



FISH NAKED

Mike Finley

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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 canines were scattered like dice
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
he is a proficient, 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 dream about teeth
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,
exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands,
grinding away at the imperfect stump.

Osama Bin Laden's Pornography

New reports say that substantial amounts of porn movies were found at the hideout in Abbotabad.

The CIA released this news, which raises questions.

If true, it's a way of pissing on bin Laden's grave, and shitting on it, if it's not.

What kind of porn was it? Was it Islamic, or at least Middle Eastern?

Was it soft or hard, straight or gay -- was it cruel, as we likely assume, or was there another Osama we never knew,

one who licked the toes of others and toppled skyscrapers because he did not feel worthy?

The man had failed kidneys and needed regular dialysis.

But are people on dialysis big masturbators?

For that matter, was the porn even bin Laden's?

Maybe it was erotic entertainment

for when Al Qaeda dignitaries dropped by, and a little masculine hospitality, like a toast with Cutty Sark, was in order. Maybe it was inspiration for the soon-to-be exploded,

a vision of the action that awaited them on the other side of this life?

In our tradition God is dead set against masturbation.

It shows irreverence for life and disrespect for women.

Each time we jerk off, the nails sink deeper into Jesus' palms.

Maybe Allah is not so strict, but that would surprise me
because he seems plenty strict, generally speaking.

Maybe there were images of Muhammad, naked, pictures
people

would lose their lives by seeing, but maybe he felt he had
earned the right.

I think of bin Laden on a lazy Sunday morning, in his suburban
compound,

nothing to do, forbidden by circumstances from taking a walk
into town,

and saying Howdy to the people he meets, doffing his turban
the way that they do, his kidneys aching, none of the three
wives on hand

doing much for him, rinsing out dishes and beating rugs for the
most part,

and he gets so lonely, and he needs to remind himself he's still a
human being,

his hands around the throat of the world, the secret smell of
smoke

and molten plastic always in his nostrils, but never enough,

he has needs right now, he gets so bored, and the mysteries of
naked bimbos,

living in lofts in New York City, stretching their beatnik limbs,
shamelessly showing him everything they have, and only the
touch of a button away.

Govinda and the Park Policeman

The enlightened one and a disciple walked down a mountain road

to sit at the foot of the cascading waters
that were famous in that province.

And it was here at this waterfall that he understood

For the first time the poured-outness of God

Into the world of nature, how divinity infuses itself

In the commonest things, the splash of a trout

Or an insect's buzz in the hollow of one's ear.

And when his meditation was complete.

The two climbed back up the mountainside,

Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.

What is the matter, officer? he asked.

You park registration is good for sixty minutes

But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.

I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,

We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of time.

That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not honest

To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with ninety.

I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.

But as you can see, I am but an old monk,

And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills

As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the ranger.
Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,
So people can deposit their money directly, said the disciple,
Who was red-faced with irritation.
Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm
Solves no problem, and creates many.
Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.
Write him a check then for the full amount,
But mark on the memo line:
"A tax on illumination."

Twins At The State Fair

They don't do it anymore,
provide peeks at freaks for seventy-five cents
as a feature of the midway experience.

But back then my friend Bob and me
tiptoed into a tent and saw two girls
older than us and not Siamese,
connected at the forehead,
languidly paging through a single issue
of Little Lulu.

One of them, the larger one,
chewed Juicy Fruit
Bob and I tumbled down the out ramp.
We were sarcastic, opinionated boys
But we did not speak again
for twenty-five minutes.

Manitou Cemetery

i.

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 Kinbrae today,
but two hundred lie here in the spongy soil.
Being sensible and land being land
the graveyard was dug in the side of a marsh.
In '59, when Jack's Creek rose
it lifted the boxes and bones of a dozen citizens
and strewed them among
the cattails and ratweed.

ii.

Ploughboys in this town were beaten into militia,
fewer and fewer, war to war.
Two to Manila, two to the Solomons,
one in Panmunjon, none left for Vietnam.
The inscription says Relinquant,
meaning they gave their all,
leaving nothing on the table but their blood.
All outnumber the citizenry now,
a massacre called everybody gone.

Pushed From a Huey

Interrogation in the field sometimes went this way.
having got what they wanted,
or having not got what they wanted,
they led you to the lip and gave you a nudge.
They always took the blindfold off,
giving you the gift of scenery.
You wonder what is the best way to spend your thirty
seconds --
You could spend it working up your anger at the
Americans,
but isn't that a waste?
You could do the calculus on saving yourself,
perhaps the perfect tuck and roll would minimize
the wear and tear you are about to undergo.
There in the distance are the crags of Ninh Binh
and that is your own village at its feet
and there are your brother and little sisters
somewhere out there.
It is natural at this point to start running in place,
like a plummeting swastika,
because why hold back, and someone
may be watching

The Transfiguration of Danny Klecko

We climbed the highest mountain in Minnesota.

The sun streaking across the Gitchee Gummee.

We had come to meditate on our service to the people
and to prepare ourselves psychically for the long campaign
ahead.

When we reached the summit we were amazed
to see three spirits waiting for us --
the giant Paul Bunyan, Hiawatha the Lakota brave,
and Grand Rapids' own Judy Garland.

Klecko called to them: "What is the meaning of this meeting?"
"You are the chosen one, the elect," said Hiawatha.
"We have to share good medicine with you."

Hiawatha offered his calumet, stuffed with kinnickinnick.
The four of them puffed ceremoniously.
I, Big Vanilla, knelt at their feet and moaned.

Klecko asked them: "What advice can you offer for the task
before me?"
"Watch your step," the giant said. "There are people down
below."
"Honor the people," Hiawatha said. "Suffer on their behalf."

"Give it your all," said the girl in red shoes. "Don't let 'em see you sweat."

The mist then enveloped them, and Klecko stood alone,
his countenance blazing with wisdom.

"I thank you for this blessing," he whispered into the cool mountain air.

"I will not forsake this trust."

I AM GOYA

https://www.facebook.com/events/1468379160143111/?ref=5&action_history=null

White American poets don't have great credibility in protest

We come across as privileged

But I saw a poet do it right, March 19, 1971

Russian, Andrei Voznesenski

Protégé of Boris Pasternak

In the 1960s he was as big as the Beatles in the USSR because
he embodied the rage and sorrow of Soviet youth

He even wrote a book with a Beatles title, Rubber Souls

Kruschev personally asked Voznesenski, to his face, to obtain a
passport and defect,

He was that challenging

He filled stadiums with his electricity and charisma,

And often, as in his great poem to Goya, the Spanish painter
and critic,

He swung his arm like a steel-driving man

One critic said that he along with Yevtushenko were the first
poets to write for the stage, not the page, making them the first
slam poets

I met Andrei Voznesensky, and this is our story

With less than a day's notice, the KGB

gave Siberian poet Andrej Vosnesenski a visa to fly to
Minnesota.

There was no time to promote the event.

A handful of writers and scholars and a few Soviet emigrés
cluster in the front rows of the roped off-Northrop Auditorium,
a mere 50 people dotting the 5,000 seats
while, standing like a speck upon the giant stage,
the poet groans and raises his fist like a steel sledge,
poised to come down hard.

He reads his famous poem about Goya,
the Spanish painter of the post-Napoleonic years
regarded as the last of the old masters
and the first of the moderns, assailing power
for its crushing offenses.

An English actor translates his words, but no one listens to that
blow-dried fop.

All eyes are on the pumping hand, all ears attuned to
Vosnesenski's condemnation of tyrants.
No one understands, and yet everyone understands.

And as he moves into action, one word thunders through the
auditorium --

GOYA reanimates the frozen corpses of the field.
GOYA daubs you with the blood of your victims.
The dashed, the dead, the unblinking eyes.
GOYA stands against the blistering fire,

accosting you with your terrible crimes.

GOYA slams the hammer that fractures the rock.

GOYA swings the scythe that mows the grain.

Even when all the words against you are shredded

Even when the books have made a roaring fire,

The lies that murdered millions come back on you

GOYA is implacable against the barrels of rifles

GOYA sees you for what you are

GOYA stabs with his truth

GOYA announces that the day is over

That the whited dead cry out for justice

You mighty leaders have not prevailed

You are vanquished by your deeds

Your generations are sown with lime

You have not won, you are dead and you don't know

GOYA!

Afterward the reading breaks up and the poets and professors
drive through the snow and ice to Chester Anderson's to boast
and jostle and drink,

Voznesenski alone at the end of the couch with a shy, puzzled
frown on his face.

Several beers later, I take to the bathroom,

where Chester's golden retriever lies on a pink poof rug.
I step over the dog to pee.
Behind me, Voznesenski creeps into the room
And kneels by the dog on the pink poof rug,
a foot from the stream splashing against the porcelain lip.
He scratches the dogs ears and smiles seraphically
His two eyes closed, his face held out,
the dew alighting like communion from God
on his face, as if finally – finally -- free!

The Plaque at Meeker Island

There is a plaque at the old Ford Dam, beside a 15-ton turbine
that spun in the rushing Mississippi for 70 years,
stealing power from the comb of water that falls thirty eight
feet

like an unrolling carpet at the slaggy foot of Meeker Island.

The turbine is rusted now, and you can see the places
where the water wore the metal down,
like bite-marks sunk by Mississippi teeth in cold Mesabi steel.

The plaque says the turbine in its working lifetime
produced 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity
for the families of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Think of the turbine squatting in the roar,
taking everything the river gave,
melting snow from high up in the swamplands,
gargling the impossibly pounding water,
molecules exploding in the crashing white,
hydrogen, oxygen ripping apart
negative ions flooding the atmosphere,
these whirling blades converting this ceaseless falling
into work.

Think of the prosperity it means for the cities,
the jobs and the money and the confidence it creates.
Think of the lights that dazzle every room,
of the families pulling out chairs

and sitting down to dinner,
think of the hot meals that we prepare,
and the clashing noise of happy knives and forks.
Think of the conversations that happen,
and the jokes that we tell, and the love that we feel
for one another, alive and living alongside this river.

To The Police

Everyone you pull over is already having a bad day.

You know this, you can see it in their eyes.

People are out work, out of money,
their wives have had it with them,
they're breaking up inside.

St. Paul cops get it, mostly.

They ask you to roll down the window in the gentlest way.

They write out the ticket in sorrow,
and hand it over to you apologetically.

As if to say, We know you're doing your best,
and we're sorry it has to be this way,
but this is the system we're stuck with.

Minneapolis cops,
maybe their wives have had it with them,
they did a make on your car at the last intersection
and they know the car's not stolen,
and they can see that you're insured
and no priors come up in the database,
and you're doubtless just a guy
who is having a bad day --

but still -- you know -- they're going to do their job.

Last Year's Xmas Dance

Norwegian farmers in hospitals, islands
Of plastic tubes and fluttering eyelids
Struggle to do what they will not do,
Arise and return to their fields.

Ivor Thorsen of Glendive, Montana,
Disintegrating nerves flown in, is awed
But his speechlessness, motionlessness,
Dreams he is laughing in Glendive, Montana.

But the strings inside are all undone,
Incomprehensible to a scarecrow who
Has walked lopsided ten thousand
Crumbling furrow miles.

Mary, Anna, is it really Christmas Day?
And is it really clumsy me slipping here
With farmer feet on the Legion floor?
Oh, look at me, Mother, I am dancing.

Witnesses

Three women at Burger King 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 across 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 carried, 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.

1990

Gosh Bob Dylan

I was making a left turn against traffic when I was struck
broadside by a FedEx truck.

Next thing I knew, I am being ushered into a cell in Hell.

The place smelled like rotten eggs, but not overwhelmingly so.

You could get used to this over time, I think. The surprising thing
is,

my cellmate in hell, sitting at a chessboard, his crossed legs
showing

a fine pair of rattlesnake skin boots, is American music legend
Bob Dylan.

He looks up warily as I hold out my hand in introduction.

"Gosh, Bob Dylan!" I say, trying to absorb this extraordinary
turn of events.

"I mean, if a fellow has to die and go to Hell, this is a pretty nifty
dividend!"

Dylan stops filing his nails. "I'm a major fan," I say. "I have most
of your albums

in my collection." Then, catching myself, "Had most, I mean to
say."

I tell him about my favorite records and songs. "And, 'Ballad of a
Thin Man,' I mean --

what can I say? Classic, classic song! Kinda spooky though, too.

Maybe you can tell me who Mister Jones really was." I examine
the room more carefully.

No bookcases, no TV, no stereo. No pen or paper. Really just a
sink, the chess table,

and the two of us facing one another. Forever. "I know this is
hell," I say to Bob,

"but I'm genuinely looking forward to conversing with you. You have no way

of knowing this, but I'm actually a writer, too. I mean, not like you,

but let's just say I've taken the muse out for a spin, if you get what I'm saying."

Dylan cocks an eye at me. "Ever think that maybe you're my hell?"

"No," I say. "The thing is, I'm not a hundred percent sure why I'm here.

I get you being here, big rock star et cetera. But I was a pretty good guy.

And I read a lot – even that play by Sartre. Well, Cliff's Notes, anyway.

But we can talk about that. We've got tons of time."

Clearance

The bridge posted clearance of 17 feet, two inches.

Perhaps your tires were overinflated at that last truck stop.

A two percent variance could yield this result.

Perhaps there was high construction this summer

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

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

especially with the cross draft zagging alongside the access
road,

the tape twisting and lengthening in the wind?

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

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

The oldest child capably leads the way.

The man follows, with the infant in a Snuggli.

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

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

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

The Lake

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

Two Old Men

When I go these days I really have to go.

I was driving the River Road where Highland ends.

I parked the car and danced behind a wall to find relief,
just as an older man from the high-rise crossed the street
to take his evening walk.

As I stepped out from behind the wall we nearly collided.

"Good Christ," he shouted, grabbing his chest.

"I thought you were about to attack me."

"No, no," I said. "I was just taking a leak."

"I had heart surgery just a few weeks ago," the old man said.

"I wasn't going to kill you," I said. "I just had to go."

Big Leg Girl

Waiting at the intersection, Max noticed a girl, perhaps 16, stumbling across the street.

“You know,” he said, “I have never understood why people with obvious weight problems don’t simply exercise and eat less.”

“Maybe she’s got mental problems,” Perry said. “Maybe she is depressed. Maybe she has a circulatory disorder.

“Maybe she’s lived her whole life in foster homes. Maybe she was a victim of sexual abuse, or was bullied in school.”

Max turned to Perry.

“Oh, you’re so compassionate.”

Tony DiNapoli

Tony worked the graveyard shift with me at Southern New England Typesetting, in Hammond, Connecticut. We were proofreaders. This was in 1980.

If you have worked the graveyard shift -- anywhere, from a taxi company to a security outfit -- you know it attracts weird people. We were all shipwrecked, obsessive, on the lam.

And then there was Tony DiNapoli, maybe 65, without lines on his face, a man incapable of saying one negative thing. He spoke in a yearning, soft voice. We were unaware of him ever actually doing a good thing, like delivering meals on wheels. But he had this monk-like demeanor.

Tony was a good son, a mama's man, still living with her, and rushing home at 7 AM for the scrambled eggs she fixed for him.

He wore prescription glasses he got from a tray of used glasses at Volunteers for America. Dead people's glasses. He plucked a pair from a big tangled pile, and somehow they were good enough for him to read small-print galleys by.

He was a child in some way, intelligent enough but not very well informed. He walked a mile to work every day, even in icy weather. He didn't know good politics from bad politics. Everyone was doing his best, in his view. He was amazed by ordinary things, like a patch of marigolds he saw encircling a telephone pole just outside the door, or how odd it was that electricity worked.

He always had a good word for everyone, even Walter, the scowling shift foreman who dumped new galleys in our wire basket every few minutes. The rest of us shot Walter nasty looks. Tony said, "Thank you, Walter. I'm just about finished with the last batch!" And he smiled like he had just won the Lotto.

A running gag of the rest of us was to make fun of his nearly daily observation about a clerk at the 7-Eleven on Hartford Avenue or some other place. Every day he would stop to buy some packaged sweet, a granola bar or Ho-Ho. And he told us about it every night, in excruciating detail. And it was always the same story:

“It was a young woman I told you about. Her name badge said Cara. I think she might be Puerto Rican. She had curly hair and dimples on her cheeks. And when I handed her my money, she gave me the biggest smile.”

Oh, we teased him about the crushes he had on convenience store clerks. They always had the biggest smile. “Like roses -- like a bouquet of roses.” The other old proofreaders teased him the most. Tony was living in a dream world. They weren’t mean, but there was something about his sunny, pathetic outlook, and the dead person’s spectacles attached to his face that people just wanted to hurt, just a little bit, to let him know what a freak he was compared to their wonderful third-shift lives.

I say this because it is 37 years later, and I just bought a cup of coffee at Super America, and a cup of low-cal raspberry yogurt. And as I slid my credit card through the reader, I looked up at the girl at the cash register. She was 19, not a ravishing beauty, but strong somehow, working in this tough joint through the wee hours. She had dyed red hair, and wore a green nose-thingie, and she gave me the biggest smile.

Neighborhood Watch Meeting

We gathered to discuss unruly behavior at the student house.

“They wake me up in the dead of night, slamming their car doors,” said Fred Myers. “I can’t get back to sleep.”

“They sit up on their porch roof and smoke reefer and laugh,” said Joe Peebles.

“Martha Peterson saw two young men urinating on her hedge,” a woman said. She whispered the word urinating.

“I found this used condom on the sidewalk the night of Homecoming,” the widower in the gray house said. He drew a Ziplock bag from his jacket pocket, and there was the matted, used thing.

“Dear God,” said Mrs. Graves, of the red brick house with the climbing ivy and award-winning roses.

That Morning in Vienna

You may know that I am zero degrees of separation from Charles Manson. I met him, I'm fairly sure, in Twenty-Nine Palms, California, in the Mojave Desert, in 1968. I'm not one hundred percent sure because it's not like he showed me his ID – I just remembered the face later, when he became famous.

But this story from the 1970s may be wilder than that one. I am one degree of separation from Adolf Hitler.

The story involves a prop comedian came on named Alan Brookins-Brown, about 65. Brookins-Brown performs in the '70s with a different object every night, like a length of PVC pipe, which he improvises a lesson around. The act is both silly and brilliant.

After he finishes, my friend Barry invites him to have dessert with us. Alan is hungry but not talked out, by a long shot.

"Alan, tell Mike about the Anschluss."

"Oh, yes, my meeting with Hitler."

Brookins-Brown told a story he had told a thousand times. "I'm British, you know, and as a child I was a prodigy violinist. I was invited to perform recitals and do pieces with various orchestras in Europe. Many people in the business looked at me being the next really big thing -- maybe.

"So I was performing with the Vienna Philharmonic in March of 1938, under Maestro Clemens Krause. I was nine years old. I traveled with my mother, but this one morning I got away from her, and began running through the Hotel Imperial. I was cooped up the whole day before, practicing, and I wanted to let loose. This restlessness was unusual in a concert violinist,

"I found an empty elevator car, and began pushing all the buttons. The car went all the way up to the sixth floor, slowly, and then all the way to the basement, one floor at a time. When

I got halfway down, I pushed all the buttons again. It was an agony of slowness!

“What I did not know was that our hotel was the hotel chosen for the president of Austria to welcome Chancellor Hitler, on that very day, and that the Fuhrer’s entire entourage, along with Austrian cabinet members, were waiting in the lobby on the first floor for the elevator to take them to the balcony on the third floor, where Hitler would deliver an address to throngs of people.

“A mob of journalists were queuing with Hitler and the other dignitaries, all of them waiting for the elevator door to open. The diplomats were swallowing hard, worrying that Hitler would perceive the elevator’s erratic operation as a joke at his expense – an incident of national mischief, and who knows what might happen then.

“Finally I landed on the first floor, and the scissor gate swung open and I looked up at the gleaming black leather longcoat of Herr Hitler, arms folded and a look of considerable vexation on his features.

“I knew who he was. I began to cry. Hitler’s eyes were twitching. He was clearly furious at my behavior, and wished he could squash me like he would eventually squash the entire world. He looked like he desperately needed to do exactly that, squash me like a snail.

“But he couldn’t do that, surrounded by statesmen, officers, and members of the press. Instead he smiled and I thought, ‘He doesn’t look like Chalice Chaplin, really. He reminds me more of Oliver Hardy. Hitler was an evil Oliver Hardy.’”

“In a sudden motion, Hitler swept me up in his arms and kissed the tears from my cheeks, and turned and laughed for the photographers, who snapped us.

“I saw Adolph Hitler laugh,” said Alan Brookins-Brown. “He held me in his arms and he laughed.”

The story was over. But I needed to know more. “So—why are you an improv comedian in Minneapolis?”

“Ah,” he said, “the music was too much for me. I was already tiring of it, and the constant work and need for perfection. And something about looking up close into Hitler’s eyes -- the hunger I saw there, and the miserableness -- made me think, playing the violin isn’t everything. I didn’t need to conquer the world.

“And I’ll tell you something else. Staring into Hitler’s eyes, and living to tell the tale, I started to think life was too wonderful to work so hard. I am a dishwasher now, for Dudley. I love the sink and the sound of people laughing. I have a cat.

“I am happy. Hitler is not.”

Frowning Woman On Bus Bench

And in her arm
a hardback book
with the title
'Misgivings.'

Addict

In the clinic waiting room.

A guy enters on his mother's arm.

She is the sick one, but he looks bad –
hollow-eyed, hostile, multiple tattoos –
you can see the bullets under his skin.

While he stares emptily at the furniture
she keeps nudging him
and making funny remarks.

At one point she says, "I've got a good idea,"
leans over and whispers something in his ear.
The man blushes and smiles,
and turns to look at his mother
with unimaginable softness.

Bridge Moving Upriver

The first barge of spring comes round the bend, and it surprises.

It's not a set of empty barges to fill with gravel or sand.

It's a set of eight strapped barges pushed by a tug,

and visible across the barges are the spans for a new bridge

to replace the bridge on I-35 that fell last August

and sent cars tumbling, killing 13 and injuring 145.

Over eighty 100-foot black I-bars of steel, a dozen premade spans,

giant tires to buffer them against pylons, compressors

and an entire steel staircase in one welded piece

you could sink in place and start climbing.

These bars are so large they can't fit on flatbeds,

too heavy to be flown in by helicopter, you can ship them by train

but then what do you do?

You watch the barges shudder and smack against each new ripple,

It is upstream every inch, urged on by an engine a fraction their size,

and the S-curve of the river's resistance

to this oncoming expedition with whistles whooshing,

black smoke showing the engine's labor,

and on the prow the proud name Minneapolis.

The Mountain with Low Self-Esteem

There was a mountain out west who did not feel good about himself.

Oh sure, he was tall. But there were lots taller ones. He was snow-capped. But only barely.

He had the sun in the morning and the moon at night. But criminy, who doesn't?

Something was missing, and it caused him to slump. Sometimes he heaved a huge sigh, and giant rocks would tumble down his sides and shower station wagons and tour buses.

What did he care. He was a mountain.

The other mountains were not much help. 'There's one mountain that will never amount to a hill of beans,' one said.

'If I had an attitude like that, I think I would plateau out,' said another.

What was the mountain's problem exactly? Darned if we know. But it laid him low, or as low as a 7,482 foot high object could be laid.

One day the wise hootie-owl alit on his peak. 'You know,' the owl said, 'you could use a hobby, to take your mind off things. Have you considered taking up forestry, or mining?'

But the mountain was in no mood for a pep talk.

'Oh, blow it out your beak, hootie owl,' he said and scowled, causing a landslide on his north slope.

One day the mountain felt an itch on its nose. Well, it wasn't a nose exactly. It was more of a crag. But you get the idea. What the itch was, was a human child, splashing under a waterfall.

'Who dares to splash under my waterfall?' the mountain bellowed. Why, I'll erupt, that's what I'll do. I'll spew hot lava all over your shoes!

But the child was no idiot. 'You're not a volcano, silly,' the child said. 'You're just a regular mountain.'

The mountain simmered at this upbraiding. Where did this human child get off addressing him in such a fashion?

'Nevertheless,' the child continued, 'I think you're very beautiful, and the air surrounding you is fresh and wonderful, and I love the streams splashing down your sides.'

'Oh, right!' the mountain replied, for he was not good at taking compliments.

'Seriously,' said the child. 'In my home state, you would be the greatest thing anywhere!'

'And what state is that?' the mountain asked.

'Minnesota,' the child replied.

'Ah, what's Minnesota like? Like this?'

'No, it's flat as a pancake. You'd be a tremendous hit there.'

After the child left, skipping, the mountain pondered his options. 'A mountain in Minnesota -- even a relatively stumpy mountain like myself -- could do very well indeed.'

So when the first rays of sunshine alit on his snow-capped dome, using all his will and determination, the mountain began the slow migration to Minnesota. It wasn't easy. The mountain calculated that it was moving at approximately the rate of a sixteenth of an inch per year. 'Minnesota, here I come!' he said.

But climate change came to his assistance. A wind system out of the Rockies combined with huge packs of F1 tornadoes, combined with the crash of an enormous asteroid outside Omaha to nudge him across the Minnesota state line in a mere four years.

And oh, the welcome the mountain received the next morning! Instead of boarding their buses for school, all the children rushed to climb the mountain. They climbed in the trees and splashed in the streams. They jumped from rock to rock, and gathered snow in their hands in the middle of July.

They saw eagles soaring and hummingbirds darting back and forth. They saw bear cubs playing and pumas ready to pounce.

'Yahh! ' said the kids, as they ran from the pumas.

Minnesota would never be the same. This was bigger than the Mall of America.

Adults caught on as well. Having a mountain good for business and a stimulus to the economy. Even if the mountain was sitting right where the high school used to be.

Adults soon caught on as well. Having a mountain in town was going to be good for business and good for the economy. Even if it was sitting right where the high school used to be.

1999

McCartney at 100

They wheel him out to the balcony to blow out a single candle on the coconut cake.

His grandchildren and great-grandchildren sing to him and applaud.

They open his present for him: an old black Beatle wig from the days, still in its shrinkwrap.

He nods as the nurse positions it on his bald, mottled head.

With his drooping eyes, the wig and custard face, he could pass for a chimpanzee child.

The old man looks out at the orchard surrounding the estate.

The offspring grin. They are glad he doesn't live in a home.

Here he has full time care around the clock. All the beautiful ones are gone.

Van and Joni and Mick and Neil. Ringo. He got a card from Iggy today -- the only other one.

Ten-year-old Maeve pushes a ukulele into his hands.

Trembling he finds the frets and manages a pair of words.
Missing. Kissing.

He looks up at them all, so prosperous and glad.

Sure, he lost a lot, but was there ever a more fortunate man?

But he was the one who worried about the future. We can't keep doing this, he said.

Let's change our name. Let's go up on the roof. Let's motor through Scotland.

Something bad would happen unless measures were adopted and carried out.

And then the words are there, the fingers find the strings.

I'll pretend that I'm kissing the lips I am missing. And I'll send all my loving to you.

Couple Spotted Along Fairview Avenue

Walking past the cafe before dawn,
the young couple are swinging their held hands.
They seem ecstatic and -- uncool.
He steps behind her and starts to massage her shoulders
As they are walking, then figures, the hell with that
and hugs her around the middle, hands on her breasts.
Clearly, he is grateful that she has shown him her nakedness.
This was the greatest night of his life.
For her part, she walks in a skip step,
leaping at one point to swat the awning valance.
The look on her face is one of joyful accomplishment.
This boy adores her and she was equal to the challenge.
She doesn't look at him directly,
but she grins as she takes long strides down the sidewalk,
confident in her power.

2013

Groom

He is bashful, with a grin of self-deprecation,
like who am I to have his own day.

All his friends came, and the joke is that George
found someone to marry him.

She is satisfied, it is her biggest day
and she has escaped her crazy mother
and crazy family
to start a new one herself.

The world sucks, he is out of work,
and she's stuck on a third-shift restaurant crew.
But when it's time for the newlyweds to dance,
they stagger through a waltz,
one foot seeking to avoid the other,
and they look into one another's eyes,
and his shoulders shake and he sobs.

At the Ball Park

Ball Day at the old ball park
and before the game Lyman Bostock
throws out a couple dozen baseballs

and all us fans stand on our seats
and reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes everyone cheers.

Even the kids stop scouting for vendors
and ice cream in a cup for a minute.
And when the vendor does come by
he stands in everyone's view.

So we watch him instead,
pouring two bottles of beer at a time,
holding his dollars in his teeth.

1978

In a Hotel Lounge Outside Duluth

The singer's message: I am only a boy
And my songs and my fiddle
My only true friends.

But the woman banging her glass
On the formica bartop is receiving
Transmissions of life in the wild,

She envisions geese lifting
From a fern-bog in the peninsula
Of a state she has never visited.

Between numbers she buys him a beer
And for a moment there is no Ramada Inn:
Young man, I want to kiss you everywhere.

But he clings to character, stammers
His Thank you Ma'am but home's a distance,
And the roads up Moorhead way are slick.

To no avail. She's deaf. Changing.
Already she's a brute brown bear
In the northerly wood,

Already enjoying the scratch
She knows comes next on her rump
On the broken spruce branches.

Centipede On Chicken Curry

Fork and knife to left and right
But before digging in I see
Dancing like a deity on unpolished rice
Two dozen legs waving at me.

In Libya kids pluck centipedes larger
Than this one by far from holes
In the sand and swallow them armored
And wriggling, whole,

But that's not our way here in Brewster,
Here we give our plates a push
And pray our appetites return
In time for eggs and toast.

Little guest, I see you twirling
On my buttered rice like Krishna --
An envoy from the Sixth Kingdom doing
The jitterbug on my dinner.

At The Bulkhead

We asked the bus driver, just across from us,
if he ever thought about the danger
of all those miles rolled up,
the sleepy eyes, the open road,
the oncoming cars.
He laughed and said,
"No, I'm at peace with all that,"
and adjusted his visor.
And you and I looked at one another,
wishing we had not asked.

Gruchow on The Overbreeding of the Broad Breasted White, with an Aside About Nelson Rockefeller

Is it true what they say about turkeys drowning in rain?

I have seen the birds look up when it starts to rain, he says. It is like they are uncertain what rain is.

If it is a heavy rain, you may find a few dead in the morning.

If it is a gulley-washer, it will look like a massacre took place.

That's in the summer. I saw worse in winter.

The farmer puts light bulbs in the coops, to keep the birds from freezing. The birds crowd around for warmth. One or two will be

actually touching the hot glass, and will burn and die. The remaining birds then climb under the dead ones to get closer to the heat. Then they suffocate or burn.

On a really cold night, as many as a hundred desperate birds will force their way under the dead to take their place against the bulb.

In the morning, the farmer finds his work of a year frozen in a heap.

Paul told me he had the worst job any man ever had – turkey desemenation, at a farm near Montevideo.

Does that mean --?

Yes, Paul says. You sit them in your lap, and you jack them off.

Using a machine?

We didn't have one.

Just your fingers?

Just my fingers.

They let you do that?

They look forward to it, Mike, like a soldier in a whorehouse.

Did you wear gloves?

Yes.

What did they do?

Stared off into space mostly. A few looked at me – thankfully I guess.

Tell me about Nelson Rockefeller.

It was 1970. Governor Rockefeller was invited to be grand marshal of the Turkey Day Parade down Main Street.

Everyone told him not to, but he insisted on wearing a long hounds-tooth overcoat as he rode through in his limo. He had it in his head that Minnesota was a cold place, even though this was early September.

One guy, standing on the curb in front of the courthouse, took one look at the overdressed governor and said, "I'm glad I didn't vote for that turkey."

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 woman 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."

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.

1976

The Woman in Seat 20C

Sometimes in the
periphery of the eye
you see one.

Someone who knows
the way that
things are.

You know them by
the rings around
their eyes --

paranoid,
hostile,
broken-hearted,
they are the experts
on the way
things are.

You want to cup
her cheek in
your palm
and say I know,
I know, isn't
it awful.

2010

The Ridge Road

Robbie let go of the wheel on the turn
and Lana sailed like a poodle through a hoop
through the windshield, shrinking to a dot,
broken limbs propelling into the dark.
The police scraped Robbie together.
He was only able to say, "Where is Lana?"
But the policeman shook his head.
There was no one else in the car, he said.
Robbie woke several times in the hospital
and grabbed his brother Larry by the shirt.
She was with me, was all he said,
before slipping back into morphine.
Around dawn Larry drove out on the ridge
and found the Chevy's skidmarks on the road.
He calculated the direction a person would fly
if the car pitched headlong into the ditch
and set out walking the cornfield rows.
Around 9 AM he found her in the stalks,
about eighty feet from the point of impact,
tangled up, bloodied, open mouth full of dirt.
Two months she lay in a coma at home,
making intermittent yelps in her dreams,
no one sure she was home or had gone.
On the 66th day she sat upright and stared

goggle-eyed at the casts encasing her.

“Oh my gosh,” she cried, “what have I done?”

“You missed a lot of work,” said her dad.

The Lazarus Cheese, A Fromager's Tale

"We milk the sheep and stir the milk
and when it hardens place it in the cave.
The fungi are drawn to dark moisture,
and swarm over the great white wheels,
and cover them with a leathery skin.
But the cheese is so warm it radiates its sunshine
deep in the darkness and the fungi then seep into the light.
Then the spiders descend and they are hungry for the fruit.
They lay their eggs around the wheel like a drapery to protect it.
After five years we remember there is cheese down there
deep within the cave and we fetch it wrapped in cloth.
It is like a monster made of monsters and we cut it open
and it breathes, from its very depths it gasps
and exudes its bouquet."
"But it is so sweet," I say, "So delicious!"
"Yes," said the fromager -- but for five black years it was death!"

2005

The Spirits of Paul and Joanne

It is said that on a stormy night
when a traveler is most in need
of a helping hand they are out there in their Volvo,
idling, extra gas and jumper cables at the ready.

Few are the motorists who drive
the length of the Connecticut Turnpike
without receiving road assistance
from the spirits of Paul and Joanne.

She waits in your car with you,
chatting about the weather,
blushing at your compliments,
coupons for popcorn and salad oil
spilling from the glove compartment.

He is immediately under your hood,
blue eyes blinking away the damp,
righting the wrong connections.

Joanne has a plate of fresh brownies,
Paul a cable sweater to warm you up.

To be of use, that is all they want,
atonement in the grease and gravel

and lesser people's luck.

This simplicity saved them from fame in life.
Your cracked distributor cap outweighs
every glory they have known.

And when the emergency has been resolved,
you wave goodbye and they smile

through clutched raincoats and return to their car
to serve the next living soul in need of help.

Old Stone's Reward

Stone was a mean old man, whole town of Kinbrae knew
that for entertainment he used to take pot shots at his dog,
a good old girl deserving better.

One day Stone was said to have got bad news from
Montevideo,

folks saw him storm out the post office, kicking dust, spitting on
the sidewalk

and cussing out the Goosetown Savings & Loan.

Mr. Miller, the barber, said Stone purchased a package of Illinois
whiskey

and that was what they found later on, a broken pint bottle
by the pump house well that'd just gone dry.

Stone must have hauled his rifle down where it hung by the
stove

and stomped out to the yard with a box of fresh shells,
loaded and reloaded, pumped lead into the milkshed wall
and cackled and gnashed his nasty teeth.

Yellow tears skittered down his dry cheeks as the dark deed
formed in his mind,

the notion of completing the thing for once and for all,
and he whistled Betty to heel at his feet.

And she sidled, shivering, up and imploringly searched for the
better nature

she sometimes witnessed behind his red eyes

as he pulled two sticks of dynamite from a toolbin and tied
them to the poor bitch's tail,

lit the long fuse, smacked her hind end and sat down on the
hole
and watched through the open outhouse door as the dog took
off yelping
straight through the kitchen doorway and dove under the
master's brasspost bed
with the eiderdown comforter pulled down in after her.
No no no no, cried Stone, and he screamed with all his saw-
toothed might
with the indignation of a man so wronged by creation and
perverted
by willful beasts like a dog so dumb she couldn't even get blown
up right,
and he screeched her name and called her forth and
condemned her disloyalty
as the least-best friend a most-cursed man might have,
a churlish cur who fought his dominion from the day she was
whelped,
who skipped naps thinking up ways to undo him, him, him
who now wailed like a ghost to get out, get out, get out, get out
of my pine-board, tar-paper, china platter house God damn
your four-legged soul.
And Betty, hearing his breakdown without and imagining herself
the object
of some grand reprieve at the hands of this fiery and possibly
lovable
if you really undertook to know him, but until then deeply
disliked failure of a man

and imagining moreover her lifelong ordeal at those knotted
hands
to be miraculously over and herself forgiven of the unforgivable
crime
of having been his dog, dashed happily down the creekstone
steps
and full tilt and with her master's heartfelt cries of no no no no
no
echoing across the furrowed glade leaped gladly into his awe-
crossed arms
and the two best friends saw eye to eye, each bade goodbye,
and left Kinbrae together.

1976

Pack Up Your Sorrows

Richard Fariña called to us saying,

If somehow you could pack up your sorrows and send them all to me,

you would lose them, I know how to use them ... and so on.

And my callback, 45 years since he flipped over the handlebars, breaking his neck, is what a kind offer that was.

We will *lose* them. He knows how to *use* them.

But what did that mean? What use could our sorrows be put to?

I lie awake nights pondering this mystery.

He did not promise to store them in a mountain where they no longer cause pain.

He did not refashion them into something useful, like spatulas or shinguards or patio furniture.

He did not break them down chemically until the active ingredients become inert.

He did not monetize them and direct the proceeds toward feeding the hungry,

or fresh bandages for those torn apart by war.

Richard Fariña, I don't think you were being figurative.

You had a plan you never got to share.

Instead you sprang off the cycle and into the barbwire,

Like a spiderweb in the wind,

and your money and receipts spilled out of your pockets and into a puddle.

You had seen mountains climb down from the mountains,

You saw the seas see-saw, you saw giants roam the plains in
search of corn.

You knew how to reprocess the sorrows of the world.

You knew the secret, it was in the spiral notebook.

Instead you added to them, chrome wheel spinning in the
morning air.

2014

Staples

What else fits together the way they do --
5000 to a box, arranged in sticks 150 long,
and then the sticks are nested into one another.

Now that's packaging.

A small box of staples would make a good weapon,
like brass knuckles, because of its heft but you could only use it
once,

because the glued-together sticks would all come apart,
not into a haystack of individual miniature croquet wickets,
but just come apart often enough that the purity of the
formation

would be wrecked and if you put them in a stapler and went to
town

the chances of one misfiring at some point are pretty good,
and it would get caught in the teeth of the cheap chrome
mouth,

and you would need a toothpick or something to pry it loose,
and a few shots over the bow to clear the stapler's throat
and get it working again -- an impressive technology.

But if you put this box of staples away, in a drawer or on a shelf,
forget about it, because those things are gone.

1991

Hyperactive Landlord

Mr Hoveland, don't go out in the dead of night to buy fuses.

You are too brave, too dedicated to your work.

Tenants need peace from so much caretaking,

We need time to not be helped.

That rasping sound just now,

That sounds like someone sharpening an axe
on a turning stone?

It's just Mr Hoveland, at four in the morning,
shoveling an eighth-inch of snow from the drive.

1974

At The Koin-O-Kleen on Chicago Avenue

The enormous man on the sorting table,
possibly Samoan, and naked to the waist,
sips a can of Mr. Pibb through a straw.
Tattooed on his full right tit is the word SWEET,
on his left the word SOUR.

1979

Two Single Mothers At the Anchorage Airport

One tows three daughters, holding hands in a line,
to the counter.

All four are beautiful, but the oldest,
perhaps 13, is different.

She walks flatfooted, open-mouthed,
pulling at her mom.

But when she reaches the check-in,
she cocks her head and moans.

The mother shows zero embarrassment,
she does not hiss harsh words.

She holds her daughter back,
with dignity and love.

The other mother might weigh 85 pounds,
and her son, 12, glances at the other passengers
with a hostile scowl.

There is no mercy in his eyes.

He too is small, a twig from her branch,
and you can see he will never be big
so he is learning to be a tough guy instead.

But now it's time for breakfast,
and the twig-woman takes him by the hand
and leads him off to McDonalds,

and the tough customer looks up at her
and beams.

2010

The Reading of Jack Kerouac's Will

Surprise surprise, the bum on the road is worth \$20 million.

Him with 91 bucks in his checking account at the hour of death.

So far at the end he couldn't find a paperback publisher for his final book.

Unsure what value to put on his estate, the probate court put it at a single dollar.

But now the heirs are wrangling over the estate,
who gets the royalties, who owns the rights to manuscripts,
diaries, and all those thousands of letters.

One will after another is tossed out by the court.

Family members sneak off to sell stuff of his they stole.

A Remington typewriter. An edition of Goethe.

Some cufflinks given him at graduation.

Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a tattered trenchcoat.

The owner of the Indianapolis Colts bid \$2.3 million
for the original teletype roll he wrote On The Road on.

Give it up, family, who never even knew the man.

He doesn't belong to the atoms and elements.

He doesn't belong to the oceans and mountains.

He doesn't belong to a nation or language
and he certainly doesn't belong to you.

"For I will write in my will," he vowed while alive, "Quote,
I regret I was not able to love money more."

NOBODY owns Jack Kerouac.

2010

The New Yorker

The breath of the woman crouched in a blanket
in the gray slush flutes about her like a dying fire.
She is wet and cold and has no place to go,
and it is only early December.
Citizens stride by her, and their faces pronounce their opinions.
Young professionals look everywhere but at her.
The state of the city is going to hell.
Even the red hot vendor steers around her filthy yellow mittens,
He is doing brisk business in the snow.
You want to stand the woman up, slap the sleet
from her hair and send her on some invisible errand,
put her to work on a phone bank or streetcorner,
passing out coupons for gyros sandwiches,
earning a few dollars, anything but this public suffering,
so deadly and so close to Christmas.
But God has made her incompetent and us indifferent,
except for one woman, in a camel hair hat,
who passes, stops, fiddles with her pocketbook,
tiptoes back and places a five in the paper cup.

2000

Minnesota State Fair

I wait outside the Port a Potty for the 7-year-old boy
inside to finish, and when I go in, there is boy pee everywhere.
It is like the first few moments following the monsoon.
It is a 360 degree bombardment, nothing was spared.
I used to be a boy, I know they have a powerful stream
but even standing up they are so close to the seat,
you would think they could aim for a better result.
Or maybe this is intentional, a kind of declaration.
Powerless in the greater world, they let loose their stream
behind the pulled latch, grim determination on their pussies.
I daub the area with toilet paper and gingerly lower myself
onto the damp, like a sad clown making way for the next act.

2008

Biker Bob Canizzaro's Living Room Decor, 1977

Ignore the Iron Crosses and posters of Nuremburg
And leather-breasted blondes on naked Harleys.
But drink in the tapestry tacked up behind the empties.
It might be a tribute to baked potatoes clad in aluminum foil
But it isn't, it's night-time on an arid beach,
And the two astronaut buddies walk hand in hand
In the white light from earth --
Brushed on black velvet, hung next to the platter of Bobby and
JFK.

1977

Pandit

The vocational counselor in Delhi apologized
for giving bad advice:

"I know now not every young Brahmin with money is wise."

Many years later, Pandit's swami, glancing about

his townhouse in St. Anthony Falls,

Shook his head. "Pandit-ji," he said,

"your instincts are bad enough,

but your lifestyle is one I cannot agree with."

His furnishings in the Danish cherrywood style,

his checks in the popular Scenic Wilderness design,

the Rockies, Mojave, Maine lighthouse and drive-thru Sequoia.

Pandit's crossing occurred one evening in the spring of 1973.

He had chanted a special Intention for two nights and a day,

and now his skin began to evanesce,

and a glow like radium suffused his features

and the bones of his hands and feet shone

in the rice-paper silhouette like moonlit twigs.

Suddenly Swami barges in, unplugs the lava-lamp

and shakes Pandit by the shoulders.

"Wake up, Balbir, you disgrace to your caste.

When will you cease all this fidgeting?"

Four years of doctrine and contemplation

and Swami Mukhtaranda throws up his hands.

"Tell me, Pandit, have you considered a alternate career,

such as Dentistry?

People get toothaches, you could ease their awful pain.

We have been Discussing your case

at Himalayan Central in the Loop.

Pandit-ji, we've arrived at a decision -- it's just not working out."

Pandit breaks down on the other end.

"But what of my chapel, with the acoustic paneling

and foam carpet pads ? What of the rent,

my three skinny daughters, the Irish setter,

the Triumph Roadster?

Give me one more chance, I promise business will boom."

Swami relents: "Just thank God you're in Minneapolis

where you can't hurt anyone."

Pandit attends continuing education courses

in business management at the university convention center,

learns the Seven Words to Seal a Sale,

prints meditation coupons in the back pages

of the Sunday TV section.

Hatha enrollments begin to swell,

and a course in breathing for data processors

draws overflow crowds, registered nurses from around the city

salute the sun from every angle,

suburban gardeners no longer fret

about scaly-worm and red-ear mites.

Swami Writes: "I am man enough to admit I was wrong.

You have rounded into some kind of Pandit!

Christmas is out, we've been booked at Vail since Memorial Day."

Pandit spawns a yogi tummy, bolstered by his taste for Hostess Snowballs.

The wisdom of the East is born again, midwestern.

"Shift gears with your one min, retain the other for the clutch."

He hires so many assistant pandits, he doesn't know
which one smokes Luckys

out by the gazebo between lectures on the holy wind within.

But Sunday mornings while the Christians pray, Pandit
snaps on snorkel and weighted boots, and drifts
the tangled floor of Lake Calhoun.

"On surface," he tells his class on scuba yoga,

"we encounter the brunt of life's agitations,
those waves and splashes that torment the honest heart.

But when we go below we feel this unlikeliest thing,
the tranquil wet embrace of God."

He pads through the mud, brushes aside long ropes of alga.

I Am I, he inhales, Thou art Thou, he exhales,
and here in this constant kiss of life is the successful career
of one soldier of Shiva in these United States!

1978

Truck Stop

The older man in the leather vest
Walks with the gait of a gunfighter
Toward the men's room, a gallon bottle
Of pink windshield wash
In one hand and a bag full of cigarettes
And Hostess Snow-Balls in the other.
He is compact and erect, and his mustache
Is trim despite hours on the road.
His white-haired woman, taking smaller steps,
Follows close behind, eyebrows penciled
in an 'I will follow you anywhere' arc,
Her frame a little dumpy from the miles
She has kept his company, but you can see
There was a time when she was wonderful.
Is he a good man? You can't tell. But you admire
The seriousness he girds himself in.
Like the last sworn knight in a useless world
Ambling past the Sega Strike Fighter
And the 'For Your Safety' condom dispensary,
Past the claw-fetching crane game and the
Lip-biting girl eying the Tickle Me Elmo
embedded in the heap.

2010

Cycling

I love being able to climb a hill
I didn't think I could
and the look on the motorist's face
when I come to a stop and stop
hang in there say the telephone poles
the shiny storefronts have your back
death may toot its grim ocarina
but see the light step
through the trees!

2004

Thanksgiving at Glacier National Park

It is said that area tribesmen don't drive the Highway to the Sun.

They are still sore at being cheated out of their mountains.

They weren't real estate lawyers, they thought the men from the government

were offering money for mining rights.

So they were selling the right to mine and haul away some precious rocks.

They were shocked to be evicted from their sacred lands.

2014

Bill and Helen Smith

Not many strangers found my folks' saloon on Lake Road
but we had many regulars who stopped by every day or so
for drinks and dinner.

Bill and Helen Smith were in their late fifties.

Helen was a homemaker. Bill, who was completely blind,
was a locksmith operating out of his garage.

I didn't know them well, but they were kind to an 11-year-old,
They loved my mother, and that was enough.

Bill and Helen stopped in for the Friday night fish fry.

I had breaded the perch earlier that day, and it was me
who set their plates on the table, and filled their cups of coffee,
and picked up the \$1 tip, a lot in those days.

Heading home, an oncoming car drove over
the speedcaps on Hwy 6 & 2

and smashed headfirst into the car Helen was driving
-- there were no seatbelts back then --

but Helen did not die, because Bill, in his final act as a man,
sensed the oncoming crash

and reached over to insert himself between Helen
and the wheel,

and he died that way, crushed, against her body.

The other car was driven by our coffee salesman,
who was drunk, and had to keep coming into our place
for years afterward, because he had years invested

in the territory,
and people liked Bill and Helen Smith,
but they liked their Van Rooy Coffee, too.

On a Train Rolling Out of Berea

I take a seat in the middle of the car, and open my copy of Robert Frost. Within moments I hear a strange, crackling voice behind me.

"I see you," a voice says, in a cruel, insinuating way. "I see you. I see you. I know you."

I freeze, reluctant to turn around and see who my accuser is.

Then I hear the voice again: "Oh, you think you're so lovable. So lovable. You're so special."

I'm rattled. I pretend to return to my Frost, but who am I kidding? There is probably some kind of psycho back there -- some kind of crazy seer who cuts to the heart of people on public transportation. I don't dare look.

"You must be some kind of poet. You're so special."

And here's the thing -- a part of me does feel that way at times. I do want the whole world to love and admire me. And sometimes I egg them on, being pleasant, hoping they will like me back. You know, asking for it.

"Yes, you're just God's little treasure, aren't you?" she asks now in a childlike voice. "God's little treasure."

Then I think, No, that's not fair! I'm just a guy like anyone else. Sure, I read poetry on the RTA, but it's just because reading settles me on trips. And poems are just a page or so in length. You can flip around.

O spirit, if that's what you are -- Can't you see -- can't you sympathize with me just the tiniest bit?

I'm just struggling to make my way through life, hoping to avoid the worst kinds of pain.

Why can't you cut me just a little bit of slack?

I turn in my seat to rebut her, but all I see is an odd old woman with a birdcage in her lap, holding a wrinkled knuckle out to a pretty green parrot.

Black Forest Fudge Cake with Schicksalsschlage

Excerpted from The Bavarian Oratorio

So moist it collapses on itself,
You have to hold it to the serving knife
With the tip of one clean finger

And even then it loses its shape,
It is caught like quicksand in its own firm pudding
And the whipped cream, and the brilliant cherries

Not long ago we raised glasses in triumph
Atop the eagle's roost and dove into this treat
As we dove into the adjoining lands

It was the dessert of triumph,
And the champagne evanesced, and the beer
Barrels emptied and the tubas blew

And the ruddy people linked arms
Like joyful sausages dangling
And they danced to October's bright light

The same ones would be awakened in the night

And be trucked to the outskirts of town
To clamber through the lime and fumes

And acknowledge what they had done
Now they are crying, the cake in the earth
that was once so delicious, the cherries

So plump and so red, we did not know,
we could not know,
who could ever have known such a thing

I saw that look of shame on my friend Jurgen's face,
Jurgen who was born after the war,
Jurgen who must live with this association,

But still keeps those pictures atop his piano,
Of Aunt Ursula and Uncle Leo having a laugh,
It is Christmas and all are enjoying

This chocolate cake impaled upon the fork,
A cake so moist it can't have been baked,
This is the cake our ancestors ate

So perfect with honeyed hot coffee

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 continued to sing as long as he lived.

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

And money will stop being everything

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
Because even the hedge managers are looking out their
windows
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.

2011

Fish Naked

In the third floor clinic in the Wangenstein Building at the university, a woman with Parkinson's is raising her foot a few inches and slamming it down, over and over, into the pedal of her wheelchair. It is clear the foot is doing it, not her. She is about 80, and sick, and in her sickness she spins the chair around and topples a large oxygen cylinder onto its side, and it rolls away across the waiting room corridor, snapping breathing tubes loose and dragging them after it.

A man with spik black hair who had been sitting near her goes to help. It's clear he is a stranger, just another patient in the waiting room. He is wearing a burnoose, like Little Steven, and he has an aggressive air about him. If I saw him on the street, I think I would avoid him.

He stops the gas tank from tripping nurses and patients and drags it back to the woman in the chair. He mumbles to her about getting fixed right up. She mumbles back, but beats him on the wrist with her fist to tell him thank you.

He tries to reattach the oversized tank but it just doesn't match up to the chair. A nurse arrives with a portable pack which loops neatly over the back of the chair. The man kneels by the woman, and says, "I'm right here if you need help."

He stands and returns to his seat, the eyes in her shaking head fixed upon him. When he sits I can read his t-shirt. It says FISH NAKED.

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