

Emissary

Preposthumous
Poems

by Mike Finley
2010-2015



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Kraken Press

St. Paul

2014

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Every Guy

If every guy was all the same
we would most of us have to die
because there is just not
much need for that guy.

The Blind Old Man And His Cancerous Dog

The man with cataracts looked up while he stroked
the retriever's shoulder.

He had just been informed that his companion of twelve years
had cancer of the stomach and would have to be put down.

I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "How terrible
to lose your friend, that you rely on so much."

"Yeah," the blind old man said, kneading the dog's ruff.

"But I've been through a lot of dogs."

Don't

Don't get too attached to your feet.
They'll soon take off for the hills
because they must be going away,
leaving you on spinning stilts.

Don't plan on holding onto your eyes.
They have things to see on their own,
and all this time, all the livelong days
they were only on loan.

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

A Man with a Hole

There was a man with a hole in him
that he thought nothing of.

When he showed it to people,
they said to him,
That doesn't look right at all.

But don't all men have holes?
the man asked.
Yes, they said, but you should really
have that looked at.

How Good Of A Guy Was He

He worried that the flesh-eating bacteria
were not getting enough.

Beating Heart On Sidewalk

What do you do about it?
It's not cool to kick it under the hedge.
You could take it inside and try to raise it like your own,
but it's hard to see where that will go.
You could call the American Heart Association,
but this isn't really their bag.
Police are no good, they'll tag it and bag it.
you can see the dog in the screen door
licking its lips.
This is the problem with every heart.
We see it huffing, a little bit scuffed
from passing traffic, so brave, so hopeful,
so eager to get back to business.
We know it's there, but we don't know
what to do.

Lesson

There are people who have not been held in twenty years.
Understandably they are easily reduced to tears.

If one were just to see them and press close
All the built-up aching inside explodes.

Why can't the wounded have what the rest have?
It's because heartache is unattractive.

13th Century Chinese

How I miss the tiny footsteps on the floorboards,
of the young girl Hsia Liu
who took out the ashes and minded the children.

I think about her shy smile, and the way
she looked downward, in perfect modesty,
presenting a hot pot of tea for us.

When she passed through the room
I could detect the faint rustle of her clothing,
and when she presented herself,
the quickened beating of her heart.
How sad, I think, as I stir the tea
I had to make myself today,
we sold her to pay the mortgage
on our mountain cottage,
the one where she watched over our dear young ones,
in the northern prefecture of H'ai Province.

The Way to Do

Forget about all the effups you've made.
Thinking about them only effs you up some more.
Stop worrying what the future has in store.
Anxieties leave marks in your underpants.
The best policy, I have found, is to plant yourself
on your back stoop and watch the robins hop about,
without knees.
Think about how they do that, or don't.
Eat when you feel the need to eat.
When it's time to go down, give yourself permission
to draw the eyelids closed.
But stay on the lookout, because you never know, you know?

Blind Spot

There is always that one place you cannot see reliably.
Things sneak up on you there.
You know that when the end comes,
it will probably appear in that space behind your shoulder
that you cannot comfortably swivel to.
So that is what you focus on,
year after year,
with a dismal, forlorn feeling,
because what can you say despite all this vigilance --
"I didn't see it coming."

To A Stranger

We never refer to it,
but it's always there,
the thing unsaid,
this restless hunger
to be known.
Why does no one
seem to see the truth in you --
the effort you've been making,
the earnestness of your love.
You sit there giving
as you so often do.
Maybe this will be the hour
it all cracks open,
the moment of contact
when you can't keep it up
a single second longer,
and everything spills out of you
like feathers from a gun.
People see the goodness in you,
they see the courage
you show every day

just getting up and going about,
the things you don't talk about
but are never out of reach.
Your tender heart
that has already been broken
multiple times,
that you keep patching together
and sending back out,
that sense of duty
to those you belong to,
even when they seem unaware.
I see you in your beauty,
the hope that has no hope,
it's just you making
a trip to the well
that you have visited
so many times before.
I know. Because I see you.

Be Nice to the Devil

We could save ourselves a lot of trouble if,
instead of trying to be better people,
we focused on bringing the devil to God.
Those two love each other deep down,
you can tell, though sometimes
you have to read between the lines,
and perhaps our whole reason for being
is to urge them into reconciliation,
because after we lose those two characters
we can do anything we like.

Little Tiny Hands

I am so touched by your tiny hands.
They are like an invitation to me to take care of you,
to protect you from harm,
to kiss your sweet small knuckles
with multiple kisses,
which is strange because the rest of you
is quite large.

Victory Through Song

True story of Vasily Zaytsev, Red Army artilleryman who suffered battle fatigue in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The trauma of seeing his friends immolated caused him to sing everything he said, a little out of tune. Some comrades feared he would give away their position with his singing, and they took him out, shooting him as he slept. Not only did he not die, but he is alive today, in the city of Grozny, still singing his mad song.

From now on I will enter every room singing.

Just like in an American musical

Singing morning noon and night now

I will be singing to my cereal

I will sing to my dog who will tilt her head in confusion

But I will laugh and kiss her on her head

And everything will change now

You will smile when you see me

You will say there is a man who's not paying attention to reality

Because he always greets us singing

He is restoring the people he loves with color and laughter, they say.

And other people will start singing

They'll lock hands across the city

Traffic will come to a stop

As people roll down their windows and start singing

One beautiful song after another

And children will thank their parents for every act of love

And wives and husbands will sing to one another

Singing Oh, oh, oh, we are singing

And the government will get suspicious

As the economy starts to tank

And money stops being everything

Because even the capitalists in their silk hats

are looking out their windows now

And they sing Oh, oh, oh we can't help singing

And plans will be drawn up

And as I stand in the courtyard

Arms outstretched and beaming with love

A shot will ring out and down I will go

And my heart will stop beating but only for a moment

And I will lie on my back gazing up at the clouds

And remarkably and inexplicably I will still be singing

And I will sing to my assassins
How sad it must make you
To do this violent deed but to have so little effect
How proud you must be with your sniper's rifles
How brave you all are with your guns,
How amazing you must be
To shoot a man for singing, and to fail.

I'm Glad I Don't Have Bird Feet

It would be so hard to put socks on.

A Hand Is Like a Flower

A hand is like a flower,
perched upon a stem.

A surgeon, rinsing and
holding them aloft,
sees beauty in their form.

A fist is like a bulb,
packed full of potential.

They turn on their joints in sunshine
like tulips in a breeze.

And when you have departed,
visitors hold them up and blow,

and the ashen seeds set off
on a journey, in search

of something to hold.

Let's Get Lost in the Forest

Spin around till we lose all direction,
splash two-footed in every rocky stream,
enter the caves of sleeping bears
and wake up the young ones with tickling.
Let us give new names to all the plants,
such as "Deadly Lampshade" and "Worrier's Lips."
Let us eat grubs from moldy tree stumps
and enjoy what i imagine is a chewy texture like clams
and a nutty taste, like toasted pine cone.
But let's take a box of confectioner's sugar
just in case, let us swear eternal love
and seal the covenant with blood.
And when the search party comes
upon our tattered clothes
let us drop from the trees and shout
surprise.

The Day

I woke up and there were mountains
where there were no mountains before.
The people on the street had somewhere to get to,
but they had time to say hello.
In every tree and bush I heard cheeping,
and a variety of dogs hollered from their yards.
I went to the door where you should have been
and rapped it with my knuckles.
I sheltered my eyes with my hand from the sun.
A hawk nuzzled itself on the phone line
and a child in blue ran by with a kite.

Bumper Stickers

I break for green lights.
My gun is my friend – my only friend.
My 6th grader is nothing special.
I heart my dog, who would lay down his life for me.
Honk if you're white.
Coexist – because I know where you live.
I'm stupid ... and I vote.

The Abominable Snowman

He seemed a cheery soul with his stovepipe hat
and corncob pipe,
standing on the terrace on Ashland Avenue,
until you saw his eyes and mouth were made
from frozen sticks of dog poop.

I Would Say

That women are like
beautiful birds, sleek
and hollow-boned, long
of leg with velvet throats
and rustling wings

Except that in reality
the most beautiful birds
are males and that
is just something I
have to deal with.

Dog on the Lawn

He staggered out of the house this morning and stood on the lawn, huffing and puffing.

He is in heart failure, I guess. Rachel used her stethoscope on him -- 125 beats per minute, about 30 more than normal.

One of the curious things about dogs is that they make nearly the same face when they are in trouble as when they are happy. Panting heavily, tongue out, teeth peeled bare and grinning.

Great joy and heat stroke look about the same.

I coaxed him to step toward me but he couldn't. His legs wobbled beneath him. His chest heaved.

After half an hour I lifted him up, like a lamb, and carried him in and laid him down.

I just sat with him for a while, running my fingers through his coat, patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.

I was snuffling, but it wasn't too bad. I was reminded of the first day we brought him home, 15 years ago, and we did the same thing, he and I -- we laid our heads together on a beanbag chair, the one with the leopardskin spots, and closed our eyes and slept.

And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

Lion

This is how I wanted my kids to be,

indomitable, lazy,

supine on the plain,

purring like thunder

sliced up by bike spokes,

announcing contemptuously

to the stuttering world,

I am the terminus of the food chain.

I absorb all your poison

and shit out your bones.

Why the Dog Ate the Dictionary

Maybe she wanted to hurt me
for leaving her alone.
It was her only chance to talk back to words.
Or maybe it smelled like my hand.

Game

some say the world
will end in stone,
others paper,
and still some blade
because fear makes hash
of every laugh
and laughter drives love
to distraction
but love's cover
can smother fear
rock scissors paper
fear laughter love

Losing a Daughter Is Like Being A Bee on the Moon

Every morning you wake up shivering
gazing out at the darkened spires,
wondering where is a flower
in this barren land that you
can draw sweetness from.

Grief Plan

Don't write poems about your sadness,
sensible people will head for the exits,
except the wrong ones, some of them,
who see opportunity in sobbing.

Don't cry on every shoulder you come upon.
You only have tears for so much irrigation
and you may get stuck with dry cleaning bills.

Instead make a schedule for weeping and keep to it.
Every ten minutes should do.
Over the years try stretching this out
to eleven or thirteen.

Then find a good heart, a person who knows you,
someone whose heart has been broken themselves.
I recommend a loving sister.
Feel them pat you on the back and say
I know. I know. I know.

The Return Stroke

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

