

frowning woman on bus bench

mike finley



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Frowning Woman On Bus Bench

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

**This poem requires that you
respond like a Johnny Carson
audience**

Did you hear my dog won the Powerball?
Boy, was he happy.

(HOW HAPPY WAS HE???)

About as happy as usual.

The Sucking Sound; from 'Poems Whose Titles Come After'

The sucking sound
At the end of the milkshake

And still we want more

Title: Death

Knock Knock; from "Poems Whose Titles Come After"

Knock-knock ...

Leave me alone!

Title: **Depressing Knock Knock Joke**

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

Bloodhound

We are like those search dogs
in the prison movies,
you wave the smell of the escapee
in front of them, a dirty sock or underpants,
and off they go, focused on one thing only.

And if after hours and days of slopping
through the swamps he doesn't locate
the think he seeks,
it doesn't matter, the scent remains
in his head like a vision,
and he will keep splashing
until he finds the thing that got away
or his poor heart bursts.

Big Gulp

Could 7-Eleven have chosen
a more degrading name, one making us sound
as sentient as a toilet, a swallower of commodities,
a flusher of calories.

I read that a farmer in LeMars, Iowa,
fed his cattle expired ice cream from the Schwan plant
there,
great troughs of cookie dough vanilla and chocolate
mint
disappearing into labyrinthine stomachs,
it feels as if our politics are retarded, we have no more
way
to elect ourselves out of this maze
than the cows do, the free market is a confinement
facility,
and we are the herd shut up in the meat factory,
and by and by we buy and buy,
hoping for something, for the conviction that we will be
OK,
sucking down corn solids in the feedlot of America,

we are not citizens, we're livestock and democracy
is such a crock, we get lost in the indifference,
if not for you, there but for you, the exception is you
and the intelligence you honor me with,
the wonderful gift, the seeing of me,
the seeing that I am not a callus of tissue,
not a yard of tillage, I am a man with thumping heart,
I know we fight sometimes but forget about tha,
because you are all I have to make me feel known,
a person, not another cart at the register,
the moo cow returning to kneel at your manger,
burping vanilla and stamping my hoofs to say
thank you.

Roger That

That isn't his last name,
I forget his last name.
As a teenager he was in our house
all raggedy and drunk
and he sidled up to me
working at my desk, paused
about thirty seconds,
until I really knew he was there,
and asked,
Can I bum a cigarette?

A few years later, drunk
beyond belief, he tried boarding
a moving coal train and fell
and got both legs lopped off.

I saw him the other day
in a wheelchair all by himself
in front of the courthouse
carrying a sign that said
Adolf Hitler was the most
misunderstood man in history!

I said, "Roger, do you really believe that?"
He said, "Well, I don't agree
with every single one of his policies,

but being Nazi makes me feel strong."

"I get that," I said.

"Besides, he said,

"I like fucking with people."

Walking With a Friend by the River in Winter

Sometimes it feels good to shut up
and keep trudging down the crackling path.
The dogs chase in an ecstasy of play.
Trains shudder as the freight cars connect.
Because we are not talking we see the young bald eagle
careen overhead on the branch of a cottonwood.
We did not see at first he held a fresh-killed pigeon
in his talons.
Now just above us in the tree he plucks
the feathers from the body and they fall like snow,
they fall with the snow,
feathers drift to the frozen ground.

'King of the St. Paul Poets,' Explained

People always 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.

Turning the Tables

Instead of me taking forever to brush my teeth,
put on my clothes, slip on a belt, grab my glasses
and locating the keys –

It's the dog doing all these things, taking her time,
everything having to be just so --

Finally saying, "I'm ready to go" out loud --

Too late, I indicate, I just pooped on your pillow

The Man Who Liked To Read

He read in bed knowing it might be his last day.

He was wishing he had started the book earlier
when he felt death grab him by the ankles and pull.

He read as if he had studied the Evelyn Wood method,
a sentence a second with remarkable comprehension.

He shuddered, he shook, he tore out pages with his
teeth,

he had to make it to the final page to find out how it
ended.

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 by the flip of a coin.

Tipping Point

If you wish to know when the change occurred,
the record is quite clear on that,
it was the moment the borogroves went all mimsy.
You expect mimsy here and there among
the borogroves, but there is no ambiguity on this
account.

They went all mimsy. It was not partial.
It was not a plurality. There were no holdouts.
It was a tsunami of mimsy, and the old order
had no alternative but to yield to the new,
mome raths to the contrary notwithstanding.

The Unlovable Man

It was a wonder to him he wasn't loved more.
Even in the blush of his beauty,
buffed to a shine and fully functional,
the ladies found him resistible.
He did not grow in stature over time.
or take on the appearance of mastery in his years.
All his life he would stop to look at himself
in the mirror and ask
What did the world not see
that he could not see, either.

The Difficult Person

The therapist presents a behavioral recommendation:

"I want to suggest that every time someone speaks to you,

you pause for a moment, and carefully consider how you want this person to regard you.

You want them to appreciate your capacity for empathy,

and your respect for their life experience and opinion."

"I can't do that, Doc," says the difficult person.

"I'm on a mission to be the way I am!"

I Hated Mustard As A Child

I hated mustard as a child,
how it ruined a good frankfurter.
I felt dismay down the third base line,
unwrapping the yellow smeared paper.

What was it about the taste
that almost made me cry?
It was like some awful medicine
I felt certain would make me die.

Eventually one's taste buds age,
And you can swallow anything.

A Pat on the Ass From a Flower

In the documentary *Microcosmos*, the director uses special lenses that allow you to see insects and other tiny creatures in full perspective. You see every bristle on the flanks of a fly – the talented camera shows all depths of field.

A caterpillar inches up a leaf,
a water strider skips across water without getting wet,
borne aloft by surface tension only.

Here a honeybee lands on a flower.
We know the bee extracts the honey
while brushing against the pollen sac,
which it carries off to another location,
enabling new growth through cross-pollination.

But see how personal everything is.
The bee clings close to the flower's pistil,
then sinks a long tongue down the stem,
and slurps up the honey like a milkshake.
More amazingly there is give and take on both sides,
as the flower sends two tendrils around the bee's back,
and the tendrils hold the sticky pollen in their "hands,"
which they massage into the backside of the bee.

It is eerily erotic –

the lovee squeezing the rear end of the lover,
while tacking a hidden message to its back,
an advertisement for itself.
There is more of me, it is saying, so very much more.
Now share me with the vastness of the meadow!

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.

Some cops get it.
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, I know you're doing your best,
and I'm sorry it has to be this way,
but this is the system we're stuck with.

Other 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 know
you're insured
and they know you have no priors, and they know
you're just a guy
who is having a bad day --

but still they fix bayonets and stab you in the heart.

A Proper Poem

In a proper poem something changes.
The reader thinks of something he never thought of
before,
or he remembers something that was long forgotten,
or he decides, God damn it, I'm not going
to think that way ever again.
A proper poem murders the reader.
Brain cells re-bootstrap and learn.
The old reader goes into the dumpster,
the new one grabs the baton.
It doesn't have to be anything major.
A crumb on the collar that needs brushing off, will do.
A good one and the reader will be
packing his bags for Bolivia.
Because something has been added.
The old ways have been found wanting.
The murdered reader is set ablaze.
The old task completed, the new hands slap off the dust
and move on.

Bill and Helen Smith

This is a story from my folks' saloon on Lake Road in Vermilion, Ohio.

Not many strangers found the place, but we had many familiar friends

who stopped by every day or so for drinks and dinner.

Bill and Helen Smith were a couple 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 -- to an 11-year-old, boy it seemed like there was little to know,

they were just nice people, unfailingly kind to me because they loved my mother.

who ran the restaurant side of things, and was revered by our customers as a quality lady.

Bill and Helen stopped in for the Friday fish fry, night, as they usually did.

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 cleaned up when they left a \$1 tip, a lot in those days.

Going home, an oncoming car drove over the speedcaps on 6 & 2 and smashed headfirst

into the car Helen was driving --

no seatbelts back then --

but she did not die, because Bill, in his final act as a man, leaned over and placed himself between her and the wheel, and that was the end of Bill.

The other car was driven by our coffee salesman, who was drunk, and had to keep coming into our place for years afterward, because customers insisted on Van Rooy Coffee, which was nothing special, but people liked it.

Playing the Odds

The guy who was afraid of flying
now takes a bomb with him on every flight.

Because what are the odds, he calculates,
that two people on this plane will have a bomb?

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?"

The Murderess

The reverend was visiting a condemned woman on Death Row hours before her execution.

"My child," he asked, "what was your crime?"

"I stabbed an evil man, who had his way with me, then bought a ticket to St. Louis."

"Dear woman," the minister said, "don't you know you can't stop an evil man from going to St. Louis?"

Santa Claus And Pope Benedict In Vegas

They rendezvous at vacation spots
two or three times a year.

Little-known fact: they are second cousins,
twice removed.

Here they recline in their poolside chaises
overlooking the amethyst water,
kick off their red shoes
and clink jam jars of double Dewar's.

Santa says to the Pope:

"Of course we are just stand-ins for one greater than
ourselves."

A moment of silence as they gaze into their ice cubes,
then explode simultaneously with laughter.

Hornet's Last Sting

He likes to sting, he doesn't know why.
It doesn't feel good exactly,
more like intense,
and he senses that when his plunger
is deep inside the abdomens of the other,
and he's wagging it around
until their eyes pop out of their heads,
he's doing something,
he's filling a niche,
he's passing something on,
and there's meaning in that.

But now he's getting on
and the doctor takes him aside and says,
"Hornet, you're down to your final sting.
The next time you connect may be your last."
And he wonders what good he is now,
unable to impale things on his throbbing, spasming unit,
unable to stir their guts with his stick,
and he wonders what is left to him.

Will he be revered from this point forward
as the hornet with a heart of gold,
who'd give you the stripes right off his back,
offering assistance to the vulnerable,
and wise advice to all who were uncertain?

Or will he gird for glory and take to the wind,
aching for one final picnic?

What To Get From E. E. Cummings

Not the capitalization, I hope.

The problem with great originals
is that you want to be original too –
and the way they make your heart speed up
and your lip bleed --
you want to do the same thing,
only change it just a bit.

If you want to copy something
copy the spirit that allowed him
to locate music in a world blown apart,
the eye for evil that never looked away,
copy the perfectly alive blossom of a bliss
that sang through the suffering
like a green throaty bird

Sammy Davis Jr. Dials the Wrong Number

I saw this cartoon in an old New Yorker.
A tired older man is sitting up in his pajamas
listening to Sammy rap into his telephone:
"But hey man, I just want to say in all sincerity ..."
The humor is in the contrast
between this weary man's reality
of having to get up in the morning
and be at the office by 9 o'clock sharp
and the stammering cool of the invisible Sammy.

And I realized, later, that that cartoon can't be updated.
It doesn't work with the stars of today --
It is no surprise to us that they are obnoxious and high.
That's the way they're paid to be.

If Miley Cyrus or Justin Bieber call drunk on their cells
in the middle of the night,
thinking we are the cab company,
or just telling us to suck their dick,
we're past the point of astonishment.
This is how things are now,
this is what we expect.
There is nothing really to forgive.

Jesus Was A Middle Child

His brother James was the smart one,
a whiz at Hebrew backward and forward.

The youngest, Andrew, was adored by all,
changing laps from mother to mother.

Jesus was the overlooked one
working afternoons in his father's shop,

unhappy with chores and aching for attention,
arranging the beams across one another like this.

Everyone Wants A Soft Landing

We want to die in a way that's not bad,
like they do in the old westerns,
you fall off your horse with no visible wound,
a few meaningful words, then off you go.

The worst thing, from what I've read,
in a book by Haruki Murakami,
is to be skinned alive and left in the snow.
But even that could only last an hour.

Lingering illnesses seem like a drag,
but at least you get a chance to talk with people.
Every day is precious, so they say,
but you still end up kicking the bedposts.

Everyone lined the rails when Lincoln
was shipped home
but he had it better than all his soldiers,
and who would not like to go quick in an instant,
especially if the play was good.

Weeds

*A found poem, from an An Dang tour guide's brochure,
2004*

A weed is a plant in the wrong place. It is also an attitude of mind.

Every garden plant has its origins in the wild,
when plants were properly respected for their powers.
Dock and bramble, nettle and plantain were always part
of the garden.

Cocksfoot is the stateliest of grasses in flower,
its spiky panicles smothered in anthers of pale purple.
It is also the weed to chew,
for the sugar stored deep at the base of the stem.

Other weeds are for touching:
soft cats' tails of timothy,
the pink and feathery plumes of Yorkshire fog.

Dandelion, too: its French name, pissenlit,
a tribute to the plant's powers as a diuretic,
is straightforwardly echoed in the English vernacular --
"pissy-bed."

Dandelions grow in a hedge bank community
along with primroses, violets, and celandines.

Above them, common vetch twines in summer cries
of amethyst and bright blue.

And if the downy cranesbill should edge
its pink stars into the sea kale,
won't they be most welcome there?

Is it any less beautiful scrambling among the peas?

Glacier State Park

It is said that area tribesmen will not drive
the Highway to the Sun..

They are still sore at being cheated out
of the sacred land.

They were not 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 holy spaces.

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.

Oxygen

Oxygen is burning,
each breath kisses coals
that are blushing deep inside.

It fans us into brightness
and carries us away
as heat.

To be alive is to be on fire,
a controlled burn,
an infernal combustion.

Only lately do the flames
reach up like gentle, patting hands
and steam our sobbing into cloud.

Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber

The National Ocean Service web site explains that sea cucumbers are not actually cucumbers. They are animals, echinoderms, like starfish.

The website features a picture of a chocolate chip sea cucumber with no warning or that the chocolate chips are not really chocolate chips at all, they are just dark camouflage markings --

disappointing to people hoping to taste real chocolate chip cucumbers from the sea.

Remembering 'Sammy Sloth Goes Out on a Limb'

A children's book I could not finish
that took this creature's endless labor
and stretched it out across 50 cruel pages.
Despised as sin, he yet embodied redemption,
countering a sluggish metabolism with faith.
Time was not time. Deadlines went unmet.
He rowed resolutely through the canopy,
stroke by stroke, through rain, through darkness,
hand over hand and claw by claw,
advancing slowly toward the light.

When Muzak Doesn't Help

When the root canal procedure enters a tricky phase and the great Roy Orbison is singing his classic hit "Crying."

I'm Considering Suing

the judge who called
all thirty-four of my current lawsuits
frivolous.

My Therapist Says

I plant psychic traps
for my enemies to step into.
We'll see about that.

After Monet

To combat depression I row
to the center of the lily pond,
and lie back in the boat.

Overhead the clouds bleat by,
and the pheasants beat a pathway through the sky.

My spirits soar at the knock of the woodpecker
in a faraway tree.

The cork plug I fixed the rowboat with
shoots out and pops me in the cheek.
Once again, the sinking feeling.

The Grand Finley

The tumor is inoperable, the first three doctors said.
Too close to the language center,
if something goes wrong by just a hair
you would not be able to understand
your own thoughts.

That was most of the doctors.
A fourth said, I'm not afraid,
let's go in right now and get that thing!

Is That Red Velvet Cake with Buttercream Frosting?

If not, what did you just
step into in the dark?

Surprising Discovery

It's only after studious examination
of the life habits of insects
under a magnifying glass,
that you realize how common it is
for them to burst into flame.

Eat Up, Moth

You like it so much,
I'm prepared to sit right here
till you finish
the entire sweater.

Are You Like Me?

You don't trust yourself
to hold your keys
over the storm drain
because a crazy part of you
is sure to toss them in?

Drunken Young Man Swaying in the Check-Out Line at Cub

"Is this enough toilet paper
for this amount of groceries?"

Who Suffers Most?

Musicians expect to be paid for performing,
although it is never much
and they sometimes get stiffed.

Poets seldom get paid to perform,
the whole idea is ridiculous.

Poets declaim the cheapness of truth,
but no one's lining up to hear,
because music leaves all that behind,
all that behind, behind.

Gust

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

Blue Angel

I was a goofy and excitable kid growing up in Ohio.
We had an outbuilding at the edge of the orchard,
maybe it was a tool shed, but I cleaned it out and
founded a university
and invited all my friends to be professors there.
I figured my pals were as delighted as me with the
prospect
of understanding geology and language.
How they wrinkled their noses when I offered them
everything --
prestige, stimulation, square caps with tassels --
and they said no.

As a teenager I fell in love like an anvil dropped
from a plane.
I just wanted to be with them so bad.
I was kind of a stalker, hitchhiking across the Midwest
to surprise these wonderful girls
on their family's porches.
I wanted us to be boyfriend and girlfriend
and have all those joyful experiences,
and they said no, more or less.

As a young poet I bicycled to other poets' homes
and apartments and rang their doorbells
without warning,

thinking they would welcome me with smiles and kisses.
and we would talk about the excitement of expression,
and read what we were working on,
slapping the pages in exultation.
But people had babies and homework and jobs,
and I never quite got past the door.

And after a while I reined it in,
and found myself growing more critical of others.
I became like the people who only opened their doors
an inch
and quietly closed them again.
That's what growing up is.

But in my heart I am still streaking through the blue,
precision flying, jet vapor writing challenges to the
clouds,
and it's OK I am not part of an elite squadron,
and the stands in the stadium are empty,
because sky is still sky,
and powers and visions
must not be denied.

I Cry When I Hear 'Wichita Lineman' on the Radio

It's the spaciousness of it,
the yearning of the man
high up on the pole,
blades planted against the wood,
and he hears the scratch of voices on the lines,
people talking, and telling their secrets,
and the golden wheat fields stretching out for miles.

Child Killer

My dog Beau killed several children,
a young woodchuck crossing a culvert
a kitten taken from its nursing basket,
a baby raccoon with sweet bandit markings
stolen from its burrow alongside the river,
he shook it twice and the pretty form was still,
and I mourned my responsibility for its death.
Now Beau is gone and I miss him so,
thoughtless murderer and all.

American Hearts

Americans are emotional people,
fire in the belly for every sort of thing.

But we lack depth because
there is usually something we can do
to shut down the ache --
a slice of cherry pie,
a tear at movie's end,
so we are never ever
longing for long.

Most hearts have not been broken yet,
and might not be for a good long while.



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