
THE
COMMS HOTEL

Curtis Hotel Farewell

various poems
by Mike Finley

THE CURTIS HOTEL

We had had a fight in October, 1969,
my California family and me,
and I grabbed a a shirt and my checkbook
with a few dollars in it from delivering
    Fuller Brush for my dad that fall,
and hitchhiked to LAX, wrote out a check
and flew the red-eye into St. Paul.
And the limo driver listened to my tale
and dropped me off at the Curtis Hotel
where I shivered in my shirt by the revolving door
and waited by the ashtray stand for a friend
to come get me, while the first snow fell.

He finally came and took me home,
and told me I was on my own.
I got a job in a parts warehouse
and went to night school and did pretty well
and I got a good job, with a desk and a door,
and there met Rachel, after a while.
I used to take her Sunday mornings
to the brunches at the old hotel,
and feast on omelet and melon balls,
bouquets of roses and asphodel,
and the waiter kept our glasses full
of cheap champagne, and I would peel
a twenty from a roll of bills,
which I never begrudged at the Curtis Hotel.

We lost that job, but married anyhow.
We pledged our troth in a city park
and danced all day in a friend's front room,
but when it was time for the honeymoon,
we checked into the Curtis Hotel,
the only room we could afford,
a single window overlooking the mall,
but we slept in, switched off the bell,
our only night in the Curtis Hotel.

Years later, my dad, no longer selling
door to door, had some interesting news to tell:
"Your mom and I were not doing so well,
we thought a trip together might be swell.
That's what's we have been meaning to tell
you: you were conceived in the Curtis Hotel."

I have this memory of when I was a child,
standing with my grandfather on the opposite shore
of the Mississippi in LaCrosse, and he pointed and said
Minnesota is just over there, and I repeated the word
and lingered on its power, and made a vow
to cross that river one day. So when the plane landed
years later and I stepped into the Curtis Hotel
I knew this was the place I would dwell.

When I saw it demolished on TV,
the cameras caught at the final moment
a window on the fourteenth floor slide up,
then shatter, as the building buckled
with the weight of the beds and bathtubs
of all those years, its bricks all shrugged
and its shoulders collapsed and went to hell.

And the people building the convention hall
on that site explained that no one was in Room 1410,
the crew had checked out every floor.
No homeless man could hide in a closet,
sure today was not the final day
(today is never the final day).
The opening window had no meaning,
it was no ancient honeymooner hollering No,
it was just an effect that a dying building feels.

The hum of death vibrating every sill,
so it throws up a window to let out a howl
and shout out the secrets of the Curtis Hotel,
and all the souls who sheltered there,
who slept, and wept, and shivered, and sighed,
and laughed, and loaded up their plates,
crawled into bed, and rose, and ate,
and tipped the doorman at the gate,
and drove away with no thought of farewell
to the spirits who stayed in the Curtis Hotel.

UNIVERSITY AVENUE

I was working at M&L Motor Supply
on University Avenue across from Wards,
making $108 a week as an order filler guy
while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders,
push a cart through the warehouse,
locate the parts that were in stock, box them
for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool
poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo
tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury
when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs.
of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling
from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride,
and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out,
a baseball bat could not have hit harder
but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back
until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand.
My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud
from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty
warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock
in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building
at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just approaching
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!
I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg
and said You have to get me to the University!
and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst
through the door, and every eye looked up
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.
Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell
brings the condemned man closer to his time.
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not
the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not
by our bloodlines or superior mothering
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.
But I am with you to the fullness of all time,
and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

THE WRECK OF THE HESPERUS

On a foggy morning in '76
I idled my VW at the intersection
of Cedar and 28th Streets,
awaiting the traffic light's decision.

Stealing through the mist nearby
a two-axle truck headed for the landfill
manned by Steve and his uncle Guy,
would soon have a screaming handful.

The garbage truck in overdrive
gathered speed in lightly falling rain.
My fevered brain could not surmise
the convergence of the twain.

I heard a poem in my ear.
The light was red, but turning green.
I slipped the Superbeetle into first gear
and throttled the machine.

The truck's enormous left front tire
rolled up onto my hood,
and the truck ramped into the air,
all white and beautiful and good.

My car stopped instantly, crushed.
I watched the truck fly o'er
the intersection, and the great nose pushed
itself into the asphalt floor.

The axles snapped and spun away.
Two wheels in tandem headed east.
The great container heaved and swayed
and tipped and dumped its feast.

Coffee grounds, eggshells, cereal
boxes scattered wide and far.
The screeching metal carrier
scraped street and gave off sparks.

Banana peels, venetian blinds,
and Sunday comics sections.
Burned out light bulbs and orange rinds
with jotted down directions.

I saw a flattened beach ball skin
flapping in the truck's rubble.
I saw Guy and Steve stagger from within
and feared there might be trouble.

The men seemed drunk and at a loss.
Their feet met no resistance.
People on the sidewalks paused
to offer their assistance.

Me, I crawled from the front seat,
cassette deck in one hand.
I had a small bump on my head
but was otherwise able to stand.

An ancient man from a nursing home
stepped forward with accusing eye.
He gestured with his finger bone
that I was to draw nigh.

"Young man," he asked, a squeaky falsetto,
"What church do you go to?"
I asked why the old man wanted to know.
"Because I want to go to that church, too."

HAIRCUT

When my stepdad was dying of a brain tumor,
we hired a barber named Dave to come round every week.
Dick didn't have a hair on his head,
after chemo, not one -- but he liked talking to Dave,
who also sold insurance and awnings.
Dave would pretend to cut hair
for half an hour or more, chatting about
the kids today, or an open lot
where a supermarket might go.
And Dick would nod, or grunt --
he had no words left in him -- with half open eyes.
I think he was pleased to be served,
to be the man, that ghost hair was still coming
out of him, unstoppable, wild.
When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off,
shook the cloth off on the porch,
let nothing ride away on air.

THE CLARINET IS
A DIFFICULT INSTRUMENT

I was eating minestrone
when I heard something fall
outside my apartment window.
Too dark to see much
but a pair of hairy arms slam shut
a window on the third floor
of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found
was a bent clarinet on cement,
dented horn and pawn shop sticker
saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.
He too had dreams, set sail
up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,
and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

IN THE NIGHT

My little girl awoke in the night
quaking with fright,
and I held her and explained
that the monsters were gone,
they were never there at all,
and the look she gave me was, I recall,
almost one of pity, as if
I were the doomed one, mine the swift
tumble coming soon.
I rocked her to sleep in her room
and thought of every plane
I wanted to see go down,
every siren shearing the dark
were heading toward my part
of town, my god, and all I
have is a child to protect me.

THE SUGAR TRAP

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite
I filled a pop bottle half-full
with sugar water and strawberry jelly.
As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim
and one after another descend
to sample the pink nectar.
By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,
most of them drowned
with a few still clambering over
their fellows to climb out.
But the walls are too steep
and their wings too wet
and the water is too sweet
to avoid very long.
First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,
delighted with their find,
enough sugar to feed their community for a month.
The sight of their comrades floating face-down
does not seem to be a major minus to them.
It is only when they set that first foot
in the water that they suspect,
and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.
It is impossible, they fall back
into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.
Furious, the start twitching their abdomens.
This must be someone else's fault,
they seem to be saying,
I never sought sugar for my own personal use,
it was always for the hive.
But community mindedness has fled
and in their wretchedness
they sting their comrades the dead and the dying,
spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in ther pool
and this can go on for hours, and more.
I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee
either by gesture or sound,
even though the arrival of the newcomer
spells sting after sting.
It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them.
It is good to share this meal my brothers
it is good to drink the common cup,
so cold, so sweet, this wine.

HAMSTERS

Several times I have opened an eye at night
certain someone was moving in the house,
but it was only the chrome wheel turning

Or we would be making love and hear the sound
of metal on metal from the children's room --
the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.

The crunch of seed between pointed pearls,
the scurry and blink of prisoners.
In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

A MINNESOTAN IN NEW YORK

When I landed at LaGuardia
it was seventy degrees,
all I needed was a thin jacket.
For three days I walked the streets
leery of beggars who seemed
to know something, and shadowy
figures lurking in doorways.
But when the temperature began
to fall and the canyon gusts blew
plastic sacks like ghostly luggage,
I came into my own.
I am more used to winter than them,
it is my natural element, walking into
the city wind, swinging
my computer case at my side.
All along Sixth Avenue the muggers
and murderers part, melted
from their purpose by sled dog eyes,
urgent and cheerful on a cold,
cold night.

THE FIFTH BEATLE

When I was a teenager I often dreamed they invited me
to join them and though I played no instrument
and sang only a little, and my hair wasn't right,
they sensed I was one of them and let me belong.
They seemed to enjoy being in Ohio, and walked
my front porch in their Cuban heels, and
I did my best to fit in. There was never
misgivings or resentment that I was still in high school,
or American, or stood about stiffly, with hands stuffed in pockets.
Because they were special, they were kind enough to let me be, too.
Last night I dreamt I was in LA, and a mutual friend
notified me George was anxious to see me.
We drove along the beach till we came
to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in.
A busy, happy woman with cropped curls
gestured behind her and laughed. This was where
all the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.
Some of the members of the old band were still there,
including the saxophonist with the scars on his nose,
whose name I could never remember.
I met George's son, whom I had never met before,
he was almost grown, and resembled his mother,
handsome and quiet and composed. I was taken aback by him,
and couldn't think of anything to say.
They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said
"Welcome back, Mike," with a picture of us five lads,
one without an instrument, with buttercream dahlias
and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.
And when George arrived everyone crowded around him,
but after touching his son's face he went straight to me
and hugged me and we rocked happily
for a moment, reunited, and I remembered the good times on tour,
and how they always dropped me off again afterward
at the gray house on the hill, and I would sneak inside to bed.
I could see the lines in George's eyes, and his hair had thinned
but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered
me with questions about my family and my life
and rebuked me for not bringing a photo with me.
During the meals, seeing the love they all had,
I felt tears come to my eyes, and I burst out and told
them I didn't deserve them as friends, they were all so
genuine and kind, and I was sorry I had not stayed
in touch, and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry

I had gotten old and fat and become a business writer
and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.
And in his thick scouse George quietly said
none of that mattered, I had gotten away
but we were together again, and we would always be mates,
and this day was for us to remember and to share.
And they all lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.
When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room
and kissed her several times on her smooth forehead.
She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom
and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile.
We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley
and the birds in the maple tree sang.

WHEN YOU ARE POPE

When you are pope you cannot be like other men.
You cannot be seen disappearing into limos
outside casinos or polishing off a beer at a corner tavern,
the old men snorting at your caftan and cap.
You cannot affect a commanding air,
pulling at your cincture and laughing like a man,
you must be humble all the day,
you must be unworthy to loosen the bootstraps of the world,
even if you are not feeling humble,
or humble has become tiresome as a singsong prayer.
Everyone is your boss because everyone knows you
and expects certain behavior.
No spitting, no grumpiness, no annoyance with fools
for if you show any signs of being human
they will not let you be pope any more
and you will wind up on a bridge somewhere
selling windup toys or grilled kebabs and
people will come up to you squinting
saying I know you.
You must always be for life and always be for peace
and never concede the fact that everybody dies and the world
is ripe with people who could benefit richly
from a ferocious beating and everyone knows it
but you are not allowed to say it.
People go one and on about this saint and that saint
and you can say nothing though you know all the evidence
in all their files, who was too fond of the muscatel,
who wrote letters of an unholy nature,
who masturbated with the lilies of the field, and who,
when the dog the body was disinterred and the coffin cracked
the look on their face was a maniac grin, frozen that way
for eternity.
It is hard to keep up with friends.
It is just not the same once you are pope.
They are so fond of you now, fonder than they ever were of you before
and nothing you say gets through to them,
they won't let you be honest any more.
There are times you want to burst out crying and tell them everything
what a crock the Vatican is and what assholes the cardinals all are
and what you would give just to sit and play cards and sip gin
like you used to years ago before people stopped listening.
When you are pope you understand your career
has probably peaked,

there will probably not be many achievements after this,
it will be unusual even to catch a fish
on a Saturday in an aluminum boat, the little waves banging against
the prow, and haul it flipping
into your net. You will look over your shoulder
and the lake will be full of other boats,
and film crews and helicopters, and people will say it's not a fish,
it's an allegory, you have to think about this on a very complex level,
nothing is simple any more.
When you are pope it is sadder than you imagined.
The devout and the suffering look to you as if you had the answers
for their madness, for the cough that has been getting worse,
for the world in arms, and the torture of the faithful over slow flames,
and you would do anything to take away the pain
but what can you do, you are only a pope.
Your faith that never let you down before
is suspect, you haven't heard from God in years,
he is like some clever zephyr that blows into town and blows out again,
now you see him, then for thousands of years you don't,
and if gets to be too much and you start to doubt it's your fault,
where's your faith you sad son of a bitch, I was just waiting
for this moment, I knew you would disappoint me.
And now the light pours in at Castle Gandolfo, and you awaken late
and your kidneys ache and you wonder how long
you can carry the cross for the rest of the world,
and you think of a girl you knew in school,
and you wonder what became of her,
if she got old and fat and lost that look that lifted you up off your feet
all those years ago or she is still who she was then,
a lifetime later, and all this time she could have been your friend,
and you turn in the bedsheets, holding your side,
you feel as if a spear that fetched water from you,
and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body,
shiny as silver, famous as dust.

WITNESSES

Three women at Perkins sit in front of me,
a mother and her daughters. The youngest,
in glasses, wears fuchsia lipstick and matching
fuchsia suit, with four silver buttons
on each sleeve. The sister has a sleepy, dragged out beauty,
and unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines
of her brown arms through the sleeves.
The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,
the strap looped around one wrist.
They appear to have rules about conversation,
taking respectful turns.
Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles glide on their faces,
not one word is audible twelve feet away, and no one laughs
or touches. I wonder if they are discussing the people
they met at the doors they knocked,
who seemed interested in the message they brought with them,
and who did not extend them the courtesy of respect.
Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries,
and the women in their Sunday clothes bow their heads and pray.

OLD SAW

Out walking with Red, we came upon
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like
a giant fork in the forest.
Into that fork another tree had fallen,
so that the original cottonwood stood straight
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,
and every breeze made the live tree groan
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,
or metal failing underwater,
like a natural cello's lowest string
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove
in the crotch of the live one,
and with the passage of time was wearing its way
downward, splitting it down the middle.
One main arm of the live tree had died,
and owls and birds and other things
had made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.

Rachel and I stared up at this natural saw
and we took one another's hands instinctively
as if to assure ourselves
that the rubbing of one life against another life
was a warming thing always.

But love can come into our lives and life move one.
What is left when love remains
sawing gently on our limbs?

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 must need to be held up so,
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.

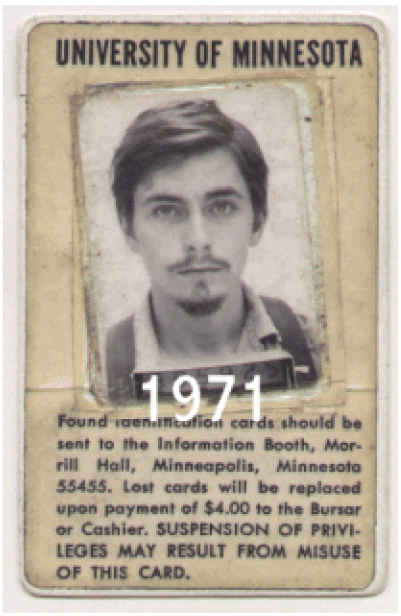
Possibly my hands were intertwined so
in the drift and brine of my mother's womb,
the twist of zero gravity
for wet weeks on end.

Or my head is made so heavy
by the ordeal of ordinary living
that only my hands can prevent its sinking
forever in mattress like a black hole of gristle,
bone against wrist against skull against mind,

as if I am taken down from the cross nightly,
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.

PENN STATION

Passengers hug their luggage close,
their faces diagonal with dismay,
and check their watches as they wait
by the message board
for news of the delayed train.
One women clasps her red gloves and keys in one hand.
A professional man folds his arms
and frowns.
A student gazes up at the board with open mouth.
Then the letters start flipping and
the speakers announce that the train
to Princeton Junction is cleared for boarding and
everyone breaks
for the steps down to Track One,
clambering down like a centipede in a suit.
Once situated in our seats, we look up, out, and away
as the conductor announces that a bridge in Newark
is causing problems
and there will be an indefinite delay.
A groan goes through the car like an infantry taking fire.
Jesus Christ, mutters the professional man, who looks
like he is about to cry, and who obviously
has someplace important to get to.
He and the woman in red gloves
and half a dozen others bolt
to their feet, grab their bags and rush back up the stairs
to catch a ride on another line.
No sooner are they gone
than the address system announces
that the problems in Newark have been resolved,
and the car begins to slide forward in the station.
I ask the conductor if we couldn't call
the people back, and end their suffering.
The man just punches my ticket, smiles
and says, "You're going to be just fine."



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