

DESALINIZATION



Table of Contents

Writers.....5

Full Up.....6

I, Gilgamesh.....7

The New Country.....8

“Nobody owns Jack Kerouac”.....9

Sympathy for the Woodpecker.....10

Old Shopping Centers.....11

Prickly Pear.....12

The Big Nothing.....13

Bathtime.....15

(2008).....15

Garfunkel.....16

God Must Be Self-Concealing.....17

Call-In Program18

Subordinate.....19

After the Hurricane.....20

My Head.....21

Hands.....22

The Pond.....23

The Imperfect Tree.....24

Scooter.....25

Put-Out Day at Wijiwagan.....26

Desalinization.....27

Eclogue.....28

Manitou Cemetery.....29

Girls of the Intercoastal Highway.....30

Sky Repair.....31

A Great One.....32

After the Rain.....34

Cannon Falls.....35

Fools Unlimited.....37

Cottonwood.....38

The Woman at the Folies Bergere.....40

The Bale-Door Ledge.....41

Opportunity.....43

Sprinkler.....	44
Entrepreneur.....	45
Critique.....	46
Sketch for a Star Trek Episode.....	47
God's Body.....	49
Shrooms Gone Wild.....	51
Pain was my bread.....	52
Why?.....	53
Cosmetic Dentistry.....	54
When You Encounter a Bear.....	56
Fifteen Rounds.....	57
The Sugar House.....	61

DESALINIZATION

Poems collected in the wake of Daniele Finley's death, 2009

by Mike Finley

During this period of grieving I used poems to help me transition to a life without my daughter. Whether they are good or bad, they became my garden for several months, and helped keep me moving forward.

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Writers

Writers start out all right
they pay attention to things and deliver reports
on the way things are, it is a useful function
they perform

but then something happens.

someone will say, you know, this is interesting,
and you can see it go bad
they enjoy the attention and want more
and tell themselves I could create lots of these reports,
they're not that hard to do
now that I know how to do it

and then they want readers
and then they want comments
and then they want praise
and then they want praise
coming out of the faucet
night and day like an endless drip.

until they are no longer reporters
but debutants on a featherbed
chins in their hands and their feet
wagging behind them

tell me more about myself
tell me more
and they're not working
for you any more

you say everyone needs encouragement
it's not true
encouraging only encourages them

Full Up

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
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.

(1988)

I, Gilgamesh

I was an ordinary king
I lived and ruled and learned what I could
and of all the world I loved
the monster Enkidu
who fought me and was defeated and
became my servant friend
and died and broke my heart again
In my grief I beheld fire squirting
from the wounded loins of Humbaba
I wooed Ishtar to determine the secret of death
and I stood on a promontory and witnessed Father Anu
create the bull of heaven and later
divide the bleeding beef and eat of it
and thrust as an insult an offering
into Ishtar's swollen mouth
and the rain of stones that continued for weeks
and fell upon Uruk, domed capital of the world,
and Uruk mourned the dead and dying
and many tablets of wet clay
were cleft that day with lamentations
of the priests of all the people
I asked Utnapishtim to put me at peace
and he prattled on about the cleansing flood
and the miracle plant that made men live
beyond this life and into the next
but the plant was swallowed by a giant snake
and destroyed men's hopes forever
and now I Gilgamesh am retired
to my house of myrtle wood
to dream of long departed friends
and breathe the smoke
of their memory

(1984)

The New Country

The laws are different here
and take some getting used to;
don't expect some Virgil to show you around.

This is not inhospitality
but an intuition that is law.
We might like to help you but can't.

Later all will be made clear,
and it will be a cinch to concede
the vanities behind your confusion.

The time has been gathering, is gathered now
into a bundle of tiny reproaches
for things unsaid and undone.

Warm greetings would only distract you now
from the greater welcome building inside.
Lover, be perfectly still to this kiss.

(1979)

“Nobody owns Jack Kerouac”

They are fighting over the poet's estate,
who gets the royalties, who owns the rights

to manuscripts, diaries, thousands of letters.
One will after another is thrown out in court

The family scrambles to sell off his stuff.
Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a trenchcoat.

Surprise of surprises, the bum on the road
is worth about \$20 million,

him with \$91 in his checking account
at the moment of his death

(1998)

Sympathy for the Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree at length,

until thoughts rattle around
like roulette balls searching
endlessly like Odysseus for home

Will I inch my way eventually
back to earth and seek grubs
in the soft warm soil

or will I spend a lifetime up here
skullstruck and stupid
reiterating the error of my ways

(2005)

Old Shopping Centers

In their heyday their parking lots
Were fresh black with brilliant yellow striping,
And cars filled every space all the way to the road.
This one, called Miracle Mile when it was platted out in the 50s,
Boasted two groceries, Fisher-Fazio at one end
And Kroger's at the other,
Like two wealthy houses at war in the same part of town
And the boxboys fought over whose cart was whose.
Now the weeds grow through the gray cracks
and Fisher-Fazio is now a bingo hall on Thursday nights
and plywood covers every Kroger window,
where there was some kind of fire.
The competition is over and the two old friends
watch a newspaper drift across the lot.

(1986)

Prickly Pear

no bigger than my thumb
poking up from the roadside
tiny one what are your dreams

to produce a perfect plum
a pear of such stabbing sweetness
to offer your master the sun

to contradict the lowliness
of your station
a lifetime spent in a ditch

dust robed by every passing car
or is it to crane
those sharp fingers to the limit

like praying hands
and pierce the black meat
of my tire

(1995)

The Big Nothing

Inspired by a verse of Rumi (1369-1420)

Every craftsman searches for what's not there
to polish his craft:

A builder locates the rot where the roof caved in.

A handyman pauses at the house with no door.

A street vendor hails the hungry man.

Workers rush into any hint of emptiness, which they then fill.

All happiness begins in emptiness, don't avoid it.

This empty cask, this chilling apprehension, this anxious possibility
contains everything you need!

If you are not friends with the great nothing,
why do you cast your net into it,

over and over, and wait so patiently?

This dark ocean gives you everything,
you call it "death," though it is your breakfast.

Always the comedian, God authorizes spiritual somersaults,
so we see the snake pit as something to investigate,

and the surrounding orchard as swarming with bees.

That's how mixed-up our notion of death is.

Your mother and father come to you in dreams,
they are your attachment to comfortable habits.

Ignore them, they are not your true family.

They seem to protect ... but they imprison.

They make you afraid of the emptiness
when emptiness is what we really need.

One day you will laugh at your stupid convictions!

Your body is a friend and a host to the soul

but it gives such shitty advice.

It would have you don armor in peacetime,

you would freeze in the summer and swelter in the cold.

The body's certitudes are like a new hire
who does know yet where things are,
so you have to follow him around all day showing him how to do his job.
But patience with emptiness is its own reward,
because patience lets you become who you are.

The rose is fragrant because it abides with the thorn.
The young camel sucks, still nursing in its third year.
The beauty of embroidery is the patience encoded in it.

And patience is what the prophets teach us.
Friendship is strong because it takes time to form.
Feeling lonely and resentful prove you haven't been patient.
Be one of those who blend with God
as honey blends with milk, and say, with me,

"Anything that flickers,
comes and goes,
rises and sets,
up and down,
over and over,
is not where my love is."

Either that ... or be a caravan fire,
left to flare itself out ...
alone ...
alongside the darkening road!

Bathtime

You could be Fabio and still
look silly in the bath.
It is unmasculine to recline
in soapy water and relax.

Bobbing through the foam
at the center of your self
is the bobbin of the penis
a buoy in a sudsy gulf.

Periscope, sea monster,
bearded triton of the tub,
bishop with a face only
mother superior could love,

These ancient ablutions
prepare us for bed.
Tuck in the little one
and kiss him on the head.

(2008)

Garfunkel

He seems not to mind his ridiculous hair,
His ridiculous hairline,
His ridiculous voice.

Your eyes fly into his eyes,
Whose sparkle was always
improbable.

Maybe he stares into the spotlights
to get them that way,
But wouldn't he be blind then?

The contrast is remarkable,
From Paul standing at his side,
Eager to be forgiven for

Every kind of shortness
And he would write a thousand songs
to make it better.

But Art requires nothing
He can even be wadded up
and thrown away

For ten years at a shot,
Then hauled back for an
impromptu in the park.

(1994)

God Must Be Self-Concealing

Otherwise it would not work
Free will would be shot
So we perceive “coincidences”

(2003)

Call-In Program

“I am dying of cancer
and I am also pregnant.
Doctors tell me my baby
is dying too.
What should I do?”

The woman on the radio
Said have the child –
“All life is precious,
So die together, weeping,
in one another's arms.”

“Pain is nothing,” she said
“And life is terminal.
All we are is a wall
Of banked stones, and
Flecks of gold between the bones.”

(1997)

Subordinate

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

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

i praise the day you gutted this fish,
zipped away the offending spine

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

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

it's the love of the dog sleeping
curled at the monastery gate

(1978)

After the Hurricane

the smell was everywhere
it was the odor of the grass
which had steeped in kerosene
like whiskey rising to the nose

(1999)

My Head

I was thinking one night
When something thrombosed
Like a plum from a branch
That splatted on the walk

And I rocked and I froze
And I fell dead asleep
And when I woke
I was cold and afraid

Five years can pass like that
Never certain of the next word
Always wincing at the next
Humiliation

One day a friend said says
You should go forward now
Cuz that bird is gone
And you are shit out of luck

I have accepted my role in the deck
As the card with the foolish hat
That's OK, that's all right

But sometimes I feel
I have kissed my head
Goodbye

(2003)

Hands

Our daughter came sheathed in blue jelly,
born in the bedroom of our apartment.
I caught her slipping into the world
with these hands that were never so sure before.
She was purple like my sick sister had been,
and she shivered, and I lifted her, cradling her head,
with the stereo playing Gustav Holtz' "Saturn,"
while the midwife wrapped a blanket around her
and she looked up at me calmly as if she had not just completed
the most tortuous journey a girl could ever take,
and she spoke to me, as if she recognized me ... ahh ...

My son was born fast in a hospital in the city.
His neck got tangled in his mother's cord,
and he tumbled out lifeless, so shapeless
these hands could not hold him. He was a thing, my son was
a thing I was sure was dead, and while the rescue team worked him over
I backed into the toilet and scraped at the cold wax
on my fingers and trembled. I waited by the isolette
doing nothing useful but manning the post.

Fathers can't heal or protect, they can't do anything but pretend
when the dangers embed themselves in the body.
I stood there by you all day long. It would be weeks before
your limbs would work, and the day your hand
found my finger and squeezed.

(1994)

The Pond

I see trees on the far shore mirrored in a pool
And below the trees the shimmer of cloud.

Below the cloud the reeds bow heads.
Behind, the shadows lengthening.

The skin on the water ripples with breeze
Like a puff of breath on a cup of tea.

Now water-beetle steadfastly rows.
Now the shifting shape of trout.

It is like thinking about thinking
And then thinking about that.

It is duck and goose and heron craning.
It is shining and subtle and wet

And it is impossibly intelligent.

(2003)

The Imperfect Tree

There is a large silver maple in our front yard ...
It is not a perfect tree ...
It does not burn bright like a sugar maple in September ...
Nor the radiant leaves of the scarlet maple ...
It seems suburban with its silver skin and delicate leaves ...
It grows so fast its trunk has split with stretchmarks ...
So thirsty the rest of the lawn is dry ...
In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by the ton ...
It is not a perfect tree ...
But it is a patient presence, and it cools the house ...
It shields us from the glare of the sun ...
Cardinals and blue jays convene there for their business ...
And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

Our neighbor plans to cut down his smaller maple ...
It blocked sunlight from his home, which is much driven past, for its
luminous openness ...
Which is admittedly not very apparent if a tree is blocking the view ...
But I think he's tired of the mediocrity ...
So out comes the chainsaw, and down goes the tree, and into the house it
goes, one armload at a time ...
I wonder if it feels like an honor ...
After all those years in the cold and the rain ...
Those thankless, dripping, freezing years of service ...
To be invited inside by the fire?

(2001)

Scooter

The young woman struggling with the scooter
Looks like she's heading off to work,
She isn't beautiful, certainly not graceful,
She's too big for the toy
But hasn't quite figured that out.
But she is becoming anyway,
Long as a feather,
She has lived a bit of a life already,
You can see the frustration
In her eyes, but also in the way she accepts
This momentary awkwardness.

(2004)

Put-Out Day at Wijiwagan

The Y girls stream into the mess hall,
Braids bouncing, teeth flashing,
It is put-out day for their weeklong voyage,
Paddling into the Boundary Waters,
And it is all I can do to stir weak coffee and not stare.
They are scattered and happy,
Long and limber like golden Q-tips
Waiting to be sprung.

The girls are wonderful, even
The ones who don't think they are.
Here and there you can see the women
They will become, more ordinary one day,
A cheeky hopefulness may droop a bit,
A dazed expression will round into disappointment,
And it will be men like me who let them down,
The way we drag everything beautiful down.

That one can't stop twirling the ribbon in her hair,
And clapping her hands like a monkey's cymbal.
If I were to actually look into her sparkling eyes,
Up close, I would turn away
Because sometimes just seeing is a violation.

Being friendly to them is like being friendly with grass,
Weaving and darting with the breeze
It is not that they aren't listening, or can't listen,
Or can't be taught to listen, it's that they have
No knowledge of that sort to trouble them,
Except we are like their parents, only not.

(1997)

Desalinization

As water became more scarce
we turned to our tears as a source

Suction cups hooked up to the eyes
Captured the precious liquid

Hand-held pumps converted them
to tapwater, ready to go

And the salt and the glycerine residue
were stored in underground casks

Nonstop grieving was encouraged
as an alternative to military service

High accidents skyrocketed
because it was so hard to see

But even that was not enough
to irrigate farm fields and

Planners looked for another source
And conducted tests on the ocean

And all agreed by the disagreeable taste
People have been weeping a long time

(2009)

Eclogue

Half a Monopoly board
blown into a thistle bush
in the Colorado chaparral –
the game ended here.

(1985)

Manitou Cemetery

Suicide Minnie went mad because
a favored child coughed up blood

She died in the snow beside his stone,
mouth and nails black from eating clay.

Only fifteen live in town today,
but two hundred lie in the soil.

Being sensible and land being land
the graveyard was dug in the marshland.

In '59, when Jack's Creek rose
it lifted the boxes and bones of a dozen

and scattered them among
the cattails and ratweed.

Farmboys were beaten into militia,
fewer and fewer, war to war.

Two to Manila, two in the Solomons,
one in Panmunjon, none left for Vietnam.

The inscription says *Relinquunt*,
meaning they gave their all.

All outnumber the citizenry now,
a massacre called everybody gone.

(1979)

Girls of the Intercoastal Highway

The girls are nearly naked,
one has no suit on her behind
and to make matters worse her friend is
slathering sunscreen on it.

The girls are laughing
and it is a happy, decent laugh.
It is me that is at fault
crouching behind my sunglasses.

The girls in Minnesota are white
or maybe these girls are Minnesotan,
from a part I don't know well
like the Arrowhead region.

The girls are wriggling under the oil
and laughing at the lotioned fingers.
When I return from the hotel
with my little boy's squirt gun

The girls are gone, doubtless shamed
by my shame, gone home
to cover their bodies. When I return
to my prairie state I shall miss

the girls and their honeyed skin,
where the snow flies sideways
and behinds sit in swivel chairs,
lotionless and waiting for the spring.

Sky Repair

As a child I had a recurring dream.
The sky was a tent-top of glass, or porcelain
And I saw a crack begin to form,
And it was my job to repair the crack.
I climbed a ladder to the brink of the sky
and I was patching the crack with spackle
When another crack formed,
and another, and another.
The profoundest grief swept over me,
Knowing my job was impossible to do.
The atoms of the universe were coming apart
And how did I get saddled with this.
Then I woke up to my sister dying in one room,
My mother sobbing in the next,
My father snoring drunk in the third.
The atoms of the universe coming apart,
And my job, repairing the crack.

(2003)

A Great One

I never constructed a great one with my hands,
one that swept cities away like a runaway reservoir,
and people did not resist the surge
because the flood felt like it was their flood,

Because a great one feels like it knows you already,
has taken up your cause without you being awares.
A great one is compassionate yet ignorant,
It pays no union dues, it knows nobody's name,

It is courageous because it really doesn't give a shit
if it's corny and it doesn't care if it passes through
the baleen of some cleaner whose job it is to filter
nutrients through the narrowest possible slit

A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head
And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,
Our heads like boiled bowling balls, pulpy
And we don't care, it's a plus in the overall profile.

A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh
Because it knows it can never die, its gestures
Cost it nothing, it is in a movie of its own life
And it is playing the part of itself.

It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,
It picks up every check and leaves twenty dollar tips.
A great one is generous in its heart because that is its pedigree
Like the people who have the good things of the world.

A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains
Because the air is better and the company convivial
And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach
So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.

It is ushered into the waiting limousine
And speeds away to the next great moment,
The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,
The reception line that loops back on itself like an homage to infinity.

The great one acknowledges no competitors,
As it dips its bread in the back seat bowl and mops up all the wine,
Yet we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, teary-eyed, choking
on the blue fumes of its burning.

(2007)

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)

Cannon Falls

The sidewalk is beautiful,
one of those dry crystalline snows
that shine in the moonlight
like white sparking wires.

We ate too many rolls at the supper club.
Back to the bed and breakfast,
the bubble lights on the Christmas tree
are boiling.

Rachel reads on the sofa,
I sit in the library and pull book
after book from the shelves.
Baseball books, history, politics, poetry.

In one is a poem by Jon Silkin
about the death of his child.
It is so heartbreaking I read it twice,
and the sorrow saws through me.

Suddenly I don't hate poetry,
it is not false or vain or unimportant,
it is a way to talk and think
about things that matter most,

because in a hundred words or so here
I felt the stab of the boy's passing and
the sundering of the parents,
sweetness and horror all there on the page,

and I want more, I pull a dozen books
down from the shelves
and careen crazily through them,
greedy for more minds, more lives.

Every paragraph seemed to sing,
every poem a shiver, people's picture
snapped in the moment of a lifetime,
and I felt no envy only joy.

My chest hurts, I step outside
and walk toward town.
The Zumbro River is frozen over,
but I hear water by the bridge.

The falls are tumbling brown
from the limestone table,
like a greasy comb of water
in winter. It is just starting

to snow again, and Rachel
is there, and takes my arm,
and we head home, middle-aged,
coughing frost in the silent air.

(1999)

Fools Unlimited

God is the reason we all go crazy
begging scraps at every doorbell

Why we wear diapers cut from the funnies
duct-taped and leaking at the fold

We embrace the people who betray us
and we bless their bratty descents

The taste of vomit is always in the mouth
And it is not even always our own

Confess to crimes we didn't commit
Love Limbaugh and Gingrich and Jones

Abandon critical thought forthwith
Your intellect was never your friend

A woman with crossed arms demands to know
what happens now and who is to blame

And the answer is always yes, of course
the voices made us do it, again

(2009)

Cottonwood

In May the fluff begins to float.
It is the feather of the cottonwood
Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississippi
And shooting into the atmosphere.
How can an airborne thing grow
Into so mammoth a being?
Because it is still light in its wood.
This ribbed pillar is mostly air,
With skies of space between every particle
So even when it thumps its giant heart
It is already beginning to fall.

(2003)

Christmas

I agree it is a horror what
with the ravenousness of us,
the hunger of memory that lusts for repetition,
and the insistence of ceremony
that the fourth candle be purple and all others
white like obligations drumming like icy twigs
against the pane of consciences.

I am grateful for Jesus volunteering to lift
the yoke from off our necks
the sack of sin like Portland cement
and taking it upon himself
but sometimes it seems he laid another on us,
we must display goodwill and keep receipts,
for if you do not display and keep
no one will believe what is in your heart.

I like the look on Jonathan's face
who still believes at age six that
withered men descend cold chimneys
in the dead of winter on Dayton Avenue
and meticulously lay out loot
that was not yanked through a broken window
during a riot but was assembled and warrantied
by gnarled people for children they don't know.

But I also enjoy Daniele's, at 10.
She is in on the lie and relishes the telling.
We look at her and she looks at Jon,
rubbing the short night from his eyes,
silent before the tree, gazing at grandeur
that would be grander simpler, at these offerings
to a king who forgives everyone everything
including Christmas.

The Woman at the Folies Bergere

I thought many thoughts.
And I never said a word.

I told you a thousand silent things
But I never said a word.

Others opened their hearts to you
But I never said a word.

The look in your eyes shouted yes to me
And I never said a word.

I have thought about you every day
But I never said a word.

(1977)

The Bale-Door Ledge

This place is neither
Here nor now and
Neither are the two bare
Legs dangling from the
Bale-door or the
Congregation of
Sunflowers craning
Below for the holy
Glimpse.

Twenty years since these
Boards saw a broom, and now
The mud climbs under
The roosting beam in
Strutting sharps and
Flats.

This place that is no
Place at all is a mile
And a year from what we
Know, lifetimes of
Thought from the twitch
Of the paw of the
Injured dog lying on the
Shoulder of the high-
Way in,
Or farther on, a car
Upside down and standing
Beside it a man,
Scratching his head with
His cap.

It all dissolves, a
Dream from which the
Sleeper awakens to two
Hornets clutched and
Teetering on the wrist's

Soft skin,
And outside the terraces
Swelling and snapping.
I think of my mother in
Her old yellow house-
Coat, shaking out rugs on
The porch.

(1980)

Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar
would chew the leaf forever

But then the tumbler clicks inside
and worm begins spinning its tomb

How afraid we would be
to seal ourselves in like that

Until all light is gone
And there is no leaf to eat

And all movement ceases
And we wait in the dark

(2006)

Sprinkler

Underfoot the worms awake.
The sudden flood is intolerable,
and they push to the surface
pink and brown and nearly straight
like little socks hung out to dry
and exposed to the idiot sun
and if I had the right kind of ears
I would hear them gasp.

(2009)

Entrepreneur

This spider studied real estate.
He built a web at the corner station
over the sign flashing Quaker State --
location, location, location.

(1989)

Critique

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

“The truth is, your work is almost entirely masturbatory.”

He clasped me by the shoulders and gazed into my eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!”

(1987)

Sketch for a Star Trek Episode

The Enterprise is drawn to a galaxy emitting immense waves of cosmic pain.

The Federation says it looks really weird, and would Kirk and his people look into it.

Entering the strobing galaxy, they alight on a single dark planet, covered with bare ground.

Sensors detect a living heartbeat coming from a dwelling on a vast featureless continent.

In the basement, they find a shivering boy of the Romulan race, wrapped in a dirty blanket.

The boy's body is a map of horrible wounds -- lacerations, burns, and impalements. And yet the boy is alive and, against all logic, healthy.

The doctor determines that they boy had been put to death by torture on the planet Romulus.

Then mysteriously, the executed boy had been brought back from the dead, and moved in a wink to this solar system to heal.

He had sat in the house, sobbing, for three thousand two hundred and eighteen years.

"This is what he does, Jim. he visits planet after planet, saves the inhabitants by dying a hideous death, and then is transported here to mend for the next planet."

"And Jim," Bones mutters, with a hint of judgment. "It's not even his idea," Bones says. "It's his old man's."

"Something very similar to this happened on my planet," Spock notes, "over forty centuries ago. We commemorate him as the noble Vulcan Epigil."

"Mine as well," says the Klingon second mate Urkuruk -- "His was called Bartakran the Bloodied."

"And on Earth, we have the story of Jesus," Kirk says, frowning. "But what was the purpose of these deaths? Did they make any difference in the behavior of your races?"

The Klingon shrugs. "A little, maybe. We could have been more warlike, I suppose."

Kirk interrogates the abused boy. "What would you like us to do? Could we find a safe place for you away from your father? Could we negotiate with him on your behalf?"

The boy shivers in his blanket.

"I just have to keep doing what I'm doing," he says, with a resigned voice. "Because there's just no talking to dad."

(2009)

God's Body

The campaign raged into its eighth decade, hopeless from the get-go.

All God had to do was think of his enemies and they ceased to exist.

You would be talking to a guy, and suddenly he was no longer there.

God would wait until they got within a spear-throw to blink, and then he laughed that awful empty laugh.

What an asshole he was.

And that was why, despite the danger, there was never a shortage of volunteers.

They signed up by the thousands, eager to end the tyranny, the caprice, and that gruesome laugh.

And the soldiers fought all their lives, until God thought of them, or they died.

The Lord God mowed them down by the million, and he laughed his giant belly-laugh.

One day God slipped up, he became intoxicated with his own self-regard and lapsed into a kind of holy coma.

A group of commandos came upon him as he lay open-mouthed on the sand, and they lanced him in the neck and armpit and groin.

Divine blood rushed from his wounds, till the seashore stank for miles.

It was a mighty and an unexpected victory.

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives, and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips.

They rendered the fat, which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

Altogether they saved thirty-two barrels of oil from God's body.

The oil was distributed to the people of the world, who burned it in lamps.

The lamps stayed lit for the lifetimes of the people.

They read, and talked, and danced, and it was their turn to laugh, to the light of God's pure oil.

And though they were nervous about the darkness that was coming, they had no regrets.

(2009)

Shrooms Gone Wild

the wilderness is underfoot
the mussels on the hulls

sunny caps are glad pagodas
winking in the sun

vaudevillians spin
silver plates on sticks

upturned cup deformed
like a beggar's hand

flash of tiger fishes
changing their direction

the phantom glides
from stump to stump

silver butterflies
like flying menus

tiny acorns tip their hats
to no nutritional value

(2009)

Pain was my bread

I must have been French

(1981)

Why?

Why do friends love us
while we hate our guts?

How can they overlook
the disturbances we fix on?

The patterns and indulgences
the sickening repetitions

Or is it that we spend
all our time in here, with that

And we are so exhausted
and the relationship is tense

Maybe we need to back off a bit
take a break from ourselves

Until we are superficial but loving
the way good friends are

And we see us as they do,
from somewhat of a distance

these forgivable things

(2008)

Cosmetic Dentistry

First the bad news.

The teeth you now run your tongue over
will all be leaving your head,
like that woman with the four-million-year-old skull
whose cuttlebone canines were scattered near the jaw
in the red dirt of Africa's Afar Rift,
because bite the dust is what teeth do.

My neighbor is a cosmetic dentist,
you can tell from the way he keeps his lawn
that he is a good one, too.

He knows teeth are designed to last a lifetime
provided your lifetime is short and brutish,
but his job is to extend the warranty,
painlessly, with amazing glue and diamond drills,
through the lengthy and lovely lives
so many enjoy today.

Jung says that an archetypal dream
is that we are standing over a sink
and our teeth fall out of our mouths
and clatter down the drain and we try
to catch them but they are gone.
Turns out it's a dream about mortality.

The good news is, it doesn't bother your dog
that he's going to lose everything,
including his canines, which you don't brush
though you know you should,
though you love your dog a lot
but it's kind of a bother to brush your dog's teeth
and why shouldn't his ivories
last the full fifteen years,
when all he eats is toasted soybeans.

And the dog never dreams that dream
of standing in the bathroom mirror
watching his mortality clank against porcelain
because he's a dog and they are spared that,
unlike you and maybe unlike the Ardipithecus lady
if people were already starting to have that dream
four million years ago in Ethiopia.
Why are we the ones haunted
the way my poor neighbor the dentist is,
everything has to be just the right way,
on his knees in the grass on Saturday mornings in June,
gas exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands,
grinding away at the imperfect stump.

(2009)

When You Encounter a Bear

First, **appraise the situation**. Might it be a nice bear? Do you see cubs in the vicinity? Is there a tree nearby? Do you suppose the bear can climb, too?

Do not run. You can't outrun a bear so don't even try.

People say to run downhill from a grizzly. **Don't.**

Try **backing away**. Sometimes they let you do that.

Climb that tree. Climb at least 33 feet off the ground so it can't get to you and hurl you down.

If successful, be prepared to **wait** a while.

Try **pepper spray**. But realize that pepper may also act as an attractant.

Fight the bear. It will be very difficult, but it will **respect you** more.

As it mauls you, **keep your backpack on**. Ideally, wear it in front of you.

Do not **play dead** until you almost are.

Once mauled, **stick around**. Only when the bear has clearly gone should you crawl away.

(1995)

Fifteen Rounds

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

The doughboy poets had it right,
They cried for peace from their bones,
Blood-rooted, likelilies in vermiculite.
We protest the war over coffee and scones.

DECLARATIVE

Jefferson, Adams and Hancock wrote verse.
Ben Franklin was better than those.
But when it was time for “When, in the course”
They had the good sense to write prose.

SO LONG SADDAM

Everyone to himself is a good guy,
Saddam Hussein told CBS he’d rather die
than leave Iraq to save his life and limb.
Too bad Iraq will soon be leaving him.

JOHN KERRY

We didn’t need bolts of lightning hurled
until the other side blinked.
We didn’t need to persuade the world.
We only needed one vote per precinct.

THE QUESTION

This madness is rooted in misunderstanding
and cyclical like the economy.
But how to create a soft global landing?
And undo governmental lobotomy?

DEAR LANDLORD

Two lines of verse that are not Kuwaiti,
they come from Bob Dylan and a president, too:
“If you won’t misanderestimate me
I won’t misanderestimate you.”

GO JOHNNY GO

In this puzzle everyone’s got a piece.
Respect, you don’t see much of it.
Johnny Paycheck, may he rest in peace,
gave me “Take this war and shove it.”

NO WORRIES

Of course, peace has problems, plenty.
I remember it like it was just a year ago,
What a hassle, having to work to make money,
Thank God that’s behind us now.

IN PRAISE OF GOD

And God made anthrax, who knows why.
And his lab was not Iraq's.
His toxin he declined to aerosolize.
and he did not pop it in our mailbox.

NEW GREETING

Instead of saying "How's it hangin',"
We need a new way to continue.
Like the way Tibetans greet each other:
"I honor the god that is in you."

HIPPIES

The hippies had a good idea,
but they were swamped by the mad and the smarmy
What good are two fingers making a V?
Thanks Manson, thanks Symbionese Army.

CHILDREN OF THE SIXTIES

The young tell the hippies poets to can it,
a peace sign's a mighty poor weapon.
The generation in charge of the planet
allowed all this bullshit to happen.

IMPRINTED

A proper poem is a fist in wet clay.
It leaves a lasting impression
Even when the hand goes away
it lives on in unconscious suggestion.

YOUNG GUNS

The doughboys hear the poppin' fresh --
a yellow light up top the ridge.
The generations rise and fetch
Another brewski from the fridge.

DISAVOWAL

Be wary of poems that mount the pedestal
Brandishing words, or better still
stand guard, prick up your ears.
A deeper peace will take a thousand years.

The Sugar House

the sugar house is shutting down
you can hear the babies cry
red cheeks rumpling in the sun
hush little children goodbye

time to lock the summer house
and bed the waterlines with straw
winter wants its solitude
and double-bolted doors



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