



Logically
the
Caterpillar

Mike Finley

Contents

Entrepreneur of the Year	7
Remembering 'Sloth Goes Out on a Limb'	8
Rising Sun Campground	9
A Pat on the Ass From a Flower	11
Albino Squirrel	12
Along I-494	13
Bald Eagle Spotted on a Hay Bale, Near Milaca	14
Worms.....	15
Uncheated	16
Geese	18
Their Cries	19
The Red Noodle.....	20
The Howling	21
Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber	22
Fly.....	23
Jacob the Crow.....	24
Dead Cat for Ray	26
Anteater	31
The Macaw in the Lobby of the Hotel Campeche.....	32
The Business Of Bees	33
Gise Pedersen Sets Me Straight	34
The Imperfect Tree	35
Hamsters	37

The Sugar Trap	38
Baboon Bride.....	40
Fishflies	43
There Is A Bear	45
Moose Cow	48
Half Past St. Mark's	49
Palp	50
Happy the Frog.....	51
To a Woodpecker	52
Parking Lot	53
Cottonwood	54
Cholla's Revenge.....	55
Sparrow in the Hangar	56
Migration of the Harriers.....	58
The Gall	59
Gust	60
Walking With a Friend By the River in Winter.....	61
God And Hippopotamus	62
Identifying Mushrooms ~ North Arm of the Echo Trail, 2003	63
New York City.....	64
The Beagles Of Arkansas	65
Hard Frost.....	66
I Saw a Deer So Now I Must Write a Poem	67
Where Birds Fare Well	68

Late August	69
Alongside Beggar’s Creek	70
The Monster	71
Puff	72
At Swanson Lake.....	73
My Poor Fish	75
Love Song of the Louse	76
The Iliad	77
The Wolf Shed	79
Slugs.....	80
The Penguins Of Rio, 2011	81
Horses Work Hard	82
Passing Through Nobles County on a Clear Day.....	83
Last Minneapolis Bear.....	84
A Very Bright Day on Hammonasset Beach	86
Room Under the Rock.....	87
Springtime	88
Did You Know?.....	89
Spring Green.....	90
Nose to the Sidewalk.....	91
Naked, At The Taylor Falls Campground.....	93
Tumbling Tumbleweed.....	95
Do Birds Have Knees?.....	96
The Trumpeter at Willow Falls	97

Not Far From The Beach At Plum Island.....	98
Death by Gopher.....	99
Talking Fly.....	100
Picnic Island ~ Two Interpretations.....	101
Logically the Caterpillar.....	102

Entrepreneur of the Year

This spider studied real estate.

She built her web at the corner station
over a bright sign flashing Quaker State –
and now her customers hang at her place.

The reason her business is such a sensation?

Location, location, location.

1988

Remembering 'Sloth Goes Out on a Limb'

A children's book I could not finish
took this creature's endless journey
and stretched it out across 50 cruel pages.
Despised as a sin, Sloth embodied redemption,
countering a sluggish metabolism with faith.
Time was not time for him. Deadlines went unmet.
He advanced resolutely, poking through the canopy,
stroke by stroke, through rain, through darkness,
hand over hand and claw by claw,
he said, "I will get to you, somehow or other,"
crawling purposely toward the light.

2003

Rising Sun Campground

The signs didn'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 invader.*

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 being ripped to shreds
and an ambulance parked on the stony path,
parents and young ones mauled
like pigs in their blankets,
we two would pack in silence and putter away
to the next campsite down the road.

2008

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 a fly, for instance – the camera is able to show all planes of field.

The movie delights in showing a caterpillar inching up a leaf, or a water strider skipping across a puddle, held aloft by surface tension.

My favorite shot was of a honeybee landing on a flower. We know what happens then: the bee extracts the honey while brushing up against the pollen parts of the flower, which it then carries to another location, encouraging new growth through cross-pollination.

But this scene takes us deeper. The bee holds close to the flower's pistil, then sinks a long tongue down the stem, and sucks up the honey like a milkshake.

But 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 hairy backside of the bee.

It is eerily erotic -- the lovee squeezing the rear end of the lover, while tacking a message to its back, an advertisement for itself.

There is more of me, it is saying -- more, more.

Now share what I am with the meadow!

2013

Albino Squirrel

He's not pretty.

He looks like he's been stung by hundreds of bees.

Whole chunks of him are missing,

where birds pecked him and other squirrels sank their teeth.

Of course – a white creature has no camouflage,

every animal can pick him out

in the grass, on a branch,

anywhere except on snowy ground

which he tends to sleep through.

He is like a celebrity, every time

he steps out into the world

everything zeroes in on him,

like a bull's-eye, he feels like

he's tap-dancing in the spotlight

every moment of his life

2000

Along I-494

Weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk leading up
to the apartment complex, past the burnt lawn.

An iron banister is rusted at the base, and leans loosely.

The door window is taped over, covering up
what looks like a bullet hole.

Char marks on the stucco show where the fire leaped out.

And over the doorway the building's name:

Heritage Square.

2005

Bald Eagle Spotted on a Hay Bale, Near Milaca

See that ripped young bird test his talons on the twine.

He could fly off with it all for a nest,

then shower the world with his droppings.

See how full of himself he is!

White on top, brown below --

the perfect emblem of America.

2007

Worms

You must have a sense of humor when you create
three times your body weight in castings every day –
The most powerful fertilizer in the known universe –
And they are just pink sleeves of flesh turning the stuff out.
Worms don't get our jokes about early birds,
So they are not offended by this genocidal cliché.
We laugh when they are laid out end to end on sidewalks
Like purple meat noodles in the rain,
as if that is where they want to be,
subject to every shoe and bike tire that comes along
When worms are just people, like ourselves most days,
Doing what they can to not drown.

2013

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
while you went about your business

When the Moon Looks Down Upon Us ...

it sees the sea, and it remembers
the rolling and pitching in the dark
and the contractions that signaled
it was time to take its leave
And though it rests now like a pearl
hung high in the night
It rose out of water and into the light,
dripping and shining like
the scalding tears of a child being born

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 South Padre Island
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 took sick and couldn't flap another flap,
They just shut their beaks and kept flying.

2011

Their Cries

Underfoot the worms awake.

The sudden flood from the oscillating sprinkler

is intolerable to them, and they push to the surface

pink and brown and nearly straight

like little socks hung out to dry

and exposed to the idiot sun

and if I had the right kind of ears

I am sure I would hear them gasp.

2009

The Red Noodle

When you see the red noodle atop the turkey buzzard's head, and the bird appears to be suspended in space, don't be like the small child in the cradle, swatting at the mobile. This is a sign to you. It is saying it's time to get up from the hammock you have spent all morning in, and move around a little.

2012

The Howling

Bruce Cockburn intones the song “Beautiful Creatures,”
and his voice rises until he is like a chimney
sending sparks high into the sky.

And what Cockburn is saying –
the beautiful creatures are going away.

Their beautiful eyes, their beautiful cries,
the tree frog, the antelope, the radiant butterflies,
the clarity of their hunger.

the fierceness of their love.

We will watch them go and be unable to stop them,
because other things matter more.

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

2014

Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber

The National Ocean Service web site explains

that sea cucumbers are not actually cucumbers,

nor are they vegetables or toll house cookies.

In fact they are animals, echinoderms, like starfish.

The misleading site features a picture

of a delicious looking chocolate chip sea cucumber

with no warning that the chocolate chips

are not really chocolate chips, rather

they are some kind of brown protective camouflage markings --

and the name does them a Darwinian disservice,

undermining the dignity they are entitled to in the biosphere,

and disappointing to people hoping to enjoy the taste

of real chocolate chip cucumbers.

2015

Fly

I felt a deerfly land on my cheek.

Instead of me slapping it, it slapped me!

The tiniest hand you could imagine 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 it was warning me about something,
urging me to shape up.

"Listen," the fly said , "I'm going say this once.

Life is pain. Accept it, you stupid, stupid man."

Then it buzzed off.

Impressive, I know, nevertheless I am downgrading the alert.

Every insect cannot be some kind of angel,
sent to deliver a message from the cosmos.

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

2012

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.

1999

Dead Cat for Ray

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm
in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.

In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat,
very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut
around it.

Its back was arched in a defensive posture,
its face pulled wide in a final hiss,
and in its mummified condition you could distinguish
each vertebra and tooth.

I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,
perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.

The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life
and death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen –
the grave of Suicide Minnie,
the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.

That night we lay down in the township road
and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into est,
a sculptor, painter, performance artist.

He flew back home the following day,
and I did not hear from him for two years,
when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.
The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut
wood, hairy ropes, chains.

Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag,
but he had something else, a ferocious vigor
that moved me.

At the heart of the installation he had suspended
on an invisible line the dead cat from Sveringen's barn,
and it turned slowly in the warm air of the gallery,
whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead
creature as art, and yet everyone who saw was
overwhelmed at the brave agony of the cat.

In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and
wrongheaded impulses

here was life and death hanging in a haze,
it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night
and taken my holy treasure from me,

the other part gratified he thought it so powerful
that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove
from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.

And astonished to see it now, in its current setting,
twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college, him always private, a dog-eared copy of *The Drunken Boat* by his bed.

His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks to straighten himself up.

Once I went to his room to listen to *Highway 61 Revisited* and came upon his diary and read a few pages, and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own, in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a month in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.

Every 20 minutes the train passed near, but my friends and I were so high we thought it was charming when the milk vibrated in the refrigerator.

I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was playing

and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus, and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.

Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.

The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type, and it never mattered.

You worked for three years teaching painting
at Walpole Penitentiary,
to murderers and rapists and killers.
On the last day you told them that you were gay
because you wanted them to know you, and that a person
could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them
to feel obliged to kill you in the process.
I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.
When people started to die you assured me you didn't do
the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.
You visited twice after the cat exhibit,
and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives
took a sharp turn away from one another.
For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.
Then Malaysia, doing I don't know what –
and that was where I lost you.
I called your parents, I called your friends,
no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.
I needed to understand because we were friends.
You once gave me a wonderful compliment,
you called me a human being
and that was so meaningful coming from you,
for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy
was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying
attention to things.
I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight

of the world to direct
you would be turning in it now
like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused
beyond it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw
but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert
to life and life's unlikely opportunities
and the aurora borealis would shift and slide
and light up our faces like 1977,
and the light show on the Velvets in 1968,
and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back
of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,
when we were young and not yet treed or backed into
impossible corners, and the world that I saw, Ray,

the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin
and the manic dazzle of your eyes,
radiant artist and friend of my youth,
I would have them know.

1988

Anteater

He's a tough negotiator.
He doesn't just eat you,
he eats your wife
and he eats your children
and he eats your mother
and he eats your cousins
and he eats your insurance agent
he eats everyone you know.
He eats your whole city
then tucks the last ant in the side of his maw
and says
I'm sorry,
I can't help it
I was made this way,
I require vast quantities of ants to survive.

2002

The Macaw in the Lobby of the Hotel Campeche

How blue is his plumage. How startling his eyes. How bold his language is.

He is like Groucho, greeting every arriving guest with a sarcastic remark. It's no concern of his who is offended.

He has to have his say.

They have done to him what is often done to the funny and the beautiful.

Sealed him up in a cell with burnished bars.

1979

The Business Of Bees

When prices are normal
And weather cold, bees clump
In a knot, suck sugar
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high
It's cheaper to dump them
Out of their drawers and buy
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are
Tumbling, hear: sugar
Is dear, the snow lies
Buzzing on the ground.

1977

Gise Pedersen Sets Me Straight On A Matter Of Natural History

"No, you've got this part all wrong,"

Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds

With the back of one hand.

"You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs

Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch

In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,

Because their legs are just tiny twigs,

They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,

So all they can do is plop themselves

Flat on the ground and make the best of it

There on their haunches. And furthermore,

What is this sobbing business? It's poetic

But hardly accurate. Their cry is more

Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,

Before he died, liked to imitate

On his walks home from school.

Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,

Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,

Only to hear out there in the darkness

The cry of a creature pressed close

And shouting from the cold of this earth

To all who might hear him:

VIP-poor-VEE!"

The Imperfect Tree

The large silver maple in our front yard

it is not a perfect tree ...

It does not burn bright like a sugar maple in September ...

Nor the radiant leaves of the scarlet maple ...

It seems suburban with its silver skin and leaves ...

It grows so fast its trunk has split with stretchmarks ...

So thirsty that the rest of the lawn is dry ...

In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by the ton ...

It is not a perfect tree, but ...

It is a patient presence, and it cools the house like an extra roof

...

It shields us from the glare of the low-lying sun ...

Cardinals and blue jays convene there for their business ...

And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

Our neighbor plans to cut his down ...

It blocked sunlight from his home, which is much driven past,

for its luminous openness and J C Penney's charm ...

Which is admittedly not very apparent if a tree is blocking the view ...

But he's just tired of the ordinariness ...

So out comes the chainsaw, and down goes the tree, and into the house

it goes, one armload at a time ...

I wonder if it feels like an honor ...

After all those years in the cold and the dark and the rain ...

Those thankless, dripping, freezing years of service ...

To finally be invited by the fire?

2001

Hamsters

Several times I have opened an eye at night
certain someone was moving in the house,
but it was only the chrome wheel turning
Or we would be making love and hear the sound
of metal on metal from the children's room –
the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.
The crunch of seed between pointed pearls,
the scurry and blink of prisoners.
In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

1990

The Sugar Trap

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite

I filled a pop bottle half-full

with sugar water and strawberry jelly.

As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim

and one after another descend

to sample the pink nectar.

By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,

most of them drowned

with a few still clambering over

their fellows to climb out.

But the walls are too steep

and their wings too wet

and the water is too sweet

to avoid very long.

First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,

delighted with their find,

enough sugar to feed their community for a month.

The sight of their comrades floating face-down

does not seem to be a major minus to them.

It is only when they set that first foot

in the water that they suspect,

and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.

It is impossible, they fall back

into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.

Furious, they 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.

1988

Baboon Bride

The summer I turned 16, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, I took a job as zoo guide at Jungle Larry's Safari Island in Cedar Point, a big Ohio amusement park. My job was to be a groundskeeper, and eventually a caretaker of every kind of animal. My jungle identity was B'wana Mike.

I was the luckiest young guy in the world – sun-drenched 18-year-old girls, Lake Erie sands, a jungle outfit, a dorm room, the Velvet Underground, a 1967 Buick Special. I read books by Alan Watts, dressed in a Japanese bathrobe, and burned sandalwood incense from my window. All the girls were older because I lied about my age to get in. My challenge was to love them credibly, the way a sophisticated 18-year-old boy would. It was a summer of lies. I calculate that I did not tell the truth for 100 days.

The opening weekend was Memorial Day. The loudspeakers played "Born Free" over and over morning to night. In my mind I always answered "and now they're in cages." It was exciting because the animals had finally arrived from winter compound. An animal that interested me was the wild olive baboon from Sudan. They have huge teeth and a reputation for viciousness. And vivid asses that no one wants to look at. In the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1932, a busload of Italian soldiers was attacked by a tribe of geladas, who tore the truck to bits and killed and carried off several soldiers. Baboons are fierce, we told ourselves.

We had a big male, Mombasa, and a smaller but equally noble female named Loma. They were incredibly strong and insane-looking. And Loma was in estrus. The first day we got a report that a group of Seventh Day Adventists was aghast because the two baboons were having sex in front of their group. We arrived in time to stake the two animals apart, so only their fingers could touch. This was at Jungle Larry's instruction. Then the terrible thing happened. Mombasa strained all the next night and day to reach Loma. Around 5 AM the next day he leaped

up, and the chain yanked him so hard his neck broke, and he died in a heap of sawdust.

Everyone was upset. We put Loma in a traveling cage and pulled blankets over the sides, like a widow's compartment. We tried to carry on, as if nothing had happened.

My job included raking out the enclosure she and Mombasa had been staked out in. Everyone said, Don't let the baboon get the drop on you. They can tear the eyes out of your head in two seconds. On the third night, after the show shut down, I was raking, and I felt a hand grab my pants pocket.

It was Loma, reaching through the bars of the cage. I nearly let our urine. I put my hand on her hand, and she quickly grabbed it and pulled me down, till I was kneeling and facing her. I could barely make out her golden eyes in the shadow of the cage. I pulled back the blanket to see her clearly. Intensely, she turned my hand over and over and examined the pores of my skin with her eyes, picking microscopic particles from the back of my hand. She was grooming me.

Grooming is a major social activity among primates. It is one way a tribe of creatures living together can bond and reinforce social structures, family links and strengthen relationships. It brings peace to even violent families. I looked at Loma and realized, for the first time, how beautiful she was. And she looked at me as fervently. She was grooming me because she needed someone, and I was it. In the days and weeks left to us, we communicated entirely by touch and by seeing

Summer wore on. Every day I worked, and chased girls when I got out. At night, however, I would sneak onto Safari Island and spent fifteen minutes with Loma. One Saturday I drove to Hammond, Indiana to see a girl who left Cedar Point because I got too fresh. When I found her apartment, and knocked on the door, a linebacker from Purdue opened it. Get lost, was all he said. I raced back to Ohio, to Sandusky, I knew Loma would be wondering where I had gone. When I got back, there was a commotion. The baboon has escaped, one of the guys said.

People gathered under a sycamore tree she had climbed up into. I saw her staring out over Lake Erie. I could see her realizing she was nowhere near home. There was no easy escape route for her to take. I called to her. Loma ... Loma ... She spotted me, hesitated a moment, then began climbing down from her high perch. I was so glad she was safe. I was even able to see her vivid ass coming down the last branches of the sycamore. She backed into my arms and held onto me. It was the only time I ever held her.

Four days later I was scheduled to leave, to start college. I couldn't say goodbye, so I slunk away, and drove across Ohio. And I put her out of my mind, and lived my life.

Twelve years later I was visiting Ohio with my wife. I wanted to show her the zoo where I had worked. I was impressed that the animal areas were more natural now, and more hospitable. We came to the primates area. She was behind see-through nylon cables, not bars. There were eight baboons in with her – all babies and other females. Loma was white in the face now, but she sat like a queen on a log of green concrete. A great grandchild, or a great great clasped in her arms. Loma did not blink but she fixed on me. Life had moved on but she had survived and done well. She had made a career for herself in the jungles of Ohio.

That was my picture of our summer romance, and the beautiful creature who made a man of me.

2015

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.

2011

There Is A Bear

First thing, you must appraise the situation. Might the bear be a friendly bear? Is it wearing a vest and a fez? Does the circus happen to be in town? Is the bear sitting up and begging for a treat? Better hope you have a treat.

Did you notice are there cubs nearby? Did you bring enough treats for everyone? If it is not an obviously friendly bear, you should consider turning and running. Do this even though bears are famously fast. If this bear is unusually slow to follow, running should buy you a good two, three minutes, plenty of time to get your affairs in order.

Some people say to run downhill from a bear. Not surprisingly, it turns out that bears are just as good at running downhill as you are likely to be. Instead of running, step carefully. Try backing away deferentially. Maybe the bear is just feeling territorial and you can get away by with a show of respect, bowing and nodding as you edge away from it. Quite possibly the bear is miles from its home and doesn't really care that you are there. It is just looking for the right path to take. Do not whip out a map to show it.

Pepper spray – you are welcome to try it. But understand that pepper can act as an attractant or a repellent. Bear's choice.

Do you have Cracker Jack or other food on you? If so, get it off you. Bears love popcorn and caramel and peanuts. Distribute it as widely as you can. Distract the bear with easy pickings, and perhaps buy another two minutes. Understand that once treated to Cracker Jack, a bear will want more. How much Cracker Jack did you bring?

Note: Most bears, seeing food distributed on the ground, will understand that the dispersed food is now “in the bank.” They can return and enjoy it any time they like. Whereas you are on the move, and trying to get away from them. You need to be put “in the bank.” Bears are not idiots.

Is there a tree nearby? Go ahead, climb it. If a tree is not tall you can stay clear of the bear for about five minutes. Eventually, however, the bear will simply bend the tree over until you are low-hanging fruit.

If it is a tall tree, you should climb at least 30 feet off the ground, ideally till the trunk is too small to support the bear. But if it can only get close, it will still have the option of whipping the trunk from side to side until you let go.

This is work, but most bears will put in the effort. If the bear gets to you in the tree, even high up, the bear will hurl you down, break your legs and crack your skull, then follow down after you. This only takes seconds.

If you are successful with the tree, hope that you did not throw your food away as suggested earlier. You may be up in the tree for several days, until you faint or fall, or the bear gets bored waiting and leaves. This does not happen often. Most bears find the situation of you being up in a tree weeping entertaining, even if they are very hungry.

Your final option is to fight the bear. If you fight a bear, keep your backpack on. Wear it in front of you, across your beating heart. Fill it with rocks, if rocks are available. Lie face down. You want the bear to get at your heart last of all. Like the king in a game of chess, you must at all costs protect the heart!

Fighting the bear will be the challenge of a lifetime – literally – and in the end you will be broken and gashed open in several places. But the bear, who up until this moment has shown disdain for your abilities, will respect you now.

You will respect yourself as well – you engaged a huge carnivore in physical battle. You will have the satisfaction of knowing you tried everything, if you are still able to feel satisfaction. Do not play dead until you almost are. Admittedly, it is harder to be persuasive then.

Once you have been mauled, and the bear has finished doing things to you, stay where you are. Wait until the bear departs to begin the long ... crawl ... home.

1999

Moose Cow

Rachel and I were drifting apart, in New Haven, 1979.

She was a grad student and fully engaged, I was out of work and depressed.

To piece things back together, we drove up to Baxter State Park in Maine.

But it wasn't working. We stood at a picnic area, yelling at each other.

Suddenly this beautiful/homely moose cow ambled through the area

we were standing in, chewing languidly on creek grass,
until she vanished from sight.

We watched the moose cow exit, then turned to one another,
and laughed.

We have been together, mostly, ever since.

1983

Half Past St. Mark's

Past midnight, the dog stops to sniff the trunk of a tree
that has not yet lost its leaves.

We hear the rustle of wings above,
black forms nesting in the branches, sleeping.

We step away to give them privacy, but they are alerted
and take to the air together.

The crows quietly loop and loop against the streetlight glow,
against the visible half moon.

Each turn they take in the night sky makes a fluttering sound,
causing a shiver in the atmosphere.

Their shape shifts in the darkness, one bird leading them one
moment,
another then taking them a different way.

With me and the dog at a safe distance,
they fall out of formation, tumbling back
into the boulevard tree,
silently, like black birds into a pie.

2008

Palp

The palp in a clam is not that footy thing
that looks like a tongue but is not,
it's the rubbery flaps that guide food
into the bivalve's mouth. Whereas,
palpate is the the art of understanding the body
without opening it up with a saw,
you do it with pushing and knocking
with knuckles.

Palpatine is the emperor in Star Wars
who made electric shoot from his hands.
Palpitations are when the heartbeat skips,
you can sitting there reading the paper
and then there's this rhythm vibrating inside you,
falling down the stairs, head over heels.
All are reminders we are made out of body,
Every muscle connected to our brains,
Going about our daily business,
so close every moment
is palpable.

Happy the Frog

Suspended animation is a trip.

The grin extends from ear to lip.

The gullet expands and lets one rip.

The legs extend from toe to hip

And into the pea soup, smiling, he slips.

1999

To a Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree
till my thoughts rattle round
like Odysseus for home
will I pry apart cambium with my nose
and find grubs in the soft meat
or will I spend a lifetime
skullstruck up a pole
reiterating the error of my life?

Parking Lot

The attendant is angry.

His edger is missing,

And in a crack in the blacktop

Near the corner of Seventh and Wabasha,

Five weeds are sticking their heads up,

Looking for trouble.

1977

Cottonwood

In May the fluff begins to float.
It is the feather of the cottonwood
Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississippi
And shooting into the atmosphere.
How can an airborne thing grow
Into so mammoth a being?
Because it is still light in its wood
This ribbed pillar is mostly air,
With skies of space between every particle
So even as it thumps its giant heart
It is already beginning to fall

2003

Cholla's Revenge

A spine no bigger than my thumb,
poking up from the roadside,
a lifetime spent in a dried out ditch,
California cars with important destinations
speeding by, paying you no mind.
But one day, growing at the rate
of ten centimeters per year,
you're going to make it to the highway's edge
and really give it to somebody's tires.

1995

Sparrow in the Hangar

The bird in the hangar is trying to escape
by the opening at the top
but there's a screen there preventing it.

The bugs clotted in the mesh regard the bird.
Ordinarily they would not feel collegial
but there is a sense they are all in the same soup now.
We're very close to being out,
the bugs insist over their shoulders.
They cling to the screen, to the fresh clean air of freedom
licking their chitinous faces.

The bird knows bugs are idiots
but she is having trouble, too.
There must be a way, but where is it?

You and I watch this drama for an hour,
the bird scanning the length of the arched roof,
searching for a way out.
After the longest time it swoops down to where we are
and escapes via the enormous open door
that is big enough to let an airplane in.

Otherwise, correct me,
but hangars would all be full of dead birds,

airplanes would be buried up to their wings
in the husks of those who perished in despair,
the sparrows, the swallows, the beetles, the bats,
every creature who wandered in
then couldn't find its way out.

Except somehow we do get out,
at least for a time,
and fly far away.

2011

Migration of the Harriers

In November the sky grows dark at their approach,
the harriers, seeking nourishment.

Wingspreads reaching eighteen feet across,
blot out the light, as jagged shadows race across cornfields,
skittish cattle form impromptu stampedes,
fearful of the great birds snatching their young for a snack en
route to Texas.

The harriers take what they want, when they want it.

A convenience store in Claiborne, Missouri, videotaped
a band of a dozen shattering the plate glass and rampaging
through the aisles, tearing open cans of tuna and olives
with razor beaks and wrenching talons,
heedless of the proprietor huddled behind the cash register.
“I'd of pulled out the shotgun but shooting one's a federal
crime,”

the store manager told the reporter.

In Texas the birds weigh down the phone lines and bully other
birds.

They will not take lip from a flamingo.

They steal shrimpers' nets and maraud picnic areas even on
holidays.

And when the world warms they take to the air,
and people to the north have misgivings about the spring
because that means the harriers are returning.

The 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.

2008

Gust

The weather is changing.

The coat hangers jangle
softly in the dark.

2010

Walking With a Friend By the River in Winter

Sometimes it's good to shut up and keep trudging the snowy path.

The dogs chase one another in an ecstasy of play.

The trains below shudder as the freight cars connect.

Because we are not talking we see a young bald eagle
caren overhead on the branch of a cottonwood.

We did not see at first he had a fresh-killed pigeon
in his talons. Now, just a few feet above us in the tree
he plucks the feathers from the body tuft by tuft
and they fall like snow, they fall with the snow,
blood-wet feathers fall peacefully to the frozen ground.

2013

God And Hippopotamus

In the beginning God told Hippo:
Kiboko, I want this bank kept clean.
Your job is to keep the grass in line.

Kiboko answered the Lord saying:
Your will is my will, but please, Lord,
May I loll my sun-hours in the stream?

God thought deeply on the matter;
Finally he said Oh, all right,
Just don't eat all the fish.

Now every night Kiboko mashes clay
Between her hooves. When she goes
She shits and pisses both at once,

Her tail a propeller scattering the mess
Up and down the twilit bank
Distributing it for God to examine.

See? she says, her billiard-ball eyes
Rolling upward to the moon --
No scales!

1971

Identifying Mushrooms ~ North Arm of the Echo Trail, 2003

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 tigerfish changing direction.

The phantom glides from stump to stump.

Silvery butterflies like flapping menus.

Tiny acorns tip their hats
to no nutritional value.

2006

New York City

It was the winter of 1980. I took a late night train
from New Haven, arriving around 5 am,
and wandered over to Central Park.

It was a crisp morning, with frost on the sidewalks and grass.
I sat on a stone bench by a stone wall,
took out my notebook, and began scribbling
thoughts from the train.

Suddenly, a giant pneumatic tube uncoiled in front of me
and blasted me with warm, stinky gas.

It was the bristled trunk of an elephant, standing just
inside the wall. I had chosen a bench at the zoo.

My head and shoulders were dampened by the blast.

The trunk retracted, left me sitting there, with the smell
of sour hay, rotten cane, and the mucous tissues
of a giant land mammal.

2003

The Beagles Of Arkansas

The crash through the bramble at night
resounds in the scraggly hills,
And well in the wake of every foreign license plate
A yapping head and a tumult of eyes plead
to be adopted and taken away.
Scorpions crane their tails to you,
peacocks explode for passing cars,
mud daubers chew hasty cabins on rear-view mirrors.
Everything seems to want out, yet it stays,
prisoners of the nonunion wage.

1978

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.

I Saw a Deer So 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 on 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
loose slag,

and dancing, whitetail bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour -- 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 are 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 a lot fewer poems about them.

Where Birds Fare Well

Swallow on telephone lines,
Doves in the underbrush,
Hawks in ruins and cathedral rafters,
Crows on the shoulders of fallen soldiers,
Peacocks on staircases,
Canaries in the offices of motel managers,
Parrots in rich women's kitchens,
Whippoorwills sobbing
in the branches of trees
on long summer nights.
Sparrows on rooftops, in hedges and haylofts,
Eagles ensconced atop immaculate mountains,
Hérons in marshes,
Swans in canals and in fountains,
Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

1975

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

2012

Alongside Beggar's Creek

The poplar leaves in the breeze
are silver coins that like to shimmy.
They are thousands of tiny cupped hands
saying gimme gimme

1973

The Monster

arises at 6 am daily,
commences abominations
everywhere he goes
he shits on beauty
and not just a little, it is
remarkable how it disperses
an oscillating propeller fans
the shit till it is everywhere
and if you ask him
what he thinks he is doing
he will say, I honor it
with my attention and my stink
he is drawn to beauty
but then must soil it
he wants to be close to it
to climb into its body
it is the very intimacy
that is so unnerving
and after a while things
are not so beautiful
then the monster moves on,
and he takes the family with him
and all of them glad
to lie down among flowers

2002

Puff

We are seed fluff that has been blown on,
We part company with one another
And float into the aloneness.
We wander so long
Borne aloft by breath, aching
To see one another again
Yearning to be stitched together at the foot
And it is like that until one day we come to rest
And realize that we carried the nucleus
Inside us all along, that we arise
From the core of a golden sun
And the day of blooming
Has been gathering inside
The whole while

1999

At Swanson Lake

Little Cora floated in an inner tube,
butt poking through,
and footy-paddled into the reeds.
When she emerged she was covered
with a hundred black leeches.
Her sisters screamed and would not help,
the mother and brother knelt
and began to pick them off
but the young were so small
that when you picked them from a toenail
they squiggled under your fingernail.
Finally the two got to the bathing suit
and the brother began to cry and ran away
because up one sat the mother of the brood,
bigger around than a tricycle tire
so the mom made several forays
to fetch her out, she wished there
were a tool that could pluck monster leeches
from little girls' hineys
but there was only her fingers that could not get a grip
on the slithery thing
and when she finally grasped it around the middle and
tugged it out, making a schlocking sound
and Cora cried with all her might
and stood on the sand,

naked, suckered, and blinking
on the sand.

2013

My Poor Fish ...

can't go to Coon Rapids.

I can go to Coon Rapids

whenever I want –

weekends or after work.

1977

Love Song of the Louse

Life in the forest is necessarily humid.
Moisture gleams from every limb and
your plaintive cursing fills the air.
I know we're not friends, but aren't we still close?
I mark and deposit, mark and deposit.
I whisper to the dendrites my sincerest affection.
Because no one knows you the way I do,
no one inhales you like a rose.
Oh, I am desperate for your scratch,
your tiny comb avails you not.
See, I am doing a slow dance in your fur.

1973

The Iliad

A cavern blasted amid high-standing corn
like the swath of a broadsword
in the prayer-chamber of the house of virgins --
trampled stalks and the crushed green ear,
braid-bearded against the ground, listening
long after the final blow is hurled.

Phantom forces have met on the night-cloaked
food-strewn fields and in their fierce combat
shed blood and laid vegetables to waste.
Their waters turned clay vermilion, their dew
that skidded and sprayed through the night
now glitters in the rosy-fingered dawn.

What German shepherd made watchman by war
and named Ajax after a foaming cleanser
now perks his ears at the scent of raccoon
on potato patrol in his quadrant of corn
and unassisted pads the township road
and accosts the raiding masked intruder?

The din of crash and gnashing fills the plain,
the tears of Ceres and countless nymphs of grain
spatter the sides and gnawed limbs of warriors,
even the light in gin-soaked Yeoman Magruder's

bedroom down by Turtle Lake flicks on
as neighbors near and far attend the clash.

By sun-up only the star-shaped wake remains,
and the trail of scarlet collecting in furrows,
leading through the dazed and shivering maize
to the banks of Jacks Creek's moaning curl,
where face-down in mud and open-bellied
the slack-jaw bandit sips his fill of death.

Back on Farmer Fagan's wooden porch
stout-hearted Ajax hints and whines,
split-cheeked and eyeless, ruffed collar
drips red and the faithful shepherd bleats
and nudges the screen, honored to share
good news in what moments of glory remain.

1979

The Wolf Shed

Needing a roof on a windy night
we came upon a shack above the logging zone.
We tiptoed in the twilight,
afraid someone was inside,
and if so, what they might be.
No one was there so we made our beds
and slept. In the morning
we saw the claw marks in the wood,
and the hair in handfuls,
suddenly free, and drifting
out the door.

1986

Slugs

You can pluck them from their surfaces
and hear the sucking sound of their slime releasing.
Sprinkle salt on them, it is said,
and you break their chemical seal,
and it burns, and they twist from the pain.
In the rain forest they are everywhere
on leaf and stem and stone.
But on the islands where it has not rained in months,
they drag themselves on meager dew
from pebble to twig like dead men left out in the open,
futile horns extending slowly
like a remark you are anxious to hurry along.
They hunch forward gradually, and the weight slides
forward like tiny beached whales
seeking to comfort themselves.
Yellow, brown, black, spotted, red,
they make their way to some lookout place
and lift blind heads and smell salt sea.

1991

The Penguins Of Rio, 2011

(AP) - Thousands of penguins, refugees from the melting Antarctic ice shelves, are washing up on Rio de Janeiro's bacterial beaches.

In recent months more than 4,000 penguins have waddled in at Copacabana, Ipanema, Barra da Tijuca, Joatinga and Leblon.

Citizens, wishing to be helpful, take the creatures to their homes and place them in their freezers, assuming penguins require cold -- which they do, but they also require air.

The result has been hundreds of frozen, asphyxiated penguins, tasting more like seafood than fowl.

Tiago Muniz, a veterinarian at the Niteroi Zoo, believes overfishing has forced the penguins to swim further from shore to find fish to eat.

"That leaves them more vulnerable to getting caught up in the strong ocean currents."

But witnesses report seeing vast flotillas of penguins paddling north past Tierra del Fuego toward Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

And now they are washing up on the shores of Brazil like messengers from God saying, change is coming.

Horses Work Hard

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

1991

Passing Through Nobles County on a Clear Day

It was not a tornado because it was not attached to cloud.
It was a dust devil, a creature of air pressure,
a swirl of turbulence zagging through beanfields on a warm
afternoon,
not giant and forboding, but tawny and tan,
the color of dirt being milled into sunlight,
like a thousand-foot feather tickling the belly of the earth.

1979

Last Minneapolis Bear

We can call her Sally but she doesn't have a name.

She was born near Savage but has lived in the city for twenty six years.

She walks at night and is never sighted by day.

The only people who see her scouring the alleys
are drunks and the homeless and couples under streetlights.

The cops don't know, they stuff themselves
with sandwiches in their squad cars,

They never see shadows slouching through the dark.

When you hear a cat screech, or a dog sound out
from behind a fence,

She is there, bounding down the boulevards.

She walks on grass to avoid leaving footprints.

She knows to let the dumpster lids down softly.

She checks screen doors to find ones that are unlocked.

Lit in floodlights, she snatches northerns
from the spillway at St. Anthony.

She drags a burlap bag of oatmeal across the Stone Arch Bridge.

She pads through the jungle along the Mississippi,

And swims across the narrows under the Interstate in the dark.

She checks the truck dock at Cub Foods
for the day's old vegetables.

Huffing and galumphing she makes her way
to the mushroom caves

That were worship centers years before,

before the railroad companies blew them up.
But they left one corridor intact -- inside the cave
the bear spreads out her takings for the two young cubs.
We can call her Sally, but Sally's not her name.

by Mike and Daniele Finley, 1993

A Very Bright Day on Hammonasset Beach

The gulls fly overhead, piercing with their alien cries.

The waves crash and foam upon the sand.

Redheads on their beach towels are bursting into flame.

1979

Room Under the Rock

Seeking refuge from the world I lifted a slab of sidewalk that
had been shunted aside.

Immediately I became aware of a community of beings who had
just had their sky

ripped away from them, and now the sun screamed at them,
and something like Polyphemus

held their world in his paws. Oh! Oh! They sought to shelter
their eyes with two hands,

four hands, some of them many more hands. I got to know
them all in time.

A doodlebug who could roll into and out of a ball again. Several
red millipedes

zipping this way and that. A lascivious nightcrawler, coiling and
uncoiling its wet body.

An earwig caught in the camera's click, a mugshot of fear. A
spider nest like a cotton ball,

twirled open by the stone. And everywhere eggs of some kind
of creature,

scattered in the pockmarked mud. A slender earthworm, too
delicate to touch,

packed its casings in the dirt. Sweet new friends of the dark and
damp, I said,

How tired I am of the ways of the world! So they invited me in,
and I crouched

alongside them -- and the rock slid comfortably back into place.

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.

2002

Did You Know?

Beavers' teeth never stop growing.

This is why they must be constantly gnawing something,

Trunks of trees, branches, sticks,

to keep their teeth from growing into their brain.

Do you ever think about the problems of beavers?

No, you only think of yourself.

2009

Spring Green

Spring green is not like regular green,
it's more shot through with shafts of gold,
gold that glimmers in the still-angular sun.

It is not sturdy or worried about rain,
it isn't worried about anything.

The grass is like a school of fish
that shift with every drifting breeze.

It is profligate and optimistic --
go ahead, step on our fibrous bodies,
the blades and leaves and buds exclaim –
you cannot crush us all.

The ghosts of winter have been vacuumed away
and all us little faces now
lift up our heads and sing.

2012

Nose to the Sidewalk

When the sun sets on the edge of the sky
And you get down on your hands and knees,
Even crumbs of grit arrayed on the sidewalk
cast a shadow an inch and a half long.

My face is pressed against the slab,
butt poised poetically in the air,
Like a man condemned to push a peanut with his nose
From here all the way to Elk River.

And this is for all of eternity, mind,
as if someone has tossed a handful of shirt pins
into the air and when they alighted
they arranged themselves magnetically,
every head facing west.

The pins are like a platoon of infantrymen
leaning on their rifles
attentive to their sergeant's instructions.

They are like a forest blown down by a single puff of wind.
They are like a civilization of sand,
and this was their sacred center,
and everyone has gathered in the late light

wearing little hats of tribute to some celestial event.

The least of things stand tall and straight,

The stars align for all of us.

1976

Naked, At The Taylor Falls Campground

For Tim Nolan

I am finishing my sip of Naked Mighty Mango when I see
a bee climb inside the plastic cup.

It is a yellowjacket bee, and his abdomen is twitching
spasmodically

as if to sting the cup, like a beating heart or a painful boner.

He climbs out of the cup and sees me move the Naked away
from him.

He sees the entirety of me now, this smirking Killroy
looming over the table, toying with him and his serious mission.
So I stop. I have been trying to do better by bees.

Now the bee is waddling along a closed copy
of Tim Nolan's book *The Sound of It*, a really good collection,
still humping the cover with his swollen thing.

He disappears for a moment under the cover and then
reappears

on the cover art, a photo of a crosscut tree trunk,
concentric whorls like a giant thumbprint.

I am enjoying the book but the bee seems unimpressed
and humps along with his pulsating body part.

I wonder if it was the Naked Mighty Mango made him drunk,
and the bee is on a bender sashaying across the picnic table.
Or – maybe it was Tim's poems – to which the bee had only

a momentary introduction, yet it is having this theatrical tumescent effect.

Now I notice there is something wrong with him.
He is walking with a kind of limp, dragging leg number five.
Then, dummy me, I see his left wing is not even there,
he is a disabled bee, something very dramatic
has happened to him,
a story we can only guess at, selfless and heroic,
or possibly some bumbling incident like getting
smacked by a windshield
on this most beautiful noontime in spring --
I could go on but it would be disrespectful to hypothesize,
and this isn't that kind of a story.

2010

Tumbling Tumbleweed

Bounding softly across the indigo prairie at night,
the tumbleweed stop at the mighty Missouri,
their momentum stalled by a cyclone fence.
Sure, these animated plantforms looked forward
To a lit-up world of sights and stimulation,
they had dreams of a tumbling, bumbling sort.
But now they're stuck in Chamberlain, forever,
somewhat like us, but not exactly.

2001

Do Birds Have Knees?

Forget about all the eff-ups you've made.
Thinking about them only effs you up more.
Stop worrying what the future has in store.
Anxieties leave marks in your underpants.
The best policy I have found is to plant yourself
on your back stoop and watch the robins hop about,
their knees bending backwards instead of forwards.
Think about how they do that, or don't.
(What we think are their knees are actually ankles.)
You must learn to go forward somehow.
Eat when you feel the need to eat.
When it's time to go down, for the day
Or for ever, give yourself permission
to draw down the blinds.
But stay on the lookout, because --
you never know, you know?

2010

The Trumpeter at Willow Falls

The falls at Willow River are three-layered like a cake,
cold water spilling over the edges like icing.

Suddenly an enormous white bird, a trumpeter swan,
Is flapping directly above us.

We shield our eyes with our hands and watch the swan
splash down on the topmost tier, then tumble end over end
down the first whitewater cascade,
then cartwheel down the second, wing over wing,
and then splash belly first into the third,
then momentarily disappear,
then surface again atop the raging waters,
shaking the rain from its feathers,
then jump back into the sky.

You expect grace and elegance from any kind of swan

But this is the clumsiest exhibition either of us has ever seen.

2007

Not Far From The Beach At Plum Island

Here the ocean makes its ocean-sound, like the roar
of a freight train pounding through the night.
My friend Dirk calls such analogies blasphemy.
Oceans and trains are not the same.
One is the original and it deserves credit --
why point to helicopters while dragonflies flit quietly by?
History talks about the boatloads of people
who crisscrossed the waters, no mention of all the other debris.
Dear friends, who wouldn't want to live in Dirk's world --
original and clean, honest and pure --
set sail on the sturdiest twig at hand?
Instead I brush the sand from my pants.
On the ground is one of those plastic collars
six-packs of beer come in, and strangle seagulls --
I stuff it in my pocket and head for the car.

1975

Death by Gopher

He's cute by the campsite bounding from crumb to crumb,
cupping your leavings in tiny twig hands and rotating it as he
gnaws.

A trail of shredded wheat leads to your fire
till he dashes up your pantleg and you commence to hop
around

Slapping your cuffs and calves and thighs and imagining
those tiny twigs are sinking into flesh.

You picture it diving into the hole it made in your muscle
and rooting around in your leg meat.

You are in a fine state now, pointing your pistol down your
pants

and squeezing off a round and lying down, staring up,
the Milky Way all creamy and a shooting star too quick to draw,
the snap of a log in the fire --

Close those eyes, brave chevalier, and be certain in your heart
that nature has never been your friend.

2006

Talking Fly

A fly lands on my resting thigh and commences wringing
its hands over my skin.

I say, Fly, do I look like a steaming pile of crap to you?

Fly says, Well, I did land on you.

1979

Picnic Island ~ Two Interpretations

This was obviously the scene of some terrible battle.

A deer was cornered by wolves here
in the shadow of the Mendota Bridge
and wolves ripped its body to bits.

Our dogs got in on the act, too, throwing themselves
into the bones and skin and remaining goo,
excited about making off with the smell.

A year later, I see it differently.

The spot where the deer died, and it is just a spot now,
a flattened place in the grass,
is just twenty feet from a column of the great arch bridge,
a hundred feet above.

Wolves didn't kill that creature.

She died where she landed, from a fall from the bridge.

I picture her browsing by the highway,
and making a wrong turn onto the concrete span.
Confused, she continues, until the high beams
of a semi light her up, and she does
what deer have successfully done for millions of years,
leap over the steel railing to safety,
and dance away into sky.

2010

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

2009

Kraken Press

St. Paul, Minnesota

© 2017 Mike Finley