

Fripperies



Short Poems by Mike Finley

Short items are the blood and guts of poetry. They are the little things you dash off on the back of an envelope, and they sit around forever, and they never get placed – but you love them because, unlike the anthemic lengthier poems that you sweat and toil over, they more closely resemble the actual thought you had when you started writing. They tend to be less hi-falutin, and more the way your mind really is. They can still be pretentious – but not for so long. I was struck, patching together this quickie collection, by how similar these thoughts were, over a forty year span.

Thank you for reading. Direct [comments here](#).

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Cafe Bulletin Board

Valentines Day Puppies, \$300 for female, \$200 for males

Laz-E Boy Chair, royal blue leather, 1 week old, \$350

Their here -- the 2004 Polaris snowmobiles!

Hi, I'm Eric, and I plow snow -- call for free estimate

Truck for sale, low miles

God's Simple Plan for Salvation, take one

Guitar lessons by Steve

Explosive home based business -- \$99 in = \$1000 out --
we

team build and every one gets paid

2 single Craftmatic beds with built-in massage and
heated mattress cover, one never used

Dog houses for sale, single insulated \$95, double
insulated \$135

Will haul for peace and justice

(2002)

Start Being a Better Poet Immediately

Stop talking and listen. Then listen to that.

Stop using ink when you write.

Pile your hats in the back yard and burn them –
especially those that have feathers.

Remove your name from everything you do.

Drive out your own sound by inviting in others.

Stop breaking sentences into lines. When you breathe,
the breaks find themselves.

Stop talking with other poets. One god per universe is
the legal limit.

Stop reading poems. Read hands, faces, hearts.

Unless it feels like a gift, don't give it.

Leave poems in unexpected places – umbrella stands, in
robins' nests, on fresh dog turds.

Stop being a poet at all. Tear away the sash and let it
float away.

Leave truths unfolded on the doorsteps of the fearful –
the only copies in the world.

(2006)

Dandelion Milk

When the stem is snapped
a circle of dripping white
forms on the green perimeter.

The lilac weakens us for a week.
Honeysuckle, a single sweet drop.
But this one has no scent, no pedigree.

Yet I say you are the yawning lion
sprawled across our lawns.
This bitter milk I choose to be my wine.

(2006)

Crazy Flesh

All our lives we wanted growth, any growth
some indication of purpose, a covenant with being
but when growth comes it is
a division of ants swarming and snapping
devouring every sentient thing.

That's the joke but who's laughing now
What kind of a joke begins
with a single cell, the nautilus wrapping
gray arms around the sunken sub
that is the precious vessel
and then the replication begins
methodically replacing with gelatin smut
the music, the argument, the thought –
poor fellow, he was just beginning
to grasp the idea, and now this!

(2000)

Renunciation

I break with St. Paul
and the one-way
Irish streets

And join with Patrick
and the Christ whose blood
veins every leaf

(2009)

Frankenstein in the Cemetery

for Daniele

Here is where I ought to be.
And here. And here.
And here. And here. And here.

(1985)

The Stink

Does not understand
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters
where are you going?

(2009)

From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis

the moon is down to the cuticle now
the stars nod in and out

the night is as dark
and as deep as the hole

in the shed of the potato farm
in Michigan my grandfather

had, and
then lost

(1976)

Fragment

Women don't know
what lies in men's hearts
and that is what makes
them so precious to us.

They forgive without
weighing what actually is.
How wise that they
cultivate ignorance!

(2002)

Les Sanglières

The wild boars of the hilltops
Venture down at night
Attracted to the perfume
Of cantaloupe and squash
Stealthy of snout and grunting opinion
They scour the sand for fallen grapes
And when they gaze bloody-eyed
At the moon
They bristle in their beauty

(2008)

The Horses Work Hard

they clamp their bits in the riding ring
kicking the sawdust behind them
and when they rest steam
rises from their bodies like prayer

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

(2006)

Happiness

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps
at its thousands of beaches,
pebbles and rock and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.
A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by an island egg in a happy sea.
A sparrow hawk flies off toward
a bank of violet mountains.
It lights on a limb of a tall green tree,
the stars alight in her branches.

(1977)

Forty Below

It was so cold
the dogs

were sticking
to the trees

(1977)

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

(2002)

Eyes

blue windmills churning sunlight into bread
the murmuring turbines of you

the gills of the goldfish
shifting in a porcelain tub

languid petals of unplugged fan
spiraling in the breeze

knowing wink of the guillotine
flared skirt of mushroom

lightswitch squirting darkness
throughout the empty room

venus flytrap closing on
some hungry living thing

(1972)

Man & Monarch

The man pokes out a finger as a perch ...
Sure enough, two flit close by ...
And he wondered what it might lead to ...
Some kind of breakthrough between butterfly and man
...
We have shared the airspace but never points of view ...
The insects desired contact, but there was that matter of
our pinning them to corkboards ...
We magnified their faces to make proper eye contact ...
But when we saw their twitching protuberances up close
we drew back ...
We held peace conferences and praised them for their
kitelike beauty ...
They described their unhappiness with riding lawn
mowers ...
They taught us about the dazzle of sunlight, about the
silence of the chrysalis, the transformation from glutton
worm to ravishing angel ...
We read poems and they beat their clapboard wings ...

(2005)

Eliza

your homeliness is a flag
and you fly it courageously
what sorrow such courage entails

if I were your father
a cottage I would build you
the echo of hammer and saw

in the trees deep in the woods
and away from the view
and the animals and flowers

would huzzah your beauty
and the sun draw warmth
from your soldierly heart

(2003)

Airplane Food

A sleigh traversing piles
of cloud, the tinfoil

peeled from
a steaming tray.

This cauliflower
seems familiar.

(1979)

Dishwasher

It's by far the best job in a restaurant
The cooks are up to their elbows in anguish
racing to meet their exacting requirements

The waitstaff are scribbling salad orders
The barkeep's pretending to listen to stories
The coat check stares from her darkened box

But the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists
And it goes to his heart like wonderful liquor
Everyone yelling, but he doesn't hear

(1982)

Look, Li Po

boats high on the water's breast
like lovers thirsty for your lips
your songs return to you

(1973)

Little Bighorn

I took my boy to the battlefield
and we paused in the locust grass
to read a warning sign, 'Beware
of rattlesnakes. Stay on the path! '

I took my son's little hand
and climbed the steady ridge
where the Sioux appeared that day
like feathered cougars in the sun.

I pointed out the crosses.
'The soldiers fell here, understand? '
'Yes, dad, they stepped off the path
and the rattlesnakes bit them dead! '

(1993)

Barns Not There

make the landscape
empty like a frame

without a thought
like weight long lost

like a big red sun
and nothing to set on

like burly boys
gone off to war

and all that's left
the old man laughed

a photograph
that can't talk back

(1999)

Embarrass

Forty minutes in the reception line.
Finally reach the newly widowed man,
rocking by Olive's open coffin,
and I will remember my words forever.
'Hey Vern, you look fantastic.'

(1980)

Li Po in Debt

The pliers draw,
the tooth leaps
out of the head.

Doctor, all my coins,
worn and sour
like all I am,
I give to you.

(1974)

Bad Neighbor

He moved in after dark
and I never saw his face.
Now I hear him moving
furniture around.

At night when I'm in bed
He's banging out 'Honolulu Baby'
On his ukulele,
It's the only song he knows

He hasn't got a pretty voice
And every ten minutes he cracks
Open a beer, and ten minutes later
Rolls the empty across the floor.

I don't know what the hell he's cooking -
Cabbage and fennel casserole? -
But the smell hangs on for days and days,
Like he's hanging it up on a line,

Always at the door about something,
A cup of sugar, I don't know,
Maybe he's lonely and wants to talk,

But I hide behind the drapes

Until the knocking stops
And his footfalls dwindle in the hall.
I wish he would pack up and move
And take the face I dare not see

But I've gotten to the point
I don't think I can live
Without him any more.

(1977)

Jerry Springer

Every day it gets more real, real blood,
Real punches, that's a real big brassiere
On the woman from Klamath Falls,

But the effect is like some circus
Where the sweat and pee of the ponies
Is bled into a plastic cup.

Instead of feeling connected you feel
A million years removed,
Detached from the people

Bellywhumping their loved ones,
Remote from your neighbors down the street,
From the people you are supposed to love.

The cord connecting set to wall
Unplugs you from your soul,
And so rumbles insipid lightning—

Ignorance growing
Like a volcano in a cornfield

(2005)

At the Lake

The day has had its way with us,
and now in the glimmer
the swans steer clear
of the clank of canoes,
couples lean into one another at the hip,
and a man on a bicycle speeds by
sobbing, in red shoes.

(1984)

Intuitions

Why do we hold them
In such high regard
When they are what got us
The way that we are?

(2006)

In My Apartment

the slightest movement electrifies
a flick of the wrist
the lights go out
the bulbs grow cool and swing
a mathematical arc
furniture huddles
it whispers your name

inside the refrigerator
the pounding has stopped
the onions have chiseled through the back
and entered chrome passageways

i must leave this place
if the car stops at this floor
i am getting off
and never coming back

(1979)

In Kansas

spring flows all around us or ought to
each field of corn is taut
with its arrows and bows
our hands can't contain
all the good gifts
they give

I keep counting the day
that shakes the calendar
It is me between you
making eager X's

We subsisted on shucks
and gathered in sheaves
to the animal earth
living outside the eyeball
like a secret

Blind as corn and armed
to the cheek
Stethoscopes hang from every ear
Everyone wants
the combination

The road accelerates
below us, a country
of plumbines
the only curve the
telegraph swell

In all this flatness we
try anyway
learning to jump
as best we can

(1974)

I Feel Sorry for My Fish

my poor fish
never go to Coon Rapids

I go to Coon Rapids
whenever I want

weekends
or after work

(1972)

Holy Ghost

We say holy spirit now
and it is the great unforgivable sin,
to mock the one from whom
inspiration flows.

But for years it was the ghost,
a god who haunts,
and no one I recall
objected to that.

Perhaps we need to
restore death to God,
the father weeping
at his failed experiment

the son dangling forsaken
from a tree, the ghost wandering
the corridors
of a good idea gone wrong

(2009)

The Courteous Target

When the arrow struck
you felt it best not to make a fuss
Sure you reached back
And felt for the shaft
In case it were convenient
But of course it wasn't,
It never is, and you didn't
Want to make a scene

(2008)

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.

(1996)

Good!

fish in the fishtank
bread in the bag
me waking up on the studio couch
the system is working

(1977)

Love Song

golder than the simple capitol of sweetness
and sweeter than the bridges of love
our directionless desires
and the one life, life

these the orchards of your hair
and these hands so plenty
with hillocks and the happy swell
of your blue like the untroubled
window your weather

look upon these undiluted eyes
your satin beams of rain
your sight and scope
your clear suburban stare

your byroads into wilderness
wetland thighs so cattailed with you
the west and east of the brushed in dance
now glistening with oil

you set the table that sings

in the cottage of singing flesh
and i roam your countryside making wrong turns
unto hamlets and county seats and acres
and acres of love

paint me the dye of you
close to your current
drawn like and flapping this
happiest flag

(1977)

At the Circus

ambulance lights
at the auditorium gate
and a lump on
a stretcher
and on top of that
the embroidered
red fez

(1972)

Wisdom

The youngsters hunt for poignancy
the bleared eyes of the whore
the stickiness of sidewalk blood

We who know have learned to shrug,
the broom we take to each day's dust
and dump it on the mountain in the back

(2008)

The Cycle

I married an orphan and therefore
never saw the frown of a father
as I drew his daughter
into deeper water.

Woman exists to be seen.
The visual prompts the erection,
Every close-up in every magazine
Is part of natural selection.

Yet every beauty had a dad.
They were not always floozies.
Now their beckoning hands
Invite us to be their abusers.

(2003)

Poet Struck by Train

i hear the chime in the poem's voice
and in the notes you write
you hunger for truth and you tell it too
you understand pain is the face of injustice
in an otherwise lopsided world

some feel a lot, some shoosh through life
as through an operation

and i know what it is like to fall forever
and wonder how there could be
anything additional below
no whiskered root to grab hold of

but this is not all there is
or why we were intense so long

why rage against a world
that can't help being busted?

your fire is proof that fire exists
and can't be extinguished ever
not by a train a thousand miles long

the human heart is infinite
survives these raggedy envelopes
keeps beating when red-faced suns
have hissed and gone out

i don't even know you
but we are one substance
neurons sparking in the dark
and flesh that sobs all through the day

and i tell you against all reason to hold on
until all that will be has been revealed

for our beauty is whole
in just the way we need
and the fire inside us boils and sings
like golden letters in our blood

(2005)

Pointless

Hot summer night and
my infant daughter has a fever
and I am up with her around two
and holding her limp in my arms.

She sees my nipples and plucks them,
and a thin smile forms. She gets
the joke, how useless I am,
and I hope the joke does her good

(1985)

Pelagius

Little is known of this man
except he refuted original sin.
Some suggest he was Irish
With a vision nightmarish:
Adam set 'a bad example'
When he bit into the apple.
And Jesus did not die for us.
Augustine railed at Ephesus
His heresy had sufficed.
To gut the crucified Christ.

(2006)

On a Bridge

the Rev John Boyce,
a native here
born 1810, died afterwards

author of *Shandy Maguire*
and *The Spaewife*,
a local hero and a bard

this bridge across
the purling Esque
is named for Rev. John

but the bridgeless
emigrē hath not
a pint to put his hand upon

(2005)

Now Then

Upon completing our educations
we planned to be cowboys
or at least the sidekicks of ones.
Everywhere I went I took pictures
with my head.

Blackberries by the roadbed.
Uncle in the garden.

I remember the boardwalk splintering
and the mirror in the barber shop breaking
and people yelling and jumping
into the river.

The car had stalled on a hill and started
rolling backwards.

I smoothed my fringe, and the mountain
in the tomato patch
grew and grew.

(1977)

My Darling Serpentine

I thought it was so tragic
And nothing could be badder
I peeked inside the basket
and beheld the speckled adder

I predicted mass destruction
The rope could only tighten
But no noose is a good noose
It was a cat-eyed python

I thought I had shed blood for you
There were none such as this
'The poet of the universe'
And then I heard the hiss

(2006)

Mother, Stay

Three years since you died
and I still come upon your things.
Today, in the glove compartment,
your amber prescription glasses

and thought of all the novels
you fell asleep reading. You saw
me through them, a little.
I drop them in a strip mall barrel.

(2006)

More, Li Po

He said each day shot from the pump
cold and fast and raw.

How I waited, he said,
the old cat still on his knee.

And now it comes
like nothing I know.

Maybe I think it wasn't you
I thought of all these years.

But more of you, more,
always more.

I was slipping into a dream
of amber - or was it honey?

There, white nipple
of the moon.

(1977)

Moment, 1954

I remember little else
of a family trip to Florida
when I was three, my brother five,
just the road appearing up ahead
and vanishing again behind us,
an endless hour descending a curving slope
in the Smokies, and in the light of day
the disappointing chartreuse dotting
the citrus grove. And once one afternoon
my mother fetched me into her arms
and carried me from the beach and
Patrick had to follow on his own.
From over her shoulder I watched him
stumble toward us. Then a keen feeling
in me that I would remember this
like a bookmark in my life, that it was
one moment in a span that one day began
and one other day would end, years might pass
and this life of ours come loose,
and the whole world groaned and took
one step backward.

(1977)

Scooter

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

(2006)

Salesmen

Have surrounded your home,
They sleep in shifts, handcuffed
To black satchels.
They demand one of your party hostage,
But you are alone.
You send them a message, 'No Deals.'
Tonight your attempted escape
Was anticipated.
As they gather around the car,
You turn up the volume,
Wheels spinning tirelessly.

(1974)

Rustic

you strip like an ear of corn
gold & beautiful
silk tumbling

i lie stiff in my crib
for you, paralyzed
with love

(1975)

Purple Eye

Woman at the crosswalk
daughter in hand,
they are late for the school bus.

The purple eye is humiliating.
How do you hide it
and everyone knows its meaning.

I have walked into a dozen doors
and never made
a fistmark on my face.

Tall despite your wound
your hand cups your little girl's
as you venture into traffic.

(2006)

Sky Repair

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

(2004)

Revolving Door

Seeing the old man
Step tentatively
Into the glass cylinder,
The girl slowed down,

The two tiptoed around
One another, palms high.
He smiled at his partner,
And she, who had never before

Danced the minuet, stepping
Out with the old, stepping
In with the new, did
likewise.

(1983)

Prayer

Something in the air,
That drew me away.
Where were you today?
I looked everywhere.

(2003)

Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar
would chew the leaf forever

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

How afraid we would be
to seal ourselves in like that

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

And all movement ceases
And we wait in the dark

(2009)

Happy the Frog

Suspended animation
is a trip.

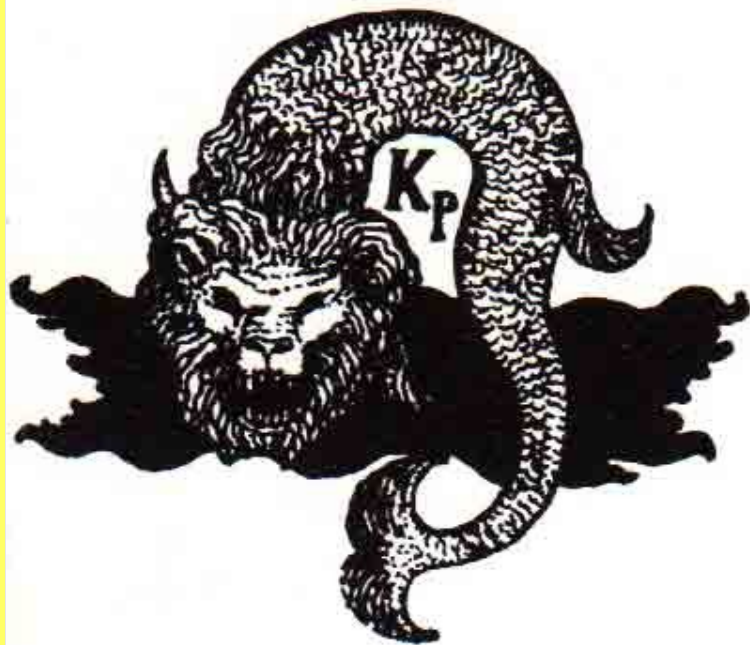
The grin extends
from ear to lip.

The gullet swells
And lets one rip.

The legs extend
from toe to hip

And into pea soup
Smiling slip.

(2006)



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