benefit analysis.

Be in the top quartile of respondents.

Maintain balance in your work/life responsibilities.

Punch the clock.

Take the road most traveled by.

Meet requirements.

Be all you can be.

Don't knock yourself out.

Smell the roses.

Set aside me time.

Visitation Weekend ~ Man With Three Daughters, Stopping to Pee at the Annandale/Clearwater Exit on I-94

Three daughters under age 5, and he has to get them from the double door of the gas station to the car by the pumps.

The oldest child capably leads the way.

The man follows, with the infant in a Snuggli.

The middle child, just under three, walks behind them, swinging her arms distractedly.

Suddenly a tiny shoe trips on a crack and goes down, her face scraping against the blacktop.

The father stops to pick up the bawling child, tells her she is all right, there's no blood, clutching her under his remaining arm.

Trumpeter

Rachel and I stand by the falls at Willow River.

It is a beautiful thing, three-layered like a wedding cake,
cold water spilling over its edges.

Suddenly there is an enormous white bird, a trumpeter swan,
flapping directly above us.

We stop, shielding our eyes with our hands, and watch the
swan land

on the topmost tier, then surf down the first whitewater
cascade,

then cartwheel down the second, wing over wing,

and then splash belly first into the third, and momentarily
disappear.

The bird then surfaces atop the raging waters,

shakes the rain from its feathers,

and leaps back into the sky.

It is the clumsiest exhibition either of us has ever seen.

Half Past St. Mark's

Past midnight, the dog stops to sniff the trunk of a tree
that has not yet lost its leaves.

We hear the rustle of wings above,
black forms nesting in the branches, sleeping.

We step away to give them privacy, but they are alerted
and take to the air together.

They quietly loop and loop against the streetlight glow,
against the visible half moon.

Each turn they take in the night sky makes a fluttering sound,
causing a shiver in the atmosphere.

Their shape shifts in the darkness, one bird leading them one
moment,

another then taking them a different way.

With me and the dog at a safe distance,
they fall out of formation, tumbling back into into the
boulevard tree,
silently, like blackbirds into a pie.

Poetry Is Immoral

Even when it's good it can inspire mob emotions.

Think "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Mao Zedong wrote poems, not especially good ones.

Though he did not attract critics.

Poetry is undemocratic by nature.

One person stands before a group.

The poet does all the talking.

No time is set aside for rebuttal.

Poems make us so sensitive,

unlayering experience into ever-finer slices,

until we stare at ourselves staring at ourselves..

It makes people spend too much time alone,

in cubbyholes and Starbucks,

ballpoints in our teeth,

words hurricaning in our heads --

When we would be

so much better off

larking about in the sunshine.

The New Policy On Showing

In the past there was no punishment,
unless you consider a stricken look to be punishment,
which is unfair because you can only
give stricken looks to people who show,
the faces you make have no effect on the people not there.
Starting January 1, this will change.

From that date going forward a fine of five dollars
will be levied against those who fail to show.

I can already hear a hubbub forming, asking
how can you charge people for exercising individual choice?
This is a valid point, except when you consider
the no-shows we are talking about.

They are so sensitive they will kneel in the snow
to hand us the money, and they will be prepared
to pay again and again over the years ahead,
because paying five dollars still beats having to show.

Living With Someone Who Lives In The Now

I am drawn to this attribute you have,
your excitement at being completely here,
eyes bright with sensation,
fervor streaming from your fingers.

At the same time, I occasionally
want to remind you of something
that we talked about, or saw,
or tie a string around your finger
so that you don't forget.

But that doesn't register.

You go the window, you open it up,
and in comes more and more and more --
there will be no getting through to you now.

Can A Poet Lock His Pickup Up?

On the one hand, there should be openness.

The reader should never be stopped from inquiring.

What then should I say, that the teaching stops here?

No one I know throws fistfuls of fives in the air

and none of us walks through the airport barenaked.

There is a balance that must be struck.

I do not like people peeing in my truck.

Old Men Fight Over Old Lady With Facelift

Howard and Hal were confined to a nursing home in Gardena, but they both eyed the lovely Ida, 77. Ida was the looker of the facility, with a face like a great old actress, noble and well contoured. Her secret was, she had had work done.

The two men competed for her, standing at the dining room door when she entered, though the door was always propped open.

With a full head of white hair, trophy-winning golfer Hal was once quite the dancer, but now had a star-shaped tumor in his chest. One-time bank officer

Howard, with his bushy mustache and remarkable teeth, owned a boat somewhere, although he could no longer pilot it.

The two found Ida intoxicating, always seeking her glance and approval, never mind that they had both been impotent for years. It seemed to each man that she offered a way around death, to be acknowledged by a woman with such features.

Over the course of weeks the focus of the triangle began to morph, from mutual enchantment to hostile rivalry.

One Tuesday, Hal elbowed Howard into the doorway to the social room. Howard, who had a new hip implanted just three months previously, cracked his glasses on the doorframe.

Two days later, Howard stood at table and announced to all who were listening, "You, Harold McManus, are a barbarian and a bastard."

Hal drew himself up, tipped over the table, spilling several cups of weak coffee, a plastic pitcher of ice water and three small plates of pineapple upside-down cake.

Hal stormed over the table and began kicking Howard with his cleated golf shoes, which were not actually allowed in the center. The cleats struck Howard at the cheek and ear and blood began to flow. Howard scrambled awkwardly to his feet, but Hal was ready, pushing him backward into a Hummel figurine showcase. Howard sat in a daze among the cracked shelves and ceramics.

Hal turned to Ida, but she was intent on the image of Montel Williams, selling long term care for seniors.

Hal would live only three more weeks. They found him shaking in his bed and were unable to revive him. Howard would continue for two years before succumbing to a stroke.

The beautiful Ida was still among us at 88, maintaining that improbable straight line under her jaw, still with the shining green eyes, and deaf as a hardened post.

Under The Covers

Oily rags within leap of the space heater --

It was Don and Dale and even Stephen

Playing race cars under the covers

The friction engines revving to roar

And the first tongue licks at the drapes

Diana was the only one who understood
the loss of my daughter.

She lost three brothers in a fire

thirty years before -- Don and Dale

and even Stephen and Momma snoring

to the Ray Coniff Singers on the sofa.

Diana traveled the world for explanation --

to India, to Bosnia, Lourdes and Rwanda to learn why

it was that Don and Dale and even Stephen

Danced that Christmas morning

and why it was that she was in church

receiving communion.

Everything is irreversible, she said,

it's how this world works,

to have it otherwise you must be dead
and in heaven, where the fire unleaps
and the tongue of faith
consumes us all.

Diana calls me later and later
to see how I am and what I've learned
and did I have feelings like the ones she had
for Don and Dale and even Stephen
rolling and laughing under the blankets.

The Ridge Road

Robbie let go of the wheel on the turn
and Lana sailed like a poodle through a hoop
through the windshield, shrinking to a dot,
broken limbs propelling into the dark.
The police scraped Robbie together.
He was only able to say, "Where is Lana?"
But the policeman shook his head.
There was no one else in the car, he said.
Robbie woke several times in the hospital
and grabbed his brother Larry by the shirt.
She was with me, was all he said,
before slipping back into morphine.
Around dawn Larry drove out on the ridge
and found the Chevy's skidmarks on the road.
He calculated the direction a person would fly
if the car pitched headlong into the ditch
and set out walking the cornfield rows.
Around 9 AM he found her in the stalks,
about eighty feet from the point of impact,
tangled up, bloodied, open mouth full of dirt.
Two months she lay in a coma at home,
making intermittent yelps in her dreams,

no one sure she was home or had gone.
On the 66th day she sat upright and stared
goggle-eyed at the casts encasing her.
“Oh my gosh,” she cried, “what have I done?”
“You missed a lot of work,” said her dad.

Lovely Thunder

How beautiful the grinding above is,
the slowness of each approach,
shoulder brushing against shoulder,
the moans of cattle,
the sound of empty barges let loose
down the river, thick steel against steel,
hollowly banging, the notes that are sounded,
each one different and in its own rhythm
but of the same threatening song.

Trempealeau

This Wisconsin meets the Mississippi here in a series of steep bluffs.

The name of the place comes from La montagne qui trempe à l'eau --

mountain standing with wet foot in the water.

I love the name. It contains tremble, temple, trample and tremolo.

When I was young I visited Valerie at her farm in Trempealeau County,

the rolling hills that sheep tumbled down, the hills that tipped over tractors.

Doreen and my brother Brian threw frisbee in the corn,
and what was noteworthy was that Doreen played barefoot
and naked,
her breasts bobbing wildly with every joyful, laughing toss.

Thirty years later I ask my brother his favorite memory in his life.

"Playing in the corn with Doreen in Trempealeau," he said.

"I never felt so forgiven or so loved."

