

dead cat

DEAD CAT

POEMS COMPOSED
ON VACATION

BY MICHAEL FINLEY

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A Penny for the Poet?

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I Saw A Deer, Now I Must Write A Poem¹

I saw a buck bolt onto Highway 5, down by the airport,
where workers are fixing the bridge.

Suddenly it was there, standing by the shoulder,
its side all rough as if scraped against stone,
then bolting into traffic, dodging cars,
leaping over the lane divider,
skidding away from a trailer truck, then vaulting
onto a bank of unaccustomed slag, and dancing,
whitetail
bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour,
it was lucky it didn't get run over.

Motorists were shocked, workers stared open-mouthed.

¹ Sunset Lake (1989)

The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled
terror, confusion, the suggestion of reproach.

Deer and construction sites don't mesh,
the deer so fragile sprinting between bulldozers.

The overarching sense that road construction is wrong
and cars should pull over and give the natural order
the right of way and any poet seeing a deer
in the wild must file a complete report,
express solidarity with the animal,
remorse for the thud of mankind,
acknowledge complicity in the hazing
of innocent blood.

I was thinking that if deer
had short legs and made grunting noises

there would be fewer poems about them.

The Wolf House

Needing a roof on a windy night
we came upon a shack above the logging zone.
We tiptoed in the twilight,
afraid someone was inside,
and if so, what they might be.
No one was there so we made our beds
and slept. In the morning
we saw the claw marks in the wood,
and the hair in handfuls,
suddenly free, and drifting
out the door.

The Lord God Addresses the Convocation Of Poets

You who puff yourselves up with words,

hear me now.

All you who achieve with the arch of an eyebrow

what you would not do with honest toil.

You who are persuaded that living sordidly

lifts you above these other my creatures,

who imagine that I harbor special grace and store

for the masturbators and malingerers

of this my world. (Yes!)

You who imagine that being unable to speak simply

and without design

are signs of my special favor.

Blow trumpets, howl winds, swirl gyres of ocean and

cyclone and rage.

I break with the poets of the field and the air,
I deny the poets of the heather and hearth,
I forswear the poets of water and land
who get it wrong more consistently
than idiots quaking in the square
or misbegotten monsters who live but an hour
goggle-eyed in their mothers' maws.
Break thunder, break cataracts, break trees at the
knees,
break promises not to destroy you again
in a boat, in a fire, in a meteor blast.

While you amuse yourselves that I send muses
to each of you
to draw out the milk of your beauty,
as if legions of angels had nothing better to do

than attend to the daydreams of lazy vanity,
pet preference of the I-Am.

O, do not play footsie with the whirlwind,
do not make nice with death-in-life,

Crush granite, strike planet, crush heaven with one swipe,

curse me as a jealous god that I am harried by these
gnats,

will no one relieve me of their pretense?

I've grown tired of the customary acts of faith,
widow women turning on spits,

infidels lighting the streets into town –

I want a special cut of meat from my subjects,
the hearts of their poets pierced en brochette,
the best minds of their generations sauteed.

Down with the poets, commence the crusade.

Line them up and start shooting, mow them down in my
name.

Begin with the successful ones in the same towns as you,
the men and women in salons who know
that if they were in any real place
and not some jerkwater parish far from Rome
they would be nobody at all.

The people who get endlessly recycled in anthologies,
panels, talk shows, the works,

they who have started to take it for granted
that they are the spokesmen for nature's art,
the voice of the flowers, the agent of the wood,
and talk and mince like boneless politicians.

Have them get ready to bathe.

Then get the street poets who might have amounted to

something

because at least they had energy

if only they'd set aside being mad at people who've

done them no harm

but that would mean losing the attitude

that is their weapon of choice

in an unworthy world so forget that.

My apocalyptic friends, you would not know an

apocalypse

if one bit you on the ass.

The pagan poets – find them, tell them

the Lord God Jehovah says –

BOOGA BOOGA!

The surrealists – find them! Tell them who would make

madness

an artform that I won't let them be crazy.

Hobble their imaginations, hamstring their minds,
let them be prisoners of syllogistic logic,
unable to free-associate or make the jettes of thought
that make them feel superior.

The solipsists – let every reality be real except theirs,
let their mirrors explode and the shards eviscerate them,

In the hall of death let them be hamburger.

I want files of dadaists turned into actuaries,
hauling their crossbeams up the ancient hill.

The suicide poets – dig them up,
and reshape their mouths into smiles,
hang lobster bibs around their necks,
put them to work doing community service,
for the people they shucked off and the examples they

set.

The myth poets who walk in the shadows of shadows,

drive them out into the light,

invite them as guests to our poem pogrom.

And the introspects who do not get out of bed

until every dream is written down, rouse them and tell

them

I have something nonmetaphorical to share with them,

Real spikes and real nails, and broken teeth and broken

bones.

Call in the botanical poets and the bird poets from the

fields –

naming things and reporting on their noises and smells,

and in all matters particularizing,

imagining this is what I do with you –

find them, mulch them, restore them to their world,

the rich good manure of poets.

The social poets who don't write much

but never miss a party,

tell them they won't miss my party,

I've got them on my list.

With a bullet.

The alcoholic poets with the hair-trigger responses

and faltering follow-up,

who sought refuge in the weak stuff, spirits of grain,

their flame will be smokeless, clean and blue.

Tell the writers of confessional poems their penance

shall be infinite fire throughout infinite time.

Tell the poets of rhymed verse my favorite poet is

Whitman,

because of the resemblance.

Tell the feminists about my long white beard.

Tell the writers of love poems I hate them.

Tell the poets obsessed with rhyme and meter

that a clock is ticking

in their asses, and their moment of glory is nearly come
round.

Light ovens, start fires, pitch boil till blackness

fills my nostrils like perfume.

The smoke of a thousand poets in residence,

who communicate in surreptitious form

the lack of respect extended them in departmental
meetings

because they don't know anything anyone with a brain

lodged inside a skull would pay \$100 an hour to learn.

Feed to the reaper the country poets who drive into
town

to depict the horrors of the street in verse.

Feed to the incinerator the city poets who take the
highway out
to bless the headwaters and mouth the names of dead
medicine men,
whom I personally know,
and who if they saw you standing there, spiral
notebooks at the ready,
would split you down the middle
with an adze, or an atlatl,
they were good honest people don't you know.
Torch their jackets with the patches on the elbows,
string up and debowel their pedigreed dogs,

bring me the beating heart of the ceremonial poet
assigned the dedications of new gymnasiums

and alumni center parking ramps,
flay the chancered workshop poets who labor with laser
and page the world with simultaneous submissions
of the same thick verse a hundred times over,
a backbreak of postmen, a slaughter of spruce
and for what, some pointless exercise in imitability
that gives pleasure to neither reader nor world,

slack stillborn refraction of art,
a bag of vomit from an unclean mouth,
vanity everywhere, top and bottom,
fetch matches, fetch torches, fetch fire.

Rage, quake, pestle, shout,
all the pretty ones blotted out,
Women poets ploughed with lime and the men enriched
with manure,

Invite every glad spirit who puts down the words,

the terribly timid, who confide the only truths they know

to incomprehensible lines that no one will read,

O, their fragile courage moves me so,

how do I attend to the business of keeping the bodies in

motion

and the atoms charged

knowing they are having a bad day in a dormitory in

Pennsylvania,

heap them high like hosannas of unexercised flesh.

Death to the clay-faced outdoorsman who writes in a

cabin

deep in the woods by the light of a candle and trust

fund.

Death to the radical poets who assailed the princes

that I myself had installed,

making their jobs even more impossible and unpleasant
than I had made them to begin with

O you who make life difficult but sleep in till ten,
draw tenure, clink glasses late into the night,
You're highly regarded, you're very well read.

I grind your bones to make my bread.

My prophecy is plain, my prophecy is pain,
my prediction mass graves and smoking soil,

nutritious to the earth beyond all reckoning,
they that held such store in words
instead bequeath calcium, nitrogen, zinc as their gifts,
their limbs interwoven in a tapestry
that puts the lie to their individuality,
O, that one there, row four hundred, two hundred sixty-
fifth from the right,
did you know he was a genius, a genius, a genius, a

genius!

My geniuses are cloth.

Come to my supper and sit at my table,

hens and chickens stewing in your broth.

I turn all your whining water to sangria,

all your crumbs to angel food.

You are fit and right and meat to me.

Climb inside the warm abode I have prepared for you

for a trillion churning years.

As you are creators

and as I am creator

let us now be as one,

alive

in the

LAVA

of language.

Inoperative

crossing state lines i see my own face

in the tollbooth looking at me

deep inside i saw filaments of moss

threaded on the rocks

the scalpel clattered to the floor

Dead Cat For Ray ²

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm
in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.
In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat,
very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut around
it.

Its back was arched in a defensive posture,
its face pulled wide in a final hiss,
and in its mummified condition you could distinguish
each vertebra and tooth.

I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,
perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.
The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life and
death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen –
the grave of Suicide Minnie,

²Sunset Lake (1989)

the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.

That night we lay down in the township road
and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into *est*,
a sculptor, painter, performance artist.

He flew back home the following day,
and I did not hear from him for two years,
when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.

The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood,
hairy ropes, chains.

Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag,
but he had something else, a ferocious vigor that moved me.

At the heart of the installation he had suspended
on an invisible line

the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly

in the warm air of the gallery,
whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature
as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed
at the brave agony of the cat.

In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded
impulses

here was life and death hanging in a haze,
it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night
and taken my holy treasure from me,
the other part gratified he thought it so powerful
that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove
from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.
And astonished to see it now, in its current setting,
twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college,
him always private, a dog-eared copy
of *The Drunken Boat* by his bed.

His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer
walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks
to straighten himself up.

Once I went to his room to listen to Highway 61 Revisited
and came upon his diary and read a few pages,
and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own,
in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a month
in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.

Every 20 minutes the train passed near,
but my friends and I were so high we thought it was charming
when the milk vibrated in the refrigerator.

I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was
playing
and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze

and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus,
and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.

Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper
titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.

The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type,
and it never mattered.

You worked for three years teaching painting
at Walpole Penitentiary,
to murderers and rapists and killers.

On the last day you told them that you were gay
because you wanted them to know you, and that a person
could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them
to feel obliged to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.

When people started to die you assured me you didn't do
the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.

You visited twice after the cat exhibit,
and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives
took a sharp turn away from one another.

For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.

Then Malaysia, doing I don't know what –
and that was where I lost you.

I called your parents, I called your friends,
no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.

I needed to understand because we were friends.

You once gave me a wonderful compliment,
you called me a human being
and that was so meaningful coming from you,
for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy
was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying
attention to things.

I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight

of the world to direct
you would be turning in it now
like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused
beyond it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw
but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert
to life and life's unlikely opportunities
and the aurora borealis would shift and slide
and light up our faces like 1977,
and the light show on the Velvets in 1968,
and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back
of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,
when we were young and not yet treed or backed into
impossible corners, and the world that I saw, Ray,
the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin
and the manic dazzle of your eyes,
radiant artist and friend of my youth,
I would have them know.

The Changeling's Wife

i am like the piano you play
that always falters somewhere up ahead

a man but also a dog needing
something to be brave for

i praise the day you filleted me
zipped away the offending spine

pull me to bed with you tonight
let me sleep this curiosity off

the way that the lion feels
for his mate when she brings him red meat

it's the love of the dog that sleeps
curled at the monastery gate

Signs ³

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods

there are signs posted saying

No Hunting and No Trespassing.

People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,

and they do not want to return to a shot-through window

or knocked over pumphouse.

A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted

seems to keep most people away, except for

a few hunters who need everything spelled out.

You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago

because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign

leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.

So that every hundred yards is a tree

with a perfectly blank sign on it.

The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots

and whorls of the plywood,

gray from the rain and north woods wind,

3 Sunset Lake (1989)

an advertisement to wilderness,
a message the animals read as well as you
saying this is this and here is here
and deeper into the pines there is more.

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

and 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 in 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."

At The YMCA

I scaled a Matterhorn on the Stairmaster machine,
ran a mini-Marathon on the indoor track, then
changed into my trunks and swam the length
of the pool a half dozen times.

I showered high as a kite. The endorphins were going off
inside me like little fireworks of drugs, good feelings
about myself and about the world.

Back at my locker I sat on a bench,

opened the door and grabbed my briefs,
slipping my feet through and pulling them up my legs.

They felt so snug, so sexy, so new. Exercise
does wonderful things to your head.

That was when I noticed none of the clothes
in the locker looked familiar. Come to think of it,

weren't my underpants blue with a white waistband?

I blinked at the locker, twice, saw it was somebody else's.

I rubbernecked to right and left, to see what men were near,
naked, hairy, territorial of the cloth they drape their loins in.

No one saw. I stripped the briefs off with one sweep
and hurled them back in the locker, slamming the door,

and opened my locker, and grabbed my old stretched-out, faded,
thin-in-the-seat underwear. To me they were very paradise.

I dressed hurriedly, grabbed my gym bag and ran to the exit.

I made good my escape, no one thinking the worse of me.

But late nights I lie awake, and contemplate the sensation
of those briefs, and know I am changed.

I will never judge another man before I have stood
a minute or two in his underpants. Maybe not even then.

Full Up⁴

The wooden barns are coming down,
Whether they are the giant-breasted kind
Collapsing from the weight of too much hay
or the countless sheds and coops
that have started to lean in on themselves,
They have had it, it is finished.

The center beam of this great red beast
off the turnpike near Defiance
was good for a hundred years
And caused many to at least
Consider chewing Mail Pouch.
But a century of wind, all that lightning, that rain
And all that standing exposed
In the hot Ohio sun take their toll.

The people who live on the acreage

4 Sunset Lake (1989)

are cannibalizing the wood for fuel,
every day pulling a board away for burning.
All that will remain will be the limestone foundation
An open ruin with neither roof nor walls,
A reminder of the Germans and Swiss
Who put up these planks.

What will replace them
Are corrugated sheds, more efficient in every way,
With sliding doors and guttered tops,
No need to store hay any more, so one story
Is as good as two, and cheaper,
But the feeling's not the same,
Of these burly brothers who stood a hundred years,
Sad and red and full to bursting.

Room For Us All

*FOR THE DEDICATION OF THE NEW ADDITION,
LUCYBOI SCHOOL*

If there was anything Dick and Mary knew

it was this: life is hard.

Each had known sorrows, and each discovered an answer in work.

They ran a restaurant together, strictly an elbow grease affair.

Later, a trucking business -- more muscle and sweat,

more payrolls and bills, and always

the kids to get educated and keep out of trouble.

Charity was fine, but family came first.

"Those who work reap the rewards."

"No free lunch in America."

Then they met Lucy and Lucy's friends,

and Dick and Mary realized they didn't know thing one

about hard work. Here were people

and their parents for whom nothing came easy --
eating, speaking, going to the bathroom.

It made driving a bulldozer sound like fun.

There are days it is hard to hold onto a single good thought,
days it is hard to get beyond the pain,
days you feel like giving up, but don't.

And Lucy and her people, where was the payoff for them,
where was the bottom-line? And the parents,
and the men and women, boys and girls,
all trying their best.

Maybe Great Americans come in all sizes.

Meeting Lucy was one of those fateful occasions.

Dick and Mary wanted to be part, but weren't sure how.

Their business was young and capital-poor.

And they had kids. But maybe it was good for the kids
to see the world did not revolve around them,
that there were other purposes, and humbler dreams --

a cherished friendship, a helping hand, a chance to do something,
anything,

But they had the land, and it was nearby, and the school was built.

Just when you think life can't get harder

life shows you how much you know.

Dick died in 1990, unreplaceable husband, father, friend.

Mary's been keeping the trucks running up and down the gravel
road

but time passes, and things change.

Still it's a comfort to see the vans arriving

and people getting set for another day.

You can call it therapy

or you can call it work

or you can call it life

but it keeps us moving and we need to move today,

because it is always today.

We knew from the beginning that nothing was perfect,
nothing ever is.

"It's lonely but it is not so lonely."

"I still cry but not so often or so long."

As long as our hands are touching we know where we are,
and we are not so alone.

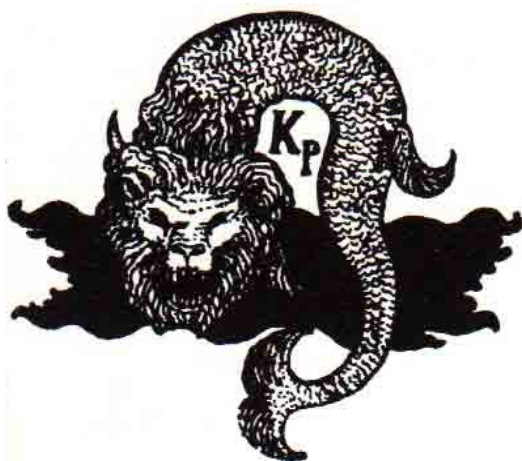
Hold onto that thought, and the darkness will pass
and we will have one another,
and a place to go and feel the sunshine
on our face, in a room, a very special room of our own,
a room is so big it can hold our love.

AUGUST 7, 1994

Plan

I know what I will do. I will drive a long way
north, to the wilderness, and pitch
my tent, and wait.

And when a tree nearby has had enough and
is ready to fall to the forest floor,
I will be on hand to see what sound it
makes, and report to you.



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