

A black and white photograph of a picnic table partially submerged in a river or stream. The table is on the left side of the frame, with its legs and benches in the water. In the background, a waterfall cascades down a rocky ledge, creating a misty spray. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the light. The overall scene is serene and somewhat surreal.

Hidden Falls

Mike Finley

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I Saw a Deer, Now I Must Write a Poem

I saw a buck bolt onto Highway 5, down by the airport,
where workers are fixing the bridge.

Suddenly it was there, standing by the shoulder,
its side all rough as if scraped against stone,
then bolting into traffic, dodging cars,
leaping over the lane divider,
skidding away from a trailer truck, then vaulting
onto a bank of unaccustomed slag, and dancing, whitetail
bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour,
it was lucky it didn't get run over.
Motorists were shocked, workers stared open-mouthed.
The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled
terror, confusion, the suggestion of reproach.

Deer and construction sites don't mesh,
the deer so fragile sprinting between bulldozers.
The overarching sense that road construction is wrong
and cars should pull over and give the natural order
the right of way and any poet seeing a deer
in the wild must file a complete report,
express solidarity with the animal,
remorse for the thud of mankind,
acknowledge complicity in the hazing
of innocent blood.

I was thinking that if deer
had short legs and made grunting noises
there would be fewer poems about them.

The Blue Bicycle

The woods at Hidden Falls echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry wood. "How much longer?" my young son Jon wanted to know.

My daughter Daniele was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," my bride Rachel joined in, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. It was 1994 and I was in heaven, luring my kids into the cold to see something remarkable.

We came to a clearing, our breath frosting up before us. "It's here," I announced.

There was no sound but the gentle poof of snow-clumps landing. Then Jon cried out, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a cottonwood. There, about ten feet up, was a rusted bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had grown around the bicycle. The riding bar was enclosed in wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I came across it a few days earlier, walking the dog. I had passed that spot a hundred times and not noticed. Who looks up to see a bicycle in a tree?

Based on the bike style, the corrosion, and the absence of tire rubber, I guessed the bicycle had been in the tree for 40 years. It was all rusted except for a path of pitted blue enamel below the handlebars.

The four of us were giddy at the idea of a bicycle growing in a

tree. How did it get there? Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree grabbed onto it and absorbed it in its wood?

Whose bike was it, and would its owner remember it?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding?

Everyone agreed, on the way back to the car, that it was a wonderful thing, and we should keep our eyes keen for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned.

But the next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- so was the tree. A rising river has no trouble undermining trees rooted in sand.

I scoured the area for the bike, to no avail. The spring vegetation was already deepening – thick enough to hide a jutting pedal or rusted rim.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bike. I returned several times, to see if I had merely misplaced it. Sometimes I thought I glimpsed it. But it was just a curl of riverbank vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

I felt like the archeologist Hermann Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, only my Troy then disappeared. What the earth lifted up, it then took back. Everything was in on it. Every falling leaf hid it. Each clump of snow buried it deeper. Every footfall sank it deeper in the ground.

It all goes. My children are grown. But in 1994 we saw a bicycle ride through the sky, its wheels still turning in the breeze from the river.

Cottonwood Tree

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.

Old Saw

Out walking with Red, we came 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?

A Jar in Tennessee

I am walking Beau on a crisp winter morning at Crosby Farm alongside the Mississippi, an undeveloped park with lots of paths cutting through the trees along the shore. A perfect place for a scofflaw to let his dog run wild.

And I have a mini-cassette recorder in my pocket, a generic blister-pack Sony. They are great for taking notes when driving, or out for a walk somewhere. Sometimes people see you and think you are schizophrenic, talking to your hand, but that is small price to pay, in my mind, for being able to "write" on the fly.

The morning is gorgeous, with crisp new powder everywhere, and white vapor rising from the river. For just a moment, a four-point deer poked his head into a clearing. Beau, being a bit blind, pays him no mind.

My dog begs me to chase him. It's his favorite game, a role reversal because chasing others is the center of his life otherwise. My knee is still sore, but I pound along for a hundred yards or so, bellowing like a dog-eating bear. He adores that.

We take several switchbacks, going deeper into the trees. When we arrive at the riverbank, I feel in my pocket for the recorder. It's gone.

You know how when something is gone you check every pocket eleven times to make sure it's gone? This was that kind of gone. I figure I either dropped it when I made my last note, or it fell out of my pocket during the little jog. So I begin backtracking. The dog wants me to chase him some more, but my mood is darkening

and I decline.

The snow is thick, but there are many deer and rabbit and human footprints. A recorder could easily vanish into any of them. I calculate in my mind the loss of the unit -- maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them. I look everywhere I walked -- about a two-mile distance -- for the little machine. No luck.

I was nearly reconciled to the loss when I spotted the unit lying on a patch of thin snow. The battery and tape compartments were both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the snow, as if a squirrel or crow had given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I popped the machine back together and pushed the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I heard my own voice. I was talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I had visited on business a couple months earlier. On the tape, I was sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars crouched by the highway signs, and the advertising, with the nearly naked models, and the infinite pastel rows of high-rise apartment buildings.

And now I am standing in a clearing in the forest, 7,000 miles away, hearing my high, sped-up voice. The woods are so quiet that this little machine and its tinny little speaker ring clear through the air. Nearby crows, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer bough.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea what I was

feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flipped the tape over -- I did not want to tape over this interesting travelogue -- and there was my daughter Daniele's voice, talking to a caller on the phone. I reuse my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape was perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight, back before we got Beau. Now her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she used to sound like. I knew I couldn't tape this over, either.

Beau, meanwhile, was looking at me with that panting grin dogs wear when they are in their element to the hilt. But the look on his face just now is all wonderment and admiration. He "understands" very little that I do, but this latest trick, picking something up in the woods and having it talk to me in my own voice, takes the cake.

This is not the end of my story. Beau has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him. Dogs to run with, people to love. At one point he gets to paddle in a canoe, with a life jacket on. Disasters rain down upon our house, and the sun comes up afterward and dries the rain up. Beau catches a bunny, and lets it live. Beau is struck by a car one night -- and it lets him live.

But I choose to end our story here, in the woods, kneeling by the fallen mini-cassette recorder.

It was the look I saw in Beauregard's eye, the look of a knowing one, a holy of holies at last. He had made the difficult crossing, from a crazy, impulsive, demanding animal to one who saw, and

enjoyed, the life we shared.

Wallace Stevens once wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," about coming upon a human artifact on a wild hillside. Placing anything human in the wilderness changes everything, just like in the time travel stories. The consciousness is contagious. Just as owning a dog is a kind of portage, in which your soul enters the dog forever and vice versa -- a miracle.

It's entirely likely, since he is a French poodle, and Stevens is the poet of that breed. And it was such a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift in the air like micro-fine confetti in the morning breeze.

Jacob the Crow

Down by the river the crows are calling in the cold.
Some have a metallic sound like a clang,
Others sound pinched as if the call
Were squeezed out from inside, like paste,
And spewing the last dab that is in them.

Just now I hear a sound that jerks me around,
The hairs stand spike upright on my neck.
It is the sound of a boy calling out, *Ahhh!*
The voice vibrates as if running downhill,
And the sound bounds out of him that way,
Every thump a reverberating Ah!
I expect to see him waving a mitten
From the knoll across the marsh.

But it is a crow, perched low in a maple.
It dips its beak, and calls again *Ah!*
And for a moment I believe the crow and boy are one,
And the crow is saying, I saw it all,
And I alone survived to tell.

A boy of eleven, bursting from a screen door
And running to a field, past the creek that runs
Through there, and stomping wet-footed
through familiar places,
A journey that ends in a sack in the dark

in the trunk of a car in the bearded black spruce.

But when the man opens the lid the bag is empty
And the boy is gone, he was ushered away,
Installed alive in the topmost branches.
When people cluster like clucks at the scene
the black angels circling above mock their sorrow –
Why seek him here, the boy is flown.

And the eyes that adored every wild thing
Are different now, they do not blink,
The mouth never yawns, the limbs do not
Stretch out in bed at night like a song of skin
And humming blood and growing bone.

He who begged to be set loose was.
And now it is he who alights on the highway at dawn,
Stripping muscle from the runover body.
The other birds bray
About shiny tidbits fetched in the light of day,
They thrive like men on predictable dreams.

But behind the dull black bead of eye
Is a boy who knew darkness deeper than a well,
And cold more pitiless than snow,
Who knows the heart endures
What winter cannot kill,
And blinks.

Springtime

When the floodwater rises
it drapes the twigs and stems
with the leaves and gunk stirred up.

Then when it recedes the muck
clings to the branches
in the shape of the water's drift.

The bushes seem populated with
puppets and dolls
with papier-maché blouses

and bunched up clothes.

And when the breeze comes through
it lifts up their skirts and they dance.

Upon Borrowing Money To Pay Taxes

I wander down to the riverbank
where the two great rivers join.
It is a drizzly day and my shoes sink
into the brown ooze of April
like laden canoes.

I think of my accountant, pale and
eager for the rest she has earned,
the long sleep and the margarita
suspended above like a salty-eyed angel.

I rejoice in her triumph;
she is indifferent to my pain.

In the river a brown mallard quacks
and her mate quacks back,
his head and neck as green
as the money of the saved,
and I wonder why was I born.

The Horror of Hidden Falls

My mom, before she left for a lengthy trip to Kentucky, paid off her car lease and gave me the keys. It was a pretty red Taurus with honey-colored upholstery. We were grateful for the gift, but unsure of her one qualification:

“Don't let the dog in the car. I'm coming back in the winter, and I want it to be in good shape.”

We agreed, but we knew we would likely violate the order. Because, how do we get our big poodle Beauregard to the park, which he likes, without driving him there?

So I violate the request, and after a month, no great damage was done to the car seats. I'm down at Hidden Falls with Beau. He is looking up at me sheepishly, my signal that he needs to take a dump. I take out my plastic bag, and wait for him.

The pedigreed champion squats in a primitive shape – his ears lower even further, emphasizing the humiliating nature of the task. But there's a disgusting hitch in the action, as Beau can't quite shake free of the thing he's getting rid of.

I must explain the problem with poodles. Unlike other dogs, their coats never stop growing. That's why they need grooming. But poodle hair grows everywhere, including the hairy hindquarters, right up to the abyss. What is happening has happened to me before, usually about two months after a grooming. It is the day the hair back there has grown to just the right length to obstruct the free flow of poop.

Still hunched over like a hissing black cat, Beau looks back at his

butt, at the suspended poop, and then back again at me, imploringly. Then he steps in a half-circle and stumbles into a patch of burdock.

"Oh, Beau, you stupid dog!" But it wasn't his fault. It's just the way his butt worked.

I am sorry to say that things got worse.

Usually I have something like a paper towel or plastic bag with which to perform the poop-dislodging procedure. I have used a decaying newspaper found in the woods, an empty McDonalds coffee cup, even a set of three check deposit slips with my name and address in the upper left-hand corner, fanned out to maximize their surface.

I used a handful of fresh-fallen snow once. Beau crossed his eyes over that one.

But today, all I have is the plastic bag. I use it for a few seconds, then for some reason I don't want to keep using it, and the problem is still not solved, and all I have left is two twenties, which I don't feel like breaking.

Exasperated, I uproot a fistful of grass, and use that to improve matters. It is a mess, but at least we succeed in getting the main poop portions out of the dog and into the world at large.

So we're limping back to the car, him on the leash, his backside still badly blotched.

But then I remember: my mother's new car. I see it ahead of me, gleaming brick red in the first rays of October sun, like in a commercial. What a beauty!

I may not know everything about this cockamamie thing we call life, but I knew this: My mom won't like if I smear dog shit all over her upholstery.

So I open the trunk, take out a blanket I was saving for deep-winter survival, tuck it around the back seat. There isn't enough to cover the backrest part, just the seat cushion. So I leverage the dog, very slowly, onto the blanket and sit him down.

"Now you lie down!" I tell him sharply. He complies with the request. I start the car and head up the 150-foot high hill leading out of Hidden Falls and back up the river road.

The shift in horizon causes Beau to stand up, with his butt touching the honey-colored backrest. I glance at the upholstery, at his butt, at him.

"Lie down!" I command in the rear view mirror.

He stares at me. "Beau, you lie down right now!"

More stares.

"Goddammit Beau, you get your ass on that blanket and lie down right now!"

He is paralyzed with uncertainty. Oh, we have only practiced the "lie down" command all of 10,000 times. But now he's frozen in the high beams of my fury, and he can't recall what it means. "Lie ... down ...?" Is that the one involving chicken? Where's the chicken?

"Lie down!"

Nothing.

I stop the car, put it in park, open the front door, get out of the car, open the back door, grab the dog by his neck and hindquarters and force him to his knees (and elbows) on the car seat.

"Now you LIE DOWN."

He lies down. And he stays that way, like a sphinx in disgrace, all the way home. Whereupon I lead him inside, take him down in the basement, fill the laundry tub with warm water and soap and load the curly blue animal in, and spray, and sponge, and scrape, and brush, and then finally, both of us exhausted, I let him out.

He dashes up the stairs, shaking the water from his legs and butt, and makes a beeline for the studio couch. I let him go, and lean against the basement wall and sigh.

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.

The Fly

Walking forlorn along the Mississippi,
I felt a deerfly land on my cheek.

Instead of me slapping it, it slapped me!
The tiniest hand you could imagine reared back
and let me have it.
At most I felt a tiny itch.

And then a sound.
I could barely hear.
Perhaps, "britzel ... britzel ..."?

But I got the sense, loud and clear, that it was
warning me about something,
urging me to shape up.

"Listen," it was saying, "I'm going say this once.
Life is pain. Accept it! Accept it,
you stupid, stupid man."

And then it buzzed off.

Now I am downgrading the alert.

It couldn't have meant much. Otherwise,
every insect that annoys you is some kind of angel,
sent to deliver a message.

About what is expected.

About how we must live.

I'm sorry, there are too many insects
for that to be true.

Unmitigated Gall

The oak tree has a gall around its trunk,
the exception to its perfect upright lines
that makes the tree look pregnant
and suggests a shortened life.

But what does a tree know.
Water is drawn, sugar is distributed,
leaves splay themselves in the sun
like stewardesses on layoff.

Photosynthesis wants no more
and the effect of a cancer
at the waistline, a tumor of wood
throwing everything off, is nil.

The game goes on, the process proceeds
despite deformity, despite
circuitousness
through cambium, xylem, and phloem.

Shrooms Gone Wild

the wilderness is underfoot

the mussels on the hulls

sunny caps are glad pagodas

winking in the sun

vaudevillians spin

silver plates on sticks

upturned cup deformed

like a beggar's hand

flash of tiger fishes

changing their direction

the phantom glides

from stump to stump

silver butterflies

like flying menus

tiny acorns tip their hats

to no nutritional value

Uncheated

There is a single day in Minnesota in April
when everything happens at once
the grass, the flowers, the leaves, the sky
and if you are not out that day
or if you are not paying attention
to what is happening around you
you will feel cheated by the world
you will feel that winter made the handoff
to spring and you were somewhere else
and you will wonder what was the good
of all that longing and how did
the air turn kind and sweet again
when you were about your business

Geese

How virtuous they seem this morning
squabbling on Marydale Pond,
pointing in every direction, leaderless,
humming from hard migration.

They are just the most recent group
to descend into St. Paul to rest up,
judging from the goose crap everywhere
like green toothpaste in the grass

Their virtue is their honking courage
attempting this 1400 mile flight
all the way down to Padre Island in the Gulf
across every kind of junkyard and garage.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
drawing attention to the epicness underway
or the brothers who fell to the hunters' guns
or got sick and couldn't flap another flap,
They shut their beaks and kept flying.

The Sugar Trap

To keep yellow-jackets from our tent-site
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.

Sympathy for the Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree at length,

until thoughts rattle around
like roulette balls searching
endlessly like Odysseus for home

Will I inch my way eventually
back to earth and seek grubs
in the soft warm soil

or will I spend a lifetime up here
skullstruck and stupid
reiterating the error of my ways

The Pond

I see trees on the far shore mirrored in a pool
And below the trees the shimmer of cloud.

Below the cloud the reeds bow heads.
Behind, the shadows lengthening.

The skin on the water ripples with breeze
Like a puff of breath on a cup of tea.

Now water-beetle steadfastly rows.
Now the shifting shape of trout.

It is like thinking about thinking
And then thinking about that.

It is duck and goose and heron craning.
It is subtle and wet and intelligent.

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 Sugar House

time to lock the summer house
and bed the waterlines with straw
winter wants its solitude
and double-bolted doors
the sugar house is shutting down
you can hear the babies cry
red cheeks rumpling in the sun
hush little children goodbye

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 not really here,
I'm just saying I am.

Hard Frost

Late in October, and leaves have been falling for weeks.

My dog and I are walking by the river, by a backwater
wearing a new skin of ice, with white vapor seeping from the
wounds.

As the sun creeps over the ridge, its rays hit the tops
of elms and beech trees, and it is like a chain reaction,
the warmth causes leaf after leaf to loosen and fall.

I imagine what it is like in the leaf to be so cold all night
and all the softness of the sugar factory is killed,
so the sun is like a ray-gun that blasts you from your perch.

So you fall, all at once, as the sun finds more and more of you,
falling all at once like wax soldiers in a failed offensive,
falling like soap flakes in an old-time flicker from the Yukon.

And they lay in a heap on the green moist ground
like panting dogs
who have been out among trees, chasing all day, and can only
grin now like the agitated dead.

Because the trees are closing shop for the season,
they are going away from the green and away from the birds,
the trees are departing for a different place.

They are not dead,
they are only gone, and these branches they leave
as remembrances.

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.

Late August

River dispatches spirit as steam
evaporating
in the morning light

The fawns of spring
dance across
dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he
is unaerodynamic
and so he
bumbles along

