



G O O D B Y E

Last
Poems

Mike
Finley

GOODBYE

Last Poems by Mike Finley

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To the King of the St. Paul Poets

I brag and chant of Finley, Finley, Finley, Finley!
King of the St. Paul Poets and better than McKinley
The one American Poet who could sing outdoors,
He brought in tides of wonder, of unprecedented splendor,
Wild roses from the plains, that made hearts tender,
All the funny circus silks of politics unfurled,
Bartlett pears of romance that were honey at the cores,
And torchlights down the street, to the end of the world.
Oh the longhorns from Texas, The jay hawks from Kansas,
The plop-eyed bungaroo and giant giassicus, the varmint,
chipmunk, bugaboo, the horn-toad, prairie-dog and ballyhoo,
From all the newborn states crow, Bidding the eagles of the west fly on.
The fawn, prodactyl, and thing-a-ma-jig, The rackaboor, the hellangone,
The whangdoodle, batfowl and pig, The coyote, wild-cat
and grizzly in a glow, In a miracle of health and speed,
the whole breed abreast, They leaped the Mississippi,
blue border of the West, From the Gulf to Canada,
two thousand miles long: Against the towns of Tubal Cain,
Ah,-- sharp was their song. Against the ways of Tubal Cain,
too cunning for the young, The longhorn calf, the buffalo
and wampus gave tongue. For Finley, Finley, Finley
Poet King of all St, Paul! take you over William Jennings Bryan any day.
Finley, Finley, FINLEY!

Dictated by the Ka of Vachel Lindsay

Submitted by Joe Green

Jellybean

I saw something in a drawer I was cleaning out.

It was round, and shiny, and small.

I said to myself, "What is this?"

Maybe it was a black pearl, or a semiprecious stone,
or a bearing in some weird machine with moving parts.

I picked it up and examined it.

Without question it was licorice jellybean -- my favorite flavor!

I wondered how long that jellybean had lain there.

It had to be a long time.

Now comes the moment of dramatic disclosure,
because I am a poet of the confessional school.

I popped the ancient black jellybean in my mouth
and nearly broke a tooth off. And it hurt!

Reluctantly I spit it into the waste can.

Now you know the worst thing about me.

Lookout

Sometimes I think to myself how lucky I am to have been so many places
and seen so many things.

It was an expectation I had, that I deserved to see things.

We would drive many miles and climb a mountain
to get to the overlook.

And we would stand there a moment, catching our breath
and viewing the lakes and cliffs and tree stands below us.

And after about four minutes I would say,

What's next on the list?

And we could scratch this one off.

Now I have the realization that I may never see a thing again.

Never be at this place again.

Of course, that was true all along, but these days I feel it so keenly.

It causes me to stop now, to slow down and look more longingly
at the picture I am part of, at the birds and other creatures
taking their part in it,

and I look at it

and I look at it

and I look.

Adagio

In the King James Version there is that beautiful question the angels by the tomb ask the visitors on Easter morning --

“Why seek you him here?”

Beautiful because the words are mixed up. Today we would translate it as, “What are you looking for him here for?”

I picture the angels smoking cigarettes.

And there is a mockery there, too. You dumbasses, why would you think the Christ would still be dead the day after he died? What earthy sense does that make?

* * *

If you are terminally ill, it's probably not a good idea to play Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings a lot. First, it will probably make you think you are a very important person, upon whom everything depended, and that your untimely passing is a tragedy touching every human heart.

Second, it will trigger memories of FDR, who struggled silently, secretly, all his adult life, with the pain in his legs, with Germany and Russia, and the hundred million dead. So that when he died, after all those years in office, the world knew it had lost a hero. Barber wrote the Adagio for him.

Or, forty years later, the caisson bearing the body and shattered head of JFK is wheeled down Pennsylvania Avenue. Pipers piping, drummers drumming.

And that little boy who steps forward and makes his little boy salute. On his birthday.

* * *

And Mick Jagger sings “I shouted out “Who killed the Kennedys,” when after all, it was you and me.”

And everybody nods, because, yeah, that just makes sense. This terrible thing had broken every heart, and no one knew who did it or why. Only the Rolling Stones knew somehow. It was all of us. Blood on every hand.

Except that didn't make any sense, either. People in the small towns, people working in office towers, they have their shortcomings but that doesn't make them assassins. That was never what they wanted.

Did Mick Jagger care? Did the angels care? What goofballs we all are, expecting a god to lie dead in a grave, or a president to cruise safely through a parade, waving at the world.

Listen to the Adagio. Feel the stabbing of the heart as the violins lift their keening cries to heaven. But do not imagine this scalding rain of tears is for you. You are just a single soul, going about his business, hanging his coat on a hook.

There is no fame. There is no comfort. There is only the pain that you pass on to those who knew you, as a remembrance.

Old Saw

Out walking with Red, we come upon
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like
a giant fork in the forest.

Into that fork another tree had fallen,
so that the original cottonwood stood straight
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,
and every breeze made the live tree groan
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,
or metal failing underwater,
like a natural cello's lowest string
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove
in the crotch of the live one,
and with the passage of time was wearing its way
downward, splitting it down the middle.

One main arm of the live tree had died,
and owls and birds and other things
have made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.
Rachel and I stare up at this natural saw
and we take one another's hands instinctively
as if to assure ourselves
that the rubbing of one life against another life

means warming, not tearing.

Love comes into our life but life comes to an end.

What is left when love remains

sawing gently on our limbs?

Tumor Talk

You know, Tumor, I think I'd like to write about you.

Please don't.

Why not?

Because no one wants to know about me.

Yeah, but it's a human experience and I just thought --

Stop thinking. That's your problem in a nutshell.

But what if I gave some person somewhere hope!

Is that your actual intention?

No, not really. But wouldn't I seem heroic, dealing in a straightforward way with you?

What have you got against me? What have I ever done to you?

Well, I'm fighting you. You know, put 'em up!

If you want to slug yourself, have at it.

Well, a journal then, tracing my growth and insights during this challenging time.

Yeah, nobody's ever done that before.

But it would give me pleasure and comfort to be engaged in something creative.

Be honest. You only write about yourself.

Yes, but, I'm the thing I know best. I want to tell that unique story!

Listen, it's fun for you, but I have to listen to it the whole goddamn day.

Then let me say this to you. Having you grow inside me has led to some interesting thoughts!

Like what?

Like “Carrying a tumor inside oneself is like carrying a child!” It takes a certain amount of time, it obtains nourishment from you, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger.

You are aware that you are not creating life, right?

Tumor, don’t you think I know that! Give me credit for that much! And please explain to me why you must always be so negative?

Because I am not your MUSE

The Water Boom

Bicycling below Hidden Falls, I saw a water boom
tucked against a storm sewer at the edge of a cliff.

Water booms are those long stocking-like absorbent ropes
they put in the water when there's an oil or chemical spill.

This boom was perhaps twenty foot long, and as I rolled past it,
I saw it was twisting in a serpentine fashion.

I stopped my bike and saw it had a face,
that looked like it was contorted from always weeping.

When I looked into the face, which was clenched like a fist,
I saw that the boom was my mother.

My heart sank at the sight of her, dead for twelve years,
yet here she was transformed, and spiraling in the ditch.

She could not talk, she could only make a sucking sound
from her lamprey mouth. I did not know what to do.

Is this how the world works, I asked myself,
that a woman who suffered so much in life
should be dispatched to suffer even worse humiliation,
soaking up the poison that shoot out of our houses.

Or is this just a dream to remind me of her heart,
and her pride, and her wish to take on pain
rather than see it attach to me.

Weeping, I dragged my mother like a sodden carpet
to the river's edge, I released her and watched her slip away.

I held my hand over my eyes against the afternoon sun,
that shone on the turning waters like diamonds.

My Sarangi

My wife Rachel can't be here tonight. She's way up high in the Himalayas. For the third year straight, bringing a medical team from all over the world up into a remote area called the Tsum Valley. She brings medicines, eyeglasses, painkillers, vaccinates kids, counsels women on their health.

I never go. Because I can't walk 100 miles through mountain passes. Because I have cancer. I said, "Maybe if we just go a mile a day?" Rachel just looked at me.

I try to help out, mostly handling paperwork. I also help set up a fundraising concert. Made a video. Once I matched 100 pairs of eyeglasses with pictures and names. I helped her raise \$4,000 for the trip, begging from friends like you.

Because I've got like 1700 Facebook friends and she has doodly. "I haven't got time for that!" she says. "People are suffering." So my friends write the checks.

She is like Mother Teresa. A superhero of goodness. Solving people's health problems. Making life easier. Showing love in a way that's hard to deny. Everyone loves Mother Teresa, out there helping the world.

Nobody ever thinks about Mister Teresa, back home, hanging up storm windows. Replacing batteries in the remote.

The whole thing is stressful for both of us, and we sometimes bark at each other. Bet you didn't know that about Mother Teresa! The D word has been uttered, though not lately. She just wants to be Mother Teresa. Having me around detracts from the image.

My shrink says, "Mike, you seem resentful."

I say, "Let's don't go there, doc. Now, back to my childhood ..."

So we hold this fundraising concert, right? It's amazing. About 300 Nepali families show up, many of them young, and strong, and taller than their parents.

The music is provided by a highly regarded guy, Shyam Nepali. The Ravi Shankar of the sarangi. He is very charismatic, and he has a rock band backing him, and he is playing this weird instrument. It's amped in and he is sawing on that thing and the dance crowd goes crazy, swirling and pumping their fists over their heads. For them it is a moment of national validation.

OK. The music stops, and the shopping begins. There's folding tables, a silent auction, jewelry, paintings and like that. Rachel disappears into the bazaar. This annoys me. She would spend all the money we raised on knickknacks. Our house is a house of knickknacks. 50 boxes of knickknacks.

She comes back, all excited.

"You have \$250?"

"No, I don't have \$250."

"A check?"

"No, I don't have a check."

(Who carries checks around any more?)

While they pack up the show, the audio visual crew puts up a silent video. It's weird. It is a video shot by a camera strapped to the front of a Norwegian train. So you feel you are shooting down the tracks, very rapidly. The snow is white. The tunnels are dark. In 20 seconds you are hypnotized by the fjords speeding by. Every bend in the tracks you felt like the train would tip over.

Then it hits me. I had a few checks in the trunk of my car. Why don't I get off my ass and get a blank check for Mother Teresa? It's her night after all.

I limp to the car, dig the checkbook out of my spare tire hiding place, and make out the check for \$250, and hand it over to my bride, who beams at me, and disappears back into the bazaar.

Suddenly, she's back. And she has this thing, this sarongi, in her hand. And behind her is Shyam Nepali, the star of the show, the Ravi Shankar of the sarongi.

I take it in my hands. I pick it up. It's amazing. Carved from one piece of wood. I give the strings a skronk.

Shyam Nepali shows me how to tune it, and the secret of playing. You don't press the string down, you lift it with the back of your nail.

He plays Hava Nagilah for me. "Practice 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,'" he says.

I look up at his peaceful face. He looks 35 but it's possible he might be my age. Mindful living!

And I look back at Rachel. This is her present to me, her thanks for helping get her show on the road. Something to do while she's away.

I look up at her pretty face, and I say to her, with my mouth open and my eyes all wide --

"This will change my life."

Dog Water

I don't notice her looking at her bowl as I sweep in the kitchen
but with every stroke more dust goes up into the air,
some settling on her water.

When the light catches it, you can see the motes floating on top,
a flotilla of uncategorizable stuff.

Likewise, every time I go into the bathroom, I see
that expression again, like,

I can't believe you're doing this to the fountain.

So when we're down by the Mississippi and I see her lapping up the river,
the river that is a soup of petrochemicals, dead animals and carcinogens,
it's not like I am doing any better.

Last Night's Dream

I waited for Ted Kennedy to drive up the ramp.

He rolled down the window.

"I wanted to buy you breakfast," I said.

"I've been wanting the same thing," he said to me.

We went to a place he knew.

"I'll have corned beef and a roll," he said at the counter.

The owner pulled corned beef and a roll from a drawer, and sprinkled the corned beef on the roll.

"That'll be seven cents," he said.

Ted dropped seven pennies in a row on the counter.

"I'll have the corned beef, too," I told the man.

He scattered some meat on the counter.

"And a roll," I added.

"That'll be seven cents," the man said, smiling.

"I produced a quarter from my pocket."

"Uh, we can't make change from that."

We sat outside and watched the street traffic.

Ted saw a parent carrying her child like a forklift.

The child's head was bent back, its mouth opened wide.

"That's not how you do it. Carry the child like it is your greatest treasure."

The parent rebalanced the load, so the child's head was against her heart.

"That's how you carry a child," Kennedy said.

Asteroid Ted Nugent

1

Suicide is still illegal in several states

Although -- what they do to you, I don't get.

Life insurance companies will deny your claim.

Then there is the problem encountered in murder mysteries,

What to do with the body.

2

If you have loved ones you do not want to leave a mess.

You don't want them to open the door and see you.

There must be a way.

3

You could step off the curb and dive under a bus,

But that would be so mean to the driver,

To his wife and child.

They will never get over it.

4

There is the possibility of well-meaning intervention.

A cop with a bullhorn might talk you out of it.

Or you attack a squad car like you are on angel dust

and instead of shooting you down

the cop takes you home for meatloaf and pie.

Fat lot of good that did you.

5

The best way might be to play golf in an electrical storm.

Teeing off on the eleventh hole

and lightning taps you on the shoulder.

Your friends would say, you loved that game.

6

You could change your mind about all this

and a suicide bomber steps into the store.

7

You T-bone a car in an intersection, and out steps Death,

all bloody in his black hoodie,

a 48-oz Big Gulp in one hand.

He expires.

What happens then?

Your predicament deepens.

8

You pay a killer to take you out, without saying where or when.

Just make it look like an accident, you say.

Years pass, and you see his name in the obits

And write a check to the charity he loved.

9

Remembering you are allergic to bee stings,

you wade into a honeysuckle bush,

But the bees that swarmed there last summer are gone,

killed off by neonicotinoids.

10

You dream every night about relief.

A roc from the Arabian Nights swoops you in its talons
and carries you off to its nest beyond mountains.

11

In your misery you shake your fist at God
and lift a revolver to your temple.

A band of winged babies appear and assume you
bodily into heaven.

You demand an explanation.

A baby explains, they are running a promotion today,
And you drew the lucky number.

12

You think this might be the day, and high in the sky
you see a bright light bearing down on the earth.

It is an asteroid named Ted Nugent by whimsical astronomers.

Ted has been crossing the galaxy for millions of years
with your name etched on its face.

Its sole purpose is to find you and put you out of your pain.

But it won't stop with you.

Oceans will rise, the earth's crust will cave in,
everyone will perish, humans and beasts.

The world will be extinguished

And terrified crowds turn to you and ask,

What did you DO?

In the Oncology Waiting Room

A couple in their thirties look for two chairs together, waiting to be called for her infusion.

She is the one with the cancer -- you can tell by her brightly colored scarf.

Nobody but cancer people and refugees wear scarves any more.

You can tell that, ten years earlier, they were a powerful pair.

She is strong, with strong legs still, she walks like a woman who knows who she is.

He is a tough guy in his motorcycle jacket, but wearing a beleaguered expression.

Being a tough guy isn't much use when your spouse has cancer.

The cancer doesn't see you coming and ducks out the back way.

In fact, it's a two-fer. She has cancer, I'm guessing of the brain.

But he has cancer, too -- it is eating him alive, you can see it in his eyes and all he can do is open doors for her, and fetch a cup of coffee in a styrofoam cup.

Prescription for Depression

Sometimes when I'm feeling cheerful
I listen to Shostakovich's 24 Fugues and Preludes,
from a record I recorded in 1970, with all the pops and cracks
of having played it 134 times, on a needle with a nickel
Weighing it down, or the later, equally beautiful version
by Tatiana Nikolayeva. All the frustration, heartache,
censorship and death of the Stalin era, told
in off-key nursery rhyme forms. Works every time.

Waiting for Her Ride

She sits at the taxi stand
Out front of the clinic,
shivering thin woman,
wrapped in white blanket,
hair burned away,
puffing on a Kool.
"How you doing today?" I ask,
to be nice.
In a gravelly voice she replies
"I been better."

Stooping to Pick Up a Pill ...

that fell to the floor and skittered under my desk.
I try bending at the back but I don't bend so good.
I slide off the chair and get down on my bony knees
but then my shoulder still keeps me from ducking under
the table, and now my neck feels like it might go out.
I get on all fours and duck my head under, and the way is clear until
I start wheezing, and my eyes bug out, and my heart begins
to thump and that big vein pulses up top, I can even
feel the stress in my hair. But then -- there it is, my precious Zytiga,
the pill of the gods, \$260.20 apiece on the open market,
the mud-colored pearl that keeps my cancer at bay,
now bearded weird with bunny dust. I hold the pill between two fingers
like a host held up to chiming bells and think this magic stone
will keep me alive, unless I have to dive under this desk again.

Sad Old Smile

When you're old your smile doesn't smile any more.
Even when you try hard to smile,
There's something about it, something miserable,
children scream and hide in their moms.
Flattened too many tires, bounced too many checks.
Had your heart trampled by people you counted on.
The muscles go saggy, you cannot hold up the world by yourself.
And anyway, smiles can lie just as much as words.
People are self-conscious, they know their teeth aren't so great,
so they minimize the amount of real estate on display.
Just remember, this is what the world wants you to do,
Be some old dirtbag better off in the ground,
keeping company with what you have become.
Defy that world, acknowledge only the one
that gives you one more day to draw breath,
in and out, like when you were young.

At Dunn Brothers

I'm at the coffee shop with Rich and I am looking around
at the people reading and playing with their phones,
and I say to him, you know, Rich, because I'm sick,
I'm really aware that everyone around me is dying, too.
We're all headed to a pretty sorry end.

These people here, they are dying but they act like nothing's happening.
A part of me wants to go from table to table and say to people,
Hi, do you know that death is coming for you?
What are you doing about that fact?
And Rich leans across the table and whispers to me,
"I don't think they want you to tell them that, Mike."

I Did A Bad Thing

I dropped a bag of dog poop in my neighbor's trash.

I knew it wasn't nice, but I thought, it's trash, right?

Next day a note in big letters on the dumpster:

"Whoever dropped dog dirt in our trash,
please do not do this disgusting thing again!"

Feeling bad, but also curious --

I mean, why would anyone care so much? --

I crept up to the barrel and opened the lid.

It was an Elizabethan theater inside,
and finger-sized musicians were fiddling and
little men and tiny woman were dancing arm in arm.

I thought of the horror of my zip-locked load,
all this happiness so brutally extinguished.

I walked the dog another way, thinking,

"Well, now I understand."

Angela Peckenpaugh

It makes me sad that Angela Peckenpaugh gave so much of her life to writing and to art, and so little appears about her online.

I knew Angela a bit. I lived in an apartment building beside her apartment building on Bradford Avenue in Milwaukee, from 1982-85.

She was a familiar figure in Milwaukee literary circles. She was attractive, and fun-loving, and she had an interesting eye for beauty,

When I knew her she was exploiting the new color Xerox technologies, creating "still-lives" on the photocopier glass using feathers, ribbons, berries, skeleton keys, and other things she found in antique shops.

She was smart, and I wanted her to like me, or to see that I was worth knowing.

But we never quite became friends. I remember one night we played pool in a bar, and she spread herself across the billiard table to make a corner shot, aware of the effect she was having on others.

I searched the Internet for a picture of her, and could find only one, a group shot of her with writer friends.

Here is the only poem of hers I could find online, from 1977,

Forget 'Ars longa, vita brevis.' Everything's gone in a puff of breath.

Sal

I knew a guy, a friend of Daniele's, who was brilliant
and schizophrenic and had trouble saying the right thing.

I think maybe drugs made him crazy.

At the vigil, Sal was among the people,
many of them punk friends, lined up to give condolences.

I have to say, the punks knew what to say more than the straights --
that's how grief is. They were all suffering.

But when Sal got to the front of the line he blurted out:

"Peas and carrots!"

And he grinned and grimaced as he said it.

I was in a daze myself, and squinted, unable to make out
what his intention was. "Peas and carrots?"

Sal got very serious and sane for just a moment.

"I'm wishing you and Rachel and Jon PEACE
for this terrible loss, and COURAGE to go on
without your beautiful daughter."

Lucy Poem

Failing again to make the New York Times Bestsellers List,
I walk my dog Lucy in the park.
She is the kind of dog who never strays far from me.
And when I speak to her
I tell her what an excellent dog she is,
and how glad I am that she stays off the streets.
When I lay my hands on her,
rubbing her soft ears and scratching her shaggy throat,
and I stroke her rounded, nearly hairless tummy,
she lets me know I am the most powerful
poet to ever draw breath.

Little Jo

Is it ironic to be old
Yet short,
86 years but 4 foot 9?
Assembling breakfast
Jo pushes a stepladder
From cupboard
To cupboard.
My friends are dead and so's
Their kids. TV's no good
Since they took off Bonanza.
She stops me In the hall
One night. You know what
I'd like, she says, before the
Rent went up and moved
Her to a high-rise and put
Me in a crummy duplex,
Some times I'd like to go out
Like I used to, and just
Run around for a while.

Teaching Daniele to Drive

Because she was phobic, it took us six years.

She was afraid of oncoming cars,
so afraid she put her hands up when they passed.

I had to find places where she felt safe,
so I chose cemetery roads,
with their strange curves,
and the mourners making their way back to their cars,
white kleenex against black clothing.

We graduated to suburban lanes, practicing every Saturday,
month after month, until I let her drive us back into the city
the length of South Lyndale Avenue.

Three times she failed her exam,
and each time I encouraged her.
Everyone fails a couple of times, I said.

You'll get it.

But I was shaking the fourth time out,
exiting the car and fretting over how she would take
a fourth failure.

After the exam she sat in the car with the instructor
for what seemed like an hour.

When she stepped out, she walked across the blacktop
toward me, a grin slowly forming on her face,
and I broke down blubbing,

tears running into my mouth,
thinking, This might change everything.

The Tissue

Before she died, my mother lived with us for a year.
She was sick from diabetes.
Her feet were black and had no feeling,
and there was little she still enjoyed in life.
But one day I caught her in the kitchen.
She had dropped a wadded-up tissue on the floor
and was struggling to bend over and pick it up.
Finally she scooted a chair beside it,
stooped, and nabbed the bit of fluff.
It all took about three minutes.
Nothing worked for her any more,
but she was damned if she would leave
a Kleenex where everyone could see it.

Old Girlfriends

I'm not supposed to but I think of them.

Not the way they are now, wise and complicated,
but the daffy way it was joyful to please me
when we were young and things were possible.

What a blessing their kindness was,
the future stretching out like airplane glue.

Me and them alive in the big house together,
Grateful to be able to get at one another.

I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her
And look into her eyes and say thank you
for thinking I was someone to dally with,
that our hours were somehow well-spent.

This one thought she saw something in the man.

This one said, Well, he's not going to hurt me much, or
He's not the one but he'll do for now, moments
Of favor gleaming like a badge upon my heart.

You Taught Me How to Die

The dog was in a coma when we arrived at the hospital.

I lifted him, limp, from the carseat and placed him on the cart.

They took him inside to examine him, then wheeled him back out to me, ready for the injection. My son and I knelt around him for a few minutes, thanking him with words and touches for being a good dog, and for being our dog his entire life. Just before it was time, he opened his eyes, which were so blind now, and so tired from his ordeal.

Then he licked the knuckles on our hands, so solemnly, then drifted back to sleep.

Compassion

I was watching an old movie from Japan
About a dinosaur bird on a destructive rampage
When the phone rang.
It was my friend Jeff, who had lost his family
In a highway accident a year before.
I paused my movie to talk to Jeff.
He said he was still struggling,
Unable to focus on his work,
That he missed his little son and two daughters,
And the talks he had with his wife Marianne,
After the kids had gone to bed
And I nodded and said the empathetic things
But all the while my finger was on the pause button,
Waiting to see what would happen to Tokyo.

My Boy Jon

My son is 30, and he has struggled with serious depression his whole life.

As a teenager he had suicidal impulses, which he pondered deeply,
picking out rooftops to fall from.

It was especially hard after his sister died, and he became
everything to us,

Still hearing the voices, still feeling the urges.

But he promised he would not break our hearts that way,
not our only remaining child.

So he goes through the days still feeling the call, shaking it off,
putting up with his life

As an act of love to us, as a gift of suffering.

If he could endure his pain for me, I decided,

I can do the same for him.

Take the Worst Thing

Take the worst thing that ever happened to you
and instead of being destroyed by it
make it your cornerstone,
the source of your power.

Find a way to refashion it as a wonderful gift,
the thing that defines you and sets you apart.
Say, if I can survive this and learn from it,
I will wake up every day singing.

For God to Be Alone

all those years in the dark
and to suddenly have us
swarming all over him

Not made in his image
but kissing and kissed
despite the mistakes we
make on the carpet
it's why we exist

‘Grieving orca still carrying her dead calf more than 2 weeks later’

A ceremony is underway, and people still don't get it.

The young are dying, but nobody sees,
or they think we need more counseling, more sedation,
to be put in a room, to remain silent, to be hidden away.

If we assigned volcanoes for our distressed children
to leap into we would quickly run out of volcanoes,
the sacrifices would be assigned numbers
and told to go home, sit in a quiet place
until your number comes up. Our job is to protect
the people we love but how do we protect them
from a world marinating in shame that has given up,
that accepts this culling of the young,
our perfect children the world could not make room for,
and so they beach themselves, perhaps if the numbers
keep rising, if we carry our dead children in our arms
to the store, people will gasp and say We have to change ...
everything.

Eyes Out, Ears Peeled

It's the best I can do
To be on the lookout
For the sight of you.
I don't know where
I don't know when
But how I ache
To see you again

I Call 911 On My Tumor

"I'm being abused by a tumor," I say.

"We'll send a squad car directly," the voice says.

Cop arrives, wants to know what the deal is.

Tumor and I both talk at the same time.

"It lives inside me and whispers terrible things," I say.

"He is the most awful, awful person," the tumor says.

"Well, I gotta take one of you in," says the cop. "City policy."

"Well, take the tumor," I say. "It wants to kill me!"

"Any truth to that?" the cop wants to know.

Tumor leans forward and confidentially says,

"This man hasn't changed his underwear in three days."

Cop grabs me roughly, reads me my rights and cuffs me.

"No, I'm the good one!" I cry. "This is my house!"

Cop lowers my head as I slide into the back seat.

"This is so messed up," I complain.

"You'll learn what's messed up, if you don't shut up," the cop says.

"It's not right," I whisper, as we speed away.

Tumor waves So Long from the kitchen window.

Servicing the Heart

You must not ignore it, it requires your attention.

See that it is regular.

Remind it you are in this thing together.

When there are signs of trouble, intervene.

A tired heart needs encouragement.

Praise it for its efforts, sympathize with its moments of uncertainty.

What does it know, it is sealed away under the bars of the chest.

It only knows what you tell it.

A soft massage may restore its confidence.

In extreme cases, it may need cleaning out.

Put it to your lips and blow it like a shofar,

all the hearts in hearing distance will turn and look.

Soak it in Joy and warm water and wring it out tight.

Flush every drop of pain from its chambers.

Every bit of goo,

And remember -- if you drop it,

should it happen to break,

consider it sold.

Candy Slice

You remember, back in the earliest days of Saturday Night Live, Gilda Radner played a rock singer named Candy Slice.

It was not one of her most famous roles, like Roseann Roseanna Danna or Lisa Lupner. Candy Slice was a role that did not offer much growing room. They tried it a few times, then dropped her.

It wasn't her most enduring SNL character. There was really nowhere it could go, unlike Roseanne Roseannadanna.

Gilda played Candy Slice, a drugged up punk rocker, somewhat like Patti Smith. She had to be carried to the stage. And then -- the moment the spotlight found her -- she came alive and raged.

Gilda was so slight -- terribly anorexic, and probably getting by on bennies. All she wore as Candy was a tiny T-shirt. There was hardly any woman there, just her furious hair and that flat-chested T-shirt.

And yet she was all woman -- stabbable, furious in her singing, virtually unconscious.

Patti was great but Gilda as Candy was greater, more vulnerable. She was helpless except to give. It was sewn into her body. She was punk and drunk. All our hopes were invested in her unlikely progress. Death awaited her -- but God that smile.

Gilda, I miss you. you gave us everything you had in you. Your self-hatred, your hopefulness, your fragility. The sort of girl who would laugh until milk came out her nose. Beautiful. Human. I miss you. I miss you.

Extracted Confession

Yes, I am the snake that swallowed
The Indonesian woman who was tending her vegetables,
But I have a point of view.
First, I am a snake, and this is what I do.
You don't make a fuss when I swallow
A chicken, or a dog,
At least, nothing like this.
I am just doing my job.
I was hungry -- doesn't that count
For anything in this world?
If you were hungry you would start a war.
All I did was inconvenience one small woman,
Who is in heaven now, that's where I send
All my meals.

Hornet's Last Sting

He likes to sting, he's not sure why. It doesn't feel good exactly, more like intense, and he senses that when his plunger

is wagging deep inside the abdomen of the other, until their eyes pop out of their heads, he's leaving a footprint of his life.

Now the doctor takes him aside and says, "Hornet, you're down to your last sting. The next time you connect may be your last."

Hornet wonders what good he is, unable to impale things on his throbbing unit, to stir their guts with his spasming stick.

He could change his ways and be remembered as the hornet with a heart of gold, who'll strip the stripes right off his back,

offering assistance to those in need. Or will he gird for glory and take to the wind, aching for one last picnic?

Bad Day

When you have a bitter experience

It is easy to lash out.

Is this why God made you, to suffer so?

Or you offer it up to Jesus, who suffered so.

These are poetic notions, but they are not logical.

Some days are fun and others are not.

It's a mixed bag, admit it. And even as far

as Jesus goes, so far as we know, at least,

He only had that one bad day.

Mad

Ginsberg was right, the best minds were all destroyed
by madness, assassinated by madness, but he missed
the obvious, that all are being destroyed best and not best.
We have been made mad by America, made mad by ourselves.
I am mad. My wife is mad. My children are mad,
The ones still alive that have not been killed by their madness.
Because we are mad there will be no grandchildren.
Suicide, addiction, compulsion, violence
All take us when we have nowhere else to look.
We hide it, and we smile, and maybe we seek counseling
Or chant to the sunrise with closed eyes
To get a handle on what is happening
But the root thing does not go away.
If you have written a poem you are mad, driven into your imagination
Because the world would not have you.
And nowadays all of us have written a poem
Because the world is too impossible, Ginsberg was right.
The young are made mad by the absence of love,
The old are mad made because love comes up short.
We all have guns to stave off the madness,
In our drawers, our car trunks, our safe deposit boxes.
We have all buried bodies by the light of the moon --
Our mothers and fathers, who helped make us mad.

People say, "You should seek help for that problem you have."
"You say, 'What can they try that has not already failed?'"

Give me some pills, assign me some reading, ask me
With a bemused expression on your face,
"Have you ever thought of it this way?"

And then you say the dumbest thing I have ever heard.
The best minds of my generation have been salted away,'
Now we are working on the second-best tier,
Mad at the system, mad at the expectations, mad
At the lies we are told to feature prominently in our speech.
Mad into groups so we feel mad together.
Mad at our desires that are never fulfilled.
Mad at our politics which could not be more mad.
Mad at one another though we yearn to be loved.
Mad at the world which seems ready to go,
To make more mad smoke and burn more mad dead,
Mad at the TV and mad at our cars, mad at the Internet,
Mad at the man next store and his mad little wife.

Ginsberg was right, we are mad at our lives, and this broken art
Is all we can show, these broken words that make us mad,
And wish for better for our children's children,
If there will be some, if they are not also made mad

Ritalin

I-- don't know -- just where I'm going
But that way is north
So I can't be -- but a block or two from home.
Look at that sunshine -- I don't feel alone
It comes riding through the treetops,
And the kids waiting at the bus stop
And how about that -- a goldfinch hopping by the hedge,
Its cheeks so rosy red
When the Ritalin is in my veins
I tell you things aren't quite the same
And I thank God that I'm so aware
And I thank God that I want to care
I'm in my sailor's suit and cap
Skipping from this sidewalk onto that
Cause when the Ritalin starts to flow
I never again want to say the word No --
And I really don't care what you know ...
I just want to go -- go -- go -- go --

I -- have made -- a big decision
I have opened wide my vision
To take a walk into the hood
And every step feels purposeful and good

I take pictures of the things I see
Uploading them for my online company

Ritalin -- it's my life, and my wife likes
seeing me so cheerful and upbeat these days
And the poems and pictures are also a treat
It puts a bandaid on my wounds
The kind with Fred Flintstone saying Yabba-dabba-do
It blocks out politicians making ill-advised sounds
And all the motorcycles and parked cars
And all the dogs yelling from their back yards
I'm in here! Don't come close! Scratch my ears!
Tell me I'm a good dog! Tell my peers!
Tell the world I'm locked up in here!

And I really don't care what's what
But I really don't care about them that much
I feel the morning' tickling touch
Just you my gorgeous soul and your pinwheeling eyes
Just you and this sweet 6 AM surprise
And the secret of our happiness
The secret I am signaling
The secret of the thrill that is positively happenin' --
What is it again?
Tell the pharmacist when

It's really not a sin --

It's Ritalin

Goodbye

I lie awake, and I need to go to sleep
But I cannot sleep, thinking of you.
All I can think of is what there is between us.
It is my promise that I will bleed for you,
Bleed out all that I have for you.
Die in your arms loving you
Telling you what you have been to me.
There are many things I cannot do
But I can certainly bleed for you.
I want to look into your eyes
And see all that I know about you
All that you have suffered,
All the times you have been wronged,
All the times the world has knocked you to the ground,
And all the times you struggled to get back on your feet,
And you were wounded but you found strength anyway
And continued in this life, and found a way to laugh again.
Bless you, my dearest, and bless you some more
And I am the poorest thing you could look at,
Every bone broken, left to die,
And willing to die to look into your face.
Forgive me my dearest for being a rat,
For being a coward from moment to moment

But you know I am not a coward now,
Not a liar though I may tell a lie.
I will bleed for you y love
And I will do so with tears running down my body.
I will bleed my thanks that you gave me my life.
I will let it escape from me
As a payment of a debt
And because I am saying goodbye to you
Dear friend of my life.



Kraken Press

1841 Dayton Avenue

St. Paul MN 55104

[mikefinleywriter/kraken](#)