LET'S GET LOST IN THE FOREST

mike finley

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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.

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."

Siamese Twins at the Ohio State Fair

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

In 1965 by 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, was chewing gum

Bob and I tumbled down the out ramp. We were such sarcastic, opinionated boys. But we did not speak again for twenty five minutes.

When I Dash Off a Poem

I throw down the ballpoint and say, Take that! You ignorant unaware world, you thought you were complete but I have added to you. I have done my insolent dance around your staid sombrero. I snap my fingers over my shoulder and say Take that, you who thought we were done.

Applause for Crow

I believe you are the blackest bird I ever saw, blacker than blackbird or raven, grackle or daw. Your wingspread blacker than onyx without flaw, Lacquered jacket black as a chaw of tar or ink or the mountain blueberries in your craw. Your eye so keen there ought to be a law, Diving down and snatching every stray gewgaw Clutch of diamond, gum wrapper or straw, snatched quicker than a talon or a monkey's hairy paw, spurs remorseless as a mongoose claw. Mightier in legend than the donkey's jaw, from the ice of January to April's dreary thaw, from summer's roasted pastures to autumn's hem and haw. Your disdain for the usual forest foofraw, your pitlilessness for feathered things carried off in a wet dog's maw, and tendency to repeat yourself are transwoodland topics of awe.

Over and over every morning, the first breath I draw

that voice like tearing paper, only still more raw, the hard spank of morning cries caw

Knock on Wood

So a tree becomes a stump and the microbes burrow in until it is all lacework a filigree of matter. The world that seems solid is full of holes, holes between pores and holes between cells, holes between the molecules, atoms and particles. There are oceans of space within and between. You could say we live in space.

I'm just saying I am.

The Bioluminescent Woman

Out on Mosquito Bay under a grinning half moon The oars of the kayaks flash brilliantly

These are the bioluminescent waters of Vieckes reportedly the shiniest of its kind in the world

But tonight, which is St. Patrick's Night, the moon is too bright for the full effect

So Rachel heaves herself over the edge and slides into water said to be populated

by bull sharks and hammerheads but she transforms into a flashing angel

lighting up the area around her, treading water like an aquatic butterfly

That's my bioluminescent woman

down there, an amazement

to those who did not know her

We Irish

It is said we hate the body and it's true. It is said we punish with silence and we do. Slow to anger, slow to judge, good thing we never hold a grudge.

Charley

I wanted my preschool boy Jon to feel strong. So I gave him a new name as he boarded the bus. A name with an attitude, not a sensitive one, a name that didn't sweat the small stuff, a name that juts out its chin. When he climbed up the giant steps of the school bus, I said" "You have a good day, Charley." But the driver heard, and so did the kids. So I learned, twenty years later, that half the kids at his school thought his name was Charley, and called him that throughout his grade school years, and being a shy boy, he never corrected them.

Eleven-Year-Olds Discussing Death

Four on the front porch, tossing a ball back and forth.

"I sure don't want to get sucked into quicksand," says one, because he just saw a movie with that.

"Get hit by a truck," the little one says. "One boom, you're gone."

All agreed that cancer's the worst. "It takes forever, and you might get your feet sawed off, and the whole while

you know you're a goner."

"Maybe a disease that gets you in a week, but doesn't hurt that much," says the third.

"You get to say goodbye to people, and then your vision gets blurry and your head goes sideways and that's it."

"Yeah, it's like you're watching the TV and someone changes the channel."

Soon they're tossing in the yard again.

"Hey quicksand," says sawed-off feet, "go long."

Toothbrush

My brother and I peed into the toilet, our streams dueling one another, the amazing hydraulics of a seven and nine year old.

Then we brushed our teeth and Pat bumped me and my toothbrush sprang into the unflushed water.

If we flushed away the evidence it might break our grandparents' pipes. If they came upon it they would surely be annoyed. I had made up my mind I was not going in after it.

Grandpa Lawrence, thin and diabetic, stood in the doorway and without a word knelt and retrieved the dripping toothbrush.

We'll get you a new one, he said quietly, and rinsed his hands. We didn't know he was a farmer who lived his whole life in piss.

But we gaped at each other, the way kids do, realizing someone was wholly on our side.

Good Thing

we forget the names of things or else they get common

that thing there it's a -what do you call a thing like that?

I know don't tell me It's on the tip of my tongue

no it isn't, it's light years from my tongue

but the more we forget the more we become poets

each moment new to us this impossible now

like just waking up

and stretching in sunlight

everything strange and unknown

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.

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.

Don't Be Like The Moon

Don't be like the moon, your face all scars, dismayed by your bombardment.

Because if that is your choice, To be just like the moon,

The night is what you will be relegated to, a lantern hanging in the darkness.

The world must carry the moon on its shoulder like a stillborn child borne to the grave.

Do not be bewildered like the moon Do not gaze open-mouthed into space

Do not dwell in memories gone bad Be like the earth you were plucked out of,

The one that lives, that farts and sighs

Deny your losses, shed your skin,

Pack away the dead so they cannot be seen Make roses grow between the rows Be like the blooming earth and forget

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.

Signs

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods

there are signs posted saying

No Hunting and No Trespassing.

People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold, and they do not want to return to a shot-through window or knocked over pumphouse.

A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted seems to keep most people away, except for

a few hunters who need everything spelled out.

You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign

leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.

So that every hundred yards is a tree

with a perfectly blank sign on it.

The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots

and whorls of the plywood,

gray from the rain and north woods wind,

an advertisement to wilderness,

a message the animals read as well as you saying this is this and here is here and deeper into the pines there is more.

Mighty Poem

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean

the opposite of themselves.

Thus *sanction* can mean ether permission or impermission.

Now, one of our commonest words, *might*,

can mean raw power, almost beyond measure,

the might of the hydroelectric dam,

the might of God,

the might of Mighty Mouse,

and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb *may*,

meaning it's possible, conceivable, it could go either way.

Looks like it might rain.

I might go to the dance with you,

a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.

You can feel the power leak out of that form.

The subjunctive *maybe* – it doesn't get less mighty than that.

And most poets take refuge in the maybe--

I might change my life.

There might be a God, A man might dream, who knows.

*

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact. We languish daytimes on our sofas in our gherkins and blue silk stockings, chewing our hangnails, play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns with bleared greasepaint that normal people can't look at long because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping because we are afraid to land a punch. We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers and maybe we suck on our thumbs,

*

When are we going to fight like men?

When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive

or to bear greater pain or to honor the past

but to advance a proposition

and make it stick?

Why are we so miserable and insecure and envious?

Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon Fund?

Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?

Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?

Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits

when those are what we love?

Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from a stone?

Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?

We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges

and honoring the dead.

We shouldn't be going over anyone's head including our own. We should be clear as champagne

and twice as fun.

*

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.

It flows like rushing water to the sea.

A mighty poem is for everyone.

It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.

A mighty poem burns calories and works on you

until you have to stop and breathe.

A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.

It says to you, get furious, or lost.

The Poem Room

It is a place of shame, the only room with a lock on the door.

To make it come out you loosen your garments and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there for you to use, one sheet after another.

But when you are done how proud you are of what you have authored.

You want to call people in to show them what you've made and they smile because they don't want you to feel dismayed,

but in the end it is the one thing you do that is expressly you

There Is a Kingdom

of people who don't like who they are, though the birds sing there with every kind of flower.

No one knows how they got this way. Some say they live under a witch's curse. Some say they drank from a poisoned well. Some say the people are sinners from another life, and this life is their punishment.

Some even say these people are the scapegoats from every other kingdom where the people don't care who suffers for them, and the music and dancing in those lands go on.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Horses Work Hard

they clamp their bits in the riding ring kicking the sawdust behind them all day the children mount and pace and when the animals rest steam rises from their bodies like prayer and they turn their heads and snort when the last class is over and the girls ride home in silence in their vans the horses are let out to find solace in the grass

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

'King of the St. Paul Poets,' Explained

People ask about the title and crown.

I try to reassure them that I don't think I'm better than other poets,

that the title is hereditary, not earned in any way.

I point out that it was handed down to me

by my father Ralph Waldo Finley,

who composed rhyming verse from the daily racing charts.

It was given to him by his father,

my grandfather, William Butler Finley,

who popularized a form known as the loku,

consisting of eleven syllables and two exclamation points,

and before that given to my great grandfather Percy Bysshe Finley --

'The Bisher,' everyone knew him as --

who received the title by legislation

for his stirring poem about the confluence

of 19th century agriculture and leisure,

"The Rusted Plough."

And I say to those who are jealous of the title

that instead of begrudging me mine,

why don't they get off their asses and inherit one,

like I did.

Dime

One day I learned I'd been wrong all my life Offended by lightness and wary of cheer And the only music my ear respected, Was the groan of the soon-to-be-dead.

Then did I see how far down-mountain I was and what hard climb lay ahead. In what spirit does one undertake such a journey? With indivisible purpose and trumpeting fanfare?

Or better, do you plant foot as if nothing is certain,

as if birds migrating

are off on a whim,

and matters

Of life and excruciating death

are resolved with the flip of a coin.

The Great Ladder of Being

On the top rungs are angels and just below men, Splendid in reason and shining like gold

Then comes everybody else, the blowhards and lepers and crooks

And then the other species line up, the noble ones first, the great apes

and great dogs and dolphins and so on till you get to the bottom rung and the dung

beetles, spirochetes, tapeworms and germs, those black blobs of smut that ruin the corn

and finally the rocks and rust and dust and the sour-tasting air of outer space

and at the lowest rung God is waiting to greet us --"What, you expected me up top?"

Rising Sun Campground

The signs don't invite argument: This is bear country. Do not leave food at your site, not even hoisted into a tree. Do not leave tubes of toothpaste around, or any scented toiletries. Even a candy bar left under your pillow is enough to attract a nighttime visitor.

For the most part I obeyed these rules, locking everything in the trunk of the Toyota. Everything else I carted a hundred yards to an ingenious bear-proofed dumpster far from camp.

But one item proved difficult, the sudsy residue of dishwashing. The tub would fill with bits of beans and rice, a thread of ketchup, the lemony scent of the detergent itself. It was too far to move the liquid to the dumpster without spilling. And so I walked thirty paces from our tent and drizzled it onto a sandy anthill, closer to another tent than ours.

If a bear did come, drawn by the smell of last night's dishes, it would venture into that family's tent, not ours. And if we woke to nylon and canvass torn to shreds and an ambulance parked on the stony path, parents and young ones mauled like pigs in their blankets, we would pack in silence and putter away to the next campsite down the road.

Gust

The weather is changing. The coat hangers jangle softly in the dark.

Instructions for Falling

We have to let go in order to fall And the steady tumble that carries us down Surrender all order, unclench every hand Until we are sleeping, and begin again

The Rapture

Walking with Rachel, We detect a fragrance So sweet and so intense

Like honey, lilac and swirled violets We look at one another With a look of boundless optimism

Until we step into a clearing And see the turquoise plastic Port O Potty.

If You Go Down

If you go down, if your face actually touches the ground

something happens, people loosen your collar and get on the horn for help.

Soon a vast and wonderful system is engaged on your behalf because you went down.

But your face has to touch the ground and if it doesn't no calls are placed.

It's all about the touch, it's all about the feel of face against street, that part is intolerable, and our beautiful idea springs into action

with no effort spared which is why I say to you when you fall, really fall,

be horizontal, even unconscious and a thousand doctors will reinflate you

to the maximum PSI, just don't keep stumbling like so many people do,

to your left and to your right, too afraid to go down and admit that it's over.

The Rapture

Walking with Rachel, We detect a fragrance So sweet and so intense

Like honey, lilac and swirled violets We look at one another With a look of joyous anticipation

Until we step into a clearing And see the turquoise plastic Port O Potty.

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? I can't tell. But I 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.

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.

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 tremble in the dark

The Young People

We were like jewels glinting off one another's light, sapphires, rubies, garnets, pearls ... our teeth were so beautiful and so was our skin, nothing old could hold us in, our poor parents were at a loss to contain this savage perfection, the Buick roaring from gravel onto highway, laughter and beauty and limitlessness, six-packs of Rolling Rock, sexy cruel sneers, and our poor dear mothers in their babooshkas and aprons carting Kleenex out of our rooms, and father with his yellow sponge daubing at the car seats. What religions would we not topple? What ancient wisdom would be next to fall?

Fishflies

They probably have some other name where you are, These clouds of angels ululating in the heat. Harmless as flying shrimp, they neither bite nor itch Yet they fill the heated sky with their bent translucent twigs, Ecstatic to be together for a day before they die, The endless day that extracts everything from them, As if life were only about them and their rollicking hour in the sun They mass at your screen door like a theater on fire Turned back by a locked emergency exit, they perish in your car grill Bodies packed so deep that the fan blade Scarcely cranks against the clog, and Robustly constructed spider webs collapse from the weight Of so much happiness. They are an army of Egyptians Spun down in chariots to the sea floor, They are the Superbowl crowd with the bomb in the stadium ticking. They are the communion of saints strewing palms In the path of the new king proclaimed. They are put in play not for any reason that benefits them But because God made a covenant with the pickerel and gar

Saying the sign to my chosen will be the feast

I visit upon you

In the first week of August, last days of July,

Eat this candy that I scatter on the waters

Till your gills no longer pulse and your stomach wants to split.

And so it will go, fish eating fly and man broiling fish In a coating of garlic and crumb, each species imagining itself special

Like a chain of being leading straightway to heaven.

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

The Sugar Trap

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite I filled a pop bottle half-full with sugar water and strawberry jelly. As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim and one after another descend to sample the pink nectar. By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle, most of them drowned with a few still clambering over their fellows to climb out. But the walls are too steep and their wings too wet and the water is too sweet to avoid very long. First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle, delighted with their find, enough sugar to feed their community for a month. The sight of their comrades floating face-down does not seem to be a major minus to them. It is only when they set that first foot in the water that they suspect, and the struggle to rise up somehow is on. It is impossible, they fall back into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered. Furious, the start twitching their abdomens.

This must be someone else's fault, they seem to be saying, I never sought sugar for my own personal use, it was always for the hive. But community mindedness has fled and in their wretchedness they sting their comrades the dead and the dying, spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in their pool and this can go on for hours, and more. I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee either by gesture or sound, even though the arrival of the newcomer spells sting after sting. It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them. It is good to share this meal my brothers it is good to drink the common cup, so cold, so sweet, this wine.

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 they 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 waggling 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

Hamsters

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

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

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

Tiny

Tiny house like a wedge of cheese.

There wouldn't be room for all our stuff.

We'd live so small, one plate, one spoon.

We always would be touching.

Clints and Grykes

Clints be the islands that float apart. Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved. Schist be the rock that guards your heart. Karst be the stones that cap your grave.

Big Ass Angels

Beauty has always distracted us from the truth. Adam was deceived by Eve.

Was she good or did she just look that way — a man never knows.

Artists likewise get taken in. Given a choice between naked beauties to model the saints and lumpy people from around town, you know which way they're going to go.

Women of the world, take heart! from the knowledge the masters could not see, that no one is prettier than anyone else.

The eyes tell lies, what we call beauty is just temptation. Help is coming, dearest friends. A bell will sound and all will know what we hoped was true, but could not quite believe. We are beautiful, lovely ones so beautiful. And then we are beautiful beyond even that.

'Beautiful Creatures,' by Bruce Cockburn

Cockburn starts to intone the phrase "beautiful creatures,"

and his voice begins to rise until the phrase

is like a chimney

sending sparks high into the sky.

And what Cockburn is saying -

the beautiful creatures are going away.

His voice is like a mournful klaxon, a shooting flame of sadness

for the species that are going extinct in our time.

The beautiful creatures are going away.

Their beautiful eyes, their beautiful cries,

tree frog, antelope, the beautiful butterflies,

the clarity of their hunger.

the fierceness of their love,

and we will see them go and be unable to stop them,

because other things mattered more.

Going away, into a different place,

by leg, by wing, on their beautiful bellies, they are taking their beauty away from us, they are never coming back.

